

Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport

Professing the Truth in Love

Summary Report on Questions presented in the Linaementa



Professing the truth in love appears to be both the challenge and the lens through which the solutions to the myriad of foundational challenges related to marriage and family in the 21st century can be explored. In response to the call from the Holy See to obtain the pulse of the hearts and minds of the faithful in response to the *Lineamenta* document for the upcoming Synod on the Family, the Diocese of Bridgeport distributed a survey of the questions presented in the *Lineamenta* to the faithful, via their representatives as delegates to the Fourth Diocesan Synod. The following narrative is intended to provide a summary of the responses to that survey, which could be classified most broadly under three distinct, yet cooperative themes. First is ***Education & Formation***, which covers the more specific ideas of developing within the church a greater understanding of the challenges we face, relying more heavily on faith formation as a tool to combat those challenges, and improving the pastoral formation of ordained clergy. Second is ***Evangelization***, which encompasses a greater passion for true and more active evangelical outreach to those who have the most need among us and increasing the availability of direct access to support for those both within and outside of our parish communities. Finally, there is identified is the need for ***Greater Pastoral Collaboration***, which must include the laity supporting one another, as well as greater collaboration between the laity and the ordained clergy, and a collaborative approach to our largest challenges from parish to parish, as well as between parishes and diocesan organizations.

In most regards, the conversation must begin within the framework of education and formation. First and foremost, ***the Church must understand the myriad of challenges that are related to marriage and family***. This begins with an understanding that these challenges are intricate and cut deep into the foundations that support the great institutions of marriage and family. While the Church understands that there are specific challenges with regards to marriage and family in the 21st century, there is a belief that there is a lack of understanding as to the root and fundamental causes of these challenges, each of which requires its own exploration and solutions.

Once the challenges directly related to the foundations of these institutions are authentically identified, then the formation of the faithful can begin. The most prevalent themes of the responses is a necessity to adopt a “before it’s too late” mentality towards formation. Indeed, the vast majority of programs and initiatives related by respondents, both as current undertakings within parishes and solutions going forward, center around an active theological and pastoral formation of the faithful, with a particular focus on the continuous formation of the confirmed. Still, there remains an understanding that ***the formation of the young church in the theological, doctrinal, and scriptural foundations of marriage and family in the Catholic tradition is of the utmost importance*** for two distinct reasons. First, pre-Cana and marriage preparation, for example, are too late to instill in someone an understanding and trust in the sacramental nature of marriage, and the subsequent effects of that understanding on family life as a small Christian community. To form the Christian faithful in the connection of the love of one another to the love of God is of an importance that cannot be understated. Moreover, many faithful identified religious education programs and youth ministry as the primary source of outreach and service within their parish communities to the disenfranchised and marginalized of our community and society.

In cooperation with the formation of the faithful, there is also a call for a shift in the paradigm of formation for the ordained clergy, both of priests and deacons. ***The call is for a more robust and effective pastoral formation for clergy.*** The current perception is that, particularly in the areas of marriage and family, while clergy possess the doctrinal knowledge of the church's teachings in these areas, they lack the pastoral experience and formation to apply that knowledge to everyday situations their parishioners and community members may be facing. Further, there is a perception that among the four pillars of formation (intellectual, spiritual, human, and pastoral), the pillar of pastoral formation seems to be the weakest. The challenge that faces the pastoral formation of clergy the most is how to better balance the doctrinal message with the method and manner in which that message is delivered.

St. James tells us in his epistle that, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). In this mindset, so too is formation in the faith without a corresponding increase in the evangelization and the application of the knowledge gained in formation. Most importantly, there is an understanding among the faithful that there must be ***a greater initiative to reach out to those who are disenfranchised from the Church,*** for a myriad of reasons. The faithful have responded that some of the most successful programs include not only creating a welcoming atmosphere within a parish or faith community, but more importantly actively inviting the faithful and those who have turned away from the Church into that welcoming community. ***The challenges of modern society are such that there is a constant barrage of teachings that are discordant with the Catholic faith and an authentic life in Christ.*** With that in mind, there is a strong desire to see an increased and intentional outreach to combat such a barrage, instead of waiting for people to come to us. More often than not in recent times, the Church has been on the defensive and responding to inaccurate claims about the applications of the teachings of Christ in contemporary times.

However, in correspondence with Pope Francis' exhortation to be missionary disciples, there is a need to increase ***outreach directly to those in need,*** before they come to seek our assistance. Such an outreach has to include an increase in direct services to those who are experiencing financial difficulties which can put increased stress on the living of an authentically Christian family life. Many respondents included as an example a fund that has been set aside for parishioners who are experiencing financial difficulties. A small gesture, but one that can have profound implications, not only in the service of one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, but also in strengthening the bonds of individual families, while strengthening the bonds of the parish family.

In that same vein is the need for greater pastoral collaboration in order to adequately address all of the issues that are directly related to marriage and family life. The first opportunity for ***increased collaboration is among parishioners*** themselves. Many respondents believe that there is a tremendous potential for effective assistance in providing the opportunity for great Christian couples and families to share their stories with others and even take an active role in the leadership of preparation programs for marriage and baptisms. As the pilgrim church on earth, we often look to those who have gone before us, the Communion of Saints, for example and support in living lives of Christian virtue. But we also know that there are those among us who have already been able to begin living lives of virtue, and we

must allow them to provide that support and guidance to their fellow pilgrims on this journey towards salvation.

Coupled with that idea is the necessity ***for greater collaboration between the laity and the ordained clergy***. A significant consequence of the challenges in the cultivation of vocations over the last few decades is that the requirements of the clergy have increased, without necessarily a corresponding increase in the number of clergy available to fulfill those requirements. To that end, ***there is a strong desire among the laity to see an increased role for the laity, particularly in the development of programs that seek to explore and provide support to marriage and family life.***

Still, the fact remains that some of the issues that confront us in marriage and family life are too big for one community and one parish to address. With that in mind, it is very important to see an ***increased collaboration of parishes with one another, collaboration between parishes and the diocese and collaboration with surrounding dioceses***. There is recognition that organizations such as Catholic charities play an important role in reaching out to those who need our help the most, but not how parishes and the lay faithful can better collaborate with these organizations, not only through financial support, but also through increased access to resources for formation and evangelization.

The challenges faced in regards to marriage and family life in the 21st century require not only a greater understanding of the challenges themselves, but just as importantly, require forming the faithful, both ordained and lay, to take appropriate steps to find solutions to these challenges. The most important piece of the equation, however, seems to be that the church, in her institutions and in her faithful, need to be proactive. The secular formation of the young church is beginning earlier and earlier in their lives, and so formation in the faith needs to begin earlier and earlier, so that the young church can internalize and live out the tenets of the faith they have been formed in. That formation must continue on through confirmation and into adult life, if there is going to be a rejuvenation of the understandings of marriage and family in the context of the Gospel. Moreover, the clergy are increasingly called on to provide pastoral care and support in some of the most challenging situations we have come to know. By improving pastoral formation, they will be better prepared to lead the faithful in the paths of evangelization and collaboration. No one can do this alone. No parish, no program, no person is enough, except for Christ Himself. The challenge, and the solution, then, is to profess the Truth of Christ and to do so with His Love.
