



“Region XVI” - National Catholic Organizations and Groups

Introduction

To accommodate the depth and breadth of Catholics engaged in ministry work outside of the traditional diocesan structure in the United States, “Region XVI” was created by the U.S. Synod Team to solicit the contributions of Catholic organizations and groups. Individual contributions submitted via a survey on the USCCB Synod Website were also included in “Region XVI.”

The U.S. Synod Team received 112 reports from organizations and other groups. The reports were divided into five categories: (1) Apostolic Movements & Community Groups; (2) Education; (3) Ministries & Ministry Networks; (4) Peace & Justice; (5) Religious Congregations. Teams of two USCCB staff members synthesized the submissions from each group into two-page syntheses to create a 10-page synthesis to represent “Region XVI” in the National Synthesis drafting process. Some reports were received after the submission deadline; late submissions were read by members of the National Synthesis Drafting Team to incorporate them into the listening and discernment process.

I. Apostolic Movements and Community Groups

The “Apostolic Movements and Community Groups” segment of Region XVI represented many viewpoints from across the country and from people at a variety levels of involvement within the church. Of the 33 reports in this segment of the region, 11 represented parishes or communities within parishes. The remaining 22 reports were from organizations within dioceses that selected this category as the most appropriate reporting structure. One of the groups reported their findings through the diocesan synodal process and directly to the USCCB’s process, and seven reported collaborating with a diocesan process in addition to their own process. Six of the organizations are national level organizations representing a specific group of Catholics or Catholic institutions, including the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, the Catholic Health Association, and National Catholic Office of the Deaf. This report represented the voices of 4,248 Catholics from 319 listening sessions. It is important to note that 1,950 of the participants came from one organization who had begun their own Synodal listening session process in 2018 and thus wrapped the goals of that listening campaign into the global Synod on Synodality.

Organizations that submitted their report represented 24 dioceses spread evenly throughout the geographic regions of the U.S. There are seven in the Northeast and eight in the Midwest and the remaining 18 either representing national organizations or in the south, southwest or west coast.

The participants represented in this segment were committed Catholics who saw both beauty and challenge in the Church. Many looked for opportunities to engage the church in meaningful or significant changes. Many reports explored the tension of loving an institution that had brought them comfort and joy while also recognizing that not all people felt welcome. The following themes showed up in nearly all the responses of the faithful in this segment of region XVI.

1. Inclusion of more people in the church
 - a. Each synthesis recognized that some people have not been as welcome as others in our churches and in our Church. Some cultural groups felt they had to ask for, and then demand, a seat at the table while others presumed their inclusion. Catholics who identify as LGBTQ were another consistent group that was named as excluded and often treated with hostility instead of welcome.
 - b. Women in leadership positions within the church, both ordained and lay, was named as a need that has persisted over time. Many syntheses named the need for women as deacons, priests, and as trusted lay members of parish councils, teachers, and advisory boards.
 - c. Lowering barriers to accessibility in both physical spaces and to access to the sacraments was mentioned time and again. Many noted the teaching of Pope Francis saying the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but medicine for the sinful.
2. Unity over division
 - a. Focus upon what brings us together above what divides us was a clear signal from synodal participants. Participants reported that cultural touchpoints were used to divide the people instead of using the voice of the church as an opportunity to bring people together.
 - b. Another layer of division was what many reported as an overly scrupulous focus on issues of sexuality as a dividing line within the church, instead of focusing on how we can love one another more fully.
3. Accountability and transparency
 - a. Both in general and specific terms, the synodal participants called for accountability from the people in leadership of the church. They seek to know how and why leaders are chosen and request inclusion in the process of formation and placement of leaders. At the same time nearly every report included gratitude for the priests and lay leaders who have formed them over the years.
 - b. The sexual abuse crisis that has plagued the church was included almost every time in the call for accountability.
4. Encourage modes of ministry that are relevant to the lives of people of faith
 - a. Updates to the modes of ministry included observations that liturgical practices must meet the demands of daily life, opportunities for catechesis for all laity should be widely available, and also that those in leadership roles ought to look more like the members of the church community than not.
 - b. One group succinctly described the need to update the ministerial modes of the church through paraphrasing the words of Pope St. John XXIII at the opening of

the Second Vatican Council, “ancient deposit of faith is one thing; the way it is articulated in every generation is another.” Many reports included quotes of individuals who feared that young adults did not consider the church relevant based on its sexual ethics alone.

5. Address the “plague of clericalism”

- a. In two-thirds of the reports, clericalism was named as a barrier for the growth of communities.
- b. Reports recommended more contact between seminarians and lay faithful, and the inclusion of more people in the priesthood would help shift this trend.

Recommendations:

The faithful voices coalesced around a few consistent recommendations. An appreciation for the liturgical celebrations of the church was consistent, while also challenging the laity to live fully into their baptismal role of full and active participation. As imagined by this group of Catholics, full active participation by the laity requires openness from ordained leaders to the gifts of the lay faithful. Groups who have been historically marginalized need to be actively included. In this segment of region XVI, African Catholics, Deaf Catholics, and Disabled Catholics all told stories of being overlooked and unseen. Nearly every synthesis called for the inclusion of women at additional levels of leadership within the church. Many participants also called for preaching and liturgical celebrations that are relevant to the lived reality of people, unafraid to engage with the prevailing topics of the day. What happens inside the church must have an impact on what goes on outside the parish walls and what goes on in the community must be recognized as an integral part of the life of the faithful.

Catholics also called for a prayerful openness to the work of this Synod, and through it, the work of the Spirit alive in our world.

II. Education

The USCCB received 20 summaries from educational institutions, including 7 Catholic schools, 5 campus ministries at non-Catholic schools, 2 associations of religiously affiliated schools, 4 groups focused on particular ministries within education, 1 ecumenical institution, and 1 association that comprises the majority of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States. The 3 umbrella associations collected and synthesized summaries from their member institutions. Among the participants were college and university students, educators, ministers, families, professional Catholics, Mass-going Catholics, non-practicing Catholics, Protestants and people from other faith communities, undocumented students, students of color, men and women, staff of non-profits, and members of social services agencies.

The Catholic schools and campus ministries reporting directly to the USCCB provided reports from surveys and listening sessions held at their respective campuses, while the 4 ministry groups reported on their primary concerns for Catholic education: persons with disabilities, traditional Latin Mass, welcoming students who identify as LGBTQ in schools, and domestic abuse. Two

USCCB staff members reviewed the 20 summaries and met on two occasions to discern, plan, and synthesize the reports.

Themes

Inclusion.—Perhaps the most common issue raised across most of the reports is the desire for a Church that is inclusive. Parishes can better include young people in the life of the local church. Schools should also devote more resources to inclusivity in Catholic education for persons with disabilities. One of the most frequent desires participants expressed was for the Church, in both parishes and schools, to welcome and include people who identify as LGBTQ. Some participants stated that the Church should revisit its choice to describe homosexuality as a “disorder” since it results in unnecessary harassment for members of the LGBTQ community.

Participants also frequently said they want to see women in more leadership roles, perhaps even in the clergy. Some reports indicate that many participants know the teachings on these difficult subjects but find those doctrines unpersuasive. Other reports say that people do not understand the teaching or that it is not clearly presented.

The theme of inclusion can also include the minority of participants who embrace a more traditional way of practicing their Catholic faith. They see themselves as marginalized. As one report noted, people in this group often think that leaders in the Church are more concerned about pleasing the world than handing on the faith. On the other hand, those who want to see the Church be more open to change often see the traditional Catholics as having a great deal of influence on the direction of Church life. Many Catholics, whether they want to push the Church to change or want to push the Church to hold fast to tradition, seem to feel marginalized and mistrustful of other Catholic groups.

Formation and catechesis.—One common concern is the sense that young people have not been well-formed in their Catholic faith. Participants from diverse backgrounds in a variety of contexts express dissatisfaction with the formation they received in Catholic schools or sacramental preparation. There is a gratitude for the opportunity to grow more through campus ministry, but they also seem dismayed that their catechesis was so lacking. Many young adults who participated in these sessions want better formation so that they can practice their faith.

Community.—An important theme, which comprises several issues, is a strong desire for a church that is more of a community than an impersonal institution. Many participants want to see more transparency with respect to how decisions are made. In a similar vein, participants from a variety of perspectives voiced their desire for more open and free discussion. Participants often felt like sincere questions were met too quickly with appeals to authority. Also, Catholics with different perspectives and vocations do not often talk openly and honestly with one another, leading to division and mistrust.

The term “clericalism” did not appear often, but the idea was expressed in frustrations about roles in the Church. Participants say they want to be able to have free conversations with clergy. Some reports voiced feelings of disempowerment when ordained clergy take on roles that could be filled by lay people. A common concern is that the Church is too centered on clergy and hence patriarchal.

Many participants want to be more active in parish life, but they say they find it difficult to get involved. They noted that opportunities to participate, such as parish council meetings, are often not made clear, and so the life of the parish can seem closed off to young adults and newcomers.

Identity.—Finally, many young adults, across the spectrum, said they love the Church and that they want to be proud of their Catholic faith, but for a variety of different reasons, they often feel ashamed to admit they are Catholic. For some students, this feeling comes from a sense the Catholic faith is not respected in a secularizing culture. Also, many young adults view the Church as complicit in what they feel to be the most significant evils of the day, such as the legacy of patriarchy, colonialism, and racism. Some believe that leaders in the Church, particularly the bishops, do not speak out clearly enough on important matters. At the same time, some students see the bishops as too political rather than focused on the essentials of the faith.

Recommendations

Find ways to foster an inclusive community, where there are opportunities for participation from all Catholics. Prioritize created a culture of welcome. The Church could be better at asking more of its parishioners.

Develop and update opportunities to mature in faith beyond sacramental preparation because current methods are not meeting the needs of the Church.

Improve communications and evangelization. Make use of social media and work to meet people where they are. Rather than wait for people to come to the Church, the Church needs to go to the people and communicate with them in ways they understand.

The Church should have active Church-wide reconciliation processes for its contributions to problems, like racism, hurting indigenous communities, and sex abuse.

Conclusion

Participants expressed that the opportunity for these listening sessions is encouraging. Many also expressed consolation in the fact that they feel that Pope Francis really cares about what they think. The American Church is very polarized. However, we can live openly the “culture of encounter” and enter into honest and fruitful dialogue. We can turn our focus on Jesus Christ and his calling for us to heal a broken world.

III. Ministries & Ministry Networks

A total of twenty-three reports were received from this grouping from across the nation, with a higher representation from the Northeast/MidAtlantic corridor. The listening sessions ranged from one all day in-person or online to over eleven sessions both in-person and online. The number of participants also ranged from 18 to over 400 per organization. Of the twenty-three ministry networks, only ten reported that they have a bishop moderator, advisor, or liaison as part of their organization. While not all reported the ages and genders of participants, the reports indicate the average participant to be over the age of thirty and more women than men.

Common Themes

Since ministries and ministry networks vary considerably in their focus areas, each organization took a unique approach to where the participants in their listening sessions or dialogue led them. However, across the ministerial landscape, there were some common themes that emerged (in the “Additional Observations” section in this report, we have shared some of the organization- or ministry-specific concerns that were raised up). What follows is a list of themes that appeared in several reports and appeared as common threads across the diverse collection of groups.

- Joy in the rich ethnic diversity of our parishes and groups and the commitment to renew efforts to outreach to these groups of different cultures.
- Appreciation of the universality of the Church.
- Finding beauty in the art and liturgy of the Church; one example: “Transcendence and wonder [helps me] find common ground with others”
- Catholics who live out the works of mercy.
- Desire for more ecumenical dialogue with other Christian communities
- The importance for a genuine sense of hospitality and respect.
- Lack of spiritual and formational accompaniment in the Church especially of laity and lay leadership, LGBTQ+ youth and their families, and young people
- Lack of the institutional Church listening to and dialoguing with the laity, especially women, young people, and those on the margins.
- Lack of support, resources, and staffing for pastoral ministries.
- Important barriers for success of a synodal Church
 - Preparations confined to the highest levels of the church hierarchy
 - The absence of lay people in important curial, diocesan, and parish roles
 - Lack of energy and effort in conducting conversations
 - Lack of a guarantee that concerns and movements of the spirit expressed in local conversations are heard at the highest levels
- The survival and future of the Church is at stake in synodality.

Recommendations

The different ministries and ministry networks offered a variety of recommendations for moving forward. Some were self-reflective, looking inward at next steps that need to be taken within their ministerial field or organization; others were focused on outward efforts to be taken up by the Church at-large, informed by their field or ministry. The latter included the following.

- Develop mechanisms and processes to guide the hierarchy in carrying out synodal initiatives and hold them accountable for doing so.
- The Synod process should continue and allow for more listening opportunities in institutional structures within the Church.
- Greater investment in accompaniment and formation, especially with
 - Youth (adolescents)
 - Young adults in general (20s and 30s)
 - Young couples and young families (20s and 30s)

- Laity, especially women
 - Seminarians, especially related to issues of laity, young people, women, and marginalized or underserved populations
- The Church's education and formation experiences, especially in its parishes, must be intergenerational, intercultural, and interracial and show the Church's openness to varied perspectives
- The pastor and bishop must be increasingly open to the women leadership in his parish/diocesan community.
- A return to the spirit of Vatican Council II, robustly affirm by word and action the *sensus fidelium*, the communion of saints, and the priesthood of the baptized.

General Observations

Despite the challenges inherent in synodality and attentive listening and dialogue, many of the participants and leaders of these ministry networks prayed for the strength to be steadfast in this work and hope they can be part of what they want to see in the Church. Other general observations include the following.

- Synodal conversations are, in theory, open to all, but the process of analyzing, prioritizing, and applying their wisdom is still hierarchical. It is difficult for laypeople to believe that their contributions will make a difference.
- It will be important to gain wisdom from models of ministry from the early Church.
- Routinely and openly involve laypeople, theologians, and clergy together in conversation in all important processes of discernment.
- Commit to radical inclusion of people of all cultures.
- True formation involves apprenticeship and mentoring.
- Programs never solve problems; rather, building personal relationships does.
- We do a poor job of going out to the marginalized; instead, we often wait for people to show up at our church door.

Additional Observations

Because of the specific nature of some of the ministries and ministry networks the following while not common were deemed primary by some.

- Weaponizing the Eucharist in polemic and political battles is a crucial issue which must be stopped.
- Appreciate that the liturgy is the source and summit of our faith and the manifestation of our unity, we, therefore, need to continue to dialogue with those still fighting the liturgical reform.
- Ordain women, married men, and others currently excluded from ordination to guarantee greater clerical familiarity with lay life and sense of accountability to laypeople.

IV. Peace & Justice

Introduction

As part of the Region XVI contributions were 16 organizations that work, or whose membership touches the Peace and Justice work of the Church: Idaho Catholics for Social Justice, New Ways Ministry, Catholic Labor Network, Catholic Relief Services, The DART Center, Los Angeles Catholic Worker, St. Louis Laborers, Ignatian Solidarity Network, The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Laudato Si El Paso, Catholic Climate Covenant, National Catholic Partnership on Disability, Pax Christi USA, Families of Loss from Forced Adoptions, Jesuit Works of San Francisco, and Faith Coalition for the Common Good. These reports were the product of over 400 in-person listening sessions and more than 900 virtual listening sessions. These reports represent the participation of more than 3,400 in-person participants, over 6,600 virtual participants, and more than 1,300 survey respondents. Submissions ranged from first-hand testimonies of those on the margins of our Church and society to those who are walking with them in solidarity and included contributions from community organizing groups, students, lay and ordained Catholics, and members of other faith traditions, as well as individuals experiencing incarceration. These reports shared the feedback of deeply faithful members of the People of God committed to the work of journeying together: *“We would not be here if we did not care about the church we know and love.”*

Restoring Tradition and Living Catholic Social Teaching

Every report included in the Peace and Justice section of Region XVI expressed great concern over what participants felt is an abandonment of the Church’s rich and expansive teaching on justice, as one participant said: *We have enough Tradition to stand for racial justice, healthcare justice, indigenous justice economic justice, women’s justice, and more but we don’t engage them. We need to engage our rich tradition.*” Many reports explained this concern as an unwillingness to *“walk the walk and talk the talk”* and that *“sometimes the Church is speaking in a whisper - which I find painful for some issues like racial equity and migration.”* Many of the reports shared that the lack of Catholic Social Teaching’s (CST) presence in their local Church severely diminished the Church’s ability to be in solidarity with those on the margins, especially as it related to the concerns of workers, care for our creation, and those most impacted by COVID-19, *“[Worker] Unions do what Jesus did and stick up for the poor, the weak, the powerless. That’s what the Church says IT does. Why is our local Church at odds with the unions – we have the same stated goal.”* Participants desired a Church that embraces *“justice as a verb as well as a noun”* and in a particular way, those young adults who participated in the process felt like the Church’s social teaching is vital to their engagement with their faith, *“I think that CST needs to be brought up, but in terms of walking with communities of young people, that ‘why’ is so important. Even with issues such as racism, where the secular culture agrees with the Church, I think it is not explained well where the Church stands.”* Overall, participants shared a deep desire for the Church to renew its commitment to Catholic Social Teaching and see that reflected in its seminary formation, homilies, and social action in local parishes.

Impact of Division and Polarization on the Margins

Closely connected with the desire to see a greater emphasis on Catholic Social Teaching was an overwhelming plea for the Church to address the division and polarization that often pits communities against each other. As one participant shared, the divisive political ideologies present in our society have seeped into all aspects of our lives, *“It feels like more and more our primary identity is not as a child of God but as a series of political ideologies.”* Many participants felt as though this polarization has created a set of acceptable issues and that many of those relating to peace and justice have been excluded: *“While certain worthy political priorities are embraced at the institutional level, other issues are left out. This often includes the priorities of Pope Francis - dialogue, ecology, ecumenism, social justice, non-violence.”* Several participants cited this division as something fueled by Church leadership, *“Violent language is often invoked from the pulpit in statements relating to abortion. One person in our discussions stopped going to church after the pastor proclaimed that ‘liberals just want to murder their own children.’”* This polarization is cited to have not only resulted in a “deprioritization” of justice but caused many to wonder if the Church was truly in solidarity with those on the margins, *“I do think that the rancor and division that we see within the Church is, at the very least, causing people to be very unsure of if the Catholic church is walking with them.”*

Impact of Clericalism and Renewal of Local Church

Nearly all of the feedback received through this process focused its attention on the impact and importance of the local Church for marginalized communities, *“When the pastor changes, anything, and everything can change.”* Many felt as though their pastors had not received the necessary formation to understand Church teaching on justice which often resulted in a lack of prophetic leadership on such concerns, particularly when it came to positions that challenged the status quo such as climate change and workers’ rights. This tendency for justice to be ignored at the parish level was perceived by many as intentional, *“We willfully ignore our own teaching because it’s easier or more convenient. It’s frustrating because that hypocrisy is what pushes people away from the Church,”* or motivated by concerns around upsetting wealthier parishioners, *“Parish councils tend to be full of big donors and are highly professionalized.”* This concern around clericalism was connected to other injustices many experienced in the local parish including as women, *“As a woman my voice is marginalized. We can do all the work and run around, but when it comes to making decisions, the door is closed,”* as well as those with disabilities. The impact of parish closures in dioceses around the country is another area where those on the margins are being ignored, *“Given the decline in Catholic religious practice and resulting plans for parish consolidation in our region, we are unsure what our local partnership with the Church looks like moving forward.”*

Hurt and the Need for Justice and Healing

Many of the participants expressed deep anger, frustration with, and hurt by the Church. There was a strong desire for the Church to acknowledge its failings with regard to its legacy of racism, its treatment of LGBTQ people, and its approach to people with disabilities and their families. Nowhere was this hurt more evident than in the summary report from Families of Loss from Forced Adoptions. This report included testimonies from mothers, fathers, adoptees, and extended families to forced adoptions in the Catholic Church spanning over several decades beginning in the 1960s. The synod report shared stories of young women being coerced to give up babies by those in leadership roles in the Catholic Church. Those who shared their experiences expressed that little has been done by the Church to reach out and hear their stories and recognize the damage and trauma inflicted as a result. As one mother said, *"The church needs to hear our voices and our anguish. It was an injustice of human rights, and the church remains silent about the gravity of forced adoption practices."*

- *"I think the thing I remember the most was the shame I felt. The thing I remember most clearly was my social worker (part of Catholic Family Services) telling me that I would forget this experience and I would surely have my own family eventually. I never had another child."* - Jo Ann V. R.
- *"I was in pretty consistent contact with Catholic Family Services and continuously told I was the 'only' mother who 'did not get over it' and move on. I was in psychiatric care for my depression due to the loss of my child and my British psychiatrist could not believe that the agency would tell me nothing."* - Patricia T.
- *"I've struggled with the trauma ever since. The Catholic Church, through its clergy and its lay 'adoption professionals' made every aspect of my experience worse with their moral certainty and sense of superiority. A half century on I still struggle to reject what they told me about myself: that I was a worthless sinner, unworthy of love and unfit to become a mother. That my baby would be better off without me."* - Julia M.

Participants called for recognition of the grief, loss, and trauma that the Church has caused and a public process for reconciliation.

Gratitude for the Synod Process

A final theme that emerged among participants was an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the synodal process and a great sense of hope for the future of the Church, *"Synodal listening is the way we can move forward."* Many participants were grateful to have been asked to participate in the process and strongly felt that only through a similar process of listening and accompaniment could the many injustices present within the Church, especially as it relates to racism, the LGBTQ community, women, and the many other marginalized communities, *"Hopefully an experience like the Synod will make us realize that we should and do have a voice in the future of our Church."* There was also great concern among participants that the Church would receive their synod contributions with an openness to journey together towards a more just Church, *"When we talk about the Church opening the doors to the world, it should include and mean a Church that is welcoming, a Church that is inclusive, a Church that reconciles, a Church that brings back the*

lost to its fold; and not the Church of the perfect, the Church that condemns, the Church that is already saved, but a Church that is on a pilgrimage and carries with it all that are on the road but not yet arrived.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

“My friends wonder why I’m still in the Church. But we can’t all leave! If social justice speaks to your heart, you can’t leave because you’re not hearing it. I want to be Church!” More than anything, the request that arose over and over again from those who shared contributions through the Peace and Justice section of Region XVI was not one of change but one of renewal. A deep desire exists to return to the radical call for justice central to the Gospel message. Many participants pointed to the key components of the synod process itself as a way forward for the Church: it’s more than just listening but also an act of discernment, of hearing where the Spirit is moving. For those who participated in these Peace and Justice reports the Spirit is calling for a restoration of relationships, for the Church to repair the harm and rebuild its commitment to empowering our most marginalized. Despite the pain and suffering many have experienced – often at the hands of the Church – there exists a great deal of hope for the future of the Church.

V. Religious Congregations

Introduction

Synodal feedback included in this synthesis comes from twenty-two submissions. Twenty of these submissions come directly from communities of women religious, and two come from national organizations representing both women’s and men’s communities. The congregations/communities submitting feedback represent broad geographic diversity – Northeast, Midwest, Southeast, and the Pacific Northwest.

Most reports noted that communities of women religious have much to offer the Church as it strives to continue walking the synodal path. Rich communal experience characterized by dialogue, deep listening, and collaborative governance stands out as a primary gift along with long histories of authentically and tangibly living as signs of the love of God for every person – most especially the poor and marginalized - and for the Earth. The contribution of women religious to the Church in the United States provides a model of pastoral care, spiritual formation, and the ability to adapt to changing ecclesial and congregational realities.

Themes

1. Hierarchy and Clericalism

There was virtual consensus that the current hierarchical power structure of the Church must be reimagined. Citing abuse of power and clericalist leadership that fails to recognize and value the gifts of lay people, particularly women, women religious call for an increase in support of and formation for lay leadership and a flattening of hierarchical power structures. There is a clear desire for collaborative and consultative leadership at all levels of the Church, in which clerics would

truly walk alongside the laity as coworkers in the vineyard. Many of the reports call for intentional work aimed at healing the wounds of clerical abuse and abuse of power.

2. Affirm, Embrace, and Expand the Role of Women

With a clear recognition that it is women who carry out a vast array of the Church's ministries, women religious call for a greater honoring of that work with the full inclusion of women in the leadership and governance structures of the Church at every level. Approximately half of the reports call for recognition and affirmation of the vocational calls of women to preaching and ordained ministry with admission to the diaconate. A smaller number of reports explicitly call for consideration of women as candidates for the priesthood. To better value and more fully include women in the Church, several reports called for the use of inclusive (non-gendered) language when referring to God and humanity, especially in the Liturgy.

3. Inclusivity

Every report articulated a desire for a Church that is inclusive of those on the margins. Categories frequently mentioned include: women religious, women in general, LGBTQ+, divorced persons, people of color, immigrants and refugees, young people, and those living in poverty. Many reports identified intentional efforts to repair harm from historic exclusion as a necessary first step to increased inclusivity.

4. Alignment with Modern Science

Particularly with reference to teachings on marriage and sexuality women religious present a strong call to incorporate current knowledge from the natural sciences, human biology, behavioral sciences, and other empirical studies. Given what is now known from these disciplines about human sexuality in particular, current moral theology regarding sexuality is seen as untenable. Some communities requested a greater emphasis on Integral Ecology in Church teaching. A few urged a more cosmic understanding of the "universe story" and the inherent holiness of creation.

5. Formation of Clergy

Deep concerns exist regarding the quality and type of formation currently utilized in seminaries, particularly diocesan seminaries. Citing a trend among the recently ordained to embrace pre-Vatican II theologies, liturgy, and ideas about the primacy of the priesthood, women religious call for sweeping reform of seminary formation. These reforms include the inclusion of lay persons and women on teaching faculties, opportunities for encounter with the poor and marginalized, critical engagement with modern theologies (feminist, indigenous, etc.), interdisciplinary studies particularly in the sciences, deeper and more meaningful spiritual formation connected to modern social and moral issues, and engagement in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

6. Vatican II

Women religious expressed concerns about the lack of consistent implementation of Vatican II in the U.S. Church and call for intentional efforts to educate and form the faithful in the ecclesiology of the council, leading the people of God to greater acceptance and understanding of the vision of Church presented therein. Essentially, this is a call to "be who we say we are."

7. Catholic Social Teaching

Some reports criticized over-emphasis by the Church on single issues; women religious call for deeper and more widespread formation in Catholic Social Teaching. Teaching about common good, care for creation, and racism are mentioned specifically.

8. Embrace Technology as Tool for Evangelization

Citing the widespread, successful use of technology to connect the people of God during the COVID-19 pandemic, women religious call for sustained use of digital technologies to reach disengaged and disconnected populations, particularly youth and young adults.

9. Synodality

As mentioned above, women religious have many gifts to offer the Church as models for collaborative leadership grounded in dialogue and deep listening. There is a profound hope that the Church, having begun to walk the synodal path, will see the fruit and truly commit to sustaining synodality as a way of being Church.

10. Love > Legalism

With clear recognition of the proper place and importance of sound doctrine, women religious call for the prioritization of pastoral care over the “enforcement” of Church law. Just as Jesus placed the needs and the lived realities of people ahead of arbitrary rule following, they urged that we learn to honor the primacy of conscience and the essential human desires for love, belonging, and community, offering contextualized pastoral care particular to an individual’s sense of self and his/her place in the world.

Conclusion

Overarchingly, themes emerging from religious congregation speak to a vision of Church that is both broad and deep. Religious sisters clearly envision a welcoming, inclusive, loving, collaborative, and active Church rooted in Gospel values and the life of Jesus Christ.

VI. Individual Contributions

Four hundred and nineteen (419) individuals from dioceses across the United States responded to a questionnaire on the USCCB Synod Website between May 19 – June 3, 2022. The form contained the fundamental question of the Synod, as well as the questions outlined in the 10 Thematic Nuclei in the *Vademecum*. A version of this [form](#) still exists on the [USCCB Synod website](#) and will be available for the People of God throughout the 2021-2023 Synod. Responses from individuals were imbued with love for Jesus Christ and the Church and answered with radical authenticity.

Of those who responded, 97% were Catholic, 2% no longer practice, and 1% were not Catholic; 61% were women, 35% were men, and 4% chose not to answer; 24% were between the ages of

18-49, 18% were aged 50-59, 29% were aged 60-69, 23% were aged 70-79, 5% were aged 80-89; and approximately 1% were 90 years of age or older.

Responses from individuals greatly overlapped with the themes that arose in in-person and online listening sessions that groups in “Region XVI” held, and represented a spectrum of varied experiences—both positive and negative—in the Church. Respondents cited various reasons for completing the survey, ranging from excitement for the synodal process, to not feeling welcome in the Church or lackluster engagement with the Synod in their community, to fear that their voice would not be heard by those leading the Synod in their community, but all rooted in love for the Eucharist, Jesus Christ, and his Church.

Responses shared with the USCCB reflected the spectrum of experience that exists in the US Church. The themes that surfaced through individual feedback were overlapping, interconnected, and often focused on parish life, recognizing how the relationship between the pastor and parishioners impacts areas of concern such as liturgy, transparency, ministry, and inclusivity. Though it was clear, that relationship—with the pastor and other parishioners—was central to a positive experience of Church. Moments of frustration and woundedness with the clergy and other Catholics were reported.

While many shared their love and gratitude for their parish priests, it was recognized that how much administrative responsibility the parish priest has directly impacts the culture he is able to cultivate. *“Our priests are hardworking and seemed overwhelmed. They don’t encourage conversations beyond the quick hello after mass.”* Lay people reported their experience of having their gifts and talents sidelined by the clergy and clerical culture. This rang especially true for women who longed to serve God and Church. *“For too long clericalism has caused women to be excluded, looked down upon, when many women have far more education including continuing education and experience than many, many clerics.”* *“Invite lay ecclesial ministers and women into dialogue. Actually support lay ecclesial ministers (rather than discounting their educational & experiences) and ask the ‘clerics’ to truly listen and respect them.”*

Many lamented certain aspects of parish life, the lack of opportunities for sharing their gifts with the community they cherish, and the difficult dynamics that sometimes accompany parish life. *“The church must find a way to encourage people to do more than just sit in the pew, receive communion, and leave.”* *“All parish councils can be ignored or overridden anytime and there is nothing the people can do about it. That leads to clique power and misery.”* *“The church seems not to teach the leaders and priests how to guard against the cliques.”* *“There are a variety of reasons that people give for leaving the Church, but the most primary one is that they were not being spiritually fed.”*

Concerns over financial decision-making at the parish and diocesan levels were prevalent. *“There is no communication on financials or accountability. People give to churches and want to know how the money is spent. Why not let members and the community determine spending too?”* Some also felt that there was an overemphasis on soliciting donations and not cultivating robust engagement in parish life, *“As parishioners, we get mailings asking for money, but nothing else.”*

Inclusivity was a repeated theme within the responses which cited *“racism, sexism, gender, immigration, poverty, morality, health care, politics, economics, and culture”* as issues that need to be addressed to be a more welcoming church. Many reported the sadness they felt that family members no longer participated in the life of the Church because of experiences of exclusion and marginalization, especially young people, but also recognized the spiritual richness that young people desire: *“I fear my young adult children will not carry on the faith- we have to pull them back and make them want to return. The Church feels disconnected and out of touch to them yet they are hungry for more. The church should see this as a crisis.”*

Others expressed how they themselves sought spiritual guidance, only to be turned away when their needs did not fit within a traditional pastoral framework, especially around issues of disability and neurodivergence, which inhibits true participation in Church life, and especially during the synodal process, which emphasizes discernment, *“There is the need to provide special needs-friendly steps for discerning.”*

Finally, there was a common desire for meaningful liturgical experiences, yet there were divergent opinions on what exactly a meaningful liturgical experience encompasses. Catholics in the United States feel this polarization regarding liturgy, *“We are celebrating life together, and that is what makes us Catholics. Hate should not be in our vocabulary.”*