

SYNOD SUMMARY

PASTORATE OF ST LOUIS & ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

(revised 1/20/23)

INTRODUCTION

Underlying Principles of the Synod Discussions

Our parishes are a part of a global Synod process called for by Pope Francis: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. This process calls for the Catholic Church—at all levels—to engage with Catholics and non-Catholics alike and listen to each other. The aim of the process is to renew our ability to live out our mission and build up our communion in our own particular time and place. As Pope Francis frequently reminds us, synodality is not a one-time event, but an invitation to an ongoing style of Church life.

At the beginning of the synod process, Archbishop Lori encouraged us to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. He said we strive to maintain “*fidelity to the authentic faith of the Church through which we encounter the person of Christ in a real and a living way. . . . Within the household of the faith, there have always been differences of opinion, and there will always be such, until the Lord comes again in glory. Yet, not one of us, from the best-educated to the newest inquirer, is “above” the faith. Rather, all of us must accept it with the childlike simplicity of heart, while remaining alert to the signs of the times.*”

(November 1, 2021, *Catholic Review*)

As Catholics we are all members of the body of Christ, an image that St. Paul often uses (1 Cor 12:27). We begin our journey on the day of our baptism. From that point forward we are all works in progress. None of us loves perfectly, believes perfectly, prays perfectly, or acts perfectly. We are saints in the making!

The Synod Process in Our Parishes

Our two parishes, St. Louis and St. Francis of Assisi, held lay-facilitated synod sessions in February and March of 2022. Parish volunteers wrote down the comments of the synod participants, trying to the best of their ability to capture their major concerns and ideas. In these sessions parishioners and participants shared their life experiences and stories of faith. In doing so, they also expressed a wide variety of comments about the parishes, the Archdiocese, and the Vatican.

Our two parishes held a total of 20 synod sessions over the 2-month period. There were sessions for parishioners at-large, young adults, retirees, teenagers, school parents, and for parents of special-needs children. There were approximately 380 participants.

These comments from the Synod sessions will be used to help guide our parish planning and strategizing for the future.

Three questions were posed to the participants.

- Question 1. What do you find valuable or encouraging in the Catholic Church today?
- Question 2. What do you find discouraging or disheartening in the Catholic Church today?
- Question 3: What do you hope for in the Catholic Church in the future?

MAJOR THEMES

Lay Participation in Parish Life

Parishioners expressed appreciation that the Church actively sought to hear from them by initiating this synod process. Many were happily surprised that the format of the synod sessions gave them real opportunity to offer their insights and thoughts.

Some requested more social opportunities to mingle and meet parishioners. Parishioners were somewhat estranged during the height of the pandemic and now wish to reconnect.

Participants expressed appreciation for the many parish ministries that give them opportunities for involvement in the Mass, in social outreach, and in youth ministry. These are good opportunities for lay participation in the life of the parish. Some expressed a desire to be more involved in the decision-making process regarding management of parish finances and facilities.

Some participants who were members of consulting groups in the parish (pastoral council, finance committee, corporators, school board) noted the importance of these bodies in making their voices heard by the pastor. They said it is important for these bodies to operate effectively, consistently and collaboratively and that their existence and purpose be made known to the laity.

Pastoral Accompaniment and Church Teaching

Ongoing need for Adult Faith Formation opportunities in our parishes, including discussions of the Mass, prayer, and a variety of Church teachings.

Some participants seek greater clarity on Church teaching on human sexuality. They requested more adult-formation and more preaching about the theology of the body, about marriage, and about sexual morality.

Some said the Church is perceived as being judgmental and unwelcoming toward those who experience same-sex-attraction or gender-identity questions. Some asked the Church to be more encouraging to those facing questions related to sexuality and gender. Some parents asked for resources from the Church to help them discuss sexuality and gender-identity with their children.

Some requested more resources for families with children with disabilities. They expressed appreciation for the SPRED faith-formation program at St. Louis for children with disabilities.

Some requested more outreach to Catholics who have experienced divorce. A significant number of parishioners find themselves in this situation and they desire more discussion of how they can relate to the Catholic religion. Some requested that there be a periodic programming for divorced Catholics.

There is a desire to connect more with young parents and families. We want to support them in their vocations as parents and spouses, and deepen their appreciation for Mass.

Participation of Women

Several participants emphasized the importance to honor, invite, and utilize the unique gifts of women in the life of the Church. Some expressed a desire for more female participation in the decision-making process of the Catholic Church. Others requested more discussion of opportunities and roles for women in the Church today.

Some expressed sadness at the decline in religious vocations for women, and asked how we can encourage more young women to enter religious life.

Priesthood and Diaconate

Synod conversations articulated a concern about the number of priests and the impact of the shortage of priests. Many expressed concerns for the health and well-being of their priests, commenting that priests are being asked to do more with less. They also asked how the parishes can better foster vocations to the priesthood.

Some requested more discussion of the Catholic priesthood, to better understand the male priesthood and celibacy. These are countercultural realities today. Why is the priesthood and diaconate reserved to men? How can women serve in the Church? Several expressed gratitude for the parish deacons. We have six deacons between our two parishes.

Abuse Scandal

Many named the sexual-abuse scandal as the most discouraging and disheartening aspect of the Catholic Church today. Some expressed anger and frustration over the response of bishops to the clergy-abuse cases over the past several decades. They acknowledged that the Church is making good efforts to protect children today, but felt betrayed by the poor response in the past.

Some questioned whether the Archdiocese gives proper due process to priests or church employees who are accused of abuse or inappropriate behavior. Some requested that the Archdiocese give better information when a priest is removed from parish ministry.

Church

The Synod Process itself is encouraging. Groups are excited about it and find the process valuable and encouraging. Some noted that, it “seems like the church is losing followers, so it is encouraging that the church is looking for feedback.”

There is tension within the church over how it engages the world. There is polarization over questions of liturgy and morality. Participants expressed a desire for unity in our church while acknowledging the different perspectives.

Many said they value the “adaptability of the church over time.” The church can change, but it is careful and deliberate, and does not bend at every whim.

In nearly every synod session, people emphasized the need to attract young people and young adults to the Church. They acknowledged that many are disconnecting from their Catholic religion. Parishioners acknowledged the hard work of our youth ministers but realize that more needs to be done to remove barriers that exist between young people and the Church. They asked for more efforts to connect with and evangelize young people.

Several teenagers expressed that they struggle with faith in Jesus and the Catholic Church. Several teenagers said they do not understand Catholic teachings concerning human sexuality. Are people who reject Catholic moral teachings welcome in the parish? Can we preach about moral truths in such a way that those who deny the truths can still feel welcomed? Some recognized that the Bible and modern trends are not in sync. They asked for more discussion of the Bible.

Some teens expressed admiration for the charitable work of the Church for the poor and the sick. One said that the Church is an “army for good,” gathering people to pray together and volunteer together. Some said that they are grateful to those parishioners who reach out and encourage young people in our parishes.

Catholic Social Teachings

Many asked for more discussion of and preaching on the social doctrines of the Catholic Church. Overall, participants spoke of the lack of consensus on many social and political issues in society today and their desire for a greater sense of unity in the Church. People want to learn the social teachings, but also fear that the discussion will become overly political and divisive. They note that families and parishes can become divided when discussing social issues.

Participants spoke of the need for the Church to speak up when human rights are threatened. There was disagreement about the extent to which the Church should speak about life issues, and the extent to which Catholic teachings can adapt to societal trends.

Prayer and Worship

As groups shared what they found encouraging or valuable in the Church today, they stated a strong appreciation for its rites, rituals, sacraments, and Mass (“the structure is valuable”). Groups mentioned that they are encouraged that the “Church promotes personal relationship with Christ,” and that regardless of sin, Jesus continues to show us mercy.

Participants expressed a desire to better understand Church teaching and the Sacraments. A substantial number of participants expressed the need for better preaching that shows the connection between faith and life.

Some parishioners requested more Adult Faith Formation opportunities in our parishes. Others were grateful that the parishes consistently offer Bible studies, retreats, and Christ Life programs each year. Some admitted that it is difficult to make time for adult formation because of busy family schedules. There were calls for more support for family and marriage, including through whole family catechesis.

Church Leadership

Some parishioners expressed gratitude to Pope Francis for his emphasis on serving the poor and suffering. Some feel that he creates a culture of welcome in the Catholic Church, and that he emphasizes the core values of love, joy, and hope. Others expressed that the Pope’s public comments sometimes seem ambiguous or confusing concerning Catholic teaching. There was concern that there seems to be a division between some bishops and Pope Francis and that there is contention at higher levels of the magisterium.

Some felt that bishops and priests should take more of a stance and not be afraid of making waves by preaching the parts of the Gospel that are countercultural.

Some asked for more diversity in Church leadership (laity, gender, and cultural communities) in the Archdiocese and in the Vatican.