



Synod Summary Report: The Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi, Raleigh, NC prepared for Bishop Zarama and the Diocesan Synod Team for the Diocese of Raleigh

The Catholic Community of St Francis of Assisi in Raleigh, North Carolina appreciates the invitation from our Holy Father Pope Francis to grow deeper into being a listening parish through the Synodal process.

As a post Vatican II parish that recently celebrated its 40th anniversary, our current pastor, Monsignor Michael Clay, reflected on our parish history as a community that

“encourages the laity in exercising their baptismal offices of priest, prophet, and leader in all aspects of parish life and ministry, to welcome everyone regardless of where they are in their life and faith journey, and to embrace those whom society generally shuns or devalues. The community also holds deep commitment to justice and peace issues, and fosters a style of worship that is meaningful and contemporary, a love for Catholic education, and a spirit of inclusivity that is also ecumenical and interreligious. I have said repeatedly to others that we are peerless on multiple levels in serving the Lord and the Gospel both within and beyond our community. No other parish has such a deep commitment to issues like these and to so many of them. We feed hungers and meet needs that other parishes do not. From small beginnings we have grown to over 5000 households, 850 children in our two schools, over 100 ministries, and an annual budget of \$12m.”

For this Synodal process, we held over 16 different in person and virtual listening sessions. We also received feedback from many of our ministry areas including from our students in both our schools, even our three- and four-year-old preschool children, through all stages of life to our seniors living in assisted living. In addition, we reached out to our social justice ministries like our prison ministries and LGBTQ+¹ ministries.

Our sessions each followed a similar outline which included these questions:

Topic 1: How do we journey together in our parish and how is God calling us to grow in journeying together?

- What are the joys?
- What difficulties, obstacles, wounds?

Topic 2: Listening Aspect of the Church

- How is God speaking to us through voices we may ignore?
- What facilitates/helps or inhibits/limits our listening?

Topic 3: Authority and Participation

- How does our community identify the goals to be pursued, the way to reach them, and steps to be taken?
- How are teamwork and co-responsibility put into practice in our parish?
- How can we foster a more synodal approach in our participation and leadership?

¹ LGBTQ+ is used in this document since it is the currently defined norm and is meant to include all orientations and gender identities.



We received input from over 580 participants and received over 44 pages of feedback that were captured from all the sessions. Please see [Appendices](#) for session outlines and detailed feedback.

A sub-committee of ten of the Pastoral Council composed entirely of non-staff, lay parishioners gathered the feedback from these listening sessions, assembled the feedback and has prepared the following summary to highlight our collective insight to share with Bishop Luis Rafael Zarama of the Diocese of Raleigh.

The parish Synod Team observed that certain key themes arose independently across most or all listening groups. We believe that the resonance of these themes across groups that differed in facilitator, scribe, participants, age group, ministry, etc. is a very strong indication of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We do not represent these points as *unanimous* views of *every* participant or even of every Synod Team member. Our process involved circling back afterward to ensure each participant had an opportunity to validate or correct the direct quotes, paraphrasing, and synthesized key messages that each scribe captured. The following has been carefully written with a mission to be true and faithful to the voices spoken; not allowing partiality to influence our actions.

Church Prioritizes Law Over Love

The rich traditions of the Church are strengths that unite Christians globally. The perception of some is that the rigid and archaic man-made rules have lost relevance and alienated many in its once plentiful flock. For some, the heavy hand of the Universal Catholic Church's hierarchy appears to be used as means of maintaining power, control, and moral authority. Some in authority in the Church are quick to judge, and the overall Church is slow to adapt to a modern world with the healing love and compassion of Christ that so many seek. Because of these perceptions, St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh has become a Catholic parish of joy and last hope stemming from its inclusivity and acceptance.

The Church's positions on marriage and divorce, celibate solo gender clergy, and women's rights create undeniable obstacles for people to find Christ in the Church. The contraception ban by the Church is not viable and an overwhelming hardship for females to endure. Promoting contraception and the health of all beings is the position for a loving Church to serve the human dignity of all.

Many longtime Catholic family and friends have left the Church due to hypocritical posturing, abusive scandals and rigid rules. Many left when they couldn't bear the burden of a Church that was founded on Love, yet abused so many innocents and did nothing to protect them for generations. There still is pain resulting from the Church willfully ignoring and hiding the abuse for generations. The Church needs to acknowledge why and how the abuse and cover-up happened, confess its sins and actively engage in penance. Actions to make sure it never happens again should be established and communicated internally and throughout the world Church.

How do dedicated Catholics become ministers of reconciliation when people challenge us on our involvement in the Church, when we are ashamed by the handling of abuse, lack of respect and exclusion of many?

We turn to the Love of Christ and pray the Church will join us.

Communion

It is always a joyous event when God's people gather around the table of our Lord to celebrate together in truth and Love. Many listening session participants think the Catholic Church should welcome all who



come forward in full communion rather than turning people away in judgment. When people of different faiths and walks of life come together to celebrate a funeral, wedding or other spiritually unifying event, communion for all strengthens the bond and joins us all spiritually.

The sacraments are beautiful gifts, not harsh weapons. They are Love, they are Christ, they are not tools to be withheld from those humans judged unworthy. Jesus would not deny himself. Why do we?

The pandemic has been and remains painful for many who have missed communion with their community. Coming back to the Lord's Supper together to celebrate Mass and join others in Christ's loving communion will be healing and binding when all are welcomed.

Man-made Institution Struggling with Leadership Structures

The Church needs to reconsider the leadership structure of the Church and allow more women and younger people in decision-making roles and leadership positions. Celibacy needs to be prayerfully reconsidered as well as women deacons. During the Listening Sessions, many women expressed a calling to the diaconate, and some to the priesthood. They have found ways to serve the Church but there is a sense of loss in being denied what they know to be a true calling from the Holy Spirit. Women should also be allowed to preach. Having ultimate authority only in the hands of a group of single, celibate men is problematic. Their limited experiences and perspectives make it challenging/difficult to be able to speak for or minister to all the people well. How can they truly understand our needs when they've never had our experiences? Women deacons and married priests would bring different and relevant experience to the pulpit. Even our youngest identify women being disallowed from becoming clergy to be one of the areas most in need of change. When asked "If I could be Pope for a day, the first thing I would change," the approximately 150 grade school students in our parish said they wanted "more singing at Mass," "more comfortable pews," and "to allow women to become priests."

Valuing, Hearing & Welcoming the Disenfranchised

There are many groups within our Church who are being marginalized, disenfranchised and whose voices are not valued, including women, LGBTQ+ people, divorced and remarried, youth, and formerly incarcerated. An example is the lack of support for LGBTQ+ by the Church, evidenced by St. Francis of Assisi being the only parish with an LGBTQ+ ministry in the diocese. Science has long ago recognized that homosexuality is not a mental disorder or a deviation, see [Appendix A](#). In all our listening sessions we overwhelmingly heard that the Magisterium needs to recognize current scientific understanding and allow individuals and families of all kinds to be welcomed as they are. All marginalized need to be fully accepted and granted full access to all Sacraments. There is urgency to act, because the longer it takes for this understanding and change in teaching to occur, exponentially more generations will leave the Church. A powerful representation of the voices of the disenfranchised, the modern-day lepers, heard from their own voices follows.

- *I am the homeless LGBTQ+ teen, disowned by parents preaching the requirements of Heaven.*
- *I am the gay person who loves in the shadows, hiding the gift of Grace I share with my partner.*
- *I am the forgotten Native American/First Nation mother whose grief for her son's suffering and death at the hands of the religious mirrors that of Mary... I still await sincere words and acts of contrition to resurrect my hope for Justice.*
- *I am the LGBTQ+ who despite my clear conscience gets a handshake instead of Absolution.*
- *I am the one who is conditionally "welcomed" but denied Eucharist for so many reasons. Am I worse than Judas?*



- *I am the parent who knows and nurtures their transgender child and is turned away by church hierarchy who will do nothing to shelter us from hate and exclusion.*
- *I am the spiritually homeless LGBTQ+ starving for the word of God and the Eucharist, driven out of many parishes, BUT thankful for the OASIS of a parish that I drive a distance to worship with.*
- *I am the one who knows the name I will answer to when God calls, but my church will not believe me.*
- *I am a Mary Magdalene desperately trying to tell the church the Good News; the impossible is possible.*
- *I am the LGBTQ+ who knows and embodies the science but becomes another Galileo to the church.*
- *I am the shunned remarried woman or LGBTQ+ who bypasses 3 Catholic churches to get to the loving one and be in joyful community.*
- *I am the one bullied, assaulted, kicked, jeered, disinherited, spat on, fired, excluded, restricted, voted against and silenced in the name of righteousness because I was not created with gender “norms” accepted by the church.*
- *I am the one whose funeral homily was filled with condemnation and warnings of damnation because I was gay and had AIDS.*
- *I am the child born with an innate sense of fairness and kinship, whose original innocence is obscured by a focus on original sin.*
- *I am the child of loving same-gender parents who cannot get baptized.*
- *I am a newly confirmed Catholic through RCIA and have since heard that my in vitro fertilization is contrary to Catholic doctrine. Am I supposed to feel guilty now?*
- *I am the lifelong scholar of my conscience who is told in one instant that I am wrong and disordered.*
- *I am the LGBTQ+ catholic: priest, prophet and servant, sidelined, silenced, and whose conscience is judged unworthy of profession or retention into a Catholic secular order.*
- *I am the invisible homeless whose needs are eclipsed by the necessity for a glamorous 2 Million dollar Tabernacle.*
- *I am the one whose mother did not have a Catholic funeral because I was deemed not “in good standing with the Church”.*
- *I am the Jesuit who ministered lovingly to LGBTQ+, wrote about The Church and the Homosexual, then was excommunicated.*
- *I am the LGBTQ+ parish or catholic school employee whose livelihood depends on hiding my truth.*
- *I am the thankful and grateful parishioner who does not have to hide sexual orientation and living circumstances, and is asked to lend a hand as a Eucharistic Minister, a Lector, a ministry leader, a group facilitator and harvest the fruits of Synodality. A ray of love, hope and respect... Hallelujah!*
- *The Gospel says, My name is “I AM who am” ... “Love one another as I have loved you” ... “whatsoever you do to the least.... that you do unto me.”*
- *“I THIRST” ... for unconditional love, whatever my walk of life or history in life. “Condition” goes against unconditional love. “Sometimes I wonder if everyone is reading the same Gospel that I am reading”. What would Jesus do? What would the Pharisees do? What does the Catholic Church choose to do?*

We need to listen more to the voices of minorities in the community, in particular African Americans, especially in white Catholic churches. There have not been African American seminarians from the Diocese of Raleigh in recent history. We should increase evangelization efforts with African Americans and encourage vocations.



As society gains greater understanding of mental health, sexuality, the effect of trauma, and other “signs of the times” the Church must have a way to adapt to those new understandings.

Repelling Our Youth

The Church is losing our youth. Many of them were raised to be good Catholics, but they no longer find the Church relevant. Young people have a strong sense of justice, and they find the Church’s position on women, people who are LGBTQ+ and other marginalized groups as a disconnect from Church teachings and Christian values. They perceive this view as unjust, discriminatory, and counter to the Gospel. The hypocrisy of the Church’s view on “others” does not pass the test of young people’s interior sense of justice, trustworthiness, and congruence (walking the talk) and is driving young people away.

The Church needs to do more to engage the youth. Engagement needs to start with middle and high school youth and needs to continue through college and into young adulthood. Opportunities for connection, for socialization, for building relationships are all key for these age groups. In the current world, opportunities for real human connection are limited and are replaced by screen time and social media posts. The Church is in a position to provide the means for human interactions and relationships. We need to make the Church a place where the youth *want* to be.

The participation and engagement of our youth and young adults can be done by appealing to the strong sense of justice by the youth, by focusing where the Holy Spirit is calling them, addressing what they perceive as compelling and relevant, such as social justice or environmental protection issues. Events and groups that allow for ongoing socialization, especially after high school, provide a means for human interaction and the building of real relationships and the strong potential that their lives will include ongoing involvement in the Church, events like social dances and spiritual retreats.

The Church should connect with young people where they are by investing time, talent, and treasure into more effective digital communications. In order to reach youth, the message needs to be delivered in short sound bites. Again, the messages need to be relevant to their sense of justice. What if the Church vied for the attention of the youth with messages of love, goodness, beauty and peace, drowning other extremist messages? This could virtually attract them, igniting a passion for the Spirit, and drawing them into the Church, physically and spiritually.

Forgetting the Goals of Vatican II

The Vatican II Council produced an optimism and a life to the Church's new teachings on ecumenism, human rights, and the work of the church in the modern world. Vatican II resulted in an opening up of the Church and an evolution that was necessary in its time and that same spirit is needed today – especially in regard to environmental advocacy and other issues of justice and peace. The goals of Vatican II appear to have slipped away. The people of the Church, including clergy and laity, need to go back to Vatican II and live the Gospel.

There were many comments from our listening sessions in love and support for Pope Francis and our bishop, Luis Rafael Zarama. People were grateful for the direction on justice from the Pope. They appreciated that the Diocese of Raleigh has a bishop who understands our parish and its focus on justice and peace. Concerns were expressed that bishops in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) are not united behind Pope Francis and not all support his directives. Doctrinal interpretation between the Pope and the USCCB seem to be in conflict at times. The Pope recognizes that the Church needs to change with the times, and the Catholic bishops need to follow the guidance from the Pope if the Church is to be effective in today’s world.



Living the Gospel in Our Spirituality

“We are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song!” As Pope St. John Paul II reminded us, “joy is the keynote of the Christian message,” but the message often becomes lost in doctrine. The Franciscan charism alive in our parish has helped many to reconnect to that joy in Christ, but the message is not only Franciscan; it is a tenant of our faith as Catholic Christians. We are called to live and to share the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel. The Church needs not so much a change, but a renewal and a return to living the Gospel. The people of the Church should be more faithful to the Gospel: loving, being merciful, not judging. We are sinful, but through Christ we are redeemed. For many, the messages about sin and judgment have become so overbearing that there is no room for joy. Love must come first. As described in the kerygma, understanding sin and its consequences is important, but that comes after first understanding and accepting God’s love and desire for relationship. This process of understanding is complicated for some by a disconnect in many areas; personal faith, spirituality, and conscience may come into conflict with the Church and its doctrines. The Church can be a place where people discern and develop spirituality, but needs to provide the necessary support in that process.

Rigidity in teaching can limit the expression and understanding of spirituality. For example, the Church needs to recognize the sacred and holy everywhere, not only within the walls of the church. Contemplative spirituality can be helpful to facilitate this necessary transition, which would naturally make the Church listen more like Jesus. Charismatic prayer can be a way to energize worship and better engage our youth. Offering support for a wider variety of spiritual practices would allow our Church to connect more deeply with more people.

Embracing Social Justice and Peace

The Church needs to move and act beyond the walls of the church. It needs to be open and embracing of the wider community. The Church needs to be more vocal and visible and advocate on issues of injustice: racism, civil rights, divisive rhetoric in the US, the care of our planet, immigration. Laudato Si should be a much higher priority for the Church globally. We heard a yearning for the leadership in the Church to show continued and increased dedication to social justice causes. For example, when George Floyd was murdered, there were messages from all levels of the Church condemning racism and the ongoing suppression of “others”, which was good. Can we have that same level of messaging continue? Can there be preaching to inspire a change of heart in the members of the Catholic community? Can there be action at all levels of the Church to force real change?

Justice and peace work can be difficult and requires a multitude of skills as well as passion. We need to nurture and develop our leaders and volunteers to become advocates in justice and peace work. People need to be nurtured before they feel called into ministry/volunteer leadership positions.

Listening to All Voices Followed with Communication

This Synodal process has begun something very good. This effort has allowed conversations with family members who have left the church. The Synod listening effort needs to continue and the channel of communication needs to remain open. All voices need to be heard, as some feel they are not being listened to.

Even though it is difficult to listen to those who have different views, we need to reach beyond our parish boundaries to invite all into the conversation. If we want people to be open to listen, they first need to feel welcomed and a part of the community. Individual connection and outreach (especially by the clergy) are powerful ways to help people feel welcomed.



For example, people hunger for personal interaction and connection. During the COVID pandemic, this hunger became even more pronounced as we all were isolated and masked. Personal connection and eye contact are essential to communicate love and belonging. Leadership of the church needs go outside comfort levels to listen and clearly communicate with the parish communities.

While it is important to listen, we need to follow our listening with action. It can be more harmful to hear someone's pain and do nothing than it is to not listen at all.

The global Church should leverage the Internet and its communication tools to spread the Word and engage people. There are effective digital content creators like Bishop Barron and Fr. Mike Schmitz, who meet people online where they are. The Church should invest more time, talent, and treasure into more effective digital communications of today.

As the Church changes, it is imperative that the reasons for those changes be communicated clearly.

CONCLUSION

The listening sessions provided our parish with a beautiful opportunity to be in authentic community with one another and hear the joys and sorrows we experience. Our committee was struck by the consistency of themes expressed across different groups in the sessions. Overall, there was a sense of joy and gratitude to be a part of our St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Community and frequent worry, sadness, and anger regarding the larger, institutional Catholic Church. We heard stories of great joy and community, beautiful connections to God and others in the Sacraments, and a true hope for what our Church can be. Many also shared experiences where they or loved ones have felt rejected and judged by the Church. If we say we serve a God who is Love incarnate and followers of Christ who ministered to the lowly, ate with sinners, and flipped tables against corruption, then we need a new direction.

We must become a Church that truly welcomes ALL. Right now, we are a Church of contradiction. We say we believe in the value of all life and yet we deny the fullness of our LGBTQ+ siblings. We say all are precious in God's sight and gifted by the Holy Spirit and yet we limit opportunities for women to exercise those gifts within the Church. We say we believe in a personal God through Jesus Christ yet we deny some the opportunity to fully experience that connection to Christ through the Eucharist. Just as an individual must repent and correct when their life veers away from the desires of God, our Church must do the same. It is time for us to hear the call of the Holy Spirit stirring within the people. It is time for the Church to let go of the old forms of judgment, rejection and condemnation and to embrace welcome, fullness, and joy. We must hear as the Holy Spirit says, "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Is 43:19) It is time to embrace the call of the Holy Spirit to renewal. Our children will have nothing less.

APPENDICES