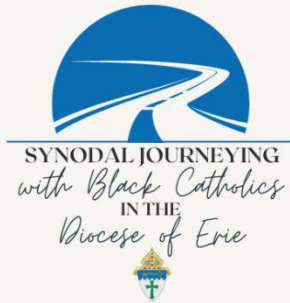


Synodal Style Listening Session: Black Catholics, 6.2.2024 St. Mark Catholic Center, Erie



Background:

This synodal style listening session grew out of a meeting between Bishop Persico and members of the Black Catholic community at which the desire “to know one another better” and develop relationships was expressed. The meeting was positive in tone and the participants were highly committed. Bishop Persico opened by explaining the synodal process in

general and expressing his longstanding goal of meeting members of this subset of his flock.

Introductions:

People shared stories of their experiences growing up as Black Catholics. Many of the stories centered on Immaculate Conception Parish. When Immaculate Conception closed, the Black Catholic community was moved to St. Mary’s. A later restructuring closed St. Mary’s and many parishioners moved to St. Stanislaus although others separated to other parishes. There was a general discussion of how each had come to be here and why those memories and experiences were dear to them.

Many expressed fond and appreciative memories of Fr. Enright, who brought “everything we needed” to church. Immaculate Conception was a small community, but it was close-knit – it felt like a second family. Parents would **bring** children to church rather than **send** them to church. Sharing the parish’s history and the memories of family and church stirred bittersweet emotions among the participants, part consolation and part melancholy with some commenting that recalling these memories made them tearful. One person stated that she had not realized how much she missed that sense of community until they began to share it here.

Question 1: What does it mean to you to be authentically Black and truly Catholic?

Growing up in a Catholic environment with Black heritage expressed in music, food, fellowship, families, revivals, including non-Catholic neighbors was how they were raised in the Church and by their parents, “this is just us.” Some said that they never heard the term “Black Catholic” until they moved out into the world. Many expressed that they simply wanted to be recognized and known as Catholic, not set aside, nor eliciting shock because they are Black and Catholic. A sense of pride and community was expressed when the group shared about the founding families of the parish who were well-known and remembered. The sense was that everything was centered on the Church.

While many positive stories were told, there were also several painful recollections of experiences outside of Immaculate Conception where some encountered less-welcoming parishioners and questions from family members of other faiths about why they were Catholic or belonged to a “white” church. One participant expressed the feeling of being judged for not being “Black enough,” but wore being Catholic as a badge of honor which caused other listeners to fight back tears. Another described the negative attention she received while wearing her Catholic school uniform of which she was proud. She and others were proud of attending Catholic schools. Another person spoke of being the first or only Black Catholic in a parish and feeling invisible or avoided at university and in church.

In the mingled memories of love, faith, affection, pride, disappointment, defensiveness, and exclusion were moments of great consolation of faith and identity as Catholic. The experience of having no connection to a new parish or community left one “with only the faith” depending on faith alone. The desire to hold to the center of the faith was expressed with conviction that going to Mass, listening to God’s Word – “that is what I carry everywhere with me every day.” “I went to get the Body and Blood – that’s why I’m here.” The Eucharist remains at the center.

Question 2: How can the Church better accompany Black Catholics and help all the baptized proclaim the Gospel and alive as community?

Great concern was expressed more in questions than in statements. The community is fading away. How many young people are there to carry on the mission? The youth do not go to church. How can we nurture faith? Some did observe that young families are gathering at some parishes and that there are places in the country with vibrant growing parishes.

Again, the ideas of community and identity were expressed as wanting to not be labeled. “I don’t want to be considered a Black Catholic – I want to dream together. Let’s all have one dream.” The participants want to be part of the conversation. Outreach to the community was praised, but it was expressed that we need to look inward and nurture the parish community also. Some suggested the need to pray for adult children who do not attend church. The group also acknowledged the impact of decreasing numbers of priests.

Welcome or rather the failure to be welcoming is acknowledged with distress. Multiple church closures, being rooted and uprooted magnify this. How do we recognize both the commonalities of our experiences and our uniqueness?

Despite the challenges and frustrations, hope, faith, and gratitude remain. Hope that God is with us on the journey though the journey is not easy. Faith that God is watching over us. Gratitude for the faith that God has given and for parents and priests like Fr. Enright who have nurtured and taught. Attending Mass, listening to the Word of God and receiving the Body and Blood: this is what sustains us through it all.