

July 21, 2022

His Eminence Cardinal Mario Cardinal Grech

c/o General Secretariat for the Synod

Via Della Conciliazione 34

Citta del Vaticano 00120

Your Eminence:

We are members of a faith group that, beginning in March 2020, meets weekly for Sunday prayer and reflection via Zoom. It was started by lay people from a group called Solidarity with Sisters. They formed in April 2012 to respond to the Vatican Mandate of Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) and to stand in solidarity with Catholic sisters, whose spirituality and active commitment to Gospel values shone especially bright during that time of great challenge for them. Our Sunday group gathers each week to create space for the Holy Spirit to work. Especially now. There are also weekday contemplative spaces that meet on Tuesday evenings and Wednesday afternoons, also via Zoom. Currently our group has about 84 members from all over the United States, as well as Canada and Europe.

We very much appreciate the initiative of Pope Francis to include the laity in a discussion of the future of the Church. Since we are from all over the United States, Canada, and even Europe, There is no one place to present our concerns to the Synod Preparatory Committee, so below is a synthesis of views expressed at two listening sessions.

Thank you and all of the persons who work to make this important Synod both a symbol of extended care of the faithful and the integrity to fulfill the mission of Christ.

Peace in Christ,

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SWS Synthesis of Listening Sessions

Solidarity with Sisters (SWS) held two listening sessions via Zoom (June 29 and June 30). A total of 28 participated (20 women, 8 men). Twenty live in Maryland, two in North Carolina, three in Michigan, one in California, one in Florida, and one in Missouri. Almost all are over the age of 60. They identified their connection to the Catholic Church in diverse ways: never again, recovering, struggling, wrestling, angry, reluctant, active and very active. Two are affiliated with a religious order and two are members of a religious order. All are faith filled people and cherish the many good things associated with being Catholic, but are challenged by the many ways the institution has hurt them and others and continues to do so.

They were asked to share responses to four questions:

1. How has the Church, universal and local, helped you on your faith journey?
2. How has the Church hurt you or others?
3. What do you think needs to change to make the Church more Christ-like?
4. How can the Church be more synodal (journey together)?

How has the Church, universal and local, helped you on your faith journey?

faith grows in the parish and local level through connections with others. One woman grew up Lutheran but was asked to join a Catholic parish. She found the community was nourishing her in all sorts of wonderful ways; the community was welcoming/ loving/ joyful, allowed her to really focus on the questions that mattered to her and not be tied to the answers.

The neighborhood parish and parochial school, family and friends, and its routine activities and devotions shaped me.

The rest of the comments below are subsets of this main point that being catholic is Local. They include Sacraments and liturgy, mentors, small faith sharing groups, Catholic education, social justice teaching, and ministry.

Sacraments and liturgy

The rituals, sacraments, and the community were all supportive. Leaders involved in this action are an inspiration for the rest. This was all reinforced at home. Eucharist and communion of saints are very important.

Mentors

Mentors included Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, Michigan, religious sisters, priests, and lay people who guided the person in being Catholic. Friends and family were very important in growing in faith. Some priests made Christ come alive in their interaction with the people. One person became aware of faith when she married and became a Catholic.

Priest “held my hand” during struggles and helped the person grow. One priest taught it was important to be authentic and that remained with her. Had many priest friends and experienced home Masses.

The murder of four nuns in El Salvador was a conversion moment for one person. She was doing the same kind of work and was moved to support refugees in the Sanctuary movement.

Encounters with a personal mentor were important for several for becoming Catholic.

Small faith sharing groups

Especially important for many were small faith sharing groups which are open and supportive of each other’s struggles. These groups also produce long-lasting supportive friendships, which are necessary for a parish community. These small communities are a microcosm of the communion of saints. Such is the experience in the prayer sponsored by SWS on Sunday, Tuesday, and Wednesday every week. The prayers are uplifting and challenging.

Couples, charismatic, Christ Renews, and marriage enrichment are the focus of some small faith sharing groups, but most are open to all. These small groups allow for storytelling. The scripture is a story, our relationships are a story, just keep telling the stories to whomever will listen; I feel a limitation to what is actually possible but storytelling brings humor and support

Having a voice, we need to hear our stories, in our voices/ in women’s voices; that is where joy and spirituality is located.

Storytelling includes the tradition of Mary and the saints. They are a strength in the Catholic church.

Catholic education

Many experienced Catholic education by sisters in K-12 and some in Catholic colleges as well, especially the Jesuits who challenged everything. This was especially good when it helped people to discover themselves and their relationship to Jesus.

Social justice teaching and action

The social justice teaching of the Church made the Church come alive as real and as part of a universal church. It made people connected with each other and the rest of the world. This was a big part for some to be Catholic. Action included campaigns for open housing and interfaith actions.

Ministry

Being involved in ministry with fellow Catholics had an important influence on faith journey. The ministry bonded people together. One person was spiritual director of Christ Renews and touched the lives of many women. Being a Eucharistic minister, lector, in the choir, marriage preparation, or a catechist enriches faith development. Prison ministry, working with the homeless, and social justice ministry also nourish faith.

Being exposed to the country and people of Haiti changed me and I am grateful. This ministry is based on Gospel values.

Vatican II and other teaching

Vatican II changed my way of thinking about Church. Laudato Si showed how interconnected we all are with each other and with creation. The Church is the people of God. One man joined the Church because of Vatican II and marriage to a Catholic. Vatican II helped to form community and accept immigrant parents in community.

2. How has the Church hurt you or others?

All are hurt by racism, sexism, homophobia that is everywhere in the institutional Church. Other hurts are directly related to priests and bishops, some teachings and practices, abuse of the sacraments, exclusion practices, clericalism, and a few others.

Priests and bishops

“The power of the clergy and control by some bishops in unbending laws, their proclamation of them, the letters, the statements that bring fear, shame, threat and embarrassment to individuals have always been hurtful and will continue to be if allowed to continue.”

Clergy are like an “old boys club”. “noise” of the institutional is bothersome.

She worked in rectory and saw all the finery and what her family couldn't afford.

Clergy act as patriarchs and autocrats.

Some women religious have been hurt by vindictiveness and punishments of priests

First wife was called to ministry and left the Catholic church to do so. It was important to support her but it was painful that she couldn't do that in the Catholic church.

People are leaving because the church is not speaking to them.

One member of a religious order was especially hurt by the Vatican investigation into religious orders in the United States.

Sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults by priests was contrary to their calling but the coverup was even more horrendous. It destroyed their credibility.

Some teaching and practices

Teaching that only Catholics go to heaven; mom was Lutheran.

One person was told in second grade she was on the road to hell. After high school she was told she had a call to religious life and if she did not follow it, she would go to hell.

Vatican inspection of women religious in US.

One Sister shared her experience of being rejected several times by the local priest. She was also asked to preach by lay people but the pastor said she could not. She was publicly criticized by her local bishop.

Divorced Catholics are hurt by being denied communion.

If you can make someone believe a lie you can get them to commit an atrocity- that has happened in the Catholic church. Teaching needs to be authentic from childhood to adult.

So many things of how we teach stories as literal truths and now teaching children to believe a lie so when you tell them other lies they believe that as well- so move from just being wrong to causing real harm.

Church employees fired because they are gay hurts them and all the People of God.

Abuse of sacraments

My first hurt was when I was 7 years old and went to confession and wasn't a great experience.

Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, but in making it available only through celibate priests limits the Eucharist

Eucharist is valuable and should be open to everyone. A couple could not have Mass at wedding because people who are being invited may not all be ready to receive Communion.

Another person was told she could not marry for six months for the prep time. Fortunately another priest intervened and let her marry after five months.

Denial of funeral to gays and people who died by suicide.

Exclusion practices

In the beginning we were a very inclusive church, women were leaders, we welcomed anyone who wanted to join us but we have lost that over the centuries.

Hierarchy caters to the privileged.

Pope Benedict and others saying there is no place in the church for people who are gay, is hurtful.

I couldn't in good conscience stay in a church that does not welcome all.

Divisive language is unwelcoming

People of color, women, LGBTQ- all are marginalized and Jesus welcomed everyone; it hurts to see people not welcoming everyone.

Clericalism

Clergy feels themselves superior to lay people.

The power of the bishops, the letters, what brings embarrassment and shame, returning to old liturgy, single issue support to the exclusion of other important issues.

What hurts me today is tied to the institutional church; pastors who have not allowed the growth; pastors who have not encouraged the growth.

Our church is wrong and doesn't see how being wrong hurts others (example of denying transgendered people).

3. What needs to change

The Church needs to be more welcoming. Many of the changes suggested below linked to the lack of a welcoming attitude among many Church leaders and members.

Youth

The youth have to be met in the cultural context; the current culture is dizzy, bring the Gospel to the varying cultures of youth.

We are missing the future of the church (younger people).

It's not insufficient catechesis that keeps young people out; they have heard the message and are repulsed by teachings such as LGBT issues; it's not a safe place for a young person.

Need to find how to keep young people engaged after confirmation- service projects; drastically address the needs of young people between confirmation and when they might turn away.

We have to find ways to have conversations with young people, we don't identify with their needs,

Need young people to bring energy and fresh air into the church.

Understanding of Church

Something has to happen to really welcome all people.

Sisters have really welcomed people- that kind of welcoming needs to be the whole church.

We need to have conversations with each other.

Agency for women, women were important from the beginning, we need to return to that.

The church is living and active in small groups, need honesty and willingness for vulnerability.

Small groups can be honest with each other, hope and sorrow together in the context of Gospel; plant those seeds; could Bishops also experience in small groups what we experience together and begin to trust that the Spirit really is active in the people of God, not hierarching the Bishops; vibrant lay led life; the Spirit is full of surprises.

The church must recognize and admit culpability to hurt, find ways of restoration and healing; the sin of these isms before we can move forward.

The people of God are us, turn it back to us.

We have benefited from a system based on exploitation, slavery, unequal power. The Bishops need to recognize the need for serious penance, not just denouncing the past evil. Reparations must be made to all those hurt by the Church.

We need to have catechesis that is intergenerational, life long spiritual formation.

Church needs to be more inclusive, make it open to more people.

The Church needs to embrace the vision of Vatican II instead of interpreting it as if all documents reinforced the old Church.

The teaching on sexuality needs to be updated to reflect modern science.

The Church needs to respect different understandings of where the church is throughout the world and how to balance that but the church COULD be the example of treating everyone as equals.

Treatment of women, white supremacy; the institution has a distorted preoccupation with sexuality (immature and misguided), antithetical to Gospel values; we have a responsibility to ourselves to recognize this and how we are party to it.

We can't just compartmentalize because perhaps we are in complicity.

How do we get the wiser people and the younger people together? How can we forge this intergenerational connection? To help people find paths in their secular lives.

Community

Community is so important, must feel welcome and not a stranger; community for faith life/ support/ for call to muster up and do better.

Parishes need to be based on small Christian communities, alternative communities, communities focused on social justice.

Ministerial preparation must be close to the life of the people served.

Priests and bishops

Training needs to change.

The understanding of what it means to be ordained and the understanding of sexuality need to be examined in relation to ministry.

Get out of the business of being partners in the halls of power and return to being the prophetic voice, to being the conscience without being a partner to that power.

Clerical hierarchical model must change; leadership from community, bottom up. priests don't know what people put up with, they need to understand that- priests being separate isn't working.

Clergy has become a boys club now, they need to go.

Pastors shouldn't be dogmatic, abrupt and disrespectful in how parishioners are treated.

A model of servant leadership must be taught to all clergy.

Need women in leadership, women deacons are a part of our tradition; that would be healing for me.

The opposite of love isn't hate, it is indifference; I don't think the hierarchy cares one bit about Gospel values, think it cares about power.

Sermons and homilies by all types of wise people to hear and learn from their wisdom.

The clergy is not in right relationship with us.

The paradox is that the people have helped shape us DESPITE the hierarchy; the moral rot of the hierarchy, we participate in that.

Stop using the Eucharist as a weapon.

Pope Francis and Jim Martin, SJ are hopeful examples in our church.

Married priests, women priests; training of priests should emphasize compassion rather than legality

Women deacons.

Resources

Equitably use the resources of the church to meet the needs of its people.

Address people's individual needs; give pastoral commissions authority to meet needs.

The Church needs to be financially transparent. Where does the money go? The money needs to go to the poor, not to the gold of the church.

The church needs to talk about its imperial past, its turning money into prayer, lots of money goes into things we don't need; I can't waste my time thinking about how to improve it without some kind of action, some kind accounting.

Redirecting the money to where the need is.

It should lose its tax exempt status; this will reduce its connection to power and money.

Pro-life Issues

Pope Francis seems to understand that people have real spiritual needs but also understands that there are practical things the church can do to meet needs.

Could parishes go to the same effort to organize and march for causes like Black Lives Matter, immigration in the same way that they have for the Right to Life march?

Educating priests on many issues.

Attack social justice issues.

We have to walk the talk of social justice instead of a focus on rules; the basic principles are publicly lived and proclaimed, the core of the Gospel.

Many of us feel much closer to one another as we hear what each other think about these difficult issues in our Catholic Church.

Rethink Pro Life to be meaningful and inclusive rather than just anti-abortion by supporting women before and after birth,

welcoming immigrants,

respecting the "different" (differently abled, the mentally ill, LGBTQ etc),

supporting the incarcerated,

working to end the death penalty,

courageously addressing gun violence,

ending the edict on birth control- would clearly minimize abortions.

A final thought:

Many parishes go all out on 1/22nd holding a special Mass, encouraging parishioners to march, providing buses, sometimes providing a meal at the end of the day when the buses return, etc.

Suppose we did all of this for a rally on gun control, the environment, racism, sexism, etc. We could make a difference.

How can the Church move to greater synodality, that is journeying together, with no distinction between clergy and lay?

The Church needs to recognize that its appetite for hierarchy is a false idol and move to do servant leadership. It needs to listen to the people when they say they find their faith supported in small church communities and not in The Church.

“We the church” have an enormous moral responsibility to help each other be church in a way that does not refuse to know what we know about the harm the institutional church causes both the people in the pews and the people not in the pews. To the degree that we deny or minimize that harm, we are complicit.

We see four paths to a synodal church:

1. Small communities are where the Spirit thrives and real church happens. This Synodal Listening Process all over the world will give people a taste and seed lasting small Gospel communities. Eventually these small communities will waken to one another.
2. Few bishops have tasted the zest, and risked the vulnerability, of small, intimate communities of faith. So use the Synod to jump-start this experience for them. Input like ours could help to form a multi-day, multi-year process where the bishops listen honestly to their hearts, speak honestly in small groups, and listen with openness and respect. Build in silence for the Spirit to speak. Repeat the small group process. Over time, welcome more and more diversity into the groups.
3. Listen to what is happening in small groups and in synodal listening in Central and South America, Africa, Asia.
4. The infinitely surprising Spirit will act in ways we can't imagine.

5. Finally, but not least, is a reformed clergy who is pastoral and compassionate, men and women, single and married.