

The Universal Church is a force for unity across the world and across cultures ...

The Church should be a beacon of hope that draws the masses, not a spotlight seeking to separate and alienate its children.

It frustrates me when women's time, talents, and spirituality are not recognized by the Church to which I belong. The all-male cast of clerics at Church liturgies increasingly alienates Catholic women and girls.

Young people want to focus on ideals, on how we should impact the world, shape the world, focus on social justice, but so many parishes don't make space for that.

These are a few of the dreams, hopes, sorrows, and frustrations expressed by those who participated in Voice of the Faithful's (VOTF) in-depth sessions responding to Pope Francis' global call for lay input into the Synod on Synodality.

We provided these sessions to our members and to any others who felt excluded from the diocesan gatherings or lived in dioceses where bishops curtailed the synodal journey or believed their voices were not heard.

To encourage participation in the Synod by members who did have access to diocesan sessions, we distributed informational videos and hosted a webinar on synodality featuring Synod-appointed theologians. In addition, we provided guidance for some parish-based gatherings at their request (see the Appendix C for reports from three of those gatherings).

Responding to the call for Synod participation was not only consistent with our VOTF mission but also continued the synodal path we have traveled during our 20 years. VOTF organized in 2002 in response to revelations of clergy sex abuse and its ongoing coverup by the hierarchy. Our mission and goals (Appendix A) emerged from mutual, prayerful discernment, and the organization quickly grew to international membership. The Synod and its path for the Church of the 21st century offer an invitation consonant with our own Mission: to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the Faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church.

VOTF Synod input sessions comprised two 90-minute meetings with optional follow-ups. We limited each group in a session to 10 people, including a trained facilitator and scribe, so that each person could participate fully and in depth.

We offered sessions from January through May 2022. Although some groups who used the follow-up options are still meeting, we base this report on the sessions run through May, which included 373 participants from 34 U.S. states and five other nations, plus responses from more than 30 relatives and friends of the attendees who used the questions we asked to obtain input from non-Catholics and departed Catholics.

The topic questions posed during each session (see Appendix B) came from the guidelines and themes sent by the Vatican Secretariat for the Synod. VOTF did not limit questions or the responses to any one theme. With this latitude, and as a result of VOTF's history and

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

approach, the primary themes that emerged from our sessions may be broader than those from lay organizations whose Synod sessions focused on directed themes.

In terms of format, each session began with a prayer and a Scripture reading followed by the questions designated for that session. They ended with reflections on the sharing and a closing prayer.

Following each session, the scribes sent their reports to the participants for review and then sent the final version (quoted segments are in italics) to VOTF's Synod Committee. The Committee read and collated all the reports, identified the key themes, and asked facilitators and scribes to review and comment on the discerned themes. Finally, after preparing this final report, we distributed it for review to all the Synod session participants before sending it to the Vatican Secretariat.

To elicit responses to the main question posed in the Synod Preparatory Document and the *Vademecum*, we asked participants to consider what they love, cherish, or dream of for the Church and what saddens or frustrates them. (See Appendix B for the text of the questions asked in each session.)

Our discernment yielded seven major themes. Notably, each theme overlaps with others, much as any journey has discrete stages along a path as well as an overall destination. If we were to summarize the message from all the themes, it would be that some Catholics find meaning, welcome, and support in our Church, but too many experience constant obstacles to participating in a Christ-centered Church, open to all, placing Catholic social teachings at the center of parish life, and living together—clergy and lay—in a discipleship of equals. The Church of the 21st century, a Church for all ages, must return to these basic principles, to a synodal discernment, to remain faithful to the path Jesus revealed to us.

- ❖ We yearn for inclusive, Christ-centered local faith communities offering fellowship, spirituality, safety, and moral values, joined in unity with the Universal Church.
- ❖ We yearn for a Church that is welcoming to everyone, especially those on the margins.
- ❖ Celebration of the Eucharist and access to the sacraments connects us all globally. For many, these are the main reasons they cling to the Church.
- ❖ We yearn for implementation of Vatican II reforms, which will help us return to the synodal model of the early Church.
- ❖ We yearn for a Church where lay voices are heard, respected, and acted upon, especially women's voices. The stark absence of women's voices was noted in every session VOTF held.
- ❖ We yearn for priests who really listen to us, practicing humility and modeling servant leadership.
- ❖ We yearn for more preaching and programs that recognize and act on Catholic social teaching in all its breadth.

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

Theme:

We yearn for inclusive, Christ-centered local faith communities offering fellowship, spirituality, safety, and moral values, joined in unity with the Universal Church.

In the Universal Church, participants value our common rituals while enjoying the different cultural expressions for such rituals. They take pride in our centuries-old commitment to works of charity, our rich traditions, and “unity in diversity.”

*There is a joy in having a recognizable liturgy wherever you go in the world.
We recognize our connection and sameness.*

The Church’s works of charity in schools, hospitals, hospices, etc., are a source of justified pride.

In local parish communities, some Catholics found parishes that exemplified the traits they identified with the Universal Church’s mission: parishes that welcomed all, encouraged outreach to the needy and poor, held vibrant liturgies, respected their voices, and built bonds that extended “beyond the pews.” However, the gap between dreams for vibrant, welcoming parishes and the lived reality of parish life often was large.

I was lucky to find a dynamic church. I depended on it to find a community and found one that is honest and forthright—it is a community, not an institution.

Should a Catholic be fortunate enough to find a welcoming and inclusive local parish, they fear it may be transient at best. Stories of how a new pastor, and sometimes a new bishop, eliminated all the existing programs in a parish or fired all the staff far outnumbered those describing good parishes.

It took us 10 years to build up a vibrant, diverse, fulfilling community and only about two years and two uninvolved pastors to destroy it.

In the few times that I have been in a well-functioning parish, the dream [fell] apart with the death or change of the pastor.

Commitment to a local church—an “investment” in its community and activities—may not endure in the face of such repeated experiences.

What impressed our facilitators and scribes as they listened to such experiences was the hope people still expressed after finding their dreams thwarted repeatedly. If they did not find the Christian community they sought or did not find opportunities for spiritual growth or engagement in social justice within the parish, they found it elsewhere, in small faith-sharing groups, for example. Some, including many young adults, simply choose other churches—or none.

I am sure they cannot take away my faith, even though they have taken away many of the things that nourished me. I know that if the church fails, then I could have a group of friends in my living room and be nourished.

I left the Church because ...

... the music was terrible as were the homilies.

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

*... I never felt “holy” enough or “perfect” enough or “sinless” enough to attend.
... tradition and community [once] were important but today there is none.*

During the Covid pandemic, yet another challenge to the traditional parish model emerged: virtual connections where the companionship is virtual and the community an electronic image. Catholics who found more-hospitable parishes online may no longer be willing to listen to boring homilies and bad liturgical music.

Theme:

We yearn for a Church that is welcoming to everyone, especially those on the margins.

The Church has a long history of supporting those on the margins. How could we not, with the example of Jesus before us? But today, especially in the U.S., when we asked who seems marginalized by the Church, the litany of those seen as unwelcome was lengthy and almost all-encompassing. Women, LGBTQ+, People of Color, sex abuse victims, the divorced, the homeless, the poor, people with disabilities, the incarcerated, all indigenous peoples, migrants, immigrants and refugees, young adults, unmarried couples seeking to baptize a child, priests and lay people seeking reform—the list was almost endless.

The Catholic faith now feels more about rules and belittling those who may not fit in a specific mold. I feel shunned by it.

I cannot feel comfortable when all are not welcome (women, LGBTQ+ community).

Yes, it is good that Pope Francis wants to officially recognize the role of women as acolytes, lectors, and catechists. ... But a handful of women cannot change an organization which is sexist to the point of misogyny.

People gathered for the sessions did not blame only the hierarchy or priests; people within parishes also were sometimes deemed unwelcoming to strangers.

Participants in our sessions praised the global vision of Pope Francis and the efforts in his encyclicals to address world problems such as hunger, immigration and refugees, workers, the environment, and more. However, many people asked why their pastors and bishops paid no attention to these encyclicals or to social justice.

We would like our local Church to lead by example rather than remaining silent in the face of injustice.

Theme:

Celebration of the Eucharist and access to the sacraments connects us all globally. For many, these are the main reasons they cling to the Church.

Our participants universally recognized the central importance of Jesus at the center of the Church. They recognized him in the face of their neighbors. They cherished and longed for his presence in the community gathered for worship. They yearned for liturgy that acknowledges his presence in the community, in the Word and in the Eucharist.

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

They sought preaching that brought his Word to life for them and sent them forth to live out their Baptism and build a community of love and justice in his name.

For me, the most meaningful aspect of belonging to a parish is to participate in sacramental life.

Other faith communities are more active in social justice causes, but I can't leave because only the universal Catholic Church offers the Eucharist.

They saw the Eucharist as a source of unity, its sharing in Mass a treasure, a gift, and a source of grace. They were profoundly disappointed and frustrated when bishops and pastors used the Eucharist as a political weapon, and by liturgies that deny the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Many decried the rigidity that would deny the Eucharist to such groups as the divorced-remarried or to LGBTQ+ persons. They hoped that following a synodal path might move the Church away from a divisive focus on a rigid and lifeless image of the past and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us toward more a merciful and inclusive future.

[Do not] deny communion to people because of rules that Jesus didn't have in mind!

If you get divorced, you cannot participate fully in the Church—No Communion. If you hurt or kill someone, you can!

Theme:

We yearn for implementation of Vatican II reforms, which will help us return to the synodal model of the early Church.

Attendees in our VOTF synod sessions were all committed to Vatican II. They described it as energizing, revitalizing, and inspiring. Many have studied its documents. They try to live according to its precepts. They believe that implementing reforms based on Vatican II will help bring necessary change for the Church, changes such as respect for and acceptance of lay voices, elimination (or curtailing) of clericalism, a return to synodal governance, and “taking Catholic social teaching seriously.”

In Vatican II we had a whole constitution that spoke about the needs of the time. But today we never talk about these needs. Hardly anyone in any parish is talking about the issues or even praying about them.

We yearn to become a true, Vatican Council II Church ... a Synodal Church at all levels, journeying with God, each other, with other faith traditions, with humankind, and with our planet home.

Some called for following the model of religious orders, especially women's, who have already done much of the renewal work outlined in Vatican II. Others spoke of the great hope and joys that arose from Vatican II. They emphasized the need to educate, or re-educate, the Faithful on the reforms of Vatican II:

Start with practical fixes we can achieve like educating all on Vatican II so we're all on the same page. Provide workshops on Vatican II in parishes and seminaries.

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

Many participants reported opposition to Vatican II in their parishes and dioceses, especially in the U.S. Lay catechists and others who have worked faithfully within their communities of faith are dismissed when new free catechetical materials or training programs that emphasize pre-Vatican II attitudes are adopted by a diocese. Young people who experience Vatican II at college cannot find similar parishes when they leave campus. The preference for pre-Vatican II attitudes permeates many of the national programs sponsored by wealthy conservative groups.

The USCCB is influenced when partnering with wealthy educational non-profit institutes that do not support the agenda of Vatican II.

What frustrates me? Pastors and bishops unilaterally undermining Vatican II's liturgical reform and its vision of who we are as a disciple church, the People of God and the Mystical Body, and who lack the Spirit of Pope Francis.

The Synod on Synodality offers hope that Vatican II reforms will now become more broadly accepted and future reforms will emerge from the Church's synodal journey. Thus, efforts of some dioceses to elicit widespread involvement in synodal discernment was greatly appreciated. However, those who felt shut out by their dioceses—and who used VOTF to present their views—noted that opposition to Vatican II reforms often was accompanied by opposition to the Synod.

We have Vatican II and Pope Francis trying to lead the Catholic Church and we have a big group of clergy challenging our Pope and ignoring Vatican II.

I yearn for the Church in the USA to be more responsive to Pope Francis's pleas for a Synodal Church in which listening rather than lecturing is the order of the day.

People in our sessions believe Pope Francis is on the right path with a servant-leadership model that stresses charity and social justice. They see anti-Francis bishops and their pre-Vatican II attitudes as divisive and promoting disunity.

Pope Francis has made the synodal journey his top priority, and yet many priests and bishops undermine his program. ... The American Church is split along political lines, and the problem is getting worse, not better.

Participants also frequently expressed their hopes that the synodal process will continue beyond the Synod meeting in October 2023.

[We hope] we all learn to dialogue with each other, that listening is more important than statements, that we understand what mercy means.

Theme:

We yearn for a Church where lay voices are heard, respected, and acted upon, especially women's voices. The stark absence of women's voices was noted in every session VOTF held.

All our participants agreed that the gifts of all lay people should be recognized, respected, and solicited in the Church. Lay voices have been suppressed for centuries, helping to fuel the clericalism that infects the Church. Some participants reported that their parishes

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

encouraged lay participation, but many described parishes where the priest made all the decisions.

Priests come and go, and programs valued by the community wax and wane depending on the priest's attitude toward them, and not on their value to the wider community.

Almost every question that led to conversations about lay voices cited the absence of women as the most obvious problem but noted that male lay voices also are sidelined and ignored.

In [today's] structures, it is especially difficult for women to feel included. Most women feel marginalized in the Catholic Church and are not accepting of this culture.

We believe that it is extremely important to allow ordained women deacons, and ideally ordained women priests; we yearn for more women to preach.

Questioning the lack of women's leadership in the Church, our daughter asked, "What is so bad about being a girl?"

While a few participants called for women to be ordained priests, many thought the priesthood itself is so broken that adding women without reforming it would make little difference.

Participants also noted that parishes are closing because the Church no longer has enough priests and wondered why the logical remedy of pastoral administrators or lay-led parishes was not applied more often. Instead, the bishops import foreign priests or combine parishes, increasing the already substantial workloads of individual priests. Increasing shared leadership by the laity in diocesan and parish activities could help relieve the additional demands as well as return the Church to its roots.

[We need] a collaborative governance structure that requires consulting the laity and engaging the laity in planning and decision-making.

My dream is to go back to the roots, back to Jesus, to his humility and compassion. ... We need more input from laity; the lay need to be valued and acknowledged; we should use the laity to the best of their abilities ...

Faith communities are stronger, groups in our sessions concluded, when the gifts and skills of the laity are recognized and welcomed. When lay voices are not taken seriously, over time those voices stop speaking—a factor that contributes to the grave problem of clericalism permeating the Church.

Theme:

We yearn for priests who really listen to us, practicing humility and modeling servant leadership.

Virtually every participant in the VOTF sessions identified the priesthood as “broken.” They see serious gaps in the training priests receive for functioning in a modern parish. Almost every session heard laments about bad homilies, arrogant priests, pre-Vatican II attitudes, dismissive treatment of women, poor preparation for parish life, and more.

Let lay people preach; they are better skilled than so many priests who preach.

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

Homilies are not relevant to a lay person's daily life. ... Homilies emphasize fire and brimstone rather than Christian values, including humility.

Too many priests, especially younger ones, are arrogant, not pastoral. ... [and] priests who harm children should never be protected.

Participants also emphasized the need to support good priests, noting that with a reduced number the isolation within parishes can leave priests without support.

There are today many, committed, faithful, faith-filled, hardworking priests, some isolated, others with support from other clergy, parishioners, friends, family. They remind us that we need to recognize and support these priests.

Most participants identified priestly formation as the cause of the poorly prepared priests they experience, and they believe that the problem will become much worse when the young priests coming out of seminaries today land in parishes.

Seminaries do not teach the students anything about the social or financial aspects of being priests nor do they teach how to tap into the gifts and talents of all those who want to share those assets with their communities.

Young priests have no understanding of Vatican II, no desire to learn about it, and no desire to learn from older priests.

Our seminaries are falling short in providing a balanced preparation for their candidates. These seminarians have little experience in the real world of families and marriages.

The remedies suggested covered all aspects of priestly formation, from choosing the candidates to placing more lay people—especially women—on faculties to closing seminaries altogether. There also was broad agreement that seminarians should serve as interns in parishes for more than just a few months.

Faculty should pay more attention to discerning if candidates for the priesthood have a genuine vocation to priestly service. Women should play a role in the formation in seminaries since women are 50% or more of parishioners.

Reform the way seminarians are taught, emphasizing connections to the world and people they will be serving.

Seminarians should spend time performing service in real community churches before being ordained. ... As much as possible, seminarians should spend a significant amount of time in a parish environment, learning how demanding it is to be a servant of the People of God.

Another common thread was impatience with the Church that married priests are not allowed, and some mentioned that priests who left to marry should be allowed to return. They also noted that married non-Catholic ministers can be ordained Catholic priests.

Why can we have married priests from other faiths, but Roman Catholic priests cannot marry?

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

Theme:

We yearn for more preaching and programs that recognize and act on Catholic social teaching in all its breadth.

Many participants said they appreciate and are proud of the good works the church does in support of social justice, especially that performed by religious women. Yet many wonder why they hear so little in homilies about social justice and almost nothing about Pope Francis's encyclicals on these needs. Instead, many hear preaching that limits social justice to one or two divisive topics.

Social justice should be a “seamless garment,” not just focused on one specific teaching or another.

They are frustrated and saddened when active social justice programs that have been supported by the Church in the past are terminated and characterized as inconsistent with Catholic teaching. Using the same flawed logic, some dioceses have ended cooperation with ecumenical social justice programs, characterizing them as not *sufficiently* Catholic. Participants often noted a prominent focus on abortion in homilies and public diocesan statements and only limited mention of the needs of poor women and children or other social justice concerns.

Our parish took part in several ecumenical programs to support housing equity and other social justice issues. Our new pastor shut them down because he said they were not “Catholic enough.”

We need to hear more about various social issues (death penalty, racism, immigration, etc.) in homilies. It seems the only social issue addressed is abortion.

Some participants pointed out that before the Church can effectively advocate for social justice, it must acknowledge its own history of exclusivity, including racism and sexism. It must also seek to heal internal divisions.

The Church needs to confront its own racism, classism, and sexism as well as society's.

We need to build a deeper commitment to social justice and diversity. Part of the diversity involves making room in the Church for both those who are more progressive as well as those who are more conservative.

Some participants also cited the strong need to acknowledge blame, finally and fully, for all clergy sex abuse.

Conclusions

The recommendations emerging from the VOTF sessions hold all the Faithful—the laity, the priests, the bishops, and the Pope—responsible for implementation. “We should all ask ourselves, what would Jesus do?” many said. Frustrations felt at local levels generally come from the actions and inactions of the bishops and the hierarchy. Participants universally agreed that resolution requires the laity to become more involved and to obtain greater roles in the guidance and governance of the Church. The clergy and laity must work together in mutual respect for any of these changes to be achieved.

Voice of the Faithful Synod Submission

The Laity need to be included in meaningful ways when selecting new bishops and parish pastors. Parish Councils and Finance Councils need to be selected by the parishioners and empowered to make decisions. Several called for the priest to provide spiritual guidance and for the laity to provide administrative management of the parish and diocese.

Participants viewed the parish as the place to provide both spiritual nourishment and a sense of community. Many believed that their spiritual sustenance was better achieved through small faith communities formed within their parishes or elsewhere. Pastors should encourage the formation of such small faith communities so that the need can be fulfilled within the Catholic Church itself.

Recommendations to ensure a welcoming church, especially welcoming those on the margins, stressed the need for the priests to lead this effort from the pulpit. Participants frequently emphasized the lack of welcome for LGBTQ+ persons and their families and for sex abuse survivors and their families. Homilies that stress Catholic Social Teaching and promote inclusion of all God's children are essential. The Church must move away from judging people by rigid rules and must become more merciful and inclusive.

The feeling that the priesthood is broken was universal amongst the participants, and the initial recommendations to address this included changing seminary education and training as well as providing ongoing spiritual formation and training in homiletics for priests. Seminary training should include education at co-ed Catholic institutions, training in the Spirit of Vatican II as well as the documents, and a required internship in a parish prior to ordination. Once ordained, priests should be required to continue their spiritual formation throughout their lives—perhaps using the practices of some Religious Orders as a model.

All stressed the need for women's voices to be heard at all levels of the Church. As a first step, the Pope must ensure women are in positions of responsibility and authority in all departments of the Curia. Bishops must ensure that women hold positions of authority on diocesan pastoral and finance councils. Parishes must invite women as well as non-ordained men to preach. Women provide a different point of view that can broaden the perspective of those engaged in decision-making. The treatment of women is also a factor in the declining number of priests; many women will not encourage their sons to become a priest in a church that treats women with disrespect.

When considering the pervasive nature and numerous scandals and problems fueled by clericalism in the Church, participants believe priests and bishops must welcome laity into a mutual relationship. Such acceptance will require education and ongoing formation for priests that emphasizes humility and servant leadership. Participants stated that the laity must take steps to break down the notion that "Father knows best" and open meaningful communications with their pastors.

Continuation of the synodal process should be required to ensure we continue to listen respectfully to one another. We must all—ordained and non-ordained—live out our Baptismal responsibilities within the Church, because together we are the Church.

Mission

Voice of the Faithful® is a worldwide organization of Roman Catholics working to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can participate actively in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church.

Our Goals

- To support survivors of clergy sexual abuse
- To support priests of integrity
- To shape structural change within the Catholic Church

Structure of Voice of the Faithful Synod Sessions

The VOTF Synod program included two initial sessions, each 90 minutes long with an optional third as well as additional sessions available should the participants wish. Participation in each group was limited to a maximum of 10, including a facilitator and a scribe, to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to speak in depth and to discern common ideas as well as differences during a reflective period. If groups chose to hold additional sessions beyond the initial two, the members themselves set the dates and times. Attendees also received optional between-session questions they could use to initiate conversations with their adult children, relatives, friends, or other persons who do not count themselves as members of the Catholic Church today.

Each session opened with a prayer, a Scripture reading, and introductions. The facilitator posed questions, eliciting responses from each attendee, and then asked each for their reflections on what they had heard. The session closed with a prayer.

Sessions were generally held on the same day and at the same time in consecutive weeks. Given the worldwide shutdown for the Covid pandemic during the bulk of the Synod period, all meetings were conducted via Zoom, using facilitators and aides trained in utilizing the technology as well as trained in the process of facilitating sharing sessions of this type.

Session Questions

Session 1: The Big Picture

1. Guided by the Holy Spirit, what for me is most meaningful about belonging to a *local faith community*?
 - What are my dreams for the Church? What do I yearn for more of?
 - What frustrates me? What do I wish would change?
2. For me, what is most meaningful about being part of the *universal Church*?
 - What are my dreams for the Church? What do I yearn for more of?
 - What frustrates me? What do I wish would change?

Session 2: Digging Deeper, Moving Towards Action

1. What issues in the Church do we need to pay more attention to?
2. Who is left out or suffering today? Who are at the margins?

Appendix B: Session Questions

3. If I could change one thing in the universal Church that I think would help us all better follow Christ, it would be _____
4. What actions can each of us take and what can we do collectively to make our Church better?

Optional Questions for Use Between Sessions 1 and 2

We know that many former Catholics and our own adult children may not attend Synod sessions despite our invitations. Such invitations are encouraged in the Synod documents, but practically speaking those who feel they are on the margins of the Church or who no longer practice the faith may not accept them. As an optional exercise after Session 1, and a way of hearing other voices, some participants may be willing to have a dialogue between session 1 and session 2 with their adult children or other people close to them. Here are two questions that could initiate that dialogue.

Both participants answer each question. Duration 30 minutes total, 15 minutes each

1. What gives meaning to my life?
2. What effect has the church had on my life? Good, bad, a little bit of both?

Potential Follow-on Meeting After Session 2

1. What should we improve or change in our communities? (This is a repeat of Question 3 in the second session, but it may be a good starter for moving towards action.)

2. Are there additional concerns that have not yet been raised that are important to me?

For example:

- What are people who attach themselves to other religious expressions looking for that the Catholic Church is not offering? Is it crucial?
- What can people who have left the Church and those who have no formal religious affiliation teach us about WHY one might affiliate with a church? How can we respond to their spiritual instincts?

3. Which of the concerns/needs are most important right now?

4. What can we individually and together do about it?

Voice of the Faithful included outreach to other groups who, for one reason or another, felt excluded from their own diocese's Synod sessions. We provided a format and guidelines and directed them to additional resources to hold their own sessions. When requested, we also included their comments in our report, and we agreed to present their individual results here, as an appendix to our own report. In this way, the circumstances of their [articular situations can be acknowledged.

The communities presenting their voices in this manner are:

- ❖ Catholics living in the Dallas, Texas, diocese who are concerned that the diocesan submission does not sufficiently address response to clergy sex abuse
 - ❖ Catholics from several parishes in a North Carolina community whose bishop has encouraged pre-Vatican II practices and resisted efforts to hold Synod sessions. ([page 3](#))
 - ❖ Older Catholics living in a large retirement community in the southern U.S. ([page 9](#))
-

Dallas Diocese

Recommendations for meaningful healing of the deep distrust and damage caused by the Church's response to the abuse crisis

1. **Conduct active *and encouraging* outreach to survivors and meaningful steps toward healing.** One example would be to initiative a restorative justice program in the whole Church, designed to bring all stakeholders together to discuss how they've been affected and decide what should be done to heal and repair the harm.

Resource: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/12/06/can-restorative-justice-help-church-heal-sex-abuse-scandals>

2. **Modify *all* diocesan safe environment practices/policies to be clear, understandable, free of Canon Law jargon, manageable and less "top-down" in nature.** Safe environment policies should be robust, but volunteers report that they either do not read or do not understand all the jargon and legalese and feel it is "CYA" rather than real prevention. Stop lobbying against legal reforms such as limitations-extension periods or "windows" and mandated-reporter laws that prohibit perpetrators from abusing the secrecy of the confessional (see, e.g., Tex. Family Code Section 26.101(c)).

Resource: https://childusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Archdiocesan_Policies_WhitePaper_10-1-20s.pdf

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

Examples of more understandable policies:

<https://fwdioc.org/safe-environment>

<https://www.archgh.org/offices-ministries/office-of-child-and-youth-protection/safe-environment-documents/>

3. **Improve transparency across the system** – for example, not just some, but all Diocesan lay review panels should publicly identify their members and their professional/personal backgrounds and follow published guidelines for continuing education and “term limits,” so that these important groups are continually refreshed with updated knowledge and new members.
4. **Ensure that all Church personnel who work with this issue, especially those whose jobs involve interacting with survivors, such as Victim Assistance Coordinators, be specifically trained** to be trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive. This would lessen the additional trauma caused when survivors attempt to communicate or participate with the Church, only to be re-traumatized.
5. **Develop a Church-wide process for assignment of priests** to parishes that allows parish lay leaders to hear about the “vetting” of the candidate and make their own inquiries about suitability for pastorship in that parish.
6. **Commission a national Lay Stewards Panel** to receive, track and monitor complaints against bishops, including those that are raised via the U.S. CBAR service.
7. **Strengthen and publicize Church efforts to protect youth and vulnerable adults**, including those who might be subject to abuse of authority, such as seminarians. This may require a more expansive definition of “vulnerable adults,” to include more than simply those who are “physically, mentally or emotionally impaired” (see, e.g., the very limited Diocese of Dallas definition of “vulnerable adult” in its Sexual Misconduct Policy, p. 6).

Resources: https://www.vatican.va/resources/resources_rapporto-card-mccarrick_20201110_en.pdf

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2019/02/16/0133/0027>

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-06/pope-francis-pascite-gregem-dei-church-criminal-penalties.html>

<https://www.cathdal.org/SexualMisconductPolicy.pdf>

8. **Proactively reach out to the lay faithful** for insight, reaction, participation, and guidance. Respond to inquiries and offers of assistance, rather than treat lay input as suspect and unwanted.

North Carolina Diocese

Session 1: January 14, 2022 – Charlotte, NC

1. What is most meaningful about belonging to a local faith community?

- Sharing my faith, my understanding of God, with other people who care about Jesus’s message of a love that cannot be exhausted.
- Letting our love for one another be a testament to why we are and stay “Catholic” and not just Christian.
- Working with small groups committed to improving the lives of vulnerable people: people with disabilities, migrants, people of color, members of the LGBTQA communities, the poor, the homeless, people with addictions, people with dementia or Alzheimer’s, etc. These vulnerable people are some of God’s favorite people.
- Being known by name or at least by face at Church liturgies and activities.

What are my dreams for the Church? What do I yearn for more of?

- Dream for a more welcoming Church.
- Dream for a more ecumenical Church.
- Dream for a more socially active Church.
- Yearn for more faith formation as opposed to faith indoctrination.
- Yearn for more opportunities to care for each other when we are sick, tired, depressed, rejected, or shunned.
- Yearn for uplifting liturgy: vibrant, soul-filling music and singing in the style of the Evangelicals, or in the style of members of religious communities, or in the style of the masters of traditional sacred music (e.g., the Messiah).

What frustrates me? What do I wish would change?

- It frustrates me when priests and bishops guilty of sexual abuse are allowed to continue in the ministry for decades without being penalized; but it equally frustrates me when priests and bishops of integrity are falsely accused of sexual misconduct, deprived of their parishioners' support, and left in a true limbo that threatens to turn into hell. We yearn for bishops whose pastoral talents and willingness to listen and learn from their flock are remarkable.

2. For me, what is most meaningful about being part of the universal Church?

- For me, the Church’s unity in diversity is amazing and comforting. No matter where I travel or live, the same eucharistic meal that fed the apostles is served to me. The

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

music, garments, and homilies may be stylistically different from those of my local church, yet I can still feel at home.

- For me, the Church’s “track record” as an institution for the good of humanity is a source of justified pride. The Church’s schools and hospitals have opened their doors to Catholic and non-Catholics alike. Throughout the ages, Catholic men and women have worked long and hard to improve the lives of vulnerable people: the elderly, the sick, the ugly, the marginalized, the grieving, the lonely, etc. The universal Church has been and still is an instrument of peace and harmony.

What are my dreams for the Church? What do I yearn for more of?

- I dream of a less judgmental Church open to LGBTQA people, to people in our families who are non-practicing Catholics, to alienated Catholics, to Protestant converts, to agnostics, and, for that matter, to atheists.
- I dream of a Church that understands that Rome is no longer the center of the People of God. North American and European Catholics will be a relatively minor constituency in the Church. Catholics in Latin America, Africa, and Asia will gradually become the dominant voices in the Catholic world unless they are converted by Protestant Evangelicals able to personalize peoples’ relationships with Jesus passionately.
- I dream of a Church in which priests do not have to be celibate males. Although a celibate life may leave more time free for “Church work” than a married life, this is not necessarily so. Many members of the laity use just as much of their time and talent on “Church work” as many priests do. Moreover, confining the priesthood to men alone does not really mesh with Catholics’ baptism as priests, prophets, and Kings. The universal Church would be better served if women had as much decision-making authority as men.
- I yearn for a Church that is more ecumenical; that appreciates the insights of non-Catholic religions.
- I yearn for a Church that takes the lead in fighting against all the “isms” that make the world less Christian: racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, nationalism, colonialism, etc.
- I yearn for a less hierarchical Church that levels the “playing field” between the clergy and laity, recognizing that priests and bishops are not necessarily more holy and spiritual than the people they are called to serve.
- I yearn for more careful and caring discussions about the topic of respect for life. Although fetal life is precious, so too is the life of young adults stretched to their limits, or the life of people so demented that they no longer recognize their loved ones. These are all complex issues for which there are no “cookie cutter” solutions.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

What frustrates me? What do I wish would change?

- I am frustrated that many bishops, especially US bishops are not promoting and supporting Pope Francis's synodal initiatives. Vatican II replaced the uniform Latin liturgy with diverse vernacular liturgies nearly overnight, enabling the People of God to be true participants and not mere spectators "at Mass." The Synod on Synodality: Journeying Together offers to make changes even greater than those made by Vatican II. But nothing important will change in the Church unless bishops and cardinals in particular let the holy Spirit work among them when they gather in 2023 at the Vatican.
- I am frustrated that women's voices are not listened to as carefully and seriously as men's voices in the Church.
- I am frustrated that the sex-abuse scandal continues in the Church and that relatively few Catholic theologians have asked the question WHY???
- I am frustrated that sexuality is still linked with sinfulness in the rhetoric of the Church.
- I wish the Roman Curia played less of a role in the Church. Although Pope Francis has sought to weaken this centuries-old, decision-making institution, he is still hemmed-in by it. Because the Church is a human institution, "power-plays" will probably always haunt it, but this is no excuse for people not calling a spade, a spade. Power can, after all, corrupt.
- I wish more members of the laity would be brave enough to demand that the Voice of the Faithful be heard. Pope Francis needs the laity to speak, to ask themselves how they can be Jesus in this messy and needy world, and to walk with him, Francis, humbly on a journey that can be difficult, but which promises life and love eternal in the mystery of the Trinity.

Session 2: Digging Deeper, Moving Towards Action

1. What issues in the Church do we need to pay more attention to?

- We need to pay more attention to what Jesus intended for his Church.
- We need to pay more attention to Church governance. The old hierarchical structure of the Church needs to be rethought so that the laity become equal to the clerics.
- We need to pay more attention to the role of women in the church, advocating for women deacons in the near future and for women priests in the long run.
- We need to pay more attention to ecumenical efforts in the Church, joining Christian, Jewish, and Islamic efforts to create a just society. In this connection we also need to learn about Buddhism, Hinduism, and other world religions.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

- We need to pay more attention to involving the laity in Christian education and spiritual direction.
- We need to pay more attention to seminary education. If young priests are taught that they are “ontologically” changed at the time of ordination, they are more likely to view themselves as somehow more special and spiritual than the laity.
- We need to pay more attention to secular thinkers, trying to understand the merits of their views rather than dismissing them as wrong-headed “heretics.”
- We need to pay more attention to providing opportunities for lay people to give homilies. Such homilies can be particularly meaningful insofar as they show how ordinary Christians live their faith on a day-by-day manner. In this connection, we also need to pay more attention to providing opportunities for deacons to give homilies.
- We need to pay more attention to publicizing the laity’s ideas about how to improve Church structures and ministries.
- We need to pay more attention to how bishops are selected, lobbying” to make this selection more transparent.
- We need to pay more attention to making the case for a married clergy, less isolated because they can draw strength from their spouses.
- We need to pay more attention to what was actually said during Vatican II so that we can access whether its teachings have been correctly promulgated.
- We need to pay more attention to fostering synodality in the Church. Listening may be more difficult than some of us have thought.
- We need to pay more attention to why some lay people and priests want to go back to the Tridentine Latin Mass. Being able to hear Mass in the vernacular was one of the most empowering accomplishments of the Second Vatican Council.

2. Who is left out or suffering today? Who are at the margins?

- Teens, young adults, young families (especially single-parent families).
- Women whose time, talent, and vision are sidelined in a Church still dominated by men.
- LGBTQIA people who feel rejected by a heterosexist church, still beholding to the idea of the first “married” couple: Adam and Eve.
- Victims of sexual abuse whose traumatic experiences are not always adequately recognized.
- The poor, an enormous and growing group of people worldwide. The dividing line between the rich and the poor is scandalous in a world where the top 1 percent

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

of individuals own 42 percent of the world's wealth. Perhaps this state of affairs is nothing new in human history. But eliminating or at least lessening poverty is one of the core missions of the Church.

- People who suffer from mental and/or physical disabilities, especially those who are labeled crazy, ugly, fat, disgusting, better dead than alive.
- People who have few or no friends and family members but are in desperate need of love.
- People who are dying. No matter how good hospice care is, it is never easy to die or, for that matter, to watch the dying process.
- People who are prisoners, especially those in solitary confinement or in maximum security prisons where, as the philosopher Hobbes might say, life is nasty, brutal, and [sometimes] short.
- People who are in need of “tenderness”: compassion, forgiveness, and mercy.
- People who have given the majority of their life to the work of the Church, only to be pushed aside as “has-beens,” not worthy of admiration and respect.
- People who have been falsely accused of sexual abuse and who suddenly find themselves alone, excluded from the “brotherhood.”
- People who have left the priesthood or a religious community who are not allowed to continue using their time, talents, and charisms in the Church that they still love.
- People who have been hurt by the Church as a result of getting divorced, having an abortion, being trans, etc.
- People who are immigrants or migrants, treated as less than fully human as in the case of children “caged” at the southern border of the United States.

3. If I could change one thing in the universal Church that I think would help us all be better follow Christ, it would be _____

- Its all-too-often lack of compassion or acceptance.
- Its teaching that priests be celibate males.
- Its failure to expand the role of women. Expanding the diaconate to include women would allow women's voices to be heard as recognized interpreters and preachers of the scriptures. More radically, expanding the priesthood to include women might increase the chances of having a servant Church, for it is women who have traditionally played the servant role as binders of wounds, feeders of the hungry, and, most importantly, as mothers capable of unconditional and sacrificial love.
- Its failure to recognize the laity's homiletic wisdom.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

- Its failure to be a more prophetic Church, aware of its sins and asking for forgiveness.
- Its inadequate formation of clergy for pastoral work.
- Its culture of clericalism that makes priests think they are better than the laity and that makes the laity continue to espouse the view that “father knows best.”

4. What actions can each of us take and what can we do collectively to make our Church better?

- We can stop enabling clericalism.
- We can insist that the clergy engage in genuine dialogue with the people in the pews, fostering a genuine give-and-take discussion of Church teachings and ministries.
- We can speak up, insisting that we be heard.
- We can financially support only those Church activities, ministries, building projects, etc., that we think Christ would endorse.
- We can join groups like Voice of the Faithful who want to effect change in the Church.
- We can recognize that the Church is a human institution, susceptible to sin.
- We can participate in our parishes’ educational offerings, charitable outreach programs, and spiritual development efforts, offering positive as well as negative “feed-back.”
- We can insist that our Church’s liturgies be vibrant, diverse, and inspiring. The “Elevation” Churches of the world have much to teach the Catholic Church about ways to develop a spirit-filled relationship with Jesus.
- We can give as much of our money as is possible to the poor people in our lives: household help, servers at restaurants, and, most importantly, to those who do the work we cannot do or the work we do not want to do.
- We can stop expecting Pope Frances to be the prime mover in Church affairs, realizing that he cannot make the Church more synodal overnight. The resistance to his programs is considerable, and he needs all the support that he can get. The fact that many dioceses and parishes in the United States have done little or nothing to support the “Synod on Synodality” is troubling indeed.
- We can remember that money talks as much today as in the past. It is troubling that millionaires and billionaires can use their money to take the Church back to pre-Vatican II days.
- We can pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us down the synodal path.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

Optional Questions between Sessions 1 and 2, asked of those unlikely to attend a formal session because they are unaffiliated with the Catholic Church today

1. What gives meaning to my life?
 - For many college-age students and young adults, what gives meaning to life is not belonging to a Christian/Catholic Church but participating in loving, non-judgmental family relationships.
 - For some college-age students the values of so-called WOKISM (originally, the word WOKE meant well-informed, up-to-date thinking. Now it is mainly used to signal alertness to racial, social, and/or sexual discrimination or unfairness) are more appealing than the values of traditional Catholic teaching.
2. What effect has the Church had in my life? Good, bad, a little bit of both?
 - For many college-age students and young adults, the Church has had a little bit of both good and bad effects. They tend to be disturbed by the Church's views on human nature and human sexuality and its slow response to the sex-abuse scandal. However, even those young people who view themselves as agnostics or even atheists respect Christians/Catholics who exhibit genuine commitment to their faith and who welcome authentic dialogue with secular thinking.
 - Millennials (born between 1981 and 1994/6) are much more likely to see the "bad" side of the Church, whereas members of Generation Z (born between 1996 and the early-mid 2000s) are far more likely to see the "good" side of the Church. Therefore, the Church has an opportunity to evangelize members of Generation Z.

Retirement Community

Session 1: March 9, 2022

Local Church

First, going forward, we wish and yearn for a local faith community that:

- Is inclusive, whose priests and lay leaders are open-minded, welcoming of everyone, and aware of every person's intrinsic worth and dignity rooted in God's love in their inner being. "Let no one ever be denied communion."
- Recognizes and encourages the diversity of roles and gifts within the People of God.
- Recognizes that every person baptized in the Catholic faith is eligible for all positions of leadership for which they are qualified, whatever their gender, sexual orientation, color, ethnic, national, or group background. There is only one human race.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

- Is collaborative in its internal governance. Laity will have a clear role in the process of selecting a bishop or a pastor. Elected pastoral councils (parish, diocesan) with which the pastor/bishop collaborates will be required.
- Is ecumenically involved and visibly present within the community, collaborating with other religious and civic leaders to promote the common good.

We wish and yearn for a local faith community:

- Whose people joyfully celebrate who we are and how we are to live in this world as the Body of Christ. Music is a critical dimension of our worship that draws us closer to God and to each other and we would like it to be a mix of traditional and contemporary music led by a trained cantor. All lay ministries (ushers, acolytes, lectors, prayer of the faithful leaders) are necessary. We would like all parts engaging the laity, such as the kiss of peace, the offertory procession, to be retained.
- Whose priests preach homilies rooted in the scripture of the day and apply the Word of God to the realities of our lives and the challenges to create the Kingdom of God.
- That provides educational opportunities to study and discuss the Second Vatican Council, what it means to be a faithful, faith-filled People of God, to be an adult member of the historic, Roman Catholic Christian tradition, and to interact and collaborate with persons of other faith traditions and none.
- That is in communion with other parishes in our diocese, helps them in their need, and collaborates with them for the greater good of the diocesan church and the common good of our civic community.

Second, our experience has included the following frustrations and disappointments:

- “We have lost our young people.”
- The treatment of divorced Catholics as 2nd class members.
- Too many hard fast rules preventing spontaneous changes for the better.
- The slowness of decision-making by bishops and Rome.
- Clericalism manifested by unilateral decision making, by a lack of transparency, and by a sense of an ontological superiority because of their indispensable sacramental role. Clericalism versus Servant Priesthood.
- A pre-Vatican Council II theology of church and liturgy indicate an inadequate seminary education.
- Some bishops seem to be theologically illiterate, openly undermine Pope Francis, and are not available or responsive to the laity.
- Lack of clerical and episcopal accountability to the laity.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

- Absolute power of local bishop enables arrogance and a superiority complex contrary to Vatican Council II's recovery of ecclesial modesty.
- Abuse of the pulpit: preaching single-issue politics instead of understanding the complexity of multiple issues and the primacy and freedom of the individual's conscience.
- We find the word "obligation" intimates and creates a sense of guilt.
- Continuing lack of recognition of the distinctive role and contributions of women: lay, religious, married, single, historically, contemporaneously.
- Lack of being ecumenically involved, especially with regard to collaborating on social justice issues.
- No way to communicate effectively with those who make the decisions.
- Failure to utilize up to date means of communication for purposes of evangelization.

Universal Church

Dreams

We dream of a universal church in which the laity will have more active leadership roles at all levels, especially women.

Recognize and support female religious in the work that they do, as in social justice, healthcare, evangelization.

Ordain women, married or single and married men to the priesthood. We already have a married clergy in the U.S.: 18,000 deacons. Allow priests to marry. Restricting sacerdotal ordination to those who think they have a vocation to celibacy is a matter of church law and not of doctrine.

Frustrations: Clericalism!

Session 2: March 16, 2022

1st Question: Church issues to which we need to pay more attention include:

- *The loss of members*, especially our young.
- *Clericalism*: Priests/bishops are out of touch with those they serve. Clergy fail to proactively seek parishioner input. We want transparency and accountability to laity.
- *Clergy Formation and Development*: We want theological education grounded in the principles of the Second Vatican Council. We want Pastoral formation to inculcate the habit of working together with the laity and working ecumenically with other secular and religious programs.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

- *Homilies* are a serious universal problem. Simply because a man is ordained to preside over the community's sacramental celebrations and to give God's forgiving love and healing does not automatically enable him to preach a meaningful homily. The People of God need and deserve better. We want scripture related to our daily lives and to the challenges of discipleship locally and internationally.
- *Inclusivity*: We want recognition of women's God-given vocations to celebrate our sacraments and to open God's Word to us and to serve in higher governance positions in our church. We want LGBTQ Catholics to receive the sacraments with us and we want enforcement of their civil rights in the public sector. In this way, we witness to God's radical inclusivity and are proactively welcoming.

2nd Question: The suffering, those left out, and the marginalized include:

- Our planet and its eco-systems.
- Locally and internationally: the economically marginalized, people of color, the homeless, the incarcerated, the seriously and chronically disabled, the elderly who live alone. Young people, people with alternative lifestyles, people without access to health care. Refugees.
- And in many locations, young women and women in general.
- In the Church, women denied the priesthood, married men denied the priesthood, and priests denied marriage; divorced men and women denied access to the Eucharist and made to feel judged and unwelcome. Faithful priests who are not fully reinstated after sexual abuse allegations against them have not been proven civilly and ecclesiastically.

3rd Question: One thing I would change in the universal church to help us all better follow Christ:

- Acceptance at all leadership levels everywhere of God's radical welcoming acceptance of every one.
- Pastors seeking laity input regarding all activities and programs.
- Allow priests to marry. Have women in higher governance positions.
- Be more hospitable. Invite others to join you at Mass or programs.
- Evangelize by deed and word.

4th Question: Individual and collective actions we can take to make our Church better include:

Individual Actions:

- Each person can directly communicate with one's pastor/bishop.
- Each person can engage in direct personal contact with those in need.

Appendix C: Supplemental Reports

Collective Actions:

- We will use the synod session model for future meetings.
- We can hold social events that build up community.
- Once the diocese submits its final document to Rome, publish that document online along with each of the diocese's parishes' submission to the bishop. This is an example of transparency.