

**SYNTHESIS REPORT | TODAY'S AMERICAN CATHOLIC LISTENING SESSION
"TOWARDS A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES"
JUNE 9, 2022**

ABOUT

Today's American Catholic ("TAC") is a journal of inquiry, reflection, and opinion on matters of ecclesial, civic, and spiritual life. It is a lay-run publication that aims to promote religious dialogue and deepen the faith of its readers. TAC has been publishing since 1993 and is currently based in the state of Connecticut.

The "Synod on Synodality" has been an invitation for Catholics of all backgrounds, including nonpracticing Catholics, to come together in a spirit of *parrhesia*, or mutual exchange. As TAC seeks to foster dialogue both within the church and between the church and the world, its editors, readers, and directors saw the synod as an opportunity to contribute to the broader "culture of encounter" of which Pope Francis has spoken (cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, §30).

To this end, TAC convened a synodal listening session via Zoom on Thursday, June 9, 2022. Ten individuals from various parts of the United States participated in the listening session. The guidelines, questions, and thematic nuclei set forth in the Preparatory Document and the Vademecum were followed closely. What follows is a brief summary of the discussion, including points of consensus, key themes, and insights discerned about paths forward for the church.

THEME #1: RELIGION AS RELATIONSHIP

A recurring theme throughout the conversation was what one participant termed "the reality of religion being relationship." This relational reality is "not being emphasized" enough in church teaching and practice; it can seem as though "the whole sense of relationship . . . in the Roman Catholic Church has disappeared." The synodal process is attempting to reinvigorate a sense of relationship, but it is unclear how individual listening sessions will translate into universal change.

Another participant pointed to the problem of identifying faith with "ahistorical abstractions"—in other words, discounting the *experiences* of human beings, which are diverse and require nuanced pastoral care, in favor of black-and-white catechetical definitions. Human nature is not a "yes or no" question, and if people feel their experience is being reduced to a set of theological propositions (such as those found in the *Baltimore Catechism*), they will only grow more isolated from the church.

Relationships are “human to human,” and communion is always “a connection between people.” The difficulty is in transposing these human relationships to an institution as large as the Catholic Church. One participant offered 8 to 10 people as the ideal for a “communion of individuals” who can grow in faith together, share scriptural readings and interpretations, and develop bonds. The issue of *scale* has to be considered whenever we think about creating community.

THEME #2: SMALL CHURCH COMMUNITIES

Multiple participants expressed the sustenance they find in small church communities (SCCs), inter-parish “meetup groups,” reading and study groups, and other prayer groups conducted in more intimate settings. One participant noted with regret that the sense of community fostered in previous generations of the US Catholic Church has largely disappeared, and that “Most people don’t expect their parish to be the source of their life-giving community.” Parishioners must take it upon themselves to build the social networks that were once a de facto part of parish life.

Another participant cited a reading group with a neighboring Episcopal church as a nourishing source of community. A group of 12 to 15 people assemble to discuss the psalms and pray together. “That’s the way we have to go,” the participant said, “is with these small groups.” She said that it was “so helpful belonging to the Episcopal group” that she attempted to start a psalm-discussion group at her own parish, but only one or two people came—a sad indication of a lack of spiritual enthusiasm.

One difficulty of maintaining a successful SCC is the church’s inherent “class system” that divides clergy and laity. “You cannot have a relational community” when you still have a class system, a participant said. He described an experience with his own SCC where the host church intimated that they would withdraw support for the SCC “because there are better things that they can spend their time on.” The SCC offered to organize, coordinate, and run all of its own activities but was told that the group was under the purview of the parish chaplain. The message is that church leaders, rather than the lay faithful themselves, have the final say in how communities are formed.

THEME #3: SIGNS OF A SUCCESSFUL PARISH

One participant defined the “sign of a successful parish” as follows: “It’s obvious that people here love one another.” She shared a story of working as a staff member in a parish of 1,200 families in Connecticut. The priest saw her as an equal and told her they were a “team.” They did a lot of good for the parish and created a sense of community where “people *cared* about one another” and “Mass and Eucharist took us to something more.” However, she noted remorsefully, because the priest’s colleagues felt that he was treating her too much like a priest, they refused to invite him to their meetings at the deanery. The parish in question now has only 200 families, which shows that “the authority issue is really affecting the people of God.”

Other participants reported more positive parish experiences. Finding a parish that adequately ministers to one's spiritual needs may require exploring different parishes within one's diocese. One participant singled out a Franciscan parish within her diocese for having a "spiritual intentionality" rooted in a sense of "accompaniment." She praised the Franciscans for their ability to listen, their openness to discussing controversial subjects such as gun control, and their work promoting social justice causes through the Franciscan Action Network (FAN). The participant noted that "When I go to Mass . . . I do feel that most people are more conservative than I," but held that what "informs my navigation of the church and to a parish" is the fact that "faith comes first" and that the shared experience of the sacraments goes deeper than any political association.

THEME #4: SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND CATECHESIS

Some participants observed that leaders of their parish communities (and throughout the church) lack "a deep sense of spirituality." This lack is not necessarily a "refusal," one participant clarified, but a "deep abyss in the very leaders that we count on to show us the way." It becomes problematic when leaders are not even *aware* of what they lack and are consequently unable to communicate to their parishioners.

One result of the failure of spiritual imagination is that the Eucharist becomes a "gateway to heaven" and nothing more. The liturgy loses its mystical-sacramental character, and the beauty of the Eucharist is reduced to a sort of base functionality, i.e., "Unless you get it, you're not going to be in good shape." Masses are conducted with an attitude of "Get it done!"—including an Easter Vigil completed in a scant 40 minutes, as one participant reported. This attitude becomes "entrenched" in the people of the parish, who are deprived of a "broader, deeper understanding" of the sacraments.

Parishioners who have legitimate questions about their faith can find themselves with nowhere to go. They may be made to feel that their doubts, struggles, or problems with the faith are signs of weakness instead of opportunities for discernment and spiritual growth. There are few if any forums for group discussion outside of small church communities (see Theme #2 above), so people have to seek out teachings on their own.

One participant shared the story of her grandson's confirmation process, which involved answering 50 questions in a test format. The participant was concerned that he was "not going to remember anything he said" and that he would see the process a compulsory task rather than an invitation to a deeper relationship with God and the church. "Jesus loves us unconditionally, that's why we should be [in church]," she said. "Jesus loved us first. God loves us. We don't hear that."

Catechesis should be more about how we "live our lives" than parroting back words and definitions. The participant who had worked as the staff member of the parish in Connecticut (see Theme #3 above) shared an instructive story: the policy of her parish was to advance students through the sacraments when they felt they were ready to

receive them, not by age or grade level. This allowed the students a degree of spiritual freedom (which is the basis of any religious commitment) and reminded them that sacraments are above all *celebrations*. One student did not want to be confirmed at the traditional 10th-grade level. His parents were upset with parish staff for respecting his decision; the staff reminded the parents that he would be making a serious profession of faith that he would have to live by. When he returned two years later on his own volition, he was a much more mature and active participant in his own faith formation, and even led a statewide service project for racial justice.

THEME #5: SERVICE AND SOCIAL TEACHING

References to social justice, environmental stewardship, and other elements of Catholic social teaching (CST) are not foregrounded in many parishes. CST used to be known as the church's "best-kept secret"; now there seems to be little awareness that it even exists, at least in certain parishes.

One participant lamented the fact that "Service does not lead into structural questions," which causes people to pay attention to only "one level" of systemic issues such as poverty. Service is seen in purely monetary terms; weekly parish donations become substitutions for helping the poor, while "monuments" such as new church buildings or additions are prioritized. Participants noted that priests are not necessarily at fault for this. They may be isolated and not get much support from their diocese, so they focus on building, fundraising, and other tangible projects that they can control.

Another participant reported that people in her parish have been turned away for baptism because they were not formal members of the church. Parish membership can have a secretarial rather than a familial feel, where registrants are seen as financial contributors before they are seen as members of a relational community.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

Our listening session revealed a church at a crossroads. "We have lost our way" in the Catholic Church, said one participant. "We are not Christ people." In the future, "Christianity is not going to be the Catholic Church" or any other denomination, but a form of "Christianity working together in small groups." Another said that the church "has to be conceived as a series of small communities" that operate in association with one another, and in turn with the larger church.

"I don't think the church as the people of God is going to fall apart," another participant said. "The institutions may. Maybe the institutions are no longer able to hold the people of God." Another said, "I have faith the church will abide, but I just don't know how, exactly." She reminded the group that the church has endured previous crises through faith in the Holy Spirit, and that we remember saints like Francis of Assisi and not the "venal Medici cardinals" when we reflect on the church's history. She recalled the example of Dorothy Day, who always remained a faithful daughter of the church despite

being condemned as a “radical” by members of the hierarchy, and offered Day’s distinction between the church as *institution* and the church as the *Mystical Body*: “The church is the cross on which Christ is crucified.”

Another participant stressed the importance of hope, saying that “This is all part of the Holy Spirit” and that the church may have to “fall apart before it can resurrect.” The synodal process could be the vehicle by which the church “blooms” into something new again. New technologies have enabled people from all over the world to meet and build community. The pandemic awakened a new understanding of the Eucharist and revealed new ways of being a Eucharistic people. In this transitional moment, as one participant summarized, we are trying to maintain a “deep sense of faith and trust and hope. There are many of us [concerned for the future of the church] everywhere. The challenge is for us to stand firm in our faith, in our hope, in our trust, in our love, and to be in relationship with others, and just let God take care of the rest.”

Respectfully submitted to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops on August 11, 2022, the Memorial of Saint Clare of Assisi.