

SYNOD ON SYNODALITY: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION
REPORT FROM ST. AGNES CHURCH, SHEPHERDSTOWN
MAY 1, 2022

INTRODUCTION

From Pope Francis' initial announcement of the Synod on Synodality, our pastor was a strong advocate for our parish's involvement in the Synod Listening process. He quickly received the Pastoral Council's unanimous support for parish engagement. The pastor spoke about the Synod at every opportunity. This was crucial! By the time the pastor and Pastoral Council selected the Parish Coordinators to lead the parish Listening process, there was already a groundswell of parishioner interest.

Like many parishes we have parishioners who are registered but attend infrequently. We also have parishioners who have not returned due to covid, and we have a number of homebound parishioners. The Coordinators and Pastor sent a joint letter to all registered households in the parish alerting them to the initial plans, the timeline, the fact that future information would be on the parish website and in periodic e-mails, and urging everyone to prayerfully consider participating, if at all possible. The Synod prayer cards supplied by the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston were stapled inside our hymnals. Every week at the end of each Liturgy the entire Assembly read the prayer together.

The second key moment came when the Coordinators, after studying the Synod Preparatory Document and Vademecum made the decision to involve as many parishioners as possible following the small group process described in the Vademecum Appendix B. 8. (with a few slight modifications). The Coordinators determined it would require two, 2-hour sessions to address all 10 Themes using this process. They knew they were taking a risk - asking a huge commitment from people with busy lives.

The Coordinators brought together an initial small group composed of themselves, the pastor and pastor emeritus and two volunteer parishioners to test the process. Satisfied that it was prayerful, and encouraged careful listening and discernment, the Coordinators recruited 27 parish facilitators. They distributed to them materials from the Facilitator Training Guidelines prepared at the request of the USCCB and available on that website. Then the facilitators were asked to participate in small group sessions themselves. Finally, the Coordinators reviewed, highlighted and commented on key components of the process and fielded questions from the facilitators. They emphasized that this was to be a prayerful process of discernment.

Every weekend for 2 months the Coordinators were present in the Narthex after each liturgy inviting parishioners to sign up for one of a large number of 2 session options. There were morning, afternoon, evening, weekday and weekend, in person and zoom options. Frequently the Coordinators made brief announcements at the end of Liturgies. Each week or so there were new bulletin and website announcements and some e-mail blasts. In total, between facilitator and small group sessions, we held 66 sessions. We held 21 interviews and received 26 written responses.

The Coordinators took seriously Pope Francis' urging that we reach out to the peripheries, the marginalized. We understood this to mean the marginalized in our Church and in society. We reached out directly or indirectly to specific groups who are on the margins of our Church: homebound, confirmandi, older youth, young adults (20's to 40's), families with young children. We also reached out to groups on the margins of society: people in poverty, people wrestling with addiction, people who are incarcerated or recently released, people who are military veterans. We weren't able to meet and listen to any individuals in these latter groups directly. Instead, our Coordinators met with individuals and agency staff who actively engage with people on the margins. We have shared what we have heard and learned from those on the margins in a separate section of this report.

Many parishioners were hesitant, or doubtful of the value of this process. It took some cajoling for them to engage, but once engaged people participated wholeheartedly. On the whole it seemed a very positive experience for parishioners. In fact, one of the most positive outcomes is the strong support for continuation of small faith groups. It is clear to parishioners that discernment is an art and a skill that takes ongoing practice. There is now curiosity and interest in learning more. Prayerfully listening to the Spirit, meditating, “deep” listening – this way of engaging is new for many, but people opened their hearts and minds and engaged willingly.

One of the most striking revelations was the lack of consensus on the mission of the Church. There is much to explore and plumb here.

The groups the Church is losing – our future generations: teens, young adults, young families – were the ones we almost totally failed to engage. We did get some powerful written responses from young adults at the last minute. We could not even find out for sure why some people are not participating. We will not give up. We will continue to reach out.

Although the questions in each Theme were intended to address the local or universal church, many, if not most, responses dealt with our parish. This process has been exactly what the parish needed coming out of our covid isolation. Over 200 parishioners engaged in these sessions. They prayed, shared and laughed together and have renewed hope for our Church.

Theme I: Companions on the Journey

Parishioners overwhelmingly felt our parish is welcoming, but also recognized there are still more people we need to reach out to.

Parishioners named much we are doing well here, especially liturgy, scripture study, serving the poor and promoting social justice.

We recognize our need to improve communication, youth and family involvement and outreach to the university community.

Nearly everyone wants to continue small groups in some format such as by interest, by geographic location, etc.

Parishioners voiced strong commitment to inclusivity. People we need to reach out to, listen to and include are members of the LGBTQ community, people of color, youth, young adults and young families, singles, people of limited resources, the homeless, immigrants and refugees, divorced and remarried, disabled, homebound, widows and widowers.

Theme II: Listening

There is much support for this Listening process called for by Pope Francis. Many saw the small group process as a way to promote deeper conversations. They recognized how difficult it is to listen to other points of view, to go beyond our own biases, not to judge, to hear the hidden pain of people, to overcome the isolation that is part of the culture, to find methods to facilitate listening.

We must constantly struggle to reach out and hear those on the margins. Our challenge is to hear the Holy Spirit among those on the periphery.

People expressed discouragement about the opposition within the Church to this process and cited the failure of many bishops to engage their Dioceses in this process. Strong doubt was expressed about the hierarchy's willingness to listen to the results of this process and act positively on them.

The modern world is set up for "doing," not for listening. There are many distractions especially technology. After listening there needs to be reflection on what was heard and what actions might be needed.

There was a strong sense that listening to the Holy Spirit is key to good listening, discernment and journeying together.

Theme III: Speaking Out

This theme elicited the most diverse viewpoints.

There was general approval of the Pope speaking out and what he says.

There is much more ambivalence about when a parish should speak out. Mentioned were the actions of the former bishop of Wheeling-Charleston, clergy sex abuse and "Black Lives Matter." It was noted the parish did speak out about the former bishop, and about the selection of a new pastor.

While some people do not want the Church to be "political," "politics and Church don't mix," others spoke of the difference between politics and morality, "speaking out is really answering the prophetic call of our faith." Some said if we don't speak out against injustice, we are complicit. Some said silence is sometimes louder than words.

People expressed a range of attitudes about various church teachings from abortion to gender issues to social justice and peace issues.

Theme IV: Celebration

There was overwhelming affirmation of liturgical celebrations in our parish, including praise for the celebrants, the music, and the liturgical ministers.

Many spoke of the absence of youth, young adults, and young families and struggled with how to "bring them back."

We heard from youth that liturgy is repetitive, dull, and boring.

There were suggestions from all ages for contemporary music and more modern translations of prayers.

A few folks missed the Latin mass.

Ongoing liturgical education is a must.

Theme V: Sharing Responsibility for our Common Mission

There is no shared understanding of what the common mission of the Universal Church is. In fact, responses about the mission of the Church were "all over the map."

A primary focus of the Church needs to be clarification of its mission among the faithful.

There was discussion about who determines the mission: the pope, the hierarchy, the entire Church.

Here is some of what was voiced about the Church's mission:

- Lead the people to Jesus, Help those in need;
- Be spiritual, human, Christ-like;
- Preferential option for the poor and disenfranchised;
- Transform the world and ourselves;
- Live the Gospel. Build God's Kingdom;
- Do Christ's work. Are we as laity called to do the mission of the Church?
- Love God, your neighbor. Simplicity;
- Evangelization
- Spread the Word of Jesus Christ.

Theme VI: Dialogue in Church and Society

It was frequently said that St Agnes has better relations with local churches of other denominations than with other local Catholic churches.

Reasons cited were divergent ways of thinking, political differences, theological differences, etc. These divergences make dialogue challenging.

When discussing dialogue in society, it was seen as the apostolate of the laity to do this, but no one is sure how to create the structures and processes for this to happen in the face of so much division.

Much of the response focused on dialogue within the parish, with some people urging that we bring parishioners together specifically to address areas of conflict, for example: racism, in an attempt to find commonalities.

If this question were about dialogue with the Vatican, people raised doubts, particularly because of restrictions on discussing allowing women to be ordained.

Engaging in dialogue with certain segments of society is especially challenging: those leaving or who have left the church, youth and young adults, young families, people who are homeless or in unstable economic situations and people who are in physical or mental pain.

Some said that dialogue needs to start from the painful exclusionary inequalities within our church which we need to name and overcome.

Theme VII: Ecumenism

There was much emphasis on the need to listen better and learn from other faiths, and to value diversity in and among denominations as well as valuing our commonalities.

Some also pointed to the negative, the inability to respect and value other faiths.

Others said that ecumenical and interfaith relations are what we do in our lives and our professions.

It was pointed out that the number of ecumenical and interfaith marriages is growing exponentially and the need for education about and respect for other faiths is crucial, as well as knowledge of our own faith.

One of the most visible signs of ecumenism in our community is our coordinated assistance, mainly our service and outreach to those in need. What is missing is the importance of reflecting on these experiences in light of the Gospel.

There is strong support for educating the young in ecumenism, many citing summer community bible school and urging its return, and also asking for more ecumenical youth activities.

Theme VIII: Authority and Participation

There was strong support for Pope Francis' commitment to the synodical process, and for our parish's active participation.

There was concern about the opposition of some clergy and laity to Vatican II and to Pope Francis.

Many mentioned the possibility of, and need for, a strong role for women and married clergy in the Church and expressed concern about the Church's opposition.

By far the greatest concern about participation is the declining number of youth, young adults and young families engaged in the Church community.

People recognize the church is not a democracy, but people object to those clergy and bishops who exercise absolute authority. Some said this is one of the prime reasons people are leaving the church. The clergy sex abuse scandal and cover-up are an example of the danger of unchecked authority as is the behavior of the former Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston.

We need to move from a church of power to a church of empowerment in order to increase participation.

Theme IX: Discerning and Deciding

There was questioning and confusion about discernment: what it is, whether it really works, how one can be sure it is authentic discernment (listening to the Spirit)?

We need to learn to distinguish between consultation and decision making. "The dance between consultation and decision making is always delicate, and we have to hope that those making the decisions are guided by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by the power of power."

It was said in a variety of ways that in a hierarchical church the laity feel excluded in decision making.

It was also frequently mentioned that In consultation and decision making it is crucial to include those often excluded: women, people of color, divorced and remarried, youth, young families, low income and those marginalized for any reason. Many shared painful experiences of rejection, often public, by clergy or church members.

There was much support for Pope Francis' efforts to create a synodal church, a listening, participatory church.

Prayer, authentic listening, and personal responsibility for our faith were cited as crucial for the church.

Improved communication was frequently urged: within the parish, between and among parishes and the diocese, and in the universal church.

Theme X: Forming Ourselves in Synodality

People recognized that journeying together accompanied by Christ and the Holy Spirit takes humility and courage as the road may not be going where we want it to go.

"Change" prompted much discussion. Some feared losing ancient traditions, some wanted the church to be accountable for its negative past, some emphasized the Pope's urging to be open to new ideas. Some expressed concern we are losing the next generation because of our failure to change. We need the Holy Spirit to guide us.

There is a strong commitment to show we are moving forward and growing and not giving up.

Again there was overwhelming support for the continuation of small group sessions – to listen, to dialogue (even about tough areas of disagreement), to pray together, to build community and consensus.

Reaching out to the Margins

We made multiple attempts to reach out to people on the periphery, especially youth, young adults, young families, non-attendees and homebound members of the Church.

- **Homebound.** Two of our parishioners visited all of our homebound and discussed the Synod themes with each person as appropriate given their health. When asked what they appreciated about the Church, overwhelming they cited the universality of the Church (the same everywhere) and the liturgy. When asked their hopes for the Church, many said they wanted to see a stronger role for women, a non-judgmental Church, and that Pope Francis would live forever. Those who have come from other parishes and are now living with family in this parish reported feeling comfortable and welcome. When asked about concerns, the loss of young people and young families was uppermost. One homebound person said, "There will not be a church if the top-heavy hierarchy that we have today continues."
- **Families involved in Christian Faith Formation (CFF) and other young families.** We prepared simplified questions which we asked parents to discuss with their young children. The Coordinators prepared a video to assist parents engage in this process. We asked parents to share the highlights of these discussions. None of the 20 plus families in CFF or other young families provided feedback.
- **Confirmandi And CFF.** We prepared similarly simplified questions for these groups. Each of the Confirmandi provided written responses and CFF oral responses to our questions. Liturgy (Youth Mass especially), service opportunities, ordination of women, and, in general, appreciating having ways to participate in Church were almost universal themes in this group. One said bringing Communion to the sick is a way people serve our community.

- **Older teens (14 – 19).** We struggled to reach anyone in this age group, ultimately failing. Despite every avenue from announcements at liturgy, to Facebook and twitter, to personal requests to parents, we reached no one.
- **Young adults (20's – 40's).** We asked parishioners to contact their adult children, 20's through middle age, and invite them to contact us to engage in some form of a listening process – zoom, written questions, in person dialogue. Three young adults participated in our small group discussions. A group of 5 gathered over pizza one evening to discuss simplified questions. Thanks to some persistent moms/aunt, between zoom and e-mail we received 12 responses. **The responses of this group are among the most significant.** We have provided excerpts here but full quotes in the Appendix.

A few remain practicing Catholics. Some said they no longer had any contact with faith or church in any form. Some had turned to the practice of meditation. Some said they prayed but didn't participate in a church. Almost all raised ordination or status of women, the sex abuse scandal and exclusion of minorities as issues for them.

"I appreciate having grown up within the church for the connection it gave me to Jesus' teachings and I love Jesus. It is in his teachings that I am shown that God is Love and love is what makes the world go round."

"I struggle with my identity as a Catholic because I feel as though my position on many social problems is incompatible with the teachings of the Church. I feel I have a strong faith and value many aspects of Catholicism, including its tradition and the sense of peace and connection to God that often comes along with that tradition, but I struggle with feelings of hypocrisy when I just don't agree with some core beliefs of the Church. How can I call myself a Catholic if I do not agree with these core beliefs? "

"It is time for the church to change so that the youth and young adults feel more comfortable. It is hard to be in a church where there are basically no blacks ... and even harder when you don't have ways to connect with people your own age."

"I grew up going to church faithfully." "As I have gotten older, I have become conflicted with some of the teachings of the church. I am bored with the same readings and responses. Going through the motions as if it were a well-rehearsed play and we were just reading the script over and over." "I relate to music. Music is where I get my spiritual healing."

"Role models, people have inspired me. Church inspired me to have a more spiritually inclined life. Contemplative practice needs to be more a part."

"I am troubled by chasms I see in the Church: infighting among factions." "In contrast, I am grateful to see the Church continue her efforts to care for millions of refugees and feed more hungry people than any other organization on earth. And I am grateful to be a part of the work of the Church."

"The Church has a lot of good teaching I didn't learn growing up, but taking a course at a Catholic college learned."

"It's made some attempts to modernize but as a whole I would call them feeble."

We also tried to reach marginalized groups in society: people with limited financial resources, asylum seekers and refugees, those with substance use disorders, presently and formerly incarcerated, and veterans. We weren't able to listen directly to those on the periphery of society. Instead, our Coordinators met with individuals and agency staff who actively engage with people on the margins, who are in daily relationship with them, who interact with them daily.

- **People in poverty.** We conducted a Zoom dialogue with our Regional Catholic Charities WV staff who provided valuable insights into the lives of the people the staff encounters each day. They spoke forcefully and movingly of the importance of respecting the human dignity of people in adverse circumstances. The constant overarching message: we need to treat all human beings with dignity, but most of the world doesn't treat these folks pushed to the margins with dignity. We do just the reverse: we belittle, we blame the victim, we lack compassion and forgiveness. The "we" is too frequently Catholics. Instead, we need to "hold each other up instead of judging," "stop the mentality of 'doing for,'" "being poor is not a judgment of morality." "It is hard to ask for help and then be treated as less than others." We need to listen to and accept people's ability to name their own needs; to accompany them rather than "directing" them on their journeys.

Immigration has become especially politicized. The staff was recently harassed by local Catholics because a major cable network incorrectly reported that a Catholic Charities agency at the border was helping people who were seeking asylum just to get government money, and urged people to raise objections to their local Catholic Charities office. Calls, many extremely hostile, flooded in.

The staff also said that many non-Catholics feel intimidated when attending a Catholic liturgy because it is foreign to their experience. They don't understand the liturgical rituals (the same comment expressed by some young Catholics), don't know when to stand or sit, and feel uncomfortable kneeling. In other words, they feel generally out of place.

- **People wrestling with addiction.** Our coordinators met with a recovery coach who accompanies people in recovery from substance abuse, and who spoke of their struggles and society's misunderstanding. We heard, "Take away the shame of addiction." This is a brain disease. People who are addicted know this is hurting them. They need medical assistance. "The stigma of addiction is the most destructive force in preventing recovery."
- **People who are incarcerated or recently released.** One of our young (25 yr. old) parishioners who is a member of the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank for Restorative Justice serving this population shared the challenges these people face due to the stigma of incarceration which haunts their lives. She pointed out that many come from very difficult situations that may lead them onto a different path, and are conducive to criminal behavior: the foster care system, a culture of violence and drugs, a lack of resources (economic, social and emotional), and lack of mentorship. She urged that we approach "people and their situations from a place of non-judgment and a willingness to accept people for where they are in life and forgiveness for things they may have done." The Church could bring about some change to this issue of social justice by advocating for those who have experienced incarceration, and engaging with organizations focused on prison reentry and violence prevention.
- **People who are military veterans.** Our emeritus pastor, a therapist at the Martinsburg VA, sought input from veterans involved in a recovery program. Most emphasized retaining the traditional teachings of the church. At the same time several voiced distrust of authority and hierarchy. One said he had lost his faith and another found "his own way." Safety for family, and safety from the world was a constantly repeated theme. When asked about the mission of the church their responses were simple and profound. Examples: "To transform lives into images of Jesus Christ through the power of the Gospel," "To lead souls to Jesus Christ," "To Shepherd people," to "Spread the Word."

Conclusion

A high level of satisfaction with the parish, the words "welcoming" and "inclusive" were said repeatedly, and warm appreciation and respect for our former pastor, Fr. T. Mathew Rowgh, and current pastor, Fr. Andy Switzer, were common themes in the small groups. It was in this positive context that parishioners voiced suggestions, concerns, questions, doubts, and even areas of ignorance. Some observations are directed to the broader Church. Most of this

response focused on the parish (though the diocese could offer assistance in some areas). We list these observations below. We will forward the applicable parish information to the Pastoral Council and pastor for further action.

Most important, we, the People of God, need to clarify our understanding of the Church's Mission in our 21st century world. In our Listening process we encountered a range of responses to the question of the Church's mission, but no consensus. To journey together we, the Church, need a shared identity and vision. Revisiting Scripture and the documents of Vatican II would be a good starting place.

There is much skepticism about what will come from this Synod: whether people's input will be heard and responded to; whether we will receive written feedback as the process continues; and whether there will be implementation plans following the Synod. This applies to our local diocesan Church as well as the Vatican leadership.

There is enormous confusion about consultation and decision-making. Roles and relationships among and between the bishop, Diocesan Pastoral and Priests' Council and Finance Council, pastors, parish pastoral councils, staffs, committees and parishioners are confusing or not understood, and perhaps not delineated.

The diocese needs to take leadership in fostering more interaction and cooperation among parishes in a region. One suggestion the diocese might consider is returning to multi-parish confirmations preceded by multi-parish retreats for confirmandi. This would model concretely the reality of local Church as larger than parish.

For our Pastoral Council and Pastor there is much to pursue.

Many asked for more information about the role of the Pastoral Council, and more feedback from the Council about its activities. Along with this is needed clarification of the roles and relationships between and among the pastor, Pastoral Council and committees, and staff and more collaboration among all these bodies. We also need to resurrect, renew and recruit for our parish committees with an emphasis on diversity of membership.

Along with much praise for our liturgies came many suggestions. We need to review, evaluate and implement appropriate suggestions, and improve our liturgical education of parishioners.

This small group Listening process people engaged in received much praise. There were lots of suggestions for future efforts in this direction, and an expressed desire to learn more about discernment as a result of this small group process.

Our parish does well with the initial welcoming of people, there is a friendly atmosphere at liturgies, and people rally when someone has a need, but people asked for more opportunities to develop our interpersonal relationships with each other. The desperate need for a large physical gathering space was much mentioned.

Inclusivity was also mentioned frequently, both as something we already practice, and something we need to work on. We need to develop strategies for outreach with special attention to diversity and people on the margins: race, ethnicity, singles (young, widows and widowers, divorced and remarried), young families, LGBTQ, low-income and more were mentioned as groups we need to focus on.

Improved communication was cited as a prime need. People want to be informed through various media about everything from Pastoral Council activities to ministries, and want better communication among all aspects of the parish.

Many voiced the need for more people in our ministries, and more spiritual formation and training opportunities for our ministers. Paradoxically it was noted that it is ever more difficult to find volunteers given the aging out of many present

volunteers and the busy lives of younger people. Lay leadership, and comments about the clerical behavior of some lay leaders, prompts the need to train leaders in servant leadership and volunteer empowerment.

Many parishioners don't know the extent of our outreach ministries or how to participate. We need to identify, review, prioritize our present ministries, identify new ministries based on community need, and constantly share updates with the parish about these ministries' activities and needs.

The parish needs to determine if it should speak out on any issues. If it decides it should, we need guidelines about when, how, why and who speaks.

Parishioners shared that our relationships with local congregations of other denominations are frequently better than relations with other local Catholic churches. There is a desire to foster these ecumenical relationships. To that end we want to support the efforts of the Ministerial Association to revive the organization, and we want to continue our involvement.

This has been a faith filled journey for our parish. We have all tried hard to listen openly, non-judgmentally and humbly to each other and to the Holy Spirit. We don't know yet what the fruits of this process will be, but we are willing and eager, with some trepidation, to walk this road together. We have said repeatedly over the past few months, that even if nothing happens at the local, national or universal church levels, we are changed and challenged. We will move forward together trusting in the Holy Spirit.

APPENDIX I

- “Do Christ’s work. Are we as laity called to do the mission of the Church?”
- “My mission is to discover the Spirit is working in everyone, their inner God – awaken it – deepest desire is for God.”
- “Need to be bold about our faith. Tell others about it.”
- “Can’t be involved based on male/female roles. Early Church had women deacons, married priests.”
- “Priest, prophet, king – from baptism. How are we doing that.” “Can’t be based on roles.”
- “Manifestation of compassion – God’s love in the world.”
- “Unifying conservative Catholics with more progressive Catholics. Get rid of division.”
- “Bridging the gap with young people.”
- “Being open to change is essential.”
- “Have to speak out – let others know where we stand. Silence is acceptance.”
- “We must listen to people by their ‘silence.’ People are leaving. We have to start by asking ‘What is missing?’”
- “Ask those who have returned to our faith/parish, ‘What brought you back?’”
- “There is a high level of divorce and remarriage. We need to listen to these people.”
- “To listen we need to solicit. Is the Church seeking the opinions of women and minorities? We can’t expect them to reach out to us. Jesus would have searched out these people. Does the Church?”
- “People may be more forgiving if we own up to mistakes of the past.”
- “We need a Church that is not obsessed with ‘law,’ ‘rules,’ when the spirit of our faith is ignored.”
- “The diocesan paper has never mentioned ‘Black Lives Matter.’”
- “Should we address the injustices in the Church before addressing those in society?”
- “Speaking out is really answering the prophetic call of our faith.”
- “Speaking out can be uncomfortable. To approach with love can help.”
- “Where we invest our time and talent speaks for our stance on issues.”
- “What you put in you get out. Not there to be entertained.”
- “If St. Agnes didn’t exist today, would we be missed?”
- “There is a huge gap between the higher ups and the rest of the Church.”
- “People in power don’t want to give it up.”
- “We need to broaden our view. Not just ask how the world is affecting me but how I am affecting the world.”
- “We need to make decisions based on our values. We have to show we are moving forward and growing, not giving up.”
- “Discernment, communication, accountability are things we need to work on. Be Church in new ways, change our behavior, do it!”
- “Information is power and sharing information is empowering.”
- “We need to journey together – to jump off this cliff together holding hands.”
- “How is God speaking through women, minorities, etc.?”
- “We all have the Holy Spirit within and if we don’t listen to those on the periphery, we miss out.”
- “The core of Christianity is humility. Some laity are clerical.
- “We need to listen with our hearts, to how others feel, where they’re coming from.”
- “Listening is the most exquisite form of love.”
- “If we feel like a community that listens, then maybe we are more open to folks speaking out.”
- “Speak your truth but humbly listen to the response because others are speaking their truth.”
- “Encourage lay leadership. Identify our own strengths and be willing to offer them.”
- “It takes humility and courage to hear what maybe you didn’t want to hear and not be threatened by it.”
- “Not one mission, many. Preferential option for the poor and disenfranchised”
- “Transform the world. Transform ourselves. Live the Gospel.
Build God’s Kingdom.
- Both roots (older traditions) and branches (more progressive ideas) are needed for a healthy tree.”
- “Our church is monochromatic (containing or only using one color)

- “Jesus broke bread with the dregs of society. As a Christian and member of a gay community.” St Agnes is the most welcoming church.”
- “Listening is the ground for inclusivity. It demands humility at the individual, community and structural levels.”
- “Someone will always be on the periphery.”
- “How can a celibate person know what a man or women is going thru as a person raising a family having marital problems.”
- “I am a lucky white male and we tend to get listened to.”
- “Don’t see advocacy anywhere in the church. If someone has an idea we need to listen.”
- “Feel intimidation dealing with racism alone has taught me that. I will stand up for what I believe in, but people don’t understand the phrase “Blackj Lives Matter.” It’s not an organization, it’s the truth. I don’t think I’ve heard the Catholic Church speak up on Black Lives Matter.”
- “We are afraid to speak because we are CANCELED, LABELED, AND PUT DOWN.”
- “We have never been taught to speak up. We’ve been told what to say by the priest.”
- “Music is such an important part of the liturgy. It brings us together and gives joy as well as contemplation if it is taken seriously and is compelling.”
- “A whole lot of participation is about formation, understanding the movement of the liturgy. More catechesis from the pulpit. The Mass is not just about the celebrant, it is about the congregation as well.”
- “Music improves the attention span. More different styles of music may be needed for full participation.”
- “Have experienced both restrictions and openness in church. Celebrating mass is important rather than just attending.”
- Don’t think we have a sense of common life and mission.”
- “Homilies encourage me to take reading and translate into action.”
- “Need to bring more participation, and diversity in ministries and music.”
- “Words are one thing, action is another; know your mission and pursue it.”
- “The mission of the Church is to spread the words of Jesus Christ, not just care for each other but also use heart and mind to invite people to know about Jesus.”
- “Evangelize our own people to be comfortable talking about Jesus.”
- “Catholics are at a disadvantage in talking about Scriptures because other denominations are much more versed in it.”
- “Encourage lay leadership. Identify our own strength and be willing to offer them.”
- “It takes humility and courage to hear what maybe you didn’t want to hear and not be threatened by it.”

APPENDIX 2

If you could speak directly to Pope Francis, what would you say to him about your life and your hopes?

Every week I am attempting to achieve in school, to manage a very cognitively and emotionally draining job, to maintain relationships with friends and family, to stay abreast of current events and the tumultuous state of our world, to do whatever I can to try to bring ease to the state of our world, and to stay healthy. I do individually pray and connect to my faith as a part of my health and well-being, but it is challenging to prioritize going to mass every week especially when it is possible that I might hear bits and pieces of a homily that I don’t agree with that end up fostering feelings of hypocrisy and disdain. It feels easier to just drift from the Church altogether and to foster my faith and relationship with God on my own. I would really like to better prioritize my faith and my religion, but it’s just challenging to do that when I am juggling so many other demands.

I have been blessed to experience so many great things in life. Our parents have raised us to always be proud of where we came from. They have given us experiences to make sure we are well-rounded individuals. At this stage in life, I realize that my path in life has not always been easy. Fighting a disease since 2017 has taken me to the next level of realizing what it is to be truly blessed for every breath God gives you. I lead a life of being positive; of always looking at the glass half full. Enriching the lives of my students and valuing the time I spend with my family. I push to inspire those around me.

To show them that no matter how hard life can be, we can accomplish anything and that we must continue to push on. "The top of a mountain is the bottom of the next. So keep climbing".

My life is a constant battle when there is so much racism around me. I am fearful for my children especially my son. Please tell me what is wrong with people; why do they dislike me so because of the color of my skin. It is time for the church to allow women to be priests and/or deacons. If more women had a stronger role in the church some of the abused would not had been covered up. My hope is that this will happen sooner than later.

I feel split, welcome in my parish but sometimes some are welcome and some are not. Ten years ago some priest would have told my Dad to leave my mom. (He had been divorced.) Gay marriage, want to welcome, but won't let them marry. Woman, some passages make me feel unwelcome.

I left at age 18, couldn't find God in the Church. Passages were tainted by human beliefs, not pure God. I got into Buddhism and meditation and other things. I am glad the Church is doing the synod, once in a lifetime, evolving.

I like a lot Pope Francis has said, good feeling, taking a political stand, inspires me, serving people, good to see after knowing the history of the Church. I haven't been a part of the Church for a long time. I am part of a meditation group of older people which reminds me of the Church.

I am happy with how things are going, excited for the future, a little nervous, at a transitional point. Pope Francis is not special to me, no more than others.

I would tell him that the most basic teachings of Jesus Christ inform my moral and ethical choices and behaviors as an adult - I try to love my neighbor, and I try to be of service to my community. How I am of service is determined more by my own study and practice outside of the Church.

I have two beautiful children and a wonderful husband. My husband and I were both raised Catholic but don't practice any religion. In talking about how we wanted to raise a family the one thing that was very important to both my husband and myself is that we want our children to be kind above all things. It's important to me that we use whatever extra resources we have to create a positive impact on the lives of others.

Time is precious, and what I would consider a reasonable work/life balance is very difficult to achieve while maintaining confidence that I can adequately provide a good/great life for my family. The time I have with my family, where commitments don't dictate where we go/what we do, is among my favorite time. I would like to get to a place where I have even more time with my family.

My Life today is spent seeking serenity and peace within my mental state. I find the most peace when I am connected to God and seeking to learn what his will for me is. When I am a channel for God's love, my life runs more smoothly. I appreciate having grown up within the church for the connection it gave me to Jesus's teachings and I love Jesus. It is in his teachings that I am shown that God is Love and love is what makes the world go round.

If I could speak with Pope Francis today, I would thank him for his decision in declaring the 2015-2016 Holy Year of Mercy. It was a welcome step for many reasons. The experience had a profound impact on my life. I would add that I am grateful to identify as a Catholic, and thank him for the impact his reforms, real or perceived, have had on my life and the Church as I experience her. I would also tell Francis that in my contemplation of sexuality and affairs related to sex (we all have them; we would hardly be human if we did not), it is difficult to accept the moral authority of the Church given the scandals that have taken place and the attendant cover-up efforts. The damage suffered by abuse victims directly is awful, and the broader impact has left many searching for answers they feel the Church cannot provide.

What would you say to him about the Church?

I struggle with my identity as a Catholic because I feel as though my position on many social problems is incompatible with the teachings of the Church. I feel I have a strong faith and value many aspects of Catholicism, including its tradition and the sense of peace and connection to God that often comes along with that tradition, but I struggle with feelings of hypocrisy when I just don't agree with some core beliefs of the Church. How can I call myself a Catholic if I do not agree with these core beliefs? How can I explain or defend my religion to others when some of my beliefs directly oppose teachings that are so aggressively publicized as being central to the Catholic faith? I want to know how I can reconcile these conflicting beliefs that I value as parts of my identity. Is there room for flexible interpretations or differences in

beliefs when it comes to social issues that the Church takes a stance on? In speaking with other young people who were also raised Catholic, we all point to these conflicts in beliefs as being a major reason why we struggle to fully identify with the Catholic faith at this stage in our lives.

I grew up going to church faithfully. At one point in my life, I was assistant choir director, director of the children's hand bells, assistant to the adult hand bells, a cantor, and an altar server. My friends and I looked forward to our time together. We had the best of both worlds (learning about God and being together). As I have gotten older, I have become conflicted with some of the teachings of the church. I am bored with the same readings and responses. Going through the motions as if it was a well-rehearsed play and we were just reading the script over and over. I rarely feel nothing. I relate to music. Music is where I get my spiritual healing. I don't always get that from the Catholic Church. I have seen many times the two faced behaviors of people that religiously refer to themselves as Christians, but seem to forget that being a Christian is a verb. I have not seen this at St. Agnes - a very nice church, but unfortunately, I have seen it at churches and it has tainted a lot of my perception concerning the Catholic faith. Many would point out that I do not go to church and wonder how I could come to that conclusion. I will be honest and say that they are correct. My feelings are simply based on experiences before attending St. Agnes. My reasons for not going to church are actually part of the reasons I do not go to a lot of public places. I deal with lymphedema - a disease that has caused extensive damage to my legs and has made me very self-conscious. I struggle with the thought of dealing with stares from people, so that is something I have to personally work on.

I would tell him that it is time for the Church to change so that the youth and young adults can feel more comfortable. It is hard to be in a church where there are basically no blacks but your own family and even harder when you don't have ways to connect with people your age.

It is my personal feeling and belief that the Church was probably once an extraordinary example of communal support and spirituality, especially in its earliest days. I believe that as happens almost every time, men's desire to control something that is organic, to gain personal benefit and enrichment, and their fear of "the other" -- anyone or anything that doesn't look like them or expresses different needs or practices from their own -- caused the Church's structure and mission to become hierarchical, patriarchal, and based on principles of obedience and control. A spiritual practice, and even the person Jesus himself expressed this, should bring us closer to one another and to the Divine without a master/servant relationship. But I feel that's mostly what the Church is -- an organization of men who uphold rules that don't fit (and in fact suppress and pervert) the needs, goals and dreams of the global community.

It's made some attempts to modernize but as a whole I would call them feeble. The fact that women are still not priests that celibacy is still clung to even though the church has spent untold resources on covering up sexual abuse by their clergy absolutely blows my mind. You've taken some steps to say you're ok with Homosexuality but no actual changes to welcome the LGBTQ community in the church. - The church is governed by a body of old men who I have very little in common with. There is no representation for an individual like me. It's ludicrous that the pope found it appropriate to comment on young people having pets instead of children. Coming from someone that has not thought about the cost of living for years and will never have to comfort a significant other going through a miscarriage or other fertility issues was to me beyond obtuse. - I believe there is a God but I think Jesus rising from the dead was a story made up to give people hope. That's fine some people need a story to cling on to. Prior to being crucified Jesus prayed to God to not have it happen to him but he was still killed. I think God has things pre-determined and praying to him is a waste of time. Instead I try to send whatever positive thoughts and energy to the person the church would tell me to pray for so that they make it through their ordeal with the least amount of pain as possible.

I have little to say. It's great for some people but I don't feel that way for myself.

Fundamentally the church has done amazing things for the world and some horrific things. I believe that there is a core of goodness in the mission of the Catholic Church, that there is strength and goodness and love. However the teachings surrounding sex, one of the most basic and fundamental parts of being human, are detrimental to mental health of the masses. The church's teachings are counter to the human conditioning and the scandals of priests molesting children are in-line with this opposition but in such a deeply hypocritical way, that they have poisoned generations of humanity. I

recognize that "hurt people hurt people " but why has there not been rehabilitation for these types of offenses if it has been so prevalent for so long? You cannot ask people to behave one way with Sex and then literally protect people who take that Sex and assault children with it. It deeply saddens me that this is even an issue because I love the church and I am proud of being a Catholic.

I would tell Pope Francis that the Church has endured difficult times over centuries, and the current times, for many, feel difficult indeed. I would state that I am troubled by chasms I see in the Church; infighting among factions. For example, the recent struggles concerning celebration of the Extraordinary form – this feels like bureaucracy in some ways, and I see great risk for an emergence of separatism. I am also troubled by the politicization of issues: public declarations made by local-level Church officials concerning a politician's eligibility to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion based upon the politician's political stance on abortion. The Church leaders ought to have larger social concerns than partisan politics. Further, when I see a parish apply for Covid-related stimulus relief in the name of improving Catholic education in parish schools, I can't help but wonder that, if in the face of people starving, that there might be some opportunism being exercised in terms of a stimulus cash grab. It feels yucky. These types of issues make it difficult to discuss being a Catholic, specifically with respect to setting an example of one for others. In contrast, I am grateful to see the Church continue her efforts to care for millions of refugees and feed more hungry people than any other organization on Earth. And I am grateful to be a part of the work of the Church.

Sharing Responsibility for our Common Mission: Synodality (journeying together) is at the service of the mission of the Church, in which all members are called to participate.

What is the mission of the Church?

Mission: Spread love at the core, but distorted expression, sexism, inequality, judgment as in other institutions. I can spread love in my own way, accept others, be open to extra-terrestrials. Help others help themselves teaching tools. Shift from finding God outside of you, finding it inside of yourself. Church can help. Don't know what the mission is, to have a lot of people go to Church?

I am not really sure as I have not been to church in a while. My main thing based on what I have experienced when I did attend, is that the mission statements says inclusive. I don't remember it being very inclusive. Outside of the occasional spiritual that would be played on certain days, I do not notice the inclusiveness in cultures and the LGBTQ community. Maybe something like a culture day where people can come by and try foods from different cultures. Maybe during the months that are geared towards a certain culture, you could have that culture represented during Mass. June is Pride month. It is important for people from the LGBTQ community to feel they have a place to give better understanding of their community. Inclusive could also mean giving understanding to different illnesses and diseases, raising money to help fund donations to helping to cure those illnesses and diseases.

The mission I believe is to spread the good news and build God's Kingdom. I will used what my Mom has taught me that we are all baptized Priest, Prophet and King. As baptized Christian we are called to active conscientious participation. I participate as a Lector but I also feel there are things women are prevented from participating. I am also on the Pastoral Council and we need to have a better understanding of our responsibilities

Mission statement taken from website: *St. Agnes is an inclusive Catholic community dedicated to the love of God and service to others. We rejoice in the Gospel, the celebration of the Liturgy, and the Sacraments. We welcome the opportunity to share God's message and to bring all others into the life of Christ.*

How are the laity called and enabled to participate or hindered from participating in the Church's mission?

What do you think the Church's mission should be?

It should be about helping people be happy. Church makes some people happy, some not. It shouldn't be for everyone.

Contemplative practice would be my mission, to help get people involved.

See God in ALL people, accept ALL people as fully human and worthy of the same rights. The effort should first and foremost be to offer succor and a path to the Divine for every single person. If there were to be foundational shifts in basic Church doctrine, I believe there would be a renewal and a regrowth of the Catholic community. This means: Allow priests to be partnered. Allow completely equal roles for male, female, and non-binary individuals within the priesthood, bishop, and cardinalships and so on. Accept and support that women (and all people) have complete and total autonomy over their own bodies. Accept, bless, and sanctify relationships beyond the traditional cisgender-heterosexual binary. Take full and unqualified responsibility for the centuries of harm done by the Church to vulnerable people (children, unwed mothers, indigenous people, and so on), and provide reparations if not to the victims themselves then in the form of (again, unqualified and untethered) financial support to organizations and groups that assist and heal people with similar traumas. There has been a lot of damage done by the Church. My generation (and the one that follows me, bless their hearts) believe very strongly in equality for all people, and are deeply sensitive to hypocrisy. The Church needs to examine its very core structures, be willing to change on a foundational level, and recommit to its flock with humility and integrity. That is what has been asked of us this whole time; in turn we ask the same.

Try to make amends with communities it has badly abused i.e. indigenous people (help families find bodies, pay reparations) and stop sheltering pedophiles, don't move them to different parishes out of the way. Make proven abusers leave the church.

Educate Educate. There are many different religions around the world. A mission to declare that there is one "right" religion won't succeed. The mission should be to educate and give people the information they need to make their own decisions about their beliefs.

To help all humans to love themselves and love others.

*Equality in society is, what feels like, lifetimes into the future. For now, as her mission, I would like to see the Church continue its work to fulfill the words found in the 58th chapter of the book of Isaiah: Free the oppressed. Feed the hungry. **Shelter the homeless. Clothe the naked. Care for family.***

Do Catholic prayers and the mass inspire the way you live?

I pray before I eat, thankful not everyone has food. Pray for someone going through a tough time.

Role models, people have inspired me. Church inspired me to have a more spiritually inclined life. The Church has a lot of good teaching. I found official documents to be wise and inclusive—different from local, how to translate to people? Like I said before, the basic teachings of Jesus that are embedded in the prayers and the mass absolutely inspire the way I live. Jesus bringing people together inspires me. His reaching out to anyone outside of accepted society. His refrain that God loves everyone. All of these things inspire me. Unfortunately, I feel alienated by the paternal tone of many of the prayers (God the Father, etc.) and being told to ask for forgiveness constantly. Reminders to feel guilt and shame regularly have driven me to keep both of those feelings close to my heart in everything I do, which leads to a deeply embedded, possibly permanent sense of unworthiness. Like Luisa in the movie Encanto, "I'm pretty sure I'm worthless/if I can't be of service."

No, every second I have to be in mass I think about not being in mass. The Catholic Church is a "one size fits all" approach to celebration and it does not fit for me.

No. I strive to be a good person and pass those traits to my family. Prayers or ceremonial masses don't impact my desire to be and do good.

Yes, some of the prayers and the messaging I receive in the masses inspire me to spend more time contemplating my connection with God or how I am choosing to live my life.

Yes, Catholic prayer and the Mass give order and direction to my spiritual life.

How could they be more inspiring?

Contemplative practice needs to be more a part.

I want the Church's language and rules to be open and embracing of ALL people. I will only be inspired by prayers and mass if the Church itself will change. Otherwise, the language is meaningless and frankly hypocritical.

I recognize that conveying the church's teachings are important but acts of service built into mass or literally anything to make it more engaging.

I pay attention to a homily when it's engaging. That means different things to different people.

For me, a correlation to everyday life that is relatable. Make the message simple, without being overly philosophical. And don't feel the need to fill a pre-determined allotment of time.

Perhaps they could be more inspiring if the messaging treated God less like a Patriarchal King and more like a loving and accepting caring God.

Promotion of Mass attendance on days other than Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation would be inspiring.

What do you think about the celebration of the Mass? "Walking together" is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist.

Where is the celebration? I don't mean for that to sound negative at all, but how many people are just going through the motions and are not invested in the word? This questionnaire is perfect, because it allows us to truly be able to express our feelings. I didn't always get the feeling of "walking together". Again, this is based on my past experiences with the Catholic Church and not so much my experience at St. Agnes. But unfortunately, my past experience has also enabled my feelings towards the Catholic faith in general. I do not leave the church feeling rejuvenated.

We need a liturgy that is vibrant and diversity is important in its music and ministers. My mom told me about the one black lady who was extremely upset because the Passion on Palm/Passion Sunday was proclaimed by three white men. People need to be taught not to say the prayers without feeling; proclaim the prayers with feeling. If we make the Mass more alive we might attract and keep our younger people. I enjoy Father Andy's homilies.

Listening: Listening is the first step, but it requires an open mind and heart, without prejudice.

Are we listening to laity, women, youth, and minorities, those on the peripheries? How can we hear these voices better?

I think you are listening to an extent. What opportunities are being provided outside of Mass? IS there a group for different age groups? Groups that will allow for those age groups to get together and talk about things they have in common. Where they can celebrate each other's accomplishments or talk to people that get where they are in their particular stage of life. Single Mothers Groups, LGBTQ groups, Minority Groups...do you these? I am not sure, but just asking. Was there a group that allowed minorities to come together and talk during the times when race has been a big issue in this country (ex. Killings of minorities by law enforcement, rioting, wanting voices heard when we say we are scared, etc.) Are different groups recognized in material/advertisements dispersed by the church? The first step of showing that I am accepted is by what I see on the outside. I have to see it on the outside, before I walk inside.