

Report on the Final General Session

May 30, 2015

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Bishop Frank Caggiano called the session to order and led us in Morning Prayer. Patrick Turner, Associate Director of the Synod, was introduced and spoke on “Our Path So Far,” giving a history of the sessions that had finally produced the four major themes of the Synod: Empowering the Young Church, Building up Communities of Faith, Evangelical Outreach, and Promoting Works of Charity and Justice. Synod delegates began this journey with formation sessions in August, followed by the First Synod Session in September that dealt with where we stood as a diocese, identifying the issues and underlying themes that had been revealed during the vicariate listening sessions and feedback from those sessions. Seven study committees were formed from these considerations, and Bishop Caggiano held further consultations with Catholic youth and Hispanic representatives. The spring sessions pivoted toward finding solutions to the identified issues both from without and within the Diocese. After study and discernment, we arrived at our final session with a set of proposals designed to move the Diocese forward toward a more vibrant tomorrow.

Msgr. Dariusz Zielonka, Director of the Synod, then briefly spoke on “Canonical Considerations,” informing us that in church law only four canons address the role of a synod in the life of a diocese. A synod is a consultative body that gives suggestions to the bishop. From this perspective, today we expressed our voice, giving approval and endorsement for the declarations and decrees to be enacted. Fourteen votes were to be taken to finalize our Synod journey.

Bishop Caggiano then spoke on “Initiatives and Proposals.” He said the Holy Spirit has been central to our task, inspiring, guiding, and leading us. Our challenge has been and remains “What is it the Lord asks of us?” Turning to scripture, Bishop recounted the question of the rich young man: “What more must I do to inherit everlasting life?” This mirrors our own attempt as the Mystical Body of Christ to answer the same question. Later, Jesus asks his disciples: “Who do you say I am?” Every aspect of our synodal journey has been an attempt to answer this one question. We are not just a human organization; we are Christ in the world, a community of sinners. Bishop said that at the heart of all we do must be a spiritual renewal that will cause us to deepen and grow in our love for others so that we may learn how to evangelize, performing works of mercy and justice. We cannot share what we do not know. The Mission Statement of the Synod provides the litmus test for effectiveness of all that will emerge: “Our common mission is to foster personal conversion and deepen each disciple’s relationship with the Lord Jesus in the community of the Catholic Church” Bishop said there is change afoot. We are to accompany our sisters and brothers in faith one at a time so that we will have an opportunity to encounter Christ, our Lord and God. We will thus deepen our conversion and relationship with God. We need to lead and be led, to listen and to

learn. Bishop was proud of the delegates' honesty in addressing the difficult issues that beset our diocese, but there were some (e.g., works of justice) that were not brought forth in the deliberations. We need a prophetic voice in the world so that healing in the Church, particularly necessitated by the clerical sexual abuse that so damaged our brothers and sisters, can take place. We still need to heal the broken trust that exists between victims and the institutional Church and the people at large. An honest dialogue about who we are as the People of God can become a strength and work to repair damaged relationships, whether because of abuse, race, or ethnicity. This must be a priority.

Bishop Caggiano then turned to a discussion of our Synod destination, saying that there will be many roads, and each of us will have to find the path most helpful to us. He cited the scriptural passage chosen as our mission "prism": "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Bishop reminded us that branches are often chaotic, growing every which way, but every branch goes back to the vine. We must all end up still attached to the same vine so that our destination as the Divine Vine in the Diocese of Bridgeport will remain strong and grow. Only the Holy Spirit can say where we are going. We must admit that things may be uncomfortable. Bishop reminded us that the United States was a mission country in 1850, and we are becoming one again. (I believe he was referencing the recent Pew Report on declining religious identification.) We need to learn how to live our discipleship, especially in a world where religion is suspect. He asked, "What would we do differently as missionaries?" The Ten Principles identified by the Synod will be the guide to our paradigm of pastoral practice: Continuity, Subsidiarity, Accompaniment, Sharing and Collaboration, Evangelical Outreach, Unity in Diversity, Creativity, Empower the Young Church, Accountability, and Transparency.

Turning to the upcoming vote, Bishop asked us to take the long view for a long project. We will need to tolerate our failures, always return to our mission statement as the key evaluative piece, and trust in God. Everyone in leadership of the Church is called to be the new Moses in the footsteps of Christ, to move us out of our mediocrity and skepticism and into the Promised Land and a deeper relationship with Christ. He said that we won't see all the fruits of our labors, but God will grant us a vision of what the diocese will inherit in the future.

Bishop Caggiano's entire thirty-minute address may be heard or downloaded via the Synod website <https://www.facebook.com/2014Synod?fref=nf> or via Soundcloud at <https://soundcloud.com/mcrsupport/bishop-caggiano-remarks-may-30>.

Next, Bishop Caggiano hosted a question and answer period on initiatives and proposals for the delegates. Inquiries ranged broadly over the fourteen items. The most interesting exchange dealt with how to create the best chance for success when instituting proposals and practices. Bishop's answer was to make the spiritual piece a priority, using prayer and spiritual discernment, saying, "To be successful we

must find a compelling reason, intentionally, to prevent indifference among our disengaged Catholics.”

Voting ensued:

Mission Statement *Passed 99%*

Ten Principles *Passed 99%*

Initiatives (nos. 3–8)

3. Establish a **Diocesan Strategic Planning Commission** by October 2015 whose competency will include: (a) the ongoing reform of the Diocesan Curia and (b) oversight of the pastoral planning process. *Passed 96%*
4. Begin a **Comprehensive Pastoral Planning Process** by November 2015 to engage every parish to create a roadmap for its future. *Passed 95%*
5. Establish a **Catholic Service Corps** by November 2015 that will focus on fostering and guiding parish and diocesan-wide opportunities to realize justice, peace, and charity within our Diocese. *Passed 95%*
6. Establish a **Leadership Institute** by January 1, 2016. *Passed 91%*
7. In addition to the Presbyterial Council and Diaconal Council, two additional permanent Councils, **The Council of Religious** and **The Diocesan Pastoral Council**, will be created by December 2015 to allow ongoing consultation with the Bishop in the work of the Diocesan Church. *Passed 92%*
8. Create a six-month consultative process, beginning in September 2015, leading to a **Presbyterial Assembly** on February 25, 2016, to draft concrete measures to realize the call of the Synod for priests to realize “holy and healthy living.” *Passed 95%*

Proposals (nos. 9–14)

9. Reestablish the **Diocesan Liturgical Commission** by December 1, 2015. The objectives of the Liturgical Commission would include but not be limited to:
 - a. Oversee the implementation of diocesan norms for liturgical worship.
 - b. Help revitalize music ministry on the parish and diocesan levels.
 - c. Greater inclusion of youth and young adults in the liturgical life of the Church.
 - d. Encourage parishes to strengthen, in concrete ways, their hospitality and welcome ministry. *Passed 94%*

10. Create a task force to draft: (a) a comprehensive revision of the **Diocesan Sacramental Guidelines** and (b) the **Diocesan Pastoral Handbook**, for approval by the Diocesan Bishop by June 1, 2016. *Passed. 97%*
11. Create a **Diocesan Pastoral Initiative** that will (a) seek to **support and strengthen couples in their marriage** and (b) reach out to **divorced and separated Catholics within the Diocese**. Such an initiative would also study the work of the Tribunal toward a plan to strengthen its work. *Passed. 95%*
12. Establish **Family Life Centers** (both virtual and physical) in collaboration with Catholic Charities, parishes and other entities. The goal is to provide resources and support to families to help strengthen the bonds of unity among its members and also to support families that are confronting particular stressors. *Passed. 89%*
13. Create a **Strategic Plan** for priestly vocations by February 25, 2016. In addition, concrete measures must be enacted towards the fostering of vocations to the diaconate and religious life. *Passed. 94%*
14. Create a **Diocesan Task Force** by October 1, 2015, whose competency is to identify concrete ways to reform our catechetical methods and programs. The Task Force will report back to the Diocesan Bishop in eight months and would undertake but not be limited to:
 - a. Possible expansion of catechetical formation to begin at Baptism.
 - b. Reexamination of models of youth ministry.
 - c. High School catechetical education and formation.
 - d. Discern and present models of faith formation that parishes would be able to examine and decide, based upon their own needs, as most effective.
 - e. Exploration of the restructuring of the Office of Faith Formation in order to strengthen its mission. *Passed. 96%*

The voting completed, Bishop Caggiano gaveled the Fourth Synod in the Diocese of Bridgeport closed. Now the real work begins.