

June 6, 2022  
Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary,  
Mother of the Church

Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops  
Via della Conciliazione 34, Vatican City



*Sensus Fidelium* by Dan Frachey

Dear Secretary General,

Mindful that, “much of the richness of this listening phase will come from discussions among parishes, lay movements, schools and universities, religious congregations, neighbourhood Christian communities, social action, ecumenical and inter-religious movements, and other groups,<sup>1</sup>” we are one of those *other groups* named *Synodality in Central Illinois* who met for four listening and sharing sessions through March and April of this year. It is with great hope and joy, faith and devotion to our beloved church that we share this report.

### **Who Comprised Synodality in Central Illinois**

Earlier this year, prior to any notice of synodal activity from the Diocese of Springfield, several members from Holy Family Inclusive Catholic Community began to discuss moving forward into the Diocesan Phase. Without disclosing our identity at the onset or during the sessions so as to encourage wide participation from anyone interested, the aim was to issue an open invitation to any practicing or former Catholic in the central Illinois area who wanted to take part in a series of synodal sessions with the understanding that our collective responses would be shared with the Secretary General as well as Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki, Diocese of Springfield, Bishop Lou Tylka, Diocese of Peoria and Cardinal Blase J. Cupich, Archdiocese of Chicago.

The wider group with Synodality in Central Illinois remained in communication via social media until the sessions began on March 30, 2022 when approximately 40 individuals came together via Zoom sessions. We were mostly lay people in attendance, older (60-70 in age) virtually all white. The percentage of female participants was 80% to 90%.

### **Our Approach to the Synodal Process**

Knowing that we were not a group officially sanctioned by leadership of any local diocese, we elected to focus on giving area Catholics the opportunity to engage in sessions that could encourage honest and open listening and sharing without fear of repercussions from ecclesial authority that might inhibit it. The topical focus for these sessions were the Paschal Mystery: the ***life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus***. In accord with the timing of the liturgical year, the first two sessions on March 30 (Life) & April 6 (Death) were held during Lent.

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<sup>1</sup> Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality, 3.1

The remaining two sessions on April 20 (Resurrection) and April 27 (Ascension) naturally flowed from the Easter season befitting the greater synodal themes articulated in the *Vademecum*.

The Sessions were convened by Dan Frachey and then handed off to several small group facilitators who guided participants through the three questions provided ahead of time for each night. We employed a contemplative dialogue approach so that all participants felt free to share without being interrupted. All held silence prior to and just after the small group sharing time. All convened into the larger group to echo key themes that emerged before we ended in group prayer.

## **Defining Aspects of Synodality in Central Illinois Participants**

It is imperative that those reading this report understand that those who took part in this process self-identified *as being deeply formed within a trinitarian faith that loves and celebrates our identity as members of the body of Christ*. There was a sense of great intent to make this a Spirit-filled process that we would joyfully enter into, beginning with the *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* prayer so as to remain faithful to the intent of the Synod.

Furthermore, those who came forward to take part in this process had a strong devotion to the reality of communion in terms of wanting to see the church remain a vibrant reality in the world while at the same time being willing to seek healing and wholeness in accord with both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. Above all, it was evident that those who participated truly valued the church and sought to live into their role as baptized members who see the need to bless and help the church reform, thrive and grow in the world today.

A defining reality that became apparent was that, despite the pervasive tone of gratitude that was felt by participants, there was a strong determination to bring up that which is problematic, discouraging and even life-draining about the church. Participants who joined in these sessions articulated a distrust in diocesan leaders from the area and felt that these would not be open to hearing and subsequently addressing the more challenging realities that they wanted to make known and share.

A final defining aspect of the participants was how many did not want to be named for fear of retribution in their own diocese. This reality represents the same fear of reprisal from those who either work for the church or those who simply recognize the necessity to remain “under the radar” lest negative repercussions are felt. As unpleasant as this might be for church leaders to know, this uneven power dynamic is a prevalent reality that results in limitations in people’s willingness to speak openly, causing a myopic view taken in by church leaders and conditions that impoverish the communion of the church.

## **The Four Foci and Sets of Questions for Each of the Four Sessions**

### ***Night No. 1 “Life” – March 30, 2022***

**Focus:** We are all the truest experts of our own experiences so tonight we'll bring forth stories as Catholic Christians. Our aim this evening is to gain a sense of what it was like for our fellow participants to be Catholic. As much as we can, this night will be marked by the positive and beneficial experiences we've had.

- 1. Share your earliest memories of being Catholic and going to church: Who were the key people in those years and how did they inspire or offer positive guidance then?*
- 2. What were some of the Catholic teachings you received early on and what impact did they have in shaping the way you grew up??*
- 3. What about being a Catholic has shaped your view of God the most up to now?*

### ***Night No. 2 “Death” – April 6, 2022***

**Focus:** We are a people who look to Jesus Christ and the gospels as our standard and yet we as a church have fallen short. Many of us have experienced pain, suffering and loss along the years that came to us by way of being in the Catholic church. Tonight, we'll bring forth the sorrows, anguish and devastation that has become part of that story in the church.

- 1. At what point did you begin to come to grips with the reality of brokenness in the church? What events come to mind as you think of this?*
- 2. What teachings were most life-draining and demoralizing to your own spirit?*
- 3. In what way have the experiences you shared negatively shaped your own personal life and your experiences of being a Catholic in the world today?*

### ***Night No. 3 “Resurrection” – April 20, 2022***

**Focus:** Jesus's resurrection is an essential truth about the human person; one that affirms how death is never the final word. We understand our relationship as members of the body with the Christ as head. At Easter, the good news comes through signs of rebirth for the bruised and broken body. Tonight, we'll share our understanding of where new life is evident within the church.

- 1. Share what helps you remain in the church and how it animates and energizes your spirit.*
- 2. In the midst of a world fraught with war, poverty, injustice and unbelief, what causes you to maintain your belief in resurrection for the church?*
- 3. Where do you see signs of new life in Christ showing up in seemingly unlikely ways, places or people?*

## **Night No. 4 “Ascension” – April 27, 2022**

**Focus:** Many theologians see the Christ within evolution and the unification of all things. This evening, we'll let our spirits soar as our sharing characterizes what the church could yet be. We will have the blessed audacity to bring our unfettered hopes, dreams and bold visioning when sharing so that we are soaked with possibility, hope and deep gratitude.

1. *Name one great hope that burns within your own heart that you yearn to see manifest within us as the Catholic Church in the years to come.*
2. *If we as the Body of Christ are to rise and come to full stature, what are some of the realities that become like ropes that are keeping us pinned down to the ground?*
3. *Take turns completing the sentence, “I dream of a church when \_\_\_\_\_!”*

## **Emerging Themes From Our Synodal Sessions**

### **I. Night No. 1 – “Life” as a Catholic in the Church**

- **Gratitude!** - Participants were grateful to be invited into this synodal process! Many of us grew up in the hopes of the Second Vatican Council that more actively allowed lay people to take a greater role not just in the liturgy of the mass but in the shaping of our parishes, schools and other instances where Catholics were involved in our communities.
- **Key Influencers** – participants spoke of the gift of faith passed on by and nourished by parents, family, members of religious communities, Catholic schools, retreat teams and parish communities. Again, there was deep gratitude for how the church helped to form so much good in us and in our world.
- **Second Vatican Council** – so many of our participants referred to the documents that emerged with great hope and connectedness to the wider church and an authentic expression of Christianity in our times. There was a great desire to see this council more fully unpacked and received by all the faithful.
- **Importance of Community** – Parish life is indeed life-giving when there is access to good preaching, participation in pastoral councils and the nurturing of a collective identity that is grounded in becoming a *transformational community*. Instead, participants voiced frustration when going to church becomes a *transactional* process; as if mere attendance and attainment of sacramental “goods” is the goal of being Catholic.

## II. Night No. 2 – “Death” experienced by those within the church

Even though we sought to take a measured approach to all that was occurring in the church, members overwhelmingly returned to the anguish and frustrations that had become the dominant narrative related to their church identity and participation. Some of the sources of sadness from our group include:

- **Exclusion.** This is the one word and spiritual practice that participants found most egregious in light of who Jesus is revealed to be in the gospels. Many who took part felt that the church has lost sight of the true message of Christ which is to be inclusive, loving, forgiving and supportive instead of focusing on a plethora of rules and the intended and unintended practices that create the specter of clerical supremacy. Virulently opposing LGBT members who long for blessing and acceptance while refusing qualified lay people, particularly women, a greater role as leaders, teachers and shepherds is exceedingly demoralizing. We cannot emphasize enough that this is much more than simply ceding ground to the cultural forces and pressures of the day. Exclusion as a felt reality through experience is viewed as one of the greatest threats to the communion of the church today.
- **The exclusion of select people from the Eucharistic table;** a problematic practice that cannot ever be truly consistent and fair. One participant shared, *“I cannot accept that people who desire to be fed the Body of Christ can be denied because of “man-made” rules. Jesus gave himself for ALL sinners who desire HIS saving grace. He did NOT make a list of who can or cannot come to HIM while hanging on the cross.”* Such selective punitive actions create an environment within the church where rules seem to trump relationship. The growing perception is that Eucharist becomes a commodity that some merit more than others.
- **Statements and actions that further ostracize Catholics who are LGBT along with their families.** One participant lamented how demoralizing it was to hear the local bishop denounce the presence of gays and lesbians in the church during a confirmation liturgy. The participant’s son, a boy who identified as gay, sat listening to these denunciations at a time he was being invited to a greater participation in the life of the church.
- **The refusal to allow the ordination of women as deacons and priests.** One participant recalled, *“In the 6th Grade, I noticed that the men of the parish got paid for work they did for the church while women did not. Also, women got to*

*clean, teach public school kids' religion, cook, and raise money for the school and church while men got to walk around the church in fancy clothes and be the bosses/leaders even of the women's groups."* While not a theological rationale, this statement expresses the anguish that stems from the current disparity, especially given the great number of women who do come forward to serve.

Because this topic was brought up with great frequency and import, others echoed this frustration: *"The absence of women in preaching and parish leadership positions is disappointing to me. The feminine approach and viewpoint are often lacking. I think many of the scandals would be more assertively addressed with equal representation of feminine and male leadership."*

- **A pervasive level of clericalism** that creates a renewed divide between the ordained and the laity, which diminishes trust in the church and compromises our ability to reflect the church that Jesus preached in the gospels. One participant shared, *"Even though I did not label it "clericalism," I knew early on in my employment in parish and diocesan positions that there was not a collaborative or shared decision-making process in place. There was always the known fact that "Father had the last word" and sometimes that last word was carried out in abusive ways. I saw people publicly taken to task when something did not please an unreasonable expectation. I also became more and more horrified as the sexual abuse scandals continued to become public knowledge and nothing at any level was being done to demand accountability.*
- **Ongoing instances where leaders are not held accountable for sexual abuse.** The disparity that is locally and globally brought to light in terms of how some church leaders protect their own and quietly reassign them when allegations come to light is extremely disheartening. This erodes trust and hope.
- **The Politicization of the clergy** – understanding that the church must act as witness to the gospel, we lament those religious leaders within the church who have allowed their political views to overshadow their role as shepherd.

### III. **Night No. 3 – "Resurrection" as New life Present Within the Church**

Impelled by the joys and hopes of resurrection, we celebrate the Kingdom of God that is already manifesting the love and presence of Jesus in our world.

- **Good Liturgy** - There are Catholics who are inspired by the steadfastness and richness of the Catholic liturgy as it is today. Many Catholic churches have beautiful music and inspiring preaching that is relevant to current times and ignites love and faith in their members. One participant shared, *"I remain in the church because of the liturgy. I have visited other faith traditions and there always seems to be something missing. I also have 10 grandchildren, and I am energized each time that one of them receives a sacrament."*

- **A Return to Gospel Inclusion** - this means not only opening the heart and soul of the church to aid those in desperate need but also to include those who Christ included. These being the outcasts, the ones who don't fit the mold set by self-righteous leaders. Christ would never turn away anyone who had the desire to love him and share that love with others. There is hope that there will be a rebirthing of the Catholic church to love and include all and to expand the leadership roles in the church to promote equality and participation by laity and women.

Christ can also be seen in the many Catholics who support inclusion of LGBTQ, divorced and remarried couples in the Eucharist as long as they are of good faith and seeking God in their lives. Individuals have found Christ in nature and in the simple things of life when they take the time to slow down and appreciate the beauty with which God has surrounded us. Toddlers are the greatest teachers of this perspective. Lastly, despite the violence even greater love and kindness prevail.

- **Adult Faith, Growth and Participation in the Community.** Participants valued feeling able to ask questions about our Catholic faith without fear of reprisal. They also found inspiration from reading diverse sources that rise above rigid teachings they have grown up with.
- **A Great Heritage of Social Concerns** - the Catholic church has a history of outreach for social justice. It has supported charities to help the poor, homeless and the defenseless. Now more than ever that kindness and charity are needed. It is in difficult times that people join together to help others. Pope Francis is trying to guide the Catholic Church into what Christ intended it to be. Many have seen Christ in the people of Ukraine and those who are helping them. Never before have so many countries come to the aid of a nation under siege.
- **Global Identity** - we celebrate being in communion with a world-wide church that is more and more recognizing other religious communities and other entities that seek to serve and enliven the common good in our common home. We celebrate how Pope Francis encourages collegiality among the world's bishops and allows them to vest themselves and their churches in the life of the church that depicts an evolving understanding of how the human person is growing and maturing.

#### IV. Night No. 4 – “Ascension” as What We See the Church Becoming

We concluded our synodal sharing by expressing our burning hopes for how we could yet manifest the Kingdom of God. We allowed ourselves to share our dreams and sense of vision for who we’re collectively becoming in Christ. We dream of a church:

- **Where church leaders** are identified by their gifts of inclusion, mercy, outreach, justice and loving kindness to all people, particularly those at the margins of the church.
- **Where ALL who seek access to the church would be welcomed** at the table and in the family room of the church in accord with how Paul articulated an integrated vision of the church as a healthy functioning body in 1: Corinthians 12.
- **That has reckoned with the corrosive spirit of clericalism and sought the Holy Spirit in the transformation into a healthy and open leadership environment.** We see this happening when men and women who are identified by the community for leadership could serve in a healthy way that honors gifts without burning people out. This includes a renewed commitment to return to the empowering of the laity in a true spirit of collaboration as articulated by the U.S. bishops in *Co-Workers for the Vineyard*, 2005.
- **That the awareness and understanding of the earth as our common home** would be a unifying reality within the church for all peoples of good will to act as stewards.
- **Where decision-making is collaborative** with church leaders and members who have some say in who gets assigned, feedback on the content of preaching and some ability to speak in terms of assisting in the ongoing formation and evaluation process.

#### Final Recommendations

Two quotes that seem to best summarize what this group shared over our synodal sessions:

*“I would love to see the church become inclusive of everyone, regardless of gender, marital status, sexual orientation, race, socio-economic status, etc., which is the way I truly believe Jesus intended us to live.”*

*“...that we’d be at the service of the gospel beyond the protection of the institution.”*

In these thoughts are found the strong yearning to return to a church modeled by Jesus Christ as presented in the gospels; one who came to transform the ways humans used to gather and worship by forging a deep respect and oneness of all God’s children.

The great inconvenient truth that these synodal responses point to is that our beloved church needs to open its heart and doors more fully to those on the margin including LGBTQ members who are already baptized, women and people of color. If the church refuses to more earnestly



incorporate and include these, a greater hemorrhaging of its members will occur and the impoverishment of the church will grow in severity; diminishing its witness and overall presence in the world. With earnest hearts, we implore the leaders of our church to avoid any entrapment of limited notions of a remnant church lest it become a small enclave for a few ideologically-driven leaders responding in fear to this moment in salvation history.

Thank you for reading this humble report from those of us who came forward out of love, devotion and hope for the church. Mary, Mother of God, pray for us. St. Joseph, pray for us. +

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