

Diocese of Portland
Report to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
At the Conclusion of Listening Sessions Held in Lent 2024
Prior to the Second Session of the Synod of Bishops in October 2024

Introduction

The Diocese of Portland was erected on July 29, 1853 and encompasses the entire State of Maine, which has an area of 35,380 square miles (91,633 km²).¹ The diocese, located in the Metropolitan Province of Boston, shares borders with the Diocese of Manchester in the State of New Hampshire and the (arch)dioceses of Sherbrooke, Quebec, Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, Edmundston, and Saint John in the Canadian Provinces of Quebec and New Brunswick. With the exception of a small number of larger cities and towns throughout the state such as Portland, Lewiston, Biddeford, Waterville, and Bangor, most parishes consist of multiple churches serving the faithful in rural communities. Most of the population is centered around the southern part of the state, in particular York and Cumberland Counties. Fishing and agriculture, particularly low-bush blueberry production remain major industries in Downeast Maine, especially in the very rural Washington County. Northern Maine, also rural, is an agricultural hub of the state, particularly for potatoes in Aroostook County. The extensive coastline, lakes, and mountains make tourism a major industry throughout the entire state, hence the nickname found on motor vehicle license plates, “Vacationland.”

In response to the request of Bishop Daniel Flores, Doctrinal Chair of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in his January 2, 2024 letter to all bishops in the country, Bishop Deeley organized three listening sessions throughout the state of Maine during February/March 2024 to assist the work of the Holy Father in the ongoing Synod on Synodality. The first was held in Caribou in Aroostook County, the second was centrally located in Winslow in Kennebec County, and the third was held in southern Maine in Scarborough, a suburb of the city of Portland, which is located in Cumberland County. In addition, there were also written submissions by both individuals and organizations in the State of Maine who wished to have their unique concerns heard by the diocesan bishop.

Bishop Deeley was assisted in facilitating each of the listening sessions by two members of the Chancery staff. Attendance at each of the sessions consisted of lay Catholic men and women, female religious, and local priests, both diocesan and religious. While the events were open to all, the vast majority were people who were ostensibly regular participants in the sacramental life of the church. While no survey was

¹ United States Census Bureau, “State Area Measurements and Internal Point Coordinates, 2010,” < <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/2010/geo/state-area.html> >.

done regarding the age of participants, most in attendance identified themselves over age 60. The number of participants varied in the sessions, with about 20 participants in Caribou, 40 in Winslow, and 95 in Scarborough.

In all three listening sessions, one preliminary question was proposed by the faithful in attendance. "What is the mission of the Church?" The consensus was that the mission of the Church is nothing other than the mandate of Our Lord Jesus Christ, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."²

Common themes from the Questions Proposed

1. Where have I seen or experienced successes—and distresses—within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?

• Successes

- Not getting in the way of the Lord, making Him present, particularly with parishes opening churches for Eucharistic Adoration, was seen as a way to bring people closer to Our Lord Jesus.
- The varied work of Catholic Charities throughout the state was widely acknowledged as a huge success and a powerful witness of the Church to the peripheries.
- The presence of small groups, such as bible studies and other prayer groups was seen as helping parishioners to connect with the Church and deepen their knowledge and practice of the Faith.
- The success of the ministry of the Newman Center at the University of Maine over the course of the last five decades to deepen the faith, participation and devotion of students as they transition into adulthood and family life.
- Parish and diocesan based retreats were identified as a way to reach those who have fallen away from the practice of the faith.
- The success in the positivity of Pope Francis with his emphasis on focusing on the peripheries.
- Bishop Deeley's annual personal presence in parishes celebrating Confirmations and First Communion for our young people throughout the state was seen as an extremely positive example of pastoral solicitude.

• Distresses

- While participants spoke of the prayerful witness and diversity in the men called to be seminarians in the diocese, it was noted that more need to be recruited in the diocese to ensure that the sacraments remain available throughout the state.

² Matthew 28:19-20 (NABRE).

- Acknowledging gratitude for their presence to minister to the people of Maine, some respondents noted that foreign born priests at times might lack a knowledge of the local culture and may also be harder to understand in preaching due to English being their second language.
- Veteran parishioners, some of whom identified themselves as having been young adults during the time period of the Second Vatican Council, reported a disconnect between their pastoral priorities and those of younger priests ordained for the diocese in the last twenty years.
- Difficulties in pastorally bridging the gap between the Church's teaching and changing societal norms, particularly in relation to the cohabitation of men and women outside of marriage and the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and the Church was frequently mentioned.
- Some participants noted that women, while doing the bulk of the work in the church, may not be involved in leadership and decision making roles due to the fact that they cannot be admitted into ordained ministry.
- Some respondents noted that they did not think that the work of promoting peace was addressed frequently enough in parish settings.

2. How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

- While successes were noted in some ministry to new Mainers, some participants noted that multicultural ministry is something that continually needs to be re-evaluated and refined.
- Participants suggested that parishes should not only have a pastoral council on paper, but that they should be utilized by the pastor.
- Some participants called for additional discernment of the benefits and drawbacks of the restored order of Confirmation, in use in the Diocese since 1997.
- Also mentioned by both laypeople and clergy were the possible study of parish clusters taking into account the shift in population southward and decreasing Mass attendance over the last twenty years.

Conclusion

The three listening sessions held in the Diocese of Portland during Lent 2024 provided for a respectful prayerful dialogue with a spirit of *parrhesia*. Many participants expressed a desire for further dialogues such as these be held locally, at both the diocesan and parish levels. As the Diocese of Portland begins to transition to the leadership of a new diocesan bishop this Spring, opportunities may present themselves, both in conjunction with the ongoing worldwide Synod and also with more local matters to assist Bishop James Ruggieri in his new role.