

Report on the First General Session

Jamie Dance

A VESPERS SERVICE at Saint Augustine Cathedral in Bridgeport on Friday, September 19, officially marked the opening of Synod 2014 and the one-year anniversary of Bishop Frank Caggiano's installation. Attended by almost 700 people, the service included hymns, psalms, scripture readings, and a homily by the bishop. The official commissioning of more than 350 delegates to the Synod was pronounced with these words: "Bless the members of the Synod and give them gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge and fear of the Lord. Commission them to go forth and be the new prophets of Your divine plan for the Diocese of Bridgeport."

This Synod is the fourth to be held in the Diocese, and the first in 34 years. It is made up of 400 individuals, predominantly laity. VOTF-Bridgeport is well represented in the delegate pool, with three of our board members nominated by the Bishop and another nominated by his parish. In preparation for the Synod, Bishop Caggiano conducted Listening Sessions in the five Vicariates, and among the youth and the Latino/Hispanic community. It was an amazing display of humility and respect on the part of our Bishop. No subject was off limits and all were heard.

Bishop Caggiano followed up these sessions with his first State of the Diocese speech on September 9. Statistics relating to finances and debts, Mass attendance, school enrollments, cemetery funds, and administrative challenges were laid out for all to see in a PowerPoint presentation. Included were data that the Diocese had previously not divulged during the Bishop Lori administration. The most noteworthy comment of the evening came when the (enormous) total Diocesan debt was revealed. Bishop Caggiano said, "This does not scare me." He has a plan and the energy to see the

process through. Bishop Caggiano inspires respect and confidence, and encourages us to understand that we all are in this together, becoming a more healthy and spiritually rich community as a result. He refers to this presentation as “checking the foundation of the house before we can build on it,” meaning the work of the Synod. The Bishop’s central plan for the Synod revolves around four elements: Empowering the young Church, Building Communities of Faith, Fostering Evangelical Outreach, and Promoting the Works of Charity And Justice. He assures us that “every challenge can be overcome with prudent and measured planning and that nothing and no one can stop Christ’s mission and the Church moving forward.”

The first General Session of Synod 2014 opened on September 20 with almost 400 delegates in attendance. Bishop Caggiano set the tone for the day when he told delegates, “This is a day of all questions and no answers. We need to saturate ourselves in the data and suspend judgment about solutions.” The leaders of the four commissions (representing the four themes mentioned above) spoke to the statistics and challenges facing the Diocese. A discussion period followed each of them, and as in the Listening Sessions, attendees were offered the chance to comment and ask questions on the topics. Several times, Bishop Caggiano urged delegates to “dig deeper, ask more questions and get to the root of the problems.” Deacon John DiTaranto, chair of the “Empowering the Young Church” commission, gave the first presentation. “Catholics who leave, leave early,” he said, pointing out that 48 percent who leave the Church do so by the age of 18. That figure jumps to 79 percent by the age of 23. Bob Rooney, chair of the “Build Up Communities of Faith” commission commented that the three communities of faith, parish, schools, and the family unit are “interconnected” and the Church needs to do more to strengthen them. He said that changes in the American family are here to stay and the Church “must figure out how to adapt to this new reality.” Father Peter Towsley, chair of the “Fostering Evangelical Outreach” commission, said that as society’s values become more

secular and less Christian, we must “bring the Gospel to the streets and bring Jesus Christ to the marketplace.” Finally, Michael Tintrup, chair of the “Promoting Works of Charity and Justice” commission, told the delegates that poverty is the root cause of many of the problems in Fairfield County including homelessness and mental illness.

This first session was a seven-hour introduction to the issues and problems that face the Diocese of Bridgeport. Many more hours of research and study will ensue before we begin the process of discernment when the Synod resumes at the second General Session on November 15.

Report on the Second General Session

Jamie Dance

ON SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, over 400 Synod delegates gathered to seek consensus on issues that affect the Diocese of Bridgeport. Sixty “Challenges” were presented by the four study committees, each related to one of the four major themes of the Synod: Building Up Communities of Faith, Empowering the Young Church, Promoting Works of Charity and Justice, and Fostering Evangelical Outreach. After opening the day with prayer, including antiphonal psalms, Bishop Caggiano announced that there were three “housekeeping” items to be voted on: a Declaration from the First Session, the Creation of the Supra Committee on Communications, and a Resolution to make the Synod body “permanent.” The last item pertains to the bishop’s desire to maintain an informed and active group for consultation as Synod decrees are enacted in the diocese. All items were approved by acclamation.

Dr. Joan Marie Kelly, a theologian at Sacred Heart University, then spoke briefly on “The Catholic Church: ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, APOSTOLIC”. Following her presentation, representatives of the “Promote Works of Charity and Justice” committee came forward to offer their committee’s work and supporting evidence for their decisions. Among these challenges were items such as “There is a need to create an understanding of social justice not only as a Gospel mandate but also a lived and personal experience” and “There is a need to use charitable service to help the believer, the non-practicing believer, and those of good will to discover Jesus.” All told, the seven Challenges were approved quickly and overwhelmingly by the delegates, using an electronic voting system that allowed three options: accept, accept with modification, and do not accept.

The next group to present was the “Empowering the Young Church” committee. Having divided their study by age groups (birth to 12, 12–18, and 19–30), the challenges presented ranged from “There is a need to introduce children into the life of the Church as fully and early as possible” and “There is a need to share the Gospel message in a manner that resonates with teens” to “Things we believe are contrary to what the Church teaches.” Once again, there was overwhelming approval for the challenges by the delegates.

The “Building Up Communities of Faith” committee (of which I am a member) considered three areas: family, parish, and school. Among the challenges for families were “There are many poorly catechized parents and a lack of ongoing faith formation opportunities” and “Many in the Church lack an understanding about the complexity and diversity of families and family life resulting in inadequate outreach and programs.” Addressing parish life, the committee named major challenges such as “There is a need to overcome competing activities, influences and negative media” and “There are inadequate resources to fulfill our mission—talent, finances, and tools” and “There is a need to create an environment of healing and understanding for the people we serve.” For the school community, it was suggested that “There

is a need to make Catholic education more accessible for those families who wish their children to attend Catholic schools” and “There is a need to strengthen the relationship that should exist between schools, parishes and the broader diocesan community.” This theme encompassed an enormous amount of territory since it touched on almost every avenue of Catholic life in the diocese. Most of the challenges were approved overwhelmingly, and it was widely noted that the sub-committee’s recommendations overlapped considerably.

The “Foster Evangelical Outreach” committee had several challenges on their agenda revolving around reaching those who are active but disengaged, and those at risk of leaving the Church or already gone, as well as challenges related to the use of social media and technology for evangelization and catechesis. Anne Pollack, a VOTF-Bridgeport board member sits on this committee. Among the challenges that it presented were “The Saturday/Sunday Mass experience needs to be a dynamic place of worship and fellowship that assists with the personal encounter with Jesus Christ”; “Everyone in diocesan leadership needs to nurture, sustain, support and encourage those who have left the Church”; and “There is a need to acknowledge past and/or present sinful actions by individual members of the Church, while at the same time pointing towards the truth and beauty of the Church as the visible Body of Christ.” Bishop Caggiano, well aware that about 80 percent of baptized Catholics in the Diocese of Bridgeport no longer attend weekly Mass, has decided to engage a professional polling organization from Marist College to provide answers to many of the questions raised by this and other committees. This data will flesh out what has transpired over the last decade and put a face on why so many have left. Interestingly, these challenges raised the most concerns among VOTF delegates (there are four of us) because there seemed to be little appetite among the delegates for addressing the issues at hand, including the absence of women from all decision-making bodies in the Church and the fact that

only two diocesan parishes have sponsored liturgies of lamentation for the victims and survivors of clerical abuse. One challenge proposed by this committee that would address this failure stated, "There is a need for acknowledgement by those in authority for past transgressions, for the sole purpose of healing those afflicted." This challenge statement was only narrowly accepted, and as John Fitzpatrick noted, it was one of the few that "garnered really substantial criticism." He attributed this response to "sheer defensiveness on the part of clergy and laity."

Several committees raised issues related to media and its uses on behalf of the Church, and how media is also used to create misperceptions and diminish the Church. John Marshall Lee, a VOTF board member, commented that "there is an undercurrent of trivializing the scandal," which was sometimes described as "real or perceived." This is disconcerting for many of us since it denies healing to not only victims/survivors but also to the larger Church. Many of us will take the opportunity to comment further on these and other issues that we either "accepted with modification" or "did not accept." Our participation in this Synod is an opportunity to have our voices heard inside the Church. We will not waste nor squander it.

Throughout the long day it became clear that a pattern of overlap was apparent in the challenges. This led Bishop Caggiano to announce that he had begun to perceive a clear, concise path for renewal in the diocese that would address multiple challenges at once. He expects the study committees to establish priorities and to discern solutions that will address the most important issues. By the Third General Session in February our committees will have discerned twelve primary goals amid the sixty challenges. This distillation will be the template for our renewal. Bishop Caggiano's great intelligence and quick wit were on display all day, seeing patterns and answers in the giant jigsaw puzzle before us.

The Synod website <http://www.2014synod.org/> is a treasury of reporting on all aspects of this historic assembly. All Catholics were invited to comment freely on the First Session at this site, and it is anticipated that further opportunities for lay comment will become available in the future.