



THE BYZANTINE CATHOLIC EPARCHY OF PARMA

CHANCERY

Synodal Synthesis of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Parma of the Ruthenians

Introduction

Below is a synthesis of feedback from twenty-seven of the thirty parishes/missions of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Parma of the Ruthenians. This feedback was collected during parish meetings held as part of the parish synodal process of the Synod on Synodality inaugurated by His Holiness, Pope Francis of Rome, and begun in the Catholic Churches of the United States in the later months of the year 2021. The feedback has been categorized based on topic, as some parishes had similar feedback on certain topics while others varied greatly. Therefore, the feedback below cannot be said to belong to one parish over another (unless noted) but is a collection of thoughts that does not represent a percentage of people who stated them. In anticipation of these parish meetings, the parishes were provided with handouts every week which consisted of meditations on the Beatitudes and reflection questions. These items were provided in order to create a prayerful environment where people would feel more open to sharing their thoughts, hopes, and hurts. Thus, the Beatitudes will be mentioned in the synthesis below. During the synodal process, we also conducted a survey administered by the Catholic Leadership Institute, by which we gathered anonymous feedback from the faithful on their personal faith life as well as their understanding of the faith, their priest, their parish, and the Eparchy. At the end of this synthesis, some graphs will be provided to illustrate elements of strength and opportunities for growth in our parish communities throughout the Eparchy.

The people of the Eparchy of Parma are very grateful for the opportunity to speak and be heard, and the expression of their hopes and hurts is well expressed in this synthesis we now present to you.

Personal Prayer

Parishioners stick too much to the minimum that is required as Christians (prayer, fasting, attending liturgical services, Bible readings) and this leaves people empty. It does not place the Faith and the Church in the first place of importance but rather, towards the end. Sports, hobbies, job, and culture are preceding faith and the Church community. There is a need for a deeper spiritual life.

Regarding Faith as a personal relationship, more time must be spent with God in prayer and reading of the Scriptures. Silence before the liturgical services and Bible studies should be implemented so that people can focus and fully encounter God. People should be taught how to do this. People should be helped to understand the Word of God, how to use the Bible, and reconnect the Word and daily life. There should be Bible education. One church community intends to place Bibles in the pews to foster private prayer and reading.

People should be taught how to develop a daily examination of conscience and how to pray. They should be given help developing a more personal prayer rather than just formal, liturgical prayer. They should also be given help in facing the challenges of personal and formal prayers, how to pray the Psalms, how to use the Scriptures in personal prayer, and help with meditation. There is a strong life of prayer in the church; but nevertheless, prayer at all times of day should be encouraged and implemented. It was noted that there is a challenge in being perseverant.

The importance of prayer in families was identified. Families should be helped by teaching them different ways of prayer which respect the age of their children and the rhythm of their daily life.

There should be an increase in the practice of talking about the faith with others and the mourning of sins.

In one parish, some expressed a struggle with the idea of praying publicly (e.g., at a restaurant or other public event). This same parish also expressed the desire to live less according to the rules of the world and more according to the rules of God.

Virtues and posture of the heart identified:

- Meekness and dependence on God are two great attributes to have as a Christian.
- Trust in the Lord and a consistent acknowledgement of God's presence in our lives is important.
- Being poor in spirit allows those in the Church to better convey the message of Christ to others. When Christ says that the meek will be blessed, this should not be taken to mean that our religious beliefs should be put under a basket.
- God is in the middle of our trials and difficulties, offering consolation. It is important to have the Beatitudes in the heart to remain humble.
- There should be a heavier focus on humility and reaching out to those within and without the parish.
- The cares of the world do not give us satisfaction and confession should be done monthly to prevent any minor offenses from becoming major offenses.
- We should mourn with one another and show compassion to those who are going through tough times.
- Jesus said that we would be ridiculed, so we should be comfortable with being ridiculed for our faith.
- God's mercy is always with us, especially during Lent, and we should always strive to ask Him for mercy.
- We should focus on spending more time with Jesus and others instead of on ourselves.

Pilgrimages are essential to one's spiritual life and can help one set aside all earthly cares. Places are all around us, but sometimes we need to strive to make better use of them. One parish recently renovated their Shrine to the "Protecting Veil of the Mother of God," which also serves as a place of prayer for anyone in their local neighborhood. This parish has a special devotion to "Our Lady Searcher of the Lost," and to that end they have a number of parishioners who have returned to the Faith.

Other areas identified:

- There should be more retreats and inviting of other speakers/priests to visit the parish communities.
- There should be an emphasis on sacramental life, specifically Confession (it should be explained more in detail).
- Persecuted Christians should not be forgotten but helped through prayer and financial/material aid.

Liturgical Prayer

One parish had conversations that usually ended with vibrant discussions on the Sacred Mysteries and parish social events. More specifically, they said that the faithful should embrace all the Sacred Mysteries and liturgical services rather than just attending Divine Liturgy on Sundays and Holy Days. Another parish said that for them liturgical life is integral, and the Byzantine tradition helps people deepen their understanding of the faith, even if they grew up with a surface-level understanding of Catholicism.

Another parish said there should be a stronger participation in singing and learning the music of the Church and in learning the Scripture and theology of our church. This parish also expressed that it is preferable to have services be in the language of the people. Care should be taken to ensure the beauty of the Liturgy, such as improvements in singing and performing of the liturgical acts.

One parish noted that the authority of the Church is in place to guide the faithful through all times and to transmit the message of Christ.

Some voiced concerns of there being too heavy of an emphasis on fundraising to the detriment of spirituality.

Community in the Parish

Some parishes expressed a tendency to gravitate toward people of the same opinion or interest, thus there is a danger of cliques being formed, and some acknowledged that there were cliques present. People should not just be 'Sunday' friends. For one parish, although there is some feeling of these cliques in their parish, their parish community is consistent and a good group. It was noted that there needs to be reconciliation among the different groups within a community – forgiveness. One parish expressed that hard feelings between their parishioners seem to be avoided rather than confronted. On the other hand, however, another parish said that since their parish is small and community-oriented, there are very few factions or divisions and they are now experiencing great growth in spirituality and in membership: "We now have more baptisms than funerals" and this year their church attendance grew by 17%; their parishioners come from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Yet another parish said that they have moved away from having different cliques and have now become more open and welcoming to others. Another parish reports that it is tight-knit and there are many young families, a good sign for future growth, but some note that there is a bit of a divide between younger families and older parishioners when it comes to being patient with children during services. Even another parish reports that they have a great community with very few "cliques" and very few tensions, with people of different ages, genders, and backgrounds who tend to all talk with one another after church.

It was noted that parishes need to improve the overall spirit of welcome. Many parishioners come to church but then are gone, they are missing the social aspect of the community and are not spending time together. One parish said that they have a spirit of hospitality that is very noticeable to new visitors and they have been developing plans for more community-building through bible studies and small groups.

There should be a greater openness towards sitting with new people in the church, singing in church, and attending the liturgical services and ECF (Sunday School program) with other parishioners. One should not go to these services just to check off a box, but rather, fully participate and give all that they can to the church. There are many things already in place that keep the parish community strong and tight together. More people should be invited to be involved in the parish; they should feel that they are wanted. Creating responsibilities for parishioners within our communities and their fulfilment is important. One parish noted that it seems to be that some people who run parish events have a negative attitude towards those who wish to assist with these events. A sense of guilt seems to come along when some are not able to attend parish activities at the behest of others. Seek and search the input of all age groups. Avoid the danger of 'a few influencing' the community life (this could be an issue of too strong of personalities). Older members of the parish are not able to contribute as much time, therefore, the younger families should step up and participate more in activities such as the parish council, the Knights of Columbus, and the decoration of the church for different seasons. On the other hand, one parish pointed out that on the parish level, young adults need older adults to live liturgical, Christ-centered lives, and to be intentionally included in the parish community. It was suggested that parishes do small group events or name-tag-days (events) to get to know fellow parishioners better.

One theme that stood out was that the parish needs to focus on growing the community and making plans to do so. When it came to social events, it was emphasized that parishioners should make sure to have fruitful discussions with friends and strangers at social events. The parish can host more youth socials, celebrate feast days with other churches in the community, and create social media pages on applications more popular with the youth. The youth seem to not be coming back to church and they need to be called back. One parish expressed that their community events have smaller turnouts now, declining membership. Families feel pressured to attend youth sports on Sundays, taking them away from church.

Ideas shared for building community in the parish:

- Set up a prayer list/line where people can ask for prayers and pray for those in need.
- Have a petition book in the vestibule so that the priest can offer them during the Divine Liturgy.
- There is not a streamlined process in place for reaching out to those who are not able to attend liturgical services in person, such as reinventing the homebound list and transporting impaired parishioners.

- Update the church directory and work on networking with people/visitors.
- Offer Zoom and other online events to involve the homebound and the larger community.
- Provide better communication through emails, bulletin, and sign-ups.
- Keep our own specific traditions as a distinctive feature of Byzantine culture.
- One parish said a Protestant visitor shared the idea with them of having home groups where parishioners invite each other to one another's homes for community-building.
- One parish shared comments on community being present during the time of death of a loved one: "Traditionally, we used to celebrate funerals as well as weddings. Tradition provided us relief from suffering the loss of a loved one by bringing the parish family and community/friends all together. We celebrated the life of the deceased loved one as part of the funeral. In the old days, the deceased were viewed in their homes with family, friends, food, and stories or jokes. It was easier to have these traditions given the gathering in the deceased person's house. We should honor widows in our parish in some sort of fashion. One tradition I remember was covering a mirror as soon as someone passes away."

Strengths shared and signs of desire for growth:

- One parish said their people participate actively in the singing. They would like to develop training opportunities for cantors and identifying new cantors among experienced parishioners. They also have good participation from boys altar serving.
- Another parish reports a strong and growing young adult presence. In the past year they have held two parish retreats which facilitated a process of thinking about the parish's future. For some years they have been prayerfully discerning the possibility of moving church spaces, though they are open to the possibility that God's will could be to move or to stay. They see it as a major priority at this time to improve their inner-parish community building to become an even stronger community.
- Another parish says their community is mostly converts from Protestantism, so there is a sense of solidarity in that all the adults are new to the Byzantine tradition and so they are all learning together. They said that some parishioners are there since they don't have access to the Traditional Latin Mass, but others find it as a place of community, prayer, and support during hardships in life.

Improvements to be made:

- One parish expressed that communication and access to parish financial information is not easily accessible, and they would like to see this rectified.
- Some parishes have parishioners who come very long distances.
- Parishes with no resident priest express a desire for more liturgical services besides the Divine Liturgy.
- One community offered self-reflection by saying they should be more patient with newcomers who have questions about the Byzantine tradition.

Outreach

Parishes identified that they need to embrace a welcoming spirit by involving more people in the ministry of greeting people who are attending liturgical services. They should help visitors to feel welcome and help them navigate through the services (finding the appropriate texts, sit next to them during the service) and invite them to the parish social or any parish activities. It was also noted that the priest must be involved in this welcoming, not only the lay faithful. The reintroduction of prayer groups and greeters would greatly help in connecting with other parishioners and breaking out of one's comfort zone. Parishioners should be involved in welcoming visitors during funerals, baptisms, and weddings as well. There should also be networking with visitors.

It was also noted that it is critical to reach out to former parishioners. Another idea mentioned was reaching out to people on the prayer list and involving parishioners in this, making it a ministry. This ministry would involve

phone calls to the home bound and elderly. More outreaches should be done to lend a hand to those who are unable to attend the liturgical services. One parish mentioned visiting the sick.

Parishioners also noted that being part of the communities they are part of, and reaching out to the larger community, as well as striving to care for others was deemed critical in making our Byzantine Catholic parishes known as a church. One parish wanted to challenge themselves to think more about what they could do outside their parish.

It was stated that it is crucial to use social media (Facebook, parish websites, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) to reach out to the community and young generations. Several parishes expressed a desire to improve the presence of their parish on these forums, and some said that their website and parish communications in general seemed to lag and not give complete information. One parish said that young people need to become the face of the church, especially by hosting podcasts. It was noted that the older parishioners, however, still need the hard copy bulletins, greetings, and other announcements to be mailed out to them at home.

One parish reported that their priest is good at reaching out to the margins and connecting with people whether they are religious or not, people of all ages and backgrounds. Their liturgical celebration features a good balance of languages: English, some parts in Spanish, Greek, and Old Slavonic, which shows the universality of the Church and makes all parishioners feel welcome, both newcomers and people who grew up Byzantine Catholic. Another parish noted that the diversity within the eastern churches can help more fully capture the multicultural environment in America. One parish acknowledged that they feel there was a previous focus on Ruthenian ethnic history which made them too focused on their own parish community to the point of not reaching out to the wider community; they now see a need to focus on reaching out to the wider community. Another parish noted that the Byzantine Catholic Church seemed to be a refuge for those who were attending parishes which seem to be more focused on the world than on God.

Ideas shared for reaching out to the wider community:

- Collaboration with the local Franciscan Brothers to join their various ministries.
- Returning to some of the events they used to have before the pandemic (festivals and community dinners) so they can invite the broader community to their church.
- One parish noted that they used to have a food pantry.
- Consideration was given to reaching out to local Roman rite parishes to invite them to Divine Liturgy.
- Consideration was given to reaching out to people whose spiritual wounds keep them away from the Church.
- At one parish, the parishioners feel that part of their charism is serving as a kind of pilgrimage site for those who want to see “the East.” They want their website updated as it is often the main way newcomers learn how to find their parish.
- One parish suggested that the parish website and Facebook page could include the priest’s homilies, articles, and YouTube interviews with Byzantine Catholic speakers.
- There is a desire for reaching out to charitable causes to help the needy.

Areas of growth:

- One parish noticed it can be a challenge to get enough people to come and set up for events, so an area for growth would be to have more people step up to contribute to these events in new ways.
- Another parish noted that their church building is structurally old in some ways and they would like more direction in how to craft a Byzantine aesthetic for the building. They had hoped that a new building would help increase their visibility and attendance, but that has not necessarily happened.

Catechesis

It was noted that the media are against the faith and faith related issues and thus people are discouraged or even afraid. There is a need to improve the knowledge and understanding of the faith, liturgical services, mysteries of the church, Scripture, and spiritual life. There are many ways for us to learn and participate in the services of the church. We need to learn how to speak about our Church, liturgy, and tradition and thus empower people to be able to witness to Jesus Christ and our faith as well as discuss the issues of our faith. We need to empower people to live the teachings and spirituality of the Church in everyday life. Many parishes said that adult education is missing and that more catechetical programs need to be offered to help those with questions find answers. One parish mentioned that they feel like they are not being properly catechized, but just going through the motions of the faith. It was recommended to offer Zoom meetings for different teaching sessions, Bible studies, etc. One parish reported that Eastern Christian Formation classes are ongoing for all age groups at their parish.

There should be a focus on educating the young people in the faith in order to draw them away from the allures of the world. It is crucial how we hand on and teach our children the faith; thus, there is great importance for a good ECF (Eastern Christian Formation) program. Families should be involved and offered family faith events and opportunities for growth. Help should be given to fathers to better live their role in the family; retreats and seminars should be offered to empower them in that way.

Other ideas shared for knowledge and understanding of the faith:

- One parish expressed a desire to see a greater implementation of the orthodox practice of *economia* and allowing for divorce in the Catholic Church, rather than discouraging divorce and going through the annulment process. They feel that the practice of withholding the Eucharist from divorced couples should not be in place. They also feel that in general, divorced couples seem to be disregarded or treated poorly in the parish (it was not clear if this statement is in reference to divorced couples or couples who are divorced and remarried).
- Another parish felt that there is not a clear attitude towards the practice of indulgences and whether Byzantine Catholics should participate in this practice.

Presence of the Pastor

The priest, and deacon as well, plays a crucial role in building up the parish community both spiritually and socially. Some communities shared strategies of evangelization and outreach. However, complaints were made that the priest does not extend into the parish community or the priest and the parish do not extend into the wider community. The priest and deacon need to be an integral part of the parish community, and not just in a liturgical capacity. A fruitful and steady relationship with the pastor should be maintained so that all in the parish can be close with the pastor and each other.

Feedback about priests at individual parishes:

- The pastor is strong in the faith and available at a moment's notice for any sacramental needs.
- The parish has a strong and solid relationship with its pastor.
- Several parishes expressed a desire for a full-time priest, especially for access to the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confession. One parish only sees their priest ten times a year.
- One parish would like to see more transparency on how decisions are made at their parish, they suggested that sharing the parish council's meeting minutes might be helpful.
- One parish reports that sometimes the homilies are too focused on bad news. They suggest that they could consist instead of a call to action for something positive.
- Another parish says that although they have a married priest with a family, the parishioners have generously given monetary gifts in order to meet the parish's needs and the donations continue to grow each year.

Relationship with the Eparchy

- One parish desires to see more transparency with the Eparchy.
- One parish expressed a desire to see the bishop more often. Another parish appreciates the bishop's visits and is thankful for his attention during his visit.
- There is a question as to why the bishop does not seem to ordain American priests.
- One parish feels that they are in the "wilderness," so to speak, very far removed from the Eparchy. This sentiment can get compounded with a culture of passive-aggression sometimes found in their state, which can affect inner parish conflicts.
- One parish says they do not feel much tangible support from the Eparchy.
- One parish expressed concerns about wanting better communication with the Eparchy, especially concerning the process of finding a priest for their community, feeling that the Eparchy does not seem to prioritize possibilities from their own parish for priests and deacons. An updated comment suggested that they felt more heard in their concerns when the bishop visited not long after their synodal meetings.
- More support is needed from the Eparchy on Young Adult ministry. Virtual networking events could be helpful in breaking geographical isolation.
- A complaint was listed about the donation portals for the Eparchy. Some report difficulties using these portals, and confusion at how to set up monthly payments to the Eparchy that are not indefinite (in case of death).
- One parish gives thanks to the Eastern monastics in the Eparchy.
- One parish says they feel the Eparchy's newspaper, *Horizons*, has gotten more polished, but there aren't enough small news stories about what is immediately happening around the Eparchy. Another parish expressed their appreciation for the Eparchy's publication, *Horizons*.
- One parish asked: In the larger Church and Eparchy, how do we offer repentance for the sins of the Church, and for Church leaders who speak heresy?

Coordinating with other Eastern and Catholic Churches

One parish noted how certain "human" traditions encountered at other Eastern churches in their area has resulted in some confusion. They also spoke of networking with other Eastern churches in their area and that an eparchial newsletter could be sent out containing different events in the area. Interparochial groups would be helpful in connecting the churches that are spread out in their area.

Consideration was given at another parish to building stronger ecumenical relationships with local Orthodox parishes and to having a stronger collaboration with other Byzantine Catholic parishes.

Comments shared

- Don't talk about problems and do not talk to those who cannot solve it. More openness and transparency are needed on all levels of parish life.
- The green Divine Liturgy book is not 'user friendly'. Improvement is needed in providing a book for people to use during the Divine Liturgy.
- There is the issue of the increasing number of aging members in many of our communities.
- One person asked why our Byzantine Catholic Church does not recognize or promote the third order groups like the Roman Catholic Church does, which could further the development of parishioners' relationships with God beyond what the local Church and parish priests does. This was in reference to orders like the Carmelites, Franciscans, Oblates, and Dominicans.
- One parish said that the Synodal process does not involve the scandals of the Church, and the bishops should focus rather on spiritual needs, not earthly ones.

- The pandemic has impaired regular attendance at one of the parishes, which seems to logically follow from a somewhat depressing state of the Church and the world.
- Parishes should network with each other to help parishioners and visitors learn more about the Faith.
- One parish asked whether the eastern churches will allow for a more involved role of women in the liturgical services.
- Some of the changes that the Second Vatican Council implemented or encouraged seem to have harmed the church.
- One parish expressed a generally negative attitude towards those in the hierarchy, while another parish expressed that they feel the hierarchy is changing Church teachings.
- One parish shared concerns about Secularism and Abortion.
- One parish said that they look forward to the time when they can move on from the pandemic and use a common spoon again for the distribution of Holy Communion.

Feedback on Synodal Process

Communities highly appreciated the possibility to be together, to discuss different issues, and to express their critical observations. Distribution of the Beatitudes and the attached comments were highly appreciated and very helpful in guiding the discussions, although some found the inserts to be hard to follow. This format made people feel closer to the Word of God and to the Church. One parish expressed that it was nice to see the Beatitudes included in the Divine Liturgy in place of the antiphons. Another parish said that Pope Francis's letter regarding what it means to be "pure of heart", greatly cleared up some confusions.

One parish said that the synodal process in general has been a good catalyst to start having conversations with strangers in the parish. Another parish had a core group of parishioners who greatly involved themselves in the synodal meetings and who are willing to help the parish grow closer to Our Lord.

A couple of parishes expressed their gratitude to Pope Francis, Metropolitan William, and Bishop Milan for the opportunity to participate in this synod. One of these parishes said that they look forward to future growth coming from these reports.

One parish submitted a report that was largely critical of the synodal process. There were many concerns cited questioning if the synodal way had an agenda to push for changes in the Church. There were many concerns listed such as the following:

- Possible changes to Church doctrine
- Restriction of the Latin Mass
- "Rainbow logo" for the synod
- Pope Francis meeting with people outside the Church
- Abandonment of the Chinese Church
- Bishops not being stronger on Church teaching
- Too much emphasis on intellectual formation of seminarians, six years of education, whereas parishioners would rather see priests who are pious and faithful
- Great fear of the Pope imposing restrictions on celebration of Divine Liturgy
- Wanting the Church to stand stronger on teaching on homosexuality and abortion

Survey Results

Below are the strengths and areas of growth that resulted from the survey that was conducted by Catholic Leadership Institute amongst the faithful of the Eparchy of Parma. The strengths are broken down by the top three *highest* percentages of people who say they strongly agree with a statement, and the top three *highest* percentages of people who participate in a particular activity monthly or more often. The second level, areas of growth or opportunities, indicates the top three *lowest* percentages of people who strongly agree with a statement,

and then the top three *lowest* percentages of people who participate in a particular activity monthly or more often.

Within the Eparchy of Parma, each parish has been instructed to form a team that will assist their priest with analyzing their parish's survey results and feedback from the synodal meetings, and then creating an action plan and goals to grow and strengthen their parish. As an Eparchy, we will also be giving the parishes goals based on the results of the Eparchy as a whole.

Strengths

Top 3 by Highest Percentage Strongly Agree

Belief: Eucharist is body/blood of Christ

☐ Show table



Belief: Scripture is word of God

☐ Show table



Belief: Church critical in relationship with God

☐ Show table



Legend

- I Do Not Know
- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Top 3 by Highest Percentage Monthly or More Often

Frequency: Mass attendance

☐ Show table



Frequency: Individual prayer time

☐ Show table



Frequency: Eucharistic adoration

☐ Show table



Legend

- Never
- Once or Twice a Year
- Quarterly
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily
- ☐ Group Daily, Weekly & Monthly

Opportunities

Top 3 by Lowest Percentage Strongly Agree

Conversations: Sharing personal story

☐ Show table



Conversations: Sharing story of Jesus

☐ Show table



Conversations: Confidence in teachings

☐ Show table



Legend

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Top 3 by Lowest Percentage Monthly or More Often

Frequency: Retreat

☐ Show table



Frequency: Invited another to religious life

☐ Show table



Frequency: Invited man to priesthood

☐ Show table



Legend

- Never
- Once or Twice a Year
- Quarterly
- Monthly
- Weekly
- Daily
- ☐ Group Daily, Weekly & Monthly

With the hope that this synodal process will allow the Church to more faithfully minister to her faithful and spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples, we humbly entrust ourselves and the Eparchy of Parma to the Most Holy Theotokos and St. John the Baptist, our patron.

Given at the Chancery of the Byzantine Catholic Eparchy of Parma of the Ruthenians, Independence, Ohio, on this 2nd day of August, 2022.



Therese Fetsko

Therese Fetsko
Delegate for the Synodal Process
in the Eparchy of Parma

Milan Lach

The Most Reverend Milan Lach, S.J.
Bishop of the Eparchy of Parma of the Ruthenians