

Report on the Third General Session

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The Third General Session, which met on February 7th, 2015, was entitled “Confirming the Challenges and Pivoting to Solutions.” From the sixty original Challenges that were created from the Listening Sessions prior to the Synod, nine Global Challenges were identified by the four Study Committees in conjunction with Bishop Caggiano and the Synod leadership. The goal of this General Session was to prioritize the nine Challenges in order to reduce them to a more manageable number, while still incorporating those issues that had already been discerned by the Synod.

Our day began with prayer and the showing of the new video that introduces the 2015 Annual Catholic Appeal (formerly “Bishop’s Appeal”), entitled “Building Communities of Faith.” Bishop Caggiano stressed that even the Appeal will correspond with our synodal work by identifying all the ways in which the diocese will implement the Global Challenges in its charitable work. It is a remarkable film that emphasizes the familial nature of the diocesan Church. Caring for others in this context means creating the Kingdom of God among us by being Christ to others. The film was widely applauded, as was Bishop Caggiano.

Consideration of the nine Challenges followed. Bishop Caggiano began with the five Pastoral Challenges.

1. *Liturgy and Worship*: Every Catholic is called to ‘Full, Conscious, and Active Participation’ (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* #14, 41, 48) in the worship life of the Church.
2. *Family Life*: There is a need to strengthen and support family life and empower and assist parents to be the primary teachers of the Catholic Faith.
3. *Evangelization*: We must create concrete plans for evangelization in, with, and through our parishes, schools, ecclesial movements, and communities.
4. *Social Teachings*: We must understand, share and implement the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church.
5. *Service*: Heeding the call of Jesus Christ, we must live the works of charity in daily life, especially to serve those in need.

The Enabling Challenges were then presented.

6. *Leadership*: There is a need to continually call, form, and support clergy, religious, and laity in active leadership roles in the life of the Church.
7. *Catechesis and Education*: We must renew the ministry of faith formation throughout the Diocese, leading each person to a deepening relationship with the Lord Jesus in and through His Church.

8. *Stewardship*: There is a need to more effectively expand, manage, and share our resources (time, talent, and treasure) and better utilize technology and communication in effective and appropriate ways to fulfill our mission in Fairfield County.
9. *Faith Communities*: There is a need to strengthen every community of faith within our Diocese, in part by challenging Church leaders to model and foster a culture of collaboration, dialogue, reconciliation, and healing.

Bishop Caggiano next called for a period of table discussion so that delegates could begin discerning the six most important Challenges. Because his presentation had been so effective and persuasive on behalf of all the Challenges, this task was difficult. Everyone could make a strong argument for the inclusion of any or all of them. It became clear that the delegates needed reassurance that, even though only six would be chosen, all issues addressed in the nine would in some way be included when the Diocese began to actively implement the Challenges. Bishop gave his assurances and a period of silent prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit followed. Automated voting then began. Delegates were asked to discern the six most important and of the highest priority to the Diocese of Bridgeport. The vote count identified five Challenges that were overwhelmingly supported by the assembled delegates. On reflection, Bishop Caggiano proclaimed them to be the “Interpretive Keys” of the Synod and that the rest of the Challenges would be included in them. The five are: Liturgy and Worship, Family Life, Evangelization, Leadership, and Catechesis and Education.

The afternoon session featured three speakers, all of whom addressed in some fashion the implementation of a challenge or challenges identified by the Synod. The first was Mike Gecan, National Co-Director of The Industrial Areas Foundation/CONNECT, a network of faith- and community-based organizations. His topic was “Faith-Based Community Building.” His presentation considered the contrasts between a bureaucratic parish and relational parish, one being more centered on physical structures, the other on leaders and potential leaders, and contrasts in approaches, i.e., service, advocacy, and relational. Gecan’s theme for us was that the rebirth of spiritual life begins with listening.

The second speaker was Mary Ellen O’Driscoll, the Regional Director of the Ignatian Volunteer Corps. Her topic was “Catholic Social Teachings,” which tied in well with the Synod’s concern for evangelization and outreach to those on the margins. The final speaker was Msgr. James Lang, Vicar of Parishes for the Diocese of Syracuse, New York. His talk was entitled “Visioning, Planning, and Excellence.” He was an engaging and challenging speaker who spoke on core values and a vision for the future. He admonished us to be attentive to our “brand” and be a follower of Christ and true to ourselves. He said that peace and justice are found only when we are a people of prayer.

The Third Synod Session ended with more homework assignments for the delegates. We are asked to pivot in order to respond to the challenges by seeking

out and examining best practices, outstanding programs and models of ministry. Our day then ended with a prayer led by Bishop Caggiano. I think most of us feel that this has been a productive and energizing experience, but our finding solutions may be more difficult than identifying the problems.