

Official and Final Synthesis of the Synodal Listening Sessions of the Catholic Community @ Stanford

February-March 2022: Dated 4/2/22

1 Where and how do you personally experience Church today?

Community of Belonging

1. Participants cited diverse pathways to the Church: born Catholic; raised/schooled Catholic; college experiences; marriage, friendships; work colleagues; their own spiritual curiosity.
 - Some: Some nostalgia for the Church of childhood and adolescence where the K-12 “Catholic cohort” defined for them what it means to be a Catholic: e.g., youth groups and extracurriculars activities reinforced collective and personal Catholic identity.
 - Several: Several mention that the Church community is an essential to their family life.
 - Several: Importance of finding support and care in secular communities (like Stanford) where your religion may be attacked.
 - Individual: Catholic Community @ Stanford is a haven and shelter, especially in the choir community.
2. Most: One common theme: the attraction of a safe, loving, welcoming, supportive and unified community...but some question if it’s still the case in the Church broadly.
 - Many: The Church at its best is like an extended family with a same sense of belonging.
3. Most: High quality liturgy, music and singing also make a positive difference.
 - Many: Attending daily Mass and other faith-building activities deepens connection.
 - Several: Finding the same liturgies and scriptures in use around the world gives a sense of stability and peace.
4. Some: Participating in ministry activities and weekly small groups as well as volunteering with peers strengthens faith.
 - Some: Rediscovering or reaffirming Catholic connections in a small faith group with mentors is more important than parish-centered efforts to reach out to them
5. Several: Sharing sacraments, sharing faith stories and “*bearing each other’s burdens*” strengthened their faith in times of doubt
6. Several: The Church has survived for two thousand years by being a “community of many communities,” necessarily involving a nuanced tolerance of diverse viewpoints even on matters once deemed decided; for many of them, this is a good thing, for some others, this cuts deeply against their sense of stability, peace, and togetherness.

Challenges

7. Many: The Church that formed us as children does not speak to us as adults or with one voice, which results in passive participation at best, abandonment at worst.
8. Public and post-secondary schooling and working and socializing with persons of other faiths (and no faiths) have challenged Catholic group identity and can trigger a need to find one's own way to the faith in adulthood.
9. Some: While a strong "Catholic family" inculcated a common value system and strengthened Church bonds, those values and bonds have often eroded after leaving home as the Catholic life was self-segregating and then a wider world of possibilities and different thinking beckoned.
10. The Church's initial embrace of Vatican II kept many in the faith, but now several sense there are forces in the Church steadily moving away from that Vatican II causing divisions and leading to confusion and rancor.

Synodal Process

11. Many: This synodal process has already made a positive impact, opening the doors to listening and renewal in a manner never experienced in our lifetimes.
12. Many: Refreshing to many that we can acknowledge and talk about not only the Church's strength and joys but also its imperfections and problems, as well as possible improvements and reforms that build on a Christ-like faith.

Question 2: What joys do you experience?

1. Most: Finding a community that loves unconditionally, and is welcoming, caring, attentive and forgiving, is a special joy for many.
2. Many: Many feel how the Church enters our lives sacramentally and as a community are sources of some of the happiest and most important moments for them. These experiences provide strength and hope when we feel most limited and vulnerable; participating in the Mass, music and ministries also comforts their souls.
3. Many: Many appreciate how the Church leads us both in how to live and how to die; feeling "ready to go home" to God is beautiful.
4. Many: Many found the sacrament of the sick and traditions around death comforting and helpful.
5. Many: Many cite finding joy in small faith group praying and sharing together, although some find such sharing difficult.
6. Many: Many cite the help the Church provides in raising a family and in knowing other families that think alike.

7. Many: Many appreciate Pope Francis's openness to non-Catholics, care for the planet and marginalized peoples, and his core message of inclusivity.
8. Many: The Church's social teachings on human dignity and social justice enlighten the world and warm the hearts of many participants.
9. Some: Some cite the comfort of knowing you are not alone and can find others with a common outlook on fundamentals who also follow Jesus and will walk with you on your faith journey.
10. Some: For others, knowing you can show up no matter what you have done and be welcomed in the Church's "big tent" is a source of great joy.
11. Some: Some are inspired by people being open and honest, working to "connect the dots" in their lives with something deeper within themselves.
12. Some: Some feel joy when they sense that the Church knows its job is to proclaim the truth, and does so with consistent apologetics and theology
13. Several find joy in realizing the people around them are also striving for a closer relationship with God; helping others grow closer to God and seeing the impact.
14. Several: Sharing with others in the liturgy and common prayers: e.g., rosary and adoration.
15. Several: Several mention being able to find the same Mass and other Catholics anywhere in the world regardless of language or cultural barriers.
16. Several: The availability of 1:1 spiritual direction is a real blessing; finding priests who are approachable and comforting.
17. Several: Several cite getting to know people from many different backgrounds and generations who experience the same or different joys, struggles and hardships.
18. Several: Others note how they enjoy socializing with persons with similar values and following up socially after services.
19. Several: Several mentioned the comfort of having a community to fall back on, where you can learn more about yourself.
20. Several: Find joy in the Church's rich intellectual tradition.
21. Several like when the Church shifts from a focus on rules, penance, and damnation to an emphasis on being present to God and God's presence with us.

Question 3: What difficulties and obstacles have you encountered? What are your insights?

1. Many: COVID seriously disrupted the full Church community experience for many participants in the listening sessions, and this loss of contact in turn has made it harder to re-connect.

2. Many: Being open about your faith experience inside the Church setting is not easy for many amid conflicting views in the Church about the role and value of tradition if it shuts down discussion of newer viewpoints.
3. Many: Seeing good people publicly turned away or shunned by Church application of highly selective criteria is painful to many participants.
4. Many: Many want the Church to be more focused on the concerns of its younger generations.
5. Many: The Church is big enough for all of us if it can meet the challenge of making this real.
6. Some: Some have found divisions and gossip in some parishes make it difficult to attend Mass.
7. Some: There is a hope that the Church will share some characteristics of 12-step programs: united in our brokenness, we share the truth about ourselves and are accepted unconditionally, and we leave other matters (i.e., politics) outside.
8. Several: Several persons regret that too many Catholics divide themselves with fences/silos. The Catholic Community at Stanford is trying to break these down.
9. Several: Several want the Church to undertake a high-level study to understand why people are leaving the Church or losing their faith, especially the young, and what those so doing are finding valuable in what the world has to offer that they don't find in the Church, and where the Church is failing to respond to its members needs and hopes.
10. The Church should provide more support for those struggling with conflicts between their life situations and their faith, with more emphasis on grass-roots level pastoral engagement rather than hierarchical structures and pronouncements.

Clerical Authority

11. Some: Some are also troubled by priests who see their roles as authoritarian not pastoral, or do not lead the parish to become a community with agency.
12. Some: Some view Church hierarchy and bureaucracy as hypocritical, out of touch with real lives and human struggles, and lacking in credibility and trustworthiness; this now can be the "price to pay" for sticking with the faith.
13. Some: Some sense it's hard for priests to counsel families with major difficulties because they do not live in a family setting and can't relate to family issues.
14. Some: There is a tendency of Church leadership to shut down discussion of moral issues. With its "just say no" stance on divorce/remarriage, in vitro fertilization, and contraception, the Church has denied itself any credible opportunity to articulate guidance on nuanced moral issues involved with such matters -- either for the world at large, or for Catholics who struggle through them.

15. Individual: One person urges the laity to claim authority, not wait for bishops to grant it.
16. Some: Some believe that the Church should be one place where we feel the safest to express our deepest selves, but it often turns out to be the opposite.

Liturgy

17. Many: Many believe we must do better in how we treat non-Catholics; one was heartbroken when non-Catholics at a family wedding were denied Communion.
18. Many *Catholic Community @ Stanford* catechetical students find the Mass more available to mature adults and the very young than to teens.
19. Some: Some find the Mass overly ritualized and hard to comprehend except for the homily and Communion.
20. Some: Some find the Mass can be isolating: one can attend without actually ever speaking to anyone.
21. Some: Some find it hard for those who do not speak the vernacular to understand and fully appreciate the Mass.
22. Some: Some say virtual settings work better for morning and evening prayer than for Mass.
23. Several: Several note that Latin Masses and Gregorian chant are disconnected from reality and do not build a sense of community; for some others, they provide continuity with Church tradition and personal comfort.
24. Several: Religious aesthetics vary widely in Catholic churches, making it hard for some to find the right fit particularly from a traditional background.
25. Individual: One person senses that Mass feels more like self-worship than God-worship: more picnic than piety.
26. Individual: One person struggled to find reverent liturgical expression anywhere in the Church in Northern California.
27. Individual: On an individual level, there is a concern about denial of Communion on the tongue to Catholics who have formed a sincere belief that using the hand is wrong.
28. Some: An “imposter syndrome” affects some: “Am I religious enough; am I Catholic enough?”

Power & Politics: Role of Bishops

29. Many: The increased identification with partisan political movements and platforms on the part of Church hierarchy and Church-related interest groups troubles many and is leading some to distance themselves from identifying with the Church both internally and externally.

30. Some: Some observed that the proposed Communion ban on President Biden and other Catholic public officials was a bad idea, and although the Church should forcefully participate in the public debate on moral issues, its power and money must no longer be used by bishops to tell Catholics how to vote or govern.
31. Several: There were several expressions that the Church has abused its power – political, financial, moral – and needs to become more humble and welcoming.
32. Several: Several believe the Church should not be promoting a “Catholic vote.”
33. Several: Several feel that the Church should stay out of partisan political relationships to the extent possible: USCCB and individual bishops may think they can achieve Church objectives by delivering politicians a “Catholic vote” but the reality often can be the other way around and embarrass the Church.
34. Several: The power of money in the Church is scandalous to several participants who sense that big dollars talk on some Church policies.
35. There is a view that paternalism in the hierarchy and homophobia at the Church doors are a very problematic combination.

Sexual Abuse

36. Many: Many want to see a Church that acknowledges its wrongdoings, as well as related cover-ups done to avoid institutional “scandal” at the price of true accountability and justice for its victims, and becomes a world leader for social justice for the powerless.
 - Many: Many emphasized that the Church’s grave sexual abuse of children, as well as its mistreatment of indigenous and out-of-wedlock children, seriously undermine its moral credibility and will be an existential threat to the Church’s stability and unity until they are fully acknowledged, and amends are made.
 - Many: The sexual defilement of children by priests and the cover up by bishops constitute a torpedo amidship to the Church’s moral credibility and authority
 - Many: The Church has not faced publicly the problem of sexual abuse: on what grounds are young men admitted to the seminary; what is their training and their support when isolated in parishes?
37. Many: There is a sense that underestimating the impact of these scandals has led the Church to adopt ‘corporate’ style policies to ‘contain’ them, which have essentially failed to stem the defections from the Church community.
38. Some: Promises of “zero-tolerance” for future abuses are not seen by participants as accompanied by fundamental institutional change.
39. Some: There is awareness of recent moves toward more acknowledgement, contrition and transparency -- but at times under legal compulsion.

40. Some: Some want the Church to counter the constant negative news about the abuse scandal by publicly highlighting the Church's social, humanitarian, and other charitable involvements and successes.
41. Some: Some suggest steps must now include an open and unrestricted examination, led by competent lay persons, of how these scandals happened, with public accountability for those complicit, seminary reforms and new policies to prevent recurrence and restore confidence that the Church can police itself and will cooperate with civil authorities.
42. Individual: One person who grew up in a Polish household knows his many cousins had long kept two pictures prominently on their home walls: the first Catholic US President and the first Polish Pope; but the one of John Paul II has come down, because the Church failed to account for its child abuse on his watch.

Sexuality & LGBTQ

43. Teachings on contraception seem to be based on one particular interpretation of natural law and miss a lot of what sexuality is all about.
44. Many: Many want the Church to rethink and reform the acceptance of homosexuals as fully functioning men and women, and to open the way for divorced persons to be full communicants.
45. Many: Patriarchy, hierarchy, homophobia, not ordaining women, considering homosexuality disordered-- all present obstacles to many in the faith.
46. Many: There is also concern that same sex couples could be excluded from attendance at Catholic weddings.
47. Many: There is much concern about reluctance in the Church to hear and understand the experience of divorced/remarried and LGBTQ persons, and their exclusion from Communion and other sacraments, as well as exclusion of LGBTQ persons as employees or beneficiaries of Church charities and social service organizations like schools, hospitals and adoption / foster care agencies.
48. Many: There are widespread and deep concerns about political / financial support from Church officials and Church-related groups in support of discrimination against LGBTQ persons in private housing, employment and personal services in the name of asserting Catholic religious liberty.

“The Teachings”

49. Many: Many are disturbed by general resistance to change in the Church, and patterns in its decisions of form over substance (“We baptize” vs “I baptize” deemed to nullify baptism); secrecy over transparency (sexual abuse scandals); enforcing rules over practicing compassion (multiple examples).

50. Many: There is a palpable yearning for a Church united in shared faith and unconditional love.
51. Many: Many participants are troubled when fellow Catholics assume everyone thinks the way they do and don't allow for different opinions: this leads them to feel they must be careful what they say in Catholic company.
52. Some: Some feel the Church should be where they are most free to express ourselves, but often it's where they are least free.
53. Some: Some participants recall approvingly that at Vatican II, while some saw Church tradition as unchangeable, many more saw the Church as a pilgrim church changing over time.
54. Some: Some also seek more theological explanations from the pulpit about the Church's difficult concepts, like the resurrection of the body and issues around infant baptism.
55. Some: Some worry that expressing their doubts may discourage others in their faith, and others fear being vulnerable so they opt to keep their problems to themselves because of how others may react.
56. Some: Sustaining teaching in a religious school when divisiveness exists within the Church can be difficult for some participants.
57. Individual: There was one expression that the Church's embrace of science and technology is a divisive rather than unifying development, harming the faith.

Theological Basics vs. Adapting to the Times (includes Social Teaching of the Church)

58. Some: Some are of the view that the Church needs to "get back to basics" and purge seminaries of teachers that "water down" the Gospel: i.e., Jesus was "a nice guy".
59. Some: Some participants are troubled by their perception that the Church is failing to clearly affirm and promote its fundamental tenets and protect its traditions in both Church policies and in the public square.
60. Some: Some think the Church has been too accommodating to what the contemporary world values and not firm enough in expressing and enforcing the Church's core tenets and tradition and wants the Church not to "cater to modernity" but find ways to loving even if that love is hard to appreciate.
61. Some: Some perceive that modern social trends are impinging on the Church's values; that there has been too much accommodation to the secular world, too much change too quickly under Pope Francis; and that too often bishops disagree with one another and lead Catholics astray.
62. Some: Some object that the Church is paying too much attention to social trends to the detriment of its own values and priorities.

63. Some: Others want to see more attention paid to social issues, including to matters of environmental justice and increasing income disparity along racial, ethnic and gender lines.
64. Several: Several are very troubled when they sense that Church officials and policies do not in practice observe those long-standing teachings even within the Church's own sphere and want to see the Church acknowledge and fix this disconnect.
65. Several: Several also urge the Church to revive the Spirit of inclusiveness and engagement with the modern world and the "signs of the times" as in Vatican II.
66. Several: Several discern and regret of a lack of empathy among some Catholics who are being too judgmental about the character of other Catholics.
67. Individual: One comment cites a contemporary tendency to define "love" as whatever makes people feel good rather than the higher ideal of love as overriding the salvation of the beloved's soul, which depends on them knowing and following God's truth as defined by the Church: better to go for the "1 and leave the 99".

Women's Role

68. Many: The relative position of women in the Church is a major concern of many participants who do not understand why they are excluded from ordination and why all positions of ultimate Church authority are reserved to male clerics, and how the example set by such Church policies also adversely affects the treatment of women in society generally.
 - Many: Many also expressed that Church authorities must reassess their concept of women, expressed in terms usually confined to the "mother" imagery, which leaves many women out of the picture to begin with.
 - Many: Given that we need more priests desperately, many urge the Roman Church should immediately cease applying two sex-related criteria gender and marital status – as absolute barriers to Holy Orders, as if the Church thinks God somehow lacks power to call a woman or married individual to a priestly vocation.
 - Some: Some see no excuse for the Church not taking full advantage of the demonstrated capacity of women to organize, grow and sustain other communities.
 - Several: Several find that the Church's policies of excluding women from positions of authority and from Holy Orders of authority are astounding in this day and age: is there another major institution where the final authority on all issues is male?
69. Some: There are some others who are scandalized by the idea of women priests.

70. Some: Some are even not clear that the Church leadership actually agrees that men and women are created equal, and sense that some still believe that women are naturally designed for supportive and subordinate Church roles, to which certain exceptions may be made while ultimate power is fully reserved to men.
71. Several: Several participants see three fundamental changes as necessary: (1) start recognizing and listening to women and no longer keep them away from positions of ultimate authority; (2) change the Church's view of sexuality to become more understanding and welcoming; (3) no longer limit the laity to paying bills and making cookies, and acknowledge that laity are capable of holiness and leadership.

Question 4: What are your dreams/visions for our Church in the future?

Participants in the listening sessions express heartfelt hopes and dreams for the Church's future from diverse perspectives but with a common yearning for unity in a growing faith; envision a Church . . .

1. experiencing a Pentecostal renewal helping people to fire-up their faith
2. where everyone contributes, goes to Mass and engages with passionate energy
3. where more small groups are developed for prayer, mutual support, inspiration
4. reconnecting, renewing and extending the Spirit of Vatican II, starting with this new and universal synodal experience where the laity's voice counts
5. becoming a more welcoming, positive and inclusive Church: more Christ-like
6. that understands that the word "catholic" means "universal" and teaches and acts accordingly: where Catholics can be of different and loyal stripes, and other religions follow our example and radiate Christ's values at their core
7. that believes and lives the reality we were taught in our first catechism: that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, including those we now selectively exclude from full unity with our community
8. that has come to terms with and embraces its inherent diversity and works with its internal divisions in a positive and healing manner
9. that recaptures its earliest understanding of its mission to serve all people with openness to the Spirit of unconditional love as Jesus taught
10. that is grateful for and inspired by Pope Francis' love of all humanity and follows his lead, rather than one which features high level officials and well-funded interest groups that attack his personal and doctrinal integrity
11. with more diverse voices and official leadership than just male clerics

12. that embraces a completely new understanding and appreciation of the equality of women before God, and their fitness for the priesthood as well as leadership at the highest levels of authority
13. that allows and promotes the vocations of women to the diaconate and the priesthood
14. where a grandmother can be assured that her granddaughter could be ordained if that were to be her true vocation
15. that others see as a way of life not just a set of rules
16. that is not moved by contemporary modernist culture, but instead moves the culture toward what the Church knows is true and good, and does not diminish its values by being too accommodating to the world
17. that aspires and inspires to higher ideals (like holy purity) and takes a stronger pro-life stand especially on secular campuses
18. that recognizes our sinful unworthiness and is joyful that Christ has redeemed us by his death; a community of persons willing to die for their faith, holds to its traditions about its sacraments and core values
19. where we cease hearing “I disagree with your view, so God does not love you” or “whatever you are doing is probably OK” – and that finds a pathway between condemning on sight and waffling on morals
20. where Pope Francis is understood to be taking 2,000 years of thinking and history and bringing it to bear on modern problems –which does not mean he is bowing to modernity
21. that understands that there is no inherent conflict between tradition and modernity: any tradition is essentially a once-modern thought that has stuck around; Jesus synthesized the ancient prophecies with exceptionally fresh insight: that’s why we still call His gospel story the *New Testament* – the *Good News*.
22. that confronts and speaks to racism, income inequality and financial avarice, as well as the degradation of God’s environment as forcefully as it does on sexual matters and reproductive practices
23. that holds open its most holy and healing sacrament to all Catholics who seek the Eucharist in good faith and conscience
24. that does not discriminate against LGBTQ persons by virtue of their status as such, either in the Eucharist and the sacraments or in employment in Church charities and services; and does not encourage public authorities to authorize private discrimination against persons in same sex marriages
25. that stays out of partisan politics and identity to the fullest extent possible
26. where we can be open and honest with each other about our faith
27. that relies less on power and majesty and more on persuasion and example

28. where every member can have a close relationship with a priest; that meets its people where they live and struggle; engages other religions in new conversations focusing on common values; and helps all Christians to bridge wide differences in inclusiveness, tolerance and what it means to be good.
29. a Church that acknowledges its wrongdoings, as well as related cover-ups done to avoid institutional “scandal” at the price of true accountability and justice for its victims, and becomes instead a world leader for social justice for the powerless.
30. that understands how lately it has become hard to talk to each other both in society and in the Church as well, and that can take a “time out” to listen and share the hope in this new synodal process
31. that has joint religious services with different Christian denominations, but also with Jewish and Muslim communities; need to bring the world together in the quest for God’s Will for the world and brings religious communities together to build that world.
32. that takes full advantages of functioning both globally and locally, and understands how true synodality inherently empowers local voices not only to lead their own community’s renewal but also to inform the global Church’s vision of humanity and openness to new thinking about how best to serve the Lord’s purposes

Question 5: Are there any aspects of the Church’s evangelizing mission that you would like to see?

Ecumenical & Inter-Faith

1. Many: Many seek a Church that engages other religions in new conversations focusing on common values and helps all Christians to bridge wide differences in inclusiveness, tolerance and what it means to be good.
2. Many: Many see the need to bring the world together in the quest for God’s Will for the world.
3. Many: Our community and country are drastically lacking in empathy for our brothers and sisters no matter their religion.
4. Some: Some would like the Church on occasion to have joint religious services with different Christian denominations as well as with Jewish and Muslim communities.
5. Some: Some believe the voices of those who would strictly enforce discriminatory rules are often what non-Catholics hear as emblematic of the Church’s values, and it drives them away; but others assert those rules are indeed emblematic of the Church’s commitment to truth: this split clearly needs to be addressed.
6. Some: Seeing good people publicly turned away or shunned by Church application of highly selective criteria is painful to many participants.

7. Individual: One person responds as follows: Given that a majority of American Catholics recently polled do not believe in the real presence, do not think it is morally wrong to use contraception, are supportive of the ordination of women, think abortion and same-sex marriage should be legal, and don't believe homosexual behavior is morally wrong (despite the fact that the official Catholic position is the reverse of all these), then there seems to be something that needs to be discussed. I would stay right where I am in The Episcopal Church, and I would not consider conversion. Society needs a charitable Christian moral anchor to help guide it.

New Evangelization (no mention)

Question 6: How do you value the Church's social mission to care for the poor and marginalized, as well as its efforts to address poverty and social change?

Social Justice & Care of the Planet

1. Many: Many students and others appreciate Pope Francis's openness to non-Catholics, care for the planet and marginalized peoples, and his core message of inclusivity.
2. Many: The Church's social teachings on human dignity and social justice enlighten the world and warm the hearts of many participants.
3. Many: Many want to see more attention paid to social issues, including to matters of environmental justice and income disparity along racial, ethnic and gender lines.
4. Many: Many want minorities to feel they have a place in the community.
5. Many: Many believe the Church should be known as a Church for the poor: its wealth is sunk too deeply into expensive architecture, communion vessels, and vestments, when it should be serving a higher purpose.
6. Many: Many desire a Church with a more frontline presence in issues of social justice: immigration, disaster relief, refugee crisis.
7. Many: Many want the Church to encourage mass action with regards to ending the death penalty and stopping climate change.
8. Many: Many feel the Church must renew and redouble its core emphasis on love and human dignity by more actively responding to society's focus on social justice, and by making amends for its wrongdoings.
9. Many student teens value the Church's social mission to:
 - i. help people with mental challenges who are marginalized
 - ii. help prisoners to rehabilitate and reintegrate
 - iii. work to improve facilities for the disabled

- iv. address the issue of poverty and income inequality
 - v. work with gangs and homeless persons
 - vi. create outreach projects for youth to help others
10. Several: Several are very troubled when they sense that Church officials and policies do not in practice observe its long-standing social teachings on justice and dignity even within the Church's own sphere of activities and want the Church to acknowledge and fix this disconnect.