

Sacred Heart Church

Synodal Listening Sessions

Report for the Diocese of Richmond

Our parish hosted roughly 25 different listening sessions, each session containing roughly four to eight participants. (The number is “rough” because two or three of the sessions, due to low numbers or coordination problems, became more like side conversations). There were three themes that the Diocese of Richmond presented to us, derived from the ten thematic nuclei found in the Vatican’s *Synod 2023 Preparatory Document*. Five of our parish sessions were in English and the remainder were in Spanish. Below is the report that Fr. Mike submitted to the Diocese.

Recall that the “fundamental question” for the Synod on Synodality is: *A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together:” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together?* This is the question that undergirds all of the other questions we have considered, and being so broad, it was decided to ask each specific group to focus on one of the three themes; it was thought that sharing about a particular “concrete” theme would illuminate the more general concepts within the fundamental question.

Facilitators reminded participants that this activity was a reflection on the universal Church, and not just on our particular parish. However, many of the participants commented on what they concretely knew here locally (which is our parish!). That said, these particular comments are clearly applicable to the Church Universal.

Theme A: Communion and Unity

There are both lights and shadows that emerged within this theme. People generally experience our parish as a “listening” and open community. They are given good advice at our church. Some folks have remarked that after distancing themselves from the church, they found their way back, and they feel well-received at this parish. Some remarked that there are folks who do not allow themselves to be listened to (perhaps because they are away). Overall, there is a lot of good will here, which helps build bridges across differences.

The biggest “challenge” or “shadow” that emerged was our lack of support and programming for youth. Almost every group that considered this theme mentioned that youth are (unintentionally) ignored. We should be gearing liturgies more to the youth. Our multi-national parish also faces the significant challenge of raising youth in a culture (and language) that is different than their parents’ culture (and language), and this significantly affects catechesis. Connected to this challenge is our lack of RETENTION of youth (and their families) after they receive their sacraments—often they don’t return after finishing their catechesis and initiation. Young adults, especially singles, feel unseen and unheard. It should be noted,

however, that our parish youth group was given a listening session, and they were really positive about the Diocesan Youth Conference (“DYC”).

The lack of communication and preparation surfaced as a common thread within this theme and the other two themes. With better communication and preparation for our servers/ushers, we would be better at welcoming newcomers. At our parish there is no effort to reach out to those who don’t attend. Other churches (especially non-Catholics) are better at that. There were a couple remarks about the lack of enthusiasm and promotion of this Synod here in the Richmond diocese, which was seen as evidence of the Church not wanting to really listen to people.

Gender, marriage, and sexuality was a big topic. The Church doesn’t listen well to women. Many have left the church because of women’s roles in the church; their voices aren’t heard. The problem of largely-male leadership and clericalism (and lack of female representation) was mentioned multiple times. The Church needs better outreach/accompaniment to divorcees, and it needs to accompany LGBTQ folks better and listen more to their experience. There is also a sense that “money talks” and that those who donate are listened to more than others.

Overall our community here is active, and there is a lot of good will between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking communities, and a desire to be even more united. One person noted “we can lose sight of what we can do if we wait around for the clergy.” There is a growing sense of community at our liturgies, even though we need lots of improvement. Our participants were fervently praying for even more patience, service, mercy, brotherhood/sisterhood, personal testimony of faith, and a feeling of belonging and commitment to this parish community.

Theme B: Dialogue and Diversity

There are lights and shadows when it comes to dialogue in a diverse church and world. Many parishioners remarked how, overall, they feel that the messages they hear in homilies and in other types of preaching/teaching from the church are positive, welcoming, and delivered in a spirit of peace. Parishioners generally want more dialogue, more outreach to marginalized groups (especially the poor, the LGBTQ community, women in the church, and youth), and they pray to the Holy Spirit for wisdom and understanding to be good dialogue partners. People are happy with the Jesuit mission of this parish, and they are proud of our diversity. We have many “small groups” in our parish within both the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking communities, and these groups have “infused new life” into the parish, and when led well, they have been loci of new encounters.

Pope Francis is a fan favorite among many parishioners. They like his stance of openness, and many folks here are encouraging him in the synod process. Ultimately the church *should* be a fundamentally listening institution; it should be at the vanguard of all institutions, so as to foment harmony in a diversifying/changing world, as a sign of inclusion. It was repeated that the church should be fundamentally inclusive and not exclusive, an especially mindful of the poor.

Dialogue should mean the openness to change, because there *are* certain things in the church that can (and should) change. Some participants reaffirmed that it is important to

accept the diversity within our families, which includes accepting the fact that LGBTQ folks exist, they are part of our families, and this is part of living in the real world. It is important to dialogue, not jump right away to judgment, and also to be clear and merciful with people who are in those situations (a canonical term for those might be “irregular” situations). The issue of women leaders came up a few times; women deacons should be considered, and more women should be in leadership roles.

There were some concerns voiced about this theme of dialogue. Some of our participants in the parish held that the church (specifically priests) speak with a lot of tolerance/openness so as to avoid making people feel bad, but this is risky because the church should be very clear in what it does not accept, such as gay and lesbian couples marrying and being godparents. Others suggested that we need to be better at apologetics so as to debate Protestants. There were repeated complaints about a lack of biblical formation and ethical preparation of our servers and ministers. There was also a repeated complaint about an overall lack of communication from parish leaders.

Food and drink (hospitality, table fellowship) has historically been a key element of our parish’s approach to dialogue and mutual encounter. Among virtually all groups/ministries of the parish, there is a yearning to restore the pre-pandemic atmosphere, which often included more picnic-style events and coffee-and-donuts-type informal gatherings. We are blessed to have a community that loves to be together!

Theme C: Leadership and Mission

In general there is a positive perception of leadership in this community. Overall, there is a desire that all of us grow together in faith, hope, and love, and that we all grow in our thirst for God. People hope that this can lead to more committed service in the church. Overall people see our community as a “family” and as a “home.” Many folks feel “invited to serve” and to “share their experience of God.”

There are certainly some needs and challenges in this category. The limited time that priests have for the whole community is an obstacle to co-responsibility, since the priests are key players in decision-making. The abuse crisis damaged the credibility of the church and its priests, and there is still a lack of transparency. Priests now need to be humble and work “shoulder to shoulder” with the laity, especially with catechesis and evangelization. The LGBTQ community and youth were again highlighted as groups that need more attention and support.

The issue of *preparation and formation of lay leaders* was repeatedly raised. We rely a lot on volunteers to make the church a thriving and welcoming place, but they continue to ask for more preparation and formation to serve the community. There is a desire for theological formation, but also for teaching strategies (for the catechists), ethical formation, and conflict management. Having leaders who can help couples, families, and youth through difficult times would be highly valuable, but nobody here is trained to do that. The issues of *communication* and *information-sharing* were also raised multiple times as a challenge to co-responsibility and lay leadership – people want clear and direct information.

One of the silver linings of the synodal listening process was that people remarked how nice it was to just take the time to sit down and talk; the ushers, for example, don't all come together and do this type of thing on a regular basis, and it was a nice experience for them. There is a desire for more participation and common meals at parish events. Decision-making and listening often happen in these informal settings. Many folks feel the call to listen better, be more compassionate, be humble, and work toward one's own conversion in the Spirit.

Other Feedback

Since the "fundamental question" undergirds all of the themes of the synod, I will use this "other" space to reflect on the *listening* process in general, as this has been the primary mode of journeying together during our parish synodal process. There are many ways this process could have been improved, not least of which is that it should have been started earlier and organized better. (That's on us). We simply didn't have the time to do a thorough job. (Most new processes achieve success when they are allowed to be iterative, in that they start one way, fail a few times, and then through trial and error achieve an effective form). To *really* listen requires a lot of preparation, as well as serious personal investment and prayer.

The listening sessions revealed many similarities across groups, but they also revealed a stark number of differences with respect to the issues that these groups are concerned about. On the one hand, there are "natural divides" in the parish that we proudly do a lot of work to bridge: the language groups (English and Spanish) in our parish carry their own sense of culture and liturgy. Generational divides are also quite clear, especially for a Latino immigrant parent with kids growing up in American culture. On the other hand, bilingual liturgies are usually met with enthusiasm and joy, and across these divides, there is a real sense of good will and inclusion. However, we still need to find more ways to creatively combine different groups and bridge differences! Come Holy Spirit!