

## **What questions did you ask in you listening session?**

- **A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together:” What are the ways in which Our Lady of Mercy and the Erie Diocese most successfully bring people together in their faith journey?**
- **What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a faith community living the Gospel message?**

## **What broad themes emerged? Consider the things that were discussed repeatedly, during which the conversation felt moved by the Holy Spirit.**

On the Parish level, comments were made about the loving family that is Our Lady of Mercy Parish. The welcoming and supportive nature of the parishioners, Pastor, and Staff was repeatedly echoed. Visitors are made to feel welcomed; the Pastor knows most by name, he makes you feel involved in the Mass, he reaches out especially when families are experience loss or suffering; Sunday celebrations feel like a family reunion. Baptism during Mass is a moving experience.

There are multiple ministries that invite the laity to share their gifts and to spread the message of Christ’s love. While most ministries are to fellow parishioners, a considerable number also reach out beyond the OLM family – prayer shawl ministry, prayer line, healing ministry, food bank, Fr. Pete’s Maria House Project. Reaching out beyond the walls of OLM is important. Parish ministries and outreach that align with the interests of the youth and young adults might bring them back into active parish life.

There are many activities at OLM including the annual mission, Sedar Meal, Parish Alive retreat, Sanctis retreat, Small Faith groups, festivals, Lenten Pastus, and Knights of Columbus, Cursillo, AA meetings, Q&A with the Pastor, live streaming of Mass provide that provide opportunities for faith sharing with a purpose.

Most participants found the pastor very approachable with only a few people who suggested that on some matters he is not. One described how she did all her research and when she approached him, he listened to her proposal and approved her initiative. The continuity of leadership at OLM has been a blessing. The Staff were acknowledged for their compassion and leadership.

The role of women in the Parish is recognized as a valuable gift. However, the limited role of women in the institutional Church was subject to constant criticism. The role of women should be expanded to include ordination to the diaconate and holy orders. The perspective of women is of equal value to that of men, but if women are excluded from leadership, then the impact of their perspective and discernment will be diminished. The Church needs the female perspective and female compassion. But the institutional Church resists. Pope Francis is an opportunity for women to make inroads, but there is a force against it. Jesus never said, “men only.”

The lack of clergy highlights the importance of lay ministry and Church needs to empower the laity to lead. Priests and deacons should be allowed to marry. The formation of seminarians should focus on the pastoral role of the parish priest.

Some felt that the celebration of the Mass was very moving and gave a sense of direction for the week. Others stated that the Mass is repetitive and boring to young people. And another said that young people do not get anything from [attending] church. At a number of sessions, it was suggested that the laity offer personal testimony at Mass. Others suggested that at Mass there should be more praise offered, more prayer from the heart. One person observed that the sacraments cannot be an end point if no one is coming. Baptisms during the celebration of the Mass is a moving experience and OLM does a wonderful job celebrating weddings and helping families with funerals that assist the family in mourning.

The Diocese has had wonderful celebrations: Memorial Mass for Pope John Paul II, ordinations of deacons and priests, and the installations of Bishop Persico. Diocese has had moving prayer services. The Diocese meets the needs of older Catholics, but not their gay children. When Pope Francis spoke up about Covid vaccines the Diocese did not echo his guidance. The Church needs to model how its members should conduct themselves in the secular world.

Participants stated that the many rules of the Church do not make sense. The example of the recent baptism that were determined to be illicit because of “We” instead of “I” was offered in two separate sessions. The rules seem to do more to exclude people than to include people. Parents of gay children spoke of the pain that their children are caused by the rules of the Church. They said withholding the sacrament of marriage is hurtful. One parent of a gay daughter said, “The Church is her hell.” Another said that his children will not come to Church because the Church excludes their gay cousin. Yet, at the end of one session a participant observed that the word “gay” would not have been mentioned in a parish meeting ten years ago. Regarding gay marriage, one person stated “Whom am I to judge? But I do not agree with gay marriage.” One person observed that there are good rules or models and all priests should follow them.

It was stated that young people are not willing to accept the control and be “under the thumb” of the hierarchy. Their interests in weddings and sacraments are met with rules that they do not accept. This theme was present in most every session.

## **What other themes came up that felt significant and Spirit-led when they were mentioned, even if they were not brought up frequently?**

Music ministry was given as an example of a “tremendous blessing” but that we have lost much since Brandon Voght left. He brought so many people together. Some stated that they joined the parish because of the music ministry and choir. Music was integrated into every celebration and brought so much charism. When Beth Tarquino (before Brandon) was leading the choir, it was huge. One person said, “Music is big part of my life.” One offered that we are doing the best we can and praying that more people will step up.

Three people spoke of firsthand experience with divorce and annulment. For two the experience was painful. One spoke of rejection by a priest in the confessional (not Fr. Ritchie). Another spoke of poor advice from a deacon (not Deacon Barko). One described the annulment experience as cleansing.

A few spoke of a more traditional approach to prayer and prayer space. Forty hours, benediction, and prayer in front of the tabernacle were listed as traditional forms of prayer that still held value.

The focus of the Church on rules while transferring abusive priests came up twice – in almost identical observations.

Some asked if the input from these listening sessions make any difference? Will the men in charge consider ideas that they do not want to hear? When the Synod convenes in Rome have religious women participate – not as observers, but as equal participants.

One person stated “I love my church; I love my faith (although I do not buy into some of the beliefs), and I hate seeing the churches disappearing. Eventually they will all disappear.”

## **What topics emerged that could benefit from additional prayerful discussion and listening in your community, and/or be deepened at a future listening session?**

While there is much joy in the parish community of OLM there are those who feel excluded from that joy. They may be divorced, gay or the family of divorced and gay people. Compassion and inclusion for those in pain should be prayed about and discussed further.

Virtually every session reflected on the absence of young adults engaged in the celebration of the Mass. Some thought that young adults are put off by all the abuse scandal, anti LGBTQ attitude of the Church leaders, many, many rules. Some ideas were to promote ministries and outreach that will capture the imagination of the young. Reach out with a survey to ask how they would feel best served by their parish. But no easy remedy seemed forthcoming.

The ritual of the Mass can be repetitive. Add personal witnesses to the celebration. Look at what other Catholic Parishes, Newman Centers, and non-Catholic churches do to engage the youth more in liturgy and celebrations. Tap into the energy of a Cursillo Mass. Music ministry may be one way to attract and retain young people.

The role of Pastoral Council could include quarterly or semiannual reports to the parish during Sunday Mass. The parish is looking into long term planning. How will parishioners be engaged in the discernment process. What is the Pastoral Councils role in this process?

What additional roles (beyond administrative) can the laity take on at the parish level considering the shrinking number of ordained clergy?

Find ways to use technology to better engage parishioners, youth, and young people. Consider other hours for some Parish programming to accommodate those whose family demands or job demands limit their ability to participate.

Find ways to better engage the homebound.

## **Where there any themes that were brought up by a certain group? (i.e. High School students, or home bound parishioners consistently mentioned) If so, mention those here.**

One group of junior high student is being listened to and that report will be submitted separately.

There was not a certain group, though each session had its own personality. Most participants are over fifty years of age and some over seventy. Some have young children and college age children. More had children who are young adults to middle age. A few were converts or non-Catholic, but most were born Catholic. Women, men, parents, married, single, home bound, divorced, widowed, remarried, working, and retired. Of the 48 parishioners who participated, virtually all engage in some sort of ministry. Some are lifelong members of the parish and others recently joined.

**Below list the three words that you would use to describe the listing sessions.**

1. Robust
2. Respectful
3. Spirit-filled