

Synodal Process Results – Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church, Alcoa, TN

The synodal process at Our Lady of Fatima was divided into two stages. First, people were given about a month to complete the survey provided by the diocese. Then, two in-person sessions were held where facilitators guided discussion using questions derived from the most common survey responses. Additionally, there was a separate in-person session with the youth using age-appropriate discussion questions. The questions covered five general areas: welcoming, politics, homilies, marriage, and doctrine.

A desire to create a more welcoming Church and parish was the most commonly expressed thought in the whole process. However, there was general confusion as to what welcoming actually means. The discussion clarified that welcoming is a broad idea and tightly bound to individual preferences and circumstances. Even so, a general theme became apparent. The faithful are seeking a greater sense of community and friendship. Many feel isolated and see fellow parishioners as strangers. They would like to see more community events and opportunities for fellowship. They especially want a significant increase in the number of small groups so that they may develop deeper relationships and find people with similar interests or life circumstances. Face-to-face connections were said to be better than general announcements or advertisements. To welcome marginalized groups such as single parents, LGBTQ people, and those who have left the Church, will require a greater understanding of their particular experiences.

Politics was one subject where there seemed to be a consensus. The faithful do not want the Church directly to involve itself in the political sphere. A clear line in the sand was speaking about particular political parties and politicians. However, there was a desire better to understand Church teaching on social justice and moral issues. They believe they have not heard even the basics of the Church's social justice tradition and therefore do not understand how properly to discern their political opinions. Focusing on the tradition and leaving out the explicitly political was seen as a way of fostering unity and a necessary alternative to an increasingly polarized society.

The homily was seen as an essential part of the liturgy and the Christian life. The faithful look to the homily to understand the faith and learn how to live it. They want the homily to be short and to the point. The youth also want to hear humor and examples rooted in contemporary life. While they recognize that the homily is intended to be constrained by the liturgical readings, they would prefer that sometimes catechesis be given priority over the readings. This was seen to be an accessible way to deepen faith and understanding. They want homilies to cover many Christian life and faith areas and not focus on just one topic.

The Church's teaching on marriage and annulments was seen as the most confusing of all her teachings. The faithful, in general, do not understand how the Church sees marriage or the source of her traditions. This lack of understanding makes it difficult to agree with the Church and renders some of her teachings incomprehensible, such as opposition to contraception. Additionally, many have had poor experiences of the annulment process and see it as a profoundly unjust and even hypocritical process. The faithful want a clear and straightforward presentation of the Church's teachings on marriage beginning from the basics. They also want a more straightforward annulment process with trained and well-educated advocates pastorally to accompany them during a difficult moment in life.

Doctrine seemed to be the subject with the most significant division among the faithful. Some want to see changes in Church teachings in various areas. However, while disagreeing with some teachings, most did not want any changes. Instead, they see their disagreements as rooted in a lack of understanding. Many believe they are missing even the basics of Catholicism and therefore cannot understand the developed teachings well enough to believe them. There was a desire to grow in understanding so that they might come to believe all the Church teaches. Until they receive that understanding, they feel free to disagree with the Church and do not believe disagreement is an inherent problem. The faithful want to see an increase in catechesis at every age group and appropriate to every level of understanding.