



Journeying Together: Moving Forward *Insights from the People of St. Virgil's Parish*

Introduction

1. The Synod on Synodality

Last year, Pope Francis announced a world-wide synod, which means to journey together, listening to each other and to the Holy Spirit. The purpose is to revitalize the Church at a critical time in history. For the first time in memory, the Church is looking to the laity as an integral part of this important work.

St. Virgil's, as well as other parishes in our Diocese and dioceses throughout the United States and the world, have held Listening Sessions with parishioners, lapsed Catholics and others to learn what the Church has meant to them, how it has challenged or disappointed them, and what should be done going forward. The

hope is that the fruit of this process will be a Spirit-inspired vision for our Church, our Diocese and our parish.

St. Virgil's initial role was to use the information gleaned from the Listening Sessions to provide information to our Diocese, which has been compiling information from all of its 108 parishes for a report to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The USCCB will use the reports from our Diocese and other American dioceses for an omnibus report to Rome.

On May 19, 2022, we filed our parish report via computer with the Diocese. The Diocese's reporting form was limited to basic information, which made it difficult to convey the specific information we learned at the Listening Sessions. The purpose of this report is to provide that more detailed input and information to St. Virgil's parish.

2. Background

Recent statistics illustrate how important it is for the clergy and laity to work together collaboratively and for each to take an ownership stake in the Church. In the United States, nearly half of our priests are over 70 years old. Worldwide, the Church has only one priest for every 3,245 Catholics.¹ In our own Diocese, there is only one active diocesan priest for every 2,711 Catholics.² The shortage of priests, as well as other circumstances, have created a

¹ Fr. Jim McDermott, "Is Pope Francis Prepping for Doomsday in the Church? I Hope So," *America*, April 12, 2022. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/04/12/pope-francis-vatican-priests-authority-242809>

² As of 2014, there were 166 active diocesan priests to serve a population of 450,000 Catholics. Diocese of Paterson, *Office for Vocations*.

void that the laity must help to fill so that we can continue the work of the Church. Filling this void will be a learning process for the clergy, the Church hierarchy, and the laity.

3. St. Virgil's Participation in the Synod.

At St. Virgil's, we held two in-person general Listening Sessions, as well as special Listening Sessions with our youth, including our Confirmation candidates. We also met with people via Zoom, in person, and by telephone. Finally, we gathered information from parishioners who reached out to their family members, neighbors, friends and those in nursing homes. In all, we heard the viewpoints of more than 150 people.

The Listening Sessions clearly showed that the people of St. Virgil's are interested in more than using the parish Listening Sessions to help revitalize the universal Church. The views expressed by our fellow parishioners point to ways that we can strengthen and revitalize St. Virgil's parish. We were struck by our fellow parishioners' deep love for and commitment to our parish. As an example, on a cold February night, 45 people attended the first Listening Session.

Faith is a highly personal matter, but parishioners opened their hearts and discussed these issues of faith with candor and passion. They want to see their suggestions result in the betterment of the parish and the Church. The participants, young and old, expressed a desire for a seat at the table to translate their ideas into concrete action, and future meetings will be needed to discuss how we can work together to make this happen. Indeed, while the

[https://patersonvocations.org/diocese-of-paterson#:~:text=As%20of%202014%2C%20there%20were,and%20non%2DCatholic\)%20population%20of](https://patersonvocations.org/diocese-of-paterson#:~:text=As%20of%202014%2C%20there%20were,and%20non%2DCatholic)%20population%20of)

initial goal was to provide input to the Diocese, Pope Francis has been clear that the synod is not a one-time exercise, but an ongoing process of joining together and listening to one another.

Although people have differing views on what should be done, four general themes emerged from the Listening Sessions:

A. Commitment to transparency, collaboration and accountability;

B. Meaningful inclusion of all in the community;

C. Spiritual nourishment for all ages to tie our Christian faith to our lives so that we can make a difference in the world; and

D. Community and mission – serving the community as a community.

As we examine the specific points raised at the Listening Sessions and from other input, most will involve one or more of these themes.

What Parishioners Said

The Role of the Church

The strong consensus was that the Church provides an anchor for faith and a moral compass to help us negotiate the struggles of everyday life. To many, the most important part of the Church is the parish, which provides a community and a forum for people to share their faith. Mass and the Eucharist are crucial because they give spiritual nourishment and a sense of peace in an otherwise chaotic world. The Church is the place where we find God.

What jumped out is how important the Church and parish are to the adults who participated in these sessions. Their passion and zeal for their parish and their faith were inspirational. What was equally apparent was their desire for the parish to be a community in which they feel welcome and included and which welcomes and includes all others.

The young adults expressed a lesser connection to the parish, but many noted that the time they felt most connected to the parish and the Church was when they participated in community-service projects such as the Appalachia Outreach Program. It gave them the sense that they were doing God's work and helping to carry out the Church's mission to help those in need. These service projects, they said, made them feel closer to God than Mass or the religious-education program. They understood that the mission of the Church and the parish is to make a difference in the world. Perhaps what was most encouraging was that these young adults expressed this degree of interest.

A. Commitment to Transparency, Collaboration and Accountability

1. Clergy-abuse

In every session, parishioners mentioned the clergy-abuse scandals. They are upset at the clergy's abuse of the Church's most vulnerable members and the Church hierarchy's cover-up of that abuse. Participants lamented the lack of candor, the hypocrisy and the absence of moral leadership from Church leaders. They wonder how many people these scandals drove away from the Church. The breadth of these scandals was illustrated by the fact that most participants knew at least one priest who has been credibly accused of abuse. Indeed, the diocesan list of credibly accused priests

includes four who served at St. Virgil's and three who taught at Bayley-Ellard High School.³

The strong consensus was that far more transparency and accountability are needed from the Church hierarchy, and doubts were raised as to whether Church leaders have done enough to atone to the victims for the harm that abusive priests and their enablers caused, whether the Church has made a full disclosure of the scope of this misconduct and whether those responsible for the abuse and cover-ups have been held fully accountable.

The repercussions of the abuse scandals are still being felt. In fiscal 2021, for example, the Diocese settled 14 sexual-abuse claims for an undisclosed sum, and as of April 2022, there were 113 additional sexual-abuse claims pending against it.⁴ The Diocese noted “significant uncertainty” about the financial impact of these claims,⁵ but as our Listening Sessions showed, the effects of clergy abuse extend far beyond dollars and cents: it is one of the major reasons cited for why so many have left the Catholic Church.

³ Diocese of Paterson, *List of Credibly Accused Priests and Deacons* (2019).
<https://rcdop.org/list>

⁴ “Annual Financial Update/Diocese of Paterson,” *The Beacon*, June 16, 2022, 9.
<http://cdn.coverstand.com/32257/750925/ddb7c04e360828cea7fbabfd6c67b9f3bd3587d1.3.pdf>

⁵ “Annual Financial Update/Diocese of Paterson,” *The Beacon*, June 16, 2022, 9.
<http://cdn.coverstand.com/32257/750925/ddb7c04e360828cea7fbabfd6c67b9f3bd3587d1.3.pdf>

2. Parish Finances

On the parish level, participants also want more transparency, and the example most often given was parish finances. People felt they have been left in the dark on matters like the proceeds from the sale of the convent, the lease of the school building to Red Oaks and the parish's overall financial condition.

At a minimum, parishioners want the parish to publish a financial statement/balance sheet in the bulletin on a yearly basis, as was done in the past. Fr. Michal and the Parish Finance Council have taken a first step in addressing these concerns by publishing a parish financial statement in the bulletin on April 10, 2022.

However, questions remain over the sale of the convent and the lease of the school building. In addition, no other information has been provided to parishioners on the composition of the Parish Finance Council, when it meets and who can be contacted with questions or concerns.

3. Parishioner Collaboration

Furthermore, parishioners have virtually no say in the parish's financial affairs, or other decisions, and they want to be kept up to date and have a greater voice in all parish matters, a process made more difficult because of the lack of a Parish Council. For example, parishioners have little or no say in the structure of the faith-formation programs for their children and teen-agers.

Transparency, inclusivity and accountability require that parishioners be continually informed on matters affecting the parish and be given a meaningful voice in these matters.

4. Priests

There was a strong consensus that there must be more interaction between the priests and the laity. People said they would like to see the priests at times other than at Sunday Mass, such as out in the community during the week. It is important for the priests to get to know parishioners on a personal level, and vice-versa.

It is equally important for parishioners to know that the pastor and other priests assigned to the parish are fully committed to them and to the parish. They want priests who treat their assignment to St. Virgil's as more than just a job.

There was also the belief that parishioners must do more to reach out to the priests and make them feel welcome and included. All acknowledged that being a pastor or a parish priest is a difficult job.

Some expressed a desire for the priests to go more often to Morris View, Sunrise and Arbor Terrace to hear confessions and celebrate Mass for our home-bound parishioners in those facilities.

The consensus was that a closer relationship between the clergy and the laity and a firm commitment by the priests to the parish are essential to build a stronger, more vibrant community of faith.

5. The Revolving Door

Several participants expressed resentment over the turnover of priests at St. Virgil's over the last 20 years. During that period, the parish has had five pastors and numerous associate pastors. It is difficult to build continuity and a stable community when the priests leave after only a few years. As soon as a priest gets to

know the parish and the parish gets to know him, he's gone. Some wonder if the former bishop treated St. Virgil's as a second-class parish by switching priests so often. Hope was expressed that Bishop Sweeney will shut the revolving door.

B. Meaningful Inclusion of all in the Church

1. LGBTQ, Divorced Catholics and others on the margins

Many participants, both adult and young adults, believe the Church must be more inclusive, specifically with respect to gay, lesbian and transgender people, divorced Catholics who have remarried, and unmarried persons living together. Not everyone agreed, but most participants seemed troubled by the Church's implicit or explicit exclusion of one or more of these groups. As for divorced Catholics, there was a belief that the annulment process is cumbersome, costly and corrupt.

Many young adults say the Church has alienated them because it has excluded the groups mentioned above. They feel that Jesus welcomed all and that his Church must follow his example. They see the Church's teachings as conflicting with the way Jesus conducted his ministry. Adults mentioned the old phrase – "Hate the sin; love the sinner" – as a way to welcome people whose lifestyles clash with Church teachings. Some were frustrated with their inability to reconcile Jesus and his ministry with Church rules that seem to exclude people.

Inclusivity extends beyond sexual orientation and marital status. The parish contains people with differing needs and interests, and some feel that greater efforts must be made to identify and meet those needs.

2. The Role of Women

The consensus was that women must be given a greater and more meaningful role in the Church. Opinion was mixed on the ordination of women as priests or deacons, but there was agreement that the Church and the parish must ensure that women are given important roles in all parish ministries and activities. Both male and female participants voiced a desire for a greater role for women. This is but one facet of the desire for a more inclusive Church.

The views expressed at the Listening Sessions were consistent with those of Catholics nationwide. An Associated Poll conducted in May 2022 showed that 72% of all Catholics and 54% of those who attend Mass regularly favor the ordination of women.⁶

3. Young Adults

The most universally expressed concern was the lack of teenagers and young adults at Mass on Sunday. For many of us, it is a personal story because our own children or grandchildren refuse to attend Mass regularly and may not identify as Catholic. This may be the greatest crisis facing the Church because these younger people are the future of the Church.

Adult participants offered many suggestions. For example, the music at Mass could be modernized by adding electric guitars and drums, and contemporary Christian music could replace some

⁶ “Most Catholic Americans Disagree with Hardline Positions of Church Leadership,” the Associated Press, June 3, 2022.
<https://apnorc.org/projects/most-catholic-americans-disagree-with-hardline-positions-of-church-leadership/>

of the current hymns. As another example, technology could be used to a greater degree at Mass and other worship services. As a final example, the parish could sponsor social activities like band concerts for its younger members.

The views of the teen-agers and young adults themselves give us an insight into the scope of the problem. They feel that the parish hasn't made much effort to include them in parish life and that most parish activities are geared for older people. As we listened to them, we got the distinct impression that the synod was the first time that the Church had asked them what they thought and listened to what they had to say. The takeaway is that greater efforts must be made to include teen-agers and young adults in all parish activities and to treat them as valued members of the parish community. They want to be included.

They also said they are made to feel guilty when they question or disagree with Church teachings, and many expressed strong disagreement with Church doctrine on matters such as homosexuality. They believe the Church has become exclusionary, harsh and overly judgmental, and some feel hypocritical attending that kind of church. They have trouble squaring Church teachings with Jesus' words and actions. As one young woman put it, the Church should spend less time spouting doctrine and more time asking what Jesus would do.

The young people have fond memories of their time in the Appalachia Outreach Program, which made them feel closer to God and to the Church, but they wonder why there are no outreach programs for local people and communities that need help. They feel called to help others, and they want a Church that helps them do so. They want a Church that preaches more with its actions than with its words.

They said that Mass is not meaningful for them, and they expressed a lack of understanding of what Mass is all about. Some have gravitated to other faith traditions because those churches make them feel welcome and offer services that inspire and invigorate them.

Another problem noted by adult participants is that sports activities often take place on Sunday morning, requiring teen-agers (and their parents) to choose between Mass and sports. Often, the choice is sports.

The views expressed by the parish's young adults are consistent with a recent nationwide survey conducted by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. When asked why they were not more active in their parishes, 44% of the young adults surveyed mentioned the clergy-abuse scandals, followed by the church's teachings on homosexuality (42%), the belief that older people have too much influence in their parishes (35%), the Church's teachings on birth control (34%), the roles available to women in the Church (33%), a feeling that the Church is not open to dialogue with other faiths (33%) and the Church's teachings on divorce and remarriage (32%).⁷

As for their questioning of Church doctrine, they are not alone. Indeed, a 2014 survey of 12,000 Catholics in 12 countries showed that many Catholics worldwide disagree with Church

⁷ Robert D. Sullivan, "Survey: A Third of Young Catholics Expect to Attend Mass Less Often After the Pandemic," *America*, November 10, 2021.
<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/11/10/cara-survey-young-american-catholics-241803>

teachings on matters such as divorce and remarriage, the celibate priesthood, the all-male clergy, and contraception.⁸

4. Politics

The strong consensus was that politics have no place in the pulpit. Politics are divisive, and voicing them from the pulpit can alienate and exclude those who do not share these views. Several people told stories of pastors in other parishes going so far as to tell their parishioners how to vote.⁹ One participant noted that he/she would walk out of Mass the minute a priest tried to tell him/her how to vote. On the other hand, there was an equally strong consensus that the Church must speak out on moral and social issues.

People recognized that the line between politics and moral/social positions may not always be clear. As the recent debate over denying the Eucharist to pro-choice politicians shows, what is a moral statement to one person may be a political statement to another.

⁸ Michelle Boorstein and Peyton M. Craighill, “Sharp Divides in a Global Poll of Catholics,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 2014, A1.

⁹ In 2021, for example, a priest in Wisconsin was removed from his ministry for telling his parishioners that anyone who voted for a particular party’s candidates would burn in hell. Todd Richmond, “Father James Altman, Who Said Democrats Would Burn in Hell and Called Covid Restrictions ‘Nazi-esque,’ Removed by His Bishop,” *America*, July 9, 2021.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/07/09/father-james-altman-removed-wisconsin-bishop-241015>

C. Spiritual Nourishment for All Ages

Universally, participants are looking for homilies, education, and programs that tie our Christian faith to our lives so that they can make a difference in the world.

1. Homilies

A topic mentioned frequently in both the adult and youth Listening Sessions concerned the Sunday homilies. Many people have trouble understanding the priests. Because of the acoustics of the church and shortcomings in the sound system, it is crucial that the priests speak more slowly and announce more carefully.

Participants also felt the homilies are often too abstract. They want sermons that relate the weekly readings to everyday life in a concrete way and give them specific ideas on how to apply that week's readings to their lives. They want to be inspired and to leave Mass invigorated and recharged. While it's difficult to define what makes a good homily, a recent article in *U.S. Catholic* reflects some of the things parishioners said they would like to hear from the pulpit.¹⁰

This concern for the quality of the homilies is shared by Catholics across the country. In a 2017 Gallup poll that asked Catholics what factors draw them to Sunday Mass, 67% listed

¹⁰ Rhonda Miska, "How Can Preachers Break Through the Noise of Today's World," *U.S. Catholic*, April 29, 2022.

<https://uscatholic.org/articles/202204/what-makes-a-good-homily/>

homilies that help connect religion to their own lives.¹¹

2. Religious Education and other Faith Formation Programs

Participants expressed a strong desire for adult religious education. They want to learn more about their faith and obtain a better understanding of Scripture. Participants mentioned programs from the past that helped meet this need. Others have mentioned faith-sharing groups and other small groups that built community as well as nourishing faith. In the past, the parish pastoral associate and deacons organized these groups.

In addition to parishioners leading Bible-study groups, there are resources like St. Elizabeth's, St. Paul's Within the Walls and the Loyola Retreat House where the parish could obtain knowledgeable priests, nuns and laypersons to conduct seminars and classes. It is crucial that these programs be presented by a variety of voices (male and female, clergy and lay, and from inside and outside the parish) so that we can better understand the wide variety of thought within the Church.

The parish religious-education program for children and teenagers was discussed. There was a perception among the adults that not enough time is spent in religious education and children are not

¹¹ Lydia Saad, "Sermon Content is What Appeals Most to Churchgoers," *Social & Policy Issues*, April 14, 2017, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/208529/sermon-content-appeals-churchgoers.aspx>

receiving adequate instruction.¹² The adults were somewhat vague in expressing what they feel the current program lacks. But one specific suggestion was for classes that include both parents and their children because of the importance of children and their parents discussing matters of faith together. Others have noted that not having a full-time Director of Religious Education indicates a lack of a commitment to religious education and our parish children.

Young adults said they want religious-education classes they look forward to attending, not ones they are forced to attend. They want to be spiritually nourished, not lectured to. They feel the programs have too much repetition, and they wonder how much they're learning. They want to know more about God and Jesus. They believe that the Bible and matters of faith can be confusing, and they want help sorting through these issues. They want honest discussion, not Church doctrine forced upon them.

D. Community and Mission

1. Parish Activities

There is a desire for more parish activities, both religious and social. These activities bring together people who might not normally interact. They help build both friendships among people and a strong parish community. One participant noted that the Listening Sessions were refreshing because they included both men and women and people of different ages. This participant said that many parish activities are, either intentionally or unintentionally, segregated by age and gender. One of the pleasant

¹² Some of this was based on parishioners' experience back when their children were in the religious-education program. Thus, some of their perceptions may be outdated.

side-effects of the Listening Sessions was that many of us got to better know our fellow parishioners.

2. Sunday Mass

Suggestions were made to make Sunday Mass a more welcoming experience. Greeters could welcome people, and the parish could provide a babysitting service for those with young children. Volunteers could pick up parishioners who are no longer able to drive. Perhaps coffee and pastries could be served after Mass.

The adult participants said they want better music at the Masses, and as noted earlier, they want more substantive homilies. Some suggested committees lead by volunteers to form, for example, a music ministry committee. There was a recognition that volunteers would be needed to accomplish these suggestions.

3. Effect of the Pandemic and Serving the Local Community

Some participants wondered where the Church was during the pandemic. They feel the parish should have made more of an effort to help the elderly, the home-bound and our quarantined neighbors who might have needed help to get groceries from the store or medications from the pharmacy.

Many participants lamented the lower attendance at Sunday Mass and believe the pandemic has had a lingering negative effect on attendance. Nationwide, 24.3% of Catholics attended Mass on a weekly basis in 2015, before the pandemic. Last year, the figure dropped to 17.3%.¹³

¹³ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “Frequently Requested Church Statistics.”

<https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>

On the positive side, the pandemic inspired St. Virgil's and other parishes to embrace technology, with the live-streaming of Mass and other services giving the Church a new way to reach people, especially those unable to come to the church.

4. Parish Ministries

Some lamented a lack of involvement in parish ministries, with a few stalwarts left to do all the work. Some participants suggested that publicizing the parish's various ministries in the bulletin and Flocknotes and identifying what kind of help is needed. This, they felt, would encourage more people to volunteer. Requests for help, it was felt, would go a long way toward encouraging volunteers.

It is imperative, of course, that all who volunteer are welcomed and given a chance to participate. There was a sense that some feel that some parish ministries and activities are controlled by a few and that those in control may be reluctant to welcome or fully include newcomers. Some participants noted the power of a personal invitation to parishioners to participate, while others noted that this would require that both priests and parishioners know their fellow parishioners.

What's Next?

Parishioners have expressed interest in receiving this report to learn what others have said, and a desire to meet to discuss how we can begin to make changes as we journey together to a

revitalized parish. We plan to schedule meetings with all interested parishioners in the near future to discuss the next steps.

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Synod Delegates
St, Virgil's Parish