

St. John the Apostle Parish Synodal Response

“Most people hate what they think the Church is rather than what it really is.”

Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

To All Participants - We appreciate the gifts of your time and honesty! You had a lot to say!

In response to the Synod, St. John the Apostle Parish, Villa Park, IL, gathered a small focus group representing the various demographic groups to listen, discuss, and draft a synod survey. Thank you to the Diocese of Knoxville whose published survey provided a template for us to adapt in gathering input for our synod response.

Our survey consisted of 55 questions which covered various topics relating to the Church, the diocese, the parish, Catholic beliefs and teachings, and the synod themes of Communion, Participation, and Mission. Question 51 allowed respondents to share in greater depth on any survey question. Questions 52-55 allowed respondents to express their views to the Pope and Bishop, share their challenges and disappointments, and express their thoughts about the future of the Catholic Church.

Our anonymous survey was offered in English and Spanish, online and on paper. All were invited to participate, including non-Catholics.

130 surveys were completed. This report is the distillation and summary of responses to the parish wide survey and the focus group listening session.

Survey responses and comments specific to our parish will be summarized and shared with the Pastor, Parish Council, and parishioners.

SYNOD SURVEY SUMMARY

Generally, respondents who answered questions and wrote comments for this survey were adults (89% ages 46 to 90), married (68%), female (60%), lifelong Catholics (85.4%). St. John the Apostle Parish encompasses multiple languages and cultures while being predominantly Caucasian (80%) and Hispanic (20%).

Overwhelmingly, parishioners support journeying together as people of God along with the entire human family. A few respondents believe that the Church should stay out of country and world politics, immigration and refugees, the environment, etc.

Most respondents do not believe the Church has handled the sexual abuse crisis appropriately, however, 97.6% of respondents said that the sexual abuse scandal did not cause them to stop practicing their faith. A sincere apology is needed as well as an active approach to the victims of abuse and their families to reconcile these transgressions. Despite what leadership has said, parishioners still sense that there are some things left unaddressed. The abuse scandal caused some respondents to leave the Church themselves or they knew someone who did.

Although there are social and spiritual ministries within this parish there is a growing need to evangelize young and mature adults, including marginalized members of our faith community like the single, divorced, widowed, disabled, homeless, homebound, alternate lifestyle, immigrants, and fallen-away Catholics.

Our respondents overwhelmingly (88.3%) believe in the Eucharist as the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ and the source of our Catholic faith life. This is further evidenced by regular attendance at Mass offered in both languages. 85.5% of respondents noted that the Eucharist was the most important part of the Mass.

There is a hope to improve worship with homilies that show us how we can apply the readings to our everyday lives, upgraded music, and periods of silence to further enhance the liturgical experience.

There is confusion and misunderstanding about Church's teachings concerning divorce, contraception, alternate lifestyles, abortion, the death penalty, and end of life issues which have some members struggling with their Catholic faith or have caused them to leave the Church.

The Church will always be here as Jesus said, even though we do so many things to sabotage it. The Church may get smaller, but hopefully more unified in belief. Maybe people, and not the Church, must change and begin studying their Catholic Faith and how it has stayed consistent over the past 2000 years to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Many accept Church Doctrine, Tradition, and Holy Scripture as God's revealed truths. The Church needs to find a balance of preserving its beliefs without leaving a sense of exclusion. The message is often overshadowed by the politics of the church. When people hear Catholic, they think Anti-Gay, Anti-Women's rights, and child molesters.

Most comments regarding immigration revolved around welcoming immigrants as they legally enter our country. There is a great desire for enhancing the unity in our parish faith community.

Differing views exist about the meaning of clericalism [*Clericalism is defined as an expectation, leading to abuses of power, that ordained ministers are better than and should be over everyone else among the People of God.*], having a married clergy, women ordained to the Diaconate and/or priesthood. Changes to the clergy should be considered and clear explanations given as to the why or why not.

By far the most evident need expressed for the Church and our parish is catechizing the youth and adults. The confusion and misunderstanding appearing throughout the survey's comments would hopefully be resolved through appropriate catechesis.

Based on our survey, the top three methods of obtaining information about the Church, Diocese and Parish are: parish bulletin, word of mouth and parish website. From the shared experiences of our focus group, it appears that communication by word of mouth is the source of a lot of misinformation about church teachings, the sacraments, policy positions, requirements, etc.

COMMUNION

Journeying Together / Listening / Speaking Out

There is a strong sense of connection to the Church that goes both forward and backward in time. The richness of the Catholic tradition. There is an awareness of there being people of all generations who come to St. John's and the many families who have been part of St. John's across multiple generations.

Liturgy is the main way we journey together. Parishioners come together for Mass and then are sent out to live the Gospel.

Responses reflected that people have family members and friends who have left the Church or find themselves on the fringes of the parish, including infrequent attendees or 'lapsed' Catholics. Many respondents know people who have left the Church because of the scandal. Many were unsure if the parish has ways to reach out to those who are not active or have become less active.

Responses indicated the desire to be responsive to the needs of groups left on the margins: the homeless, single mothers and fathers, individuals with disabilities, LGBTQ+, divorced and remarried Catholics. Many respondents commented that Christ welcomed all people, including the commoners and marginalized into his kingdom and we, as Catholics, should do the same. It starts and ends with love.

Listening to the laity - Some respondents appreciated that there was an opportunity to do something like this for the regular everyday Catholics that feel so unheard. It is a SMALL step in the right direction and quite overdue (like decades overdue). This is an INCREDIBLE survey. Cannot believe we have been given this opportunity to be heard. Awesome job!

There is a lack of understanding on how to communicate at both the parish and Diocese levels.

Listening to the needs of our parish - Many demands but few hands (volunteers). Lack of volunteers to lead groups and ministries people say we need. There is a lack of knowledge on how to start or participate in a parish ministry. Many people in the parish are not involved in the wider life of the church.

There are no opportunities offered to meet with the pastor to facilitate two-way communication between the clergy and the people. People generally feel free to speak 'freely, openly and respectfully', but some feel that the priest is too busy to be approached.

Women have very capable voices and are not being heard. Respondents recognized the importance of women and their gifts to enhance the Church, emphasizing that women should be able to take on an increased role in the Church whether by occupying senior roles within Church governance in the Vatican, by taking on more lay roles within the Church, or ordination to the diaconate or priesthood.

Respondents commented that the Church needs to increase the engagement of young people in two areas – firstly in increasing actual participation of young people in church life and liturgy; secondly, in increasing the teaching of the faith to young people. Of note was the lack of continuing formation between confirmation in early teens and adulthood. Respondents voiced the need for a Youth Club or Group in our parish. Catholic high schools need to be more affordable so students can have a Catholic education.

PARTICIPATION

Celebration / Responsibility for our Common Mission / Dialogue in Church and Society

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the people of our parish are made aware of their baptismal call to reach out in faith to evangelize in their everyday lives as Jesus did.

Based on responses, liturgy can be a divisive topic:

- There are those who want to go back to tradition: Latin Mass, incense, altar boys (no girls), communion only on the tongue, only organ and piano music. Priests should return to facing the altar.
- There are those who would like a more vibrant liturgy: more contemporary music, no incense, blessing of young children brought up at Communion.
- Most respondents agreed that Mass should be celebrated in the local language.

Some respondents suggested that Protestant services are more vibrant, entertaining, and Bible based, and that is why they, or their children, have left the Catholic Church.

Respondents commented that our parish is friendly and welcoming for new people.

70.4% of respondents attend Mass every Sunday. Some mentioned encouraging Perpetual Adoration, Holy Hour, devotions, healing Masses, and exorcisms.

Comments about worship at our parish: the lack of vibrancy in the music; homilies are sometimes too long – 8-10 minutes max so the main point is not forgotten; not understanding the homilies of priests with foreign accents; absence of young people and children and the energy they bring.

82.3% of respondents agree that our parish encourages parishioners to serve in a variety of liturgical ministries. Women deacons, as well as married priests, should be considered.

Even though 63.2% of respondents say they are active in church activities / ministries outside of their Mass attendance, many respondents have commented that there is a lack of participation in areas of parish life outside of Mass: a lack of social groups and the absence of parish social occasions.

Communication is lacking from the parish and diocese about opportunities for discussion of ideas and values that have to do with race, religion, human rights, immigration, and other current issues. Respondents were unsure if the parishioners are ever consulted in diocesan decisions in order to feel a sense of ownership into what happens to them.

56.8% of respondents agree that cultural differences, foreign language, and political views often limit our ability to listen to others with different ideas.

Respondents also noted the lack of opportunities to be involved in projects with other faith communities to support interfaith relations, while others felt it was not important.

Our parishioners understand the role of Christian Stewardship in meeting the needs of the parish and the wider community. There are some respondents who feel the Church is always asking for money.

MISSION

Authority and Participation / Discerning and Deciding / Forming Ourselves

There is a clear message from the participants that transparency and communication are of utmost importance.

Church: Almost all respondents replied that they knew very little or nothing about the governance of the Church in terms of decision making, finances, governances, and management. 37.5% felt the Diocese is transparent and 23.9% felt the Vatican is. Some felt that the Pope should continue his mission of transparency and reforms at the Vatican level, even though there is pushback. The "Church" is a man-made institution and subject to the foibles and shortcomings of men. Church leadership should set egos and power trips aside and always keep Jesus' words at the center of every decision.

Remnants of clericalism remain. Respondents have found that the interpretation of rules, teachings, sacramental requirements (baptism of children), etc. lack consistency across parishes in the Diocese and the country. They don't know much about what priests and bishops do.

Parish: Governance and decision making was a recurrent theme, with many referring to not knowing about where decisions are taken and by whom. 83% thought the Parish is transparent but the need for more information about financial matters was specifically mentioned. There is a lack of knowledge of what a parish priest's responsibilities are.

Respondents were unsure if the Pastor was open to parishioner ideas or how the parish builds consensus, as most see decisions as "top-down" decisions by the Pastor. The selection of Parish Council and other committee members is viewed as opaque. Members of our parish council are handpicked rather than selected in an open process. Parish Council and Finance Council meetings are not publicized.

Respondents still do not believe the Church handled the sexual abuse crisis well. There were numerous references to the cover-ups, transfer of priests, money spent on settlements, and lack of transparency. A few mentioned the need for better vetting and formation of seminarians.

Some respondents felt the Church was always asking for money and were concerned about funds going to the sexual abuse settlements.

89.3% of respondents believe it is the Church's mission to receive and welcome immigrants and refugees and 72% believe that there should be support for those in the Church who continue to work for social justice and citizenship issues.

55.8% of respondents actively seek opportunities to learn more about their faith. 47.1% of respondents said they were open to on-going faith formation, but when formation opportunities are offered, there is a lack of participation. Leaders get discouraged.

Forming Ourselves – Catechesis, Beliefs and Teachings

Two views were evident: Stay true to ALL the principles of the Catholic Church, and do not allow our beliefs to be 'reshaped' by the "will of the people"; The Church is too stagnant and needs to change with the times - within reason. Re-evaluate the "small t" traditions.

Based on survey responses, many respondents do not fully understand the whys of what we do and believe. The Church should provide catechesis / education with clear explanations in language the laity can understand. Apologetics (defense of Catholic teaching as a whole) seems long forgotten.

Based on survey data, respondents need to understand the "what" and "why/why not" relating to the discussion and consideration of the following:

60.8% of respondents agreed that the ordination of married men to the priesthood should be considered by Church leadership

65.6% of respondents agreed that the ordination of women to the Diaconate should be considered by Church leadership.

44.8% of respondents do not think the ordination of women to the Catholic priesthood should be considered, while 43.2% think that it should.

Deacons: Many do not have a clear understanding of the role of the Deacon and wonder why Deacons cannot hear confessions and administer the anointing of the sick.

54.8% of respondents think that the Church should allow Catholic couples to get married by a priest or deacon at a suitable location outside the church building. Some mentioned that the local Diocese could provide guidelines or designate sacred space within their boundaries.

48% of respondents thought that divorced and remarried Catholics (without an annulment) should be allowed to receive Eucharist. Some respondents believe that all divorced Catholics are not able to receive Eucharist.

87.5% of respondents believe that human life must be protected from the moment of conception, however, we cannot be a one-issue (anti-abortion) Church.

70.2% of respondents believe that it is unacceptable to permit euthanasia and assisted suicide.

46.4% of respondents believe the death penalty is always or sometimes acceptable form of punishment. 39.4% believe the death penalty is never acceptable.

53.2% of respondents disagreed that contraception should be prohibited for married Catholic couples. Respondents felt that contraception is not a black and white issue and that its use should be the decision of the couple.

67.2% of respondents agreed that IVF should be allowed for married Catholic couples. Ethical guidelines would need to be developed and communicated.

85.7% of respondents believe that being gay is not inherently sinful and that there should be no unjust discrimination in their regard. Respondents stressed the distinction between being gay and living a homosexual lifestyle.

60.8% of respondents agree that even though same-sex unions are lawful, these unions are not to be blessed in the Catholic Church because the union does not fit the Catholic teaching on marriage.

41.6% of respondents felt strongly about the lack of inclusivity of LGBTQ+ members by the Catholic Church. Some stated that God doesn't make mistakes and made members of the LGBTQ+ community the way they are. They should be welcomed and called upon to be participating Catholics.

Confession: One respondent indicated that we should not have to go to a confessional to confess our sins.

Annulments: Respondents mentioned from firsthand experience or from what they have heard about the challenges: amount of paperwork, cost, and length of time.

Conclusion

This survey allowed people to express their views about the Church from many perspectives and many were grateful for the chance to be heard!

However, it was apparent that there is a sense of cynicism that the Synod will change nothing. The people are asking that a clear, transparent, and sustained effort is put into addressing the issues raised.

Inaction could be the final straw for those who feel less connection and involvement with the parish than in the past and for those questioning their faith and unsure about their relationship with the Church.