



June 2, 2022

My dear parishioners of Our Lady of the Lake:

From February through May of 2022, our parish, like parishes and Catholic Communities all over the world, conducted local listening sessions for the *Synod on Synodality* which is being promoted by Pope Francis and the Vatican. Our faith tells us that the Holy Spirit works through all of us. Every Catholic holds a piece of the puzzle regarding living and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the goal of this Synod is to listen to all persons interested as to how we, as a universal and local Catholic Church, can better engage in the Mission established by Our Lord.

According to the Holy Father's plan, we encouraged the conversations to be candid (and even blunt) so as to express concerns and opinions freely. Such open dialogue leads to trust and even greater understanding of the concerns of parishioners. It also helps our parish lay leadership, our staff, and me, the Pastor, to know what will be important for us to explore in our parish in the coming months and years.

Attached is a summary of the comments made. These summaries were submitted to the Archdiocese of Portland, which is compiling all the comments of participating groups. These will be sent to the Vatican via the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

A concern of mine was that, even though those involved were totally engaged in the process, the numbers of participants were a mere fraction of all parishioners. Why did so few participate? Conjecture might be that perhaps the term "Synod" is unfamiliar, and parishioners were not sure what it was they were being asked to do. Some may have stayed home because they did not believe that their comments would matter in the grand scheme of things. But it is my plan, and that of the OLL Pastoral Council, that our parish will develop an annual routine of encouraging an ongoing "synodal process" in the form of town hall meetings and other kinds of listening sessions so that more parishioners will become engaged in the process of seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance in our Church's response to Jesus' call to build the Reign of God.

Thank you to all who participated, and may the Holy Spirit guide Our Lady of the Lake Parish in its service to the mission of Jesus our Savior.

Your brother in Christ,

Rev. John Kerns
Pastor

Synod Synthesis

Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church

Lake Oswego, OR

General Comments

Parishioners at Our Lady of the Lake (OLL) recently participated in a series of listening sessions as part of the Synod on Synodality. This is a process initiated by Pope Francis in October 2021, in which parishes were asked to reflect on the journey of the Catholic Church in the hopes of strengthening her mission and growing in participation. We met on four separate occasions between February 12 and March 6, 2022 to discuss the questions laid out by the Archdiocese of Portland and had constructive dialog at each event. This document aims to summarize the views, concerns, and feedback provided at these sessions.

It's important to note that the comments and feedback provided in this report were made in regard to the "broader Church" and not specifically directed towards the programs, leadership or operations at OLL. In fact, session participants voiced unanimous support for our Pastor, our Parochial Vicar, our Deacon, and our Parish Staff.

The one message that came across loud and clear was that the Church must change. This is crucial and cannot be ignored. Overall, there was a palpable, almost desperate, appeal for change; that what we are doing is "not working;" which was almost immediately followed by comments of disappointment that loved ones are no longer practicing the faith.

There was a huge frustration that "rules seem to matter more than relationships;" a sense that our Church "judges - not loves." A sense that there are so many nuances with the implementation of Church policy that consistency becomes impossible. Church policy can also lead to sacramental experiences that are more bureaucratic than spiritual. There was also a feeling of frustration amongst lay people who fear an opportunity to "tell their story" of how the Catholic faith is essential to their lives because they can't answer the Catholic-specific criticisms, defend inconsistencies and convey policy nuances, making lay evangelization very difficult.

Many participants encouraged the Church to walk a path that works better in today's world, to connect and extend messages of hope to others, and to listen to their concerns. The Church should continue to strive to build a warm and welcoming community. We see opportunities for the Catholic Church to be a beacon of light for a troubled world but are concerned that certain stances of the Church alienate and separate many from the faith.

Finally, across the sessions many respondents felt unprepared and, therefore, unable to defend their faith and to evangelize. They understand the importance of doing both but feel handicapped due to insufficient or poor catechesis. Since this is so fundamental to our role as Catholic Christians in general, and a priority for the Archdiocese, there is a clear need to address those feelings of inadequacy. There were any number of suggestions offered, including "how to" small group sessions. Respondents wanted practical help.

QUESTION #1 Feedback (What in Church fills me with life? How is the Holy Spirit at work?)

So many aspects of the Catholic Church inspire, encourage, and fill us with life. “The treasures of my faith are an endless source of comfort and new life” was a quote from one participant. Sacraments, liturgy, prayer disciplines and devotionals, the lives of the saints, and Mass rituals were all identified as times when we feel the Holy Spirit at work - nudging us on our faith journey and opening doors to community engagement and service.

Church Involvement. Many participants spoke of the fulfillment they experienced when they actively participated in Mass through a ministry such as music ministry, liturgical ministry, or as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. They also stressed the importance of community and faith sharing through our retreat programs (especially ACTS), small groups and bible studies, and outreach programs (such as Mercy Teams), Knights of Columbus, and St Vincent de Paul).

Response to COVID. COVID presented many challenges for the Church, but she responded with online Mass options, successful podcasts (like the Bible in a Year), and an uptick in attendance at our parochial school. Many used this opportunity to learn more about scripture and our Catholic faith. Saint Mother Teresa said, “without silence, you can’t hear God.” COVID gave many an opportunity to slow down and listen to the Holy Spirit more purposefully. One participant explained that DOGS (Disciples of God’s Spirit) gave him the consistency and life affirming solace he needed during the pandemic.

Unfortunately, many parishioners also have left the Church and have not returned since our mandates were lifted.

Sharing the Faith. The importance of community was stressed throughout our sessions. St Francis said we need to “preach the gospel; if necessary, use words.” As a Catholic community, we need to understand how Jesus loves so we can share that love with others. Catholics don’t talk about Jesus enough. We should ask ourselves, “What are we doing in our lives to bring Christ to others?”

We trust that the Church is the greatest force for good that has ever been, and the presence and leadership of Pope Francis has been a beacon of hope and love.

Including and Educating Youth. As we hope to rebuild our Church and allow the Holy Spirit to work through us, we immediately think of our young people. Passing on our Faith to children and families is so important. Witnessing children participate during Mass, partake in the sacraments of Baptism and First Holy Communion, and become part of our parish community all demonstrate the Continuity of Faith. As we look at how to better educate our children, we should consider teaching them the biblical foundation of each sacrament, for example. If our young people have a better understanding of the history and teachings of the Church, they wouldn’t go off to other faiths to find something more biblical.

Spiritual Growth. In summary, we see our faith journey as both singular and plural. While evangelizing others, especially our youth, is what we are called to do, we must also continue to nurture our own faith through attending Mass, daily prayer, adoration of the Eucharist, and community. When we learn alongside others, our spiritual growth deepens at both a personal and communal level.

QUESTION #2 Feedback (What experiences of the Church have brought Joys or revealed Wounds?)

As we reflect on the joys and wounds we have experienced through our journey as members of the Catholic Church, there was a sense that there is SO MUCH GOOD the Church has to offer through the beauty of her sacraments and the grace of the Lord's forgiveness. This is sadly juxtaposed with a feeling that our rules tend to push people away rather than welcome them into our community.

Sacraments. Many of us find joy in the sacraments of the Church. Whether experiencing our own or supporting the sacramental journey of others, these moments bring us together as a community and closer to our Lord and Shepherd, Jesus Christ. "The traditions of the Church are fabulous," one parishioner contributed, and another called the sacraments a "beacon of joy."

Homilies. Homilies also bring great joy to parishioners. At Our Lady of the Lake, we are blessed with a gifted orator and loving pastor. His homilies are honest, personal and connect with parishioners. His words come from a place of love, forgiveness and holiness that encourage each of us to grow in relationship with Christ. These inspirational moments elevate the Mass experience and fill us with the love of the Holy Spirit.

Church Ministries. Retreats, bible studies, prayer groups and liturgical ministries all bring us closer to God and in deeper communion with our Catholic brothers and sisters. Sharing the faith with others and growing as a faith community brings joy to each participant. Our outreach ministries, including Mercy Teams & St Vincent De Paul, provide parishioners with joyful opportunities to give of their time in service to others. One parishioner summarized the cyclical joy of volunteering by sharing that, "the happiest people give to others, and are given even more happiness in return."

Weddings & Funerals. Weddings & Funerals can bring both joy and reveal wounds. While they provide an opportunity to share our faith and traditions with others, they may also create a deeper divide amongst those who cannot fully participate in the service based on their sexual preference, a past divorce or their departure from the Church. This pain can cloud a deeply religious event with the feeling that not all loved ones are welcome. We may understand that gays/lesbians cannot be married in the Church but how family members should respond to these marriages seems contrary to Christ's fundamental message to love.

Under-served Communities. One individual spoke of Pope Francis' reference to the Church as a field hospital caring for the sick. We are all sinners in need of healing. There are many groups who feel wounded by how the Church addresses (or doesn't address) their needs. They include divorced Catholics, women unable to serve in leadership roles within the Church, parishioners suffering post-abortion trauma, and members of the LGBTQ community. For these communities and their loved ones, it can feel as though the Church is more focused on establishing and enforcing rules rather than following Christ's example and caring for the sinners and societal fringes.

Concerns for the Church. There was concern expressed that the Church's "business model" seems broken when we look at declining attendance and vocations. Young people leaving the Church often feel we are hypocritical given the continuing revelations of priest sex abuse scandals, and what appear to be exclusionary practices. Some participants voiced pain that our Church does not take a more public stance on global atrocities and felt we should be more active in fighting for Human Rights and equality.

Even amongst more active and practicing Catholics, there are many rules that tend to feel contradictory. The Church's stance on contraception, for example, is hard to comply with or understand, leaving many otherwise "good Catholics" feeling hypocritical. These hypocritical feelings stifle full engagement with our faith and cloud a much more important priority of growing in relationship with Christ.

QUESTION #3 Feedback (What steps is the Holy Spirit inviting us to take?)

We feel an urgency to respond to callings of evangelization, education, and engagement. Outreach was also a major theme discussed throughout our sessions. This includes reaching out to the young, disenfranchised, lonely, **and** the faithful. We are all God's children and should have a place at His table.

Family. The education, evangelization, and retention of young people was a major topic in our discussions. While the world around us has changed dramatically over the last 50+ years, the structure of our religious education programs has not. Since they are so vital in delivering Christ's message to our youth, we need to examine their effectiveness. For example, parents don't know how to talk to their children about God. Sending kids to Catholic school isn't enough, and today's adults have been inadequately catechized. We need to invest in families.

We believe the Church can do more to support parents (and God/grandparents) in passing the faith to their children, discussing tough cultural issues (same sex marriage; sex outside of marriage), furthering their own faith journey through continuous education programs for parents that coincide with their children's catechesis, and providing a positive environment for their children to learn about God's love.

We also believe a greater focus on the Holy Spirit – **Catholics know OF God but do not KNOW God** – would also help strengthen the faith of our young people. We want them to experience the joy of the Catholic Church through more involvement in Mass, reinvigorated education programs, and family faith formation support. Involving youth in community outreach can also be a powerful tool of evangelization.

Women. There was a passionate and consistent call for increased roles for women in the Church. The gender inequality within the Catholic Church was passionately discussed in all of our sessions.

Culture and Social Issues. These can challenge our Catholic teachings. Topics including birth control, divorce (and the isolation/disenfranchisement felt by divorced individuals), and homosexuality (and how we are called to respond to it). One participant asked, "how is our message of Joy shared in light of the above issues?" We also encourage the Church to better share the Catholic Social Teaching as an antidote to racial/social evils. We believe the Church can do a lot more to address and impact issues of social justice. Community outreach aligns strongly with this priority and creates strong community bonds and opportunities for evangelization through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Technology. We applaud the utilization of technology to encourage worship and faith formation. Live streaming Masses, television shows like *The Chosen*, and resources from Ascension Press, Word on Fire Institute, and Hallow are amazing. The Church should continue to promote these tools.

Community Building and Faith Sharing: There is a need to be more welcoming as a Church. One way to do this is through community building and faith sharing opportunities. The ACTS and Teen ACTS programs have been incredibly successful in this way. Ongoing programming should support each parish community, such as faith formation classes, DOGS, bible study and small groups. Finally, parishioner involvement (through personal invitation) creates a sense of purpose and connection to the Church.

Communication and Consistency. Participants discussed ways to move away from antiquated terminology, which can make evangelization more difficult, and towards consistency in teachings and a general emphasis on the Love of Christ. The Catholic Church needs to find a way past scandal and headlines like that of the Arizona baptism invalidation. We can do better and need to embrace positive change.