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Update: NCR's survey of US diocese's synod on the family surveys

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NCR Today

In this space last week, I explained how *NCR* and writer Michael O'Loughlin surveyed U.S. dioceses about how they gathered data for the Vatican, which sent a questionnaire to the world's bishops to prepare for an October Synod of Bishops on family life. That research identified 76 dioceses that "publicly and actively" (my words) sought some kind of consultation with their people on these issues and about a dozen dioceses that reported back to the people consulted.

We knew our research wasn't perfect, so I also issued an invitation to readers that if their diocese was not included in our findings but should have been, to please let us know.

Readers let us know quickly that we did miss at least four dioceses that most definitely should be included. Charlotte, N.C., Dubuque, Iowa, Erie, Pa., and Trenton, N.J., were well above average in their outreach to Catholics in their territories, and in reporting back to respondents.

O'Loughlin is working on a follow-up story to update our findings. That will appear in the near future. (As per reader request, we have a report for our Canadian Catholic cousins coming soon, too.)

Until then, I wanted to give you an update on what I am hearing.

I did hear from a few people who said that they were able one way or another to participate, though some had to jump through hoops. Some recounted tales of tracing down diocesan communication directors or family life officers until they found a way to join in. Once they could make comments, they were really glad.

Sr. Kathleen Dietz, FSO, the vice chancellor of Erie, Pa., who along with chancellor Fr. Christopher Singer, was responsible for gathering data in Erie, expressed well how people felt.

"It's like people were saying, 'Wow, we have a chance to speak. Let's do this,' " Dietz told Erie's diocesan newspaper. There was "an immense interest in the topic," she said.

The largest group of readers I heard from were people who were dismayed that their dioceses weren't listed. They would have gladly participated in some kind of consultation, either online or group discussion, but didn't know if their diocese had sought any input. And most of the people I heard from are engaged, practicing Catholics: "I didn't hear anything about the questionnaire even though I am on my parish's pastoral council," a woman from a Western state wrote me.

This woman's diocese -- and still the vast majority of dioceses -- falls into what I call the "shadow category," where we can't figure out what the diocese did. This doesn't mean that the bishop did not consult broadly or that he didn't report back to the people he consulted what he heard, but we can't find any easily, publicly available information that describes the process he used or what he did with the data.

One reader from a Southern state who didn't find his diocese listed called and emailed the chancery to learn what he could. He received an email from a chancery staffer, who informed him that the diocese had a notice on the diocesan website and in the diocesan newspaper "about the plan to survey a large cross section of [the diocese] taking into account state in life, age, sex, ethnicity, ethnic group (communities), geographical location, etc. All in all we had a very thorough, and varied, report to send to the synod."

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The chancery guy told our reader that our research was faulty and asked him, "Why didn't *NCR* just call us and ask what we were doing?" We could have done that, but the point of our exercise was to test the ease of availability.

I did, by the way, go to that diocese's website and newspaper archive: Even knowing I should be able to find something, I couldn't.

Either O'Loughlin or I will update you next week.

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