



What We Heard

Synod + Sínodo
2021-2023



at St. Catherine of Alexandria Parish, Riverside, CA

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St. Catherine of Alexandria Church has been actively engaged in the Synod process since January 2022, with some of the groundwork done in 2021. The theme was "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission."

Eleven listening sessions were held from February to April, along with distribution of a survey. As a result of those efforts, 183 voices were heard.

Listening sessions sought out the following groups:

- Parishioners at large.
- Teenagers, especially those preparing for confirmation.
- Spanish-speaking parishioners.
- Members of the deaf community.
- Adults and children engaged in religious education.
- Liturgical ministers.
- Parish Council members.
- Retirees.

Most sessions were conducted via Zoom, though in person sessions were held following certain weekday Masses both at St. Catherine and at Westmont Village retirement community.

Some of the major themes that emerged were:

- How to better minister to seniors.
- How to better meet the needs of Spanish-speaking parishioners.
- How to engage teenagers and young people.
- How to be more inclusive of the LGBT community.
- How to better engage young families.
- How to better teach the basics of the Catholic faith and the sacraments.

them. Some disagreed with church teachings, and some cited a lack of family support.

A strong thread throughout the discussion was a greater emphasis on the teachings of the Catholic faith, a hunger to learn more about the liturgy, sacraments, scripture, and the catechism. In an era when our politics and our church have become polarized, Catholics are looking for reliable sources of information. There are discordant voices: calls for a Latin Mass, support for leaders critical of Pope Francis, advocacy of extreme organizations and points of view. In the first reading May 20, 2022 from Acts, the story was told of representatives dispatched by the Apostles to Gentile communities in Antioch and elsewhere. "We have heard that some of our number who went out without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind." They sought to clarify matters with a missive they sent. In his homily that same day, our priest touched on distortions and misinformation coming from social media. Social media, like those "without any mandate" in the early church, can amplify and distort discordant views. There may be a role for our leaders at St. Catherine to elucidate and clarify the teachings of the church.

Overall, during the Synod process there was a positive sense from attendees of gratitude for the listening sessions that we got to come together as a community and share with one another, especially during the in-person conversations. We learned more about the challenges of families seeking to enrich their faith. Meanwhile, some are grappling with such issues as mental health and autism. We also learned more about the special needs of the deaf community and people with other disabilities.

Here are brief summaries of discussions under each of the three Pillars of the Synod. Following these brief summaries are more detailed summaries of the discussions.

Communion:

We are "diverse peoples of one faith," our bishops have told us about the Synod. "The communion we share finds its deepest roots in the love and unity of the Trinity."

Our participants spoke of a multitude of ways we can achieve that communion, reflecting themes that arose in the Participation and Mission segments of our listening sessions. The role of the family in fostering faith is paramount. Members of the St. Catherine community want to see a parish that is inclusive of the

needs of young people, Spanish-speaking, the deaf and senior citizens. They want to see involvement by more than just “the same small group of people.”

Participation:

We are called, as our leaders tell us in Synod, “to engage in the exercise of deep and respectful listening to one another.”

Welcomeness can be expressed in many different ways. It comes when greeters stand at the door saying hello, or when coffee and donuts are offered after Mass. It comes when ministry leaders invite volunteers to step forward to help and respond to their efforts to become engaged. It comes when the parish and the church reach out to the many people who feel disengaged – the elderly, young people, gays, divorced Catholics, immigrants who feel more comfortable in their home languages. St. Catherine has a reputation among some for being for the elite, the English-speaking, for rigidity.

Mission:

Living our faith is focused on these three areas: prayer, participation in the Mass, and going out and serving others.

One participant may have summarized the idea of Mission this way:” The mission of the church should be helping people on their faith journey.” Another said, “The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel, transform people into better people; transform society; make people holy.”

Those sentiments reflect what our leaders tell us in Synod, that the mission of the church is to evangelize, “to witness the love of God in the midst of the whole human family.”

Attending Mass constitutes our most important prayer, and the heartbeat of our faith. Participants want to learn more about the Mass and our faith to deepen our appreciation of it. They want more than learning a series of rote gestures – they want to learn why do we do what we do in Mass, and where do the various prayers come from. They want to hear the message of our faith clearly not just in English, but in Spanish, Tagalog and ASL.

Further, they see the Mission of our church as helping others, being kind, supportive, respectful. When we go in peace to love and serve the Lord, we are living that Mission and our faith.

Looking ahead

In the best of times, the parish has had to deal with the loss of parishioners who may have lost interest in religion generally, moved to another parish or city, or

joined a non-Catholic congregation. The synod began as the parish was taking steps to re-open following two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. The period from 2020 to 2022 presented unique challenges, including limitations on use of the sanctuary and other parish facilities. But the parish responded by moving many religious services to live-streaming, Zoom, and other online platforms. It also invested in a state-of-the-art video system to livestream Masses and parish events from the sanctuary. Nevertheless, much of the conversation in the synod conversations focused on what services were eliminated during the pandemic, such as rosaries after Mass inside church.

In a sense the pandemic presents the parish with the opportunity to look at its ministries and practices with a fresh eye and determine what changes and improvements can be made.

Next steps for the parish include a recap of the synod process with parishioners, presentation of findings and a dialogue about what the next steps will be so we can journey together.

Here is a recap of the points that came up during the discussion of each of the three Pillars. Respondents often returned to the same themes when talking about each of the Pillars.

Communion

Highlights from the discussion:

In reviewing the discussion around the first pillar, Communion, some common areas of interest, fulfillment, and concern started to become apparent:

Very faithful and active parishioners have grown up in the parish and/or have strongly devout family members who have kept the family centered on God and The Church.

Older parishioners are concerned with the lack of young people at Mass, and the dearth of young people in service and Ministry. "Cradle Catholics" over 60 are concerned with attrition and with keeping the traditions, dogma, and beauty of The Church alive, while teaching young people the Truth and beauty of the Catholic faith.

There is a concern on the part of many of the most devoted parishioners that the same small group of people seems to do all the work in Ministry, and newer members and/or young people are not answering the call. This concern is also voiced by many of those who serve in various Ministries as they are always asked to do more and do not feel it possible to do more than they already are.

The Spanish speaking community feel they need more Masses, more faith development, and more classes/experiences for the youth offered in Spanish.

The deaf community expressed the need for Priests or Deacons who can sign ASL, or a guest who might be able to minister to them in their own language on occasion. There was an expression of feeling on the outside looking in.

There is a hunger for more faith development events or classes. Many feel they or family members are under-catechized, and do not understand many Catholic basic tenets, such as the real Presence in the Eucharist.

There were several expressions of a need for ministry to senior citizens who live by themselves and need human contact, or a prayer partner. Perhaps part of this need is seeing they are eating properly and getting to appointments.

A number of responses expressed a desire to serve in one of the ministries, but the individual did not know how to go about getting involved. All the ministries are listed in the bulletin, and often there are appeals for new participants in the form of ads in the bulletin, but it seems people don't take the bulletin, or perhaps don't read it fully. This dovetails into another concern about social media being underutilized, or a lack of parish presence on Twitter or Instagram. Social Media is the means by which most parishioners or interested persons get their information. Social Media should be expanded and updated to appeal to a wider population base.

When asked "If you could immediately improve one thing in the parish or church, what would it be?", we received a laundry list of desires and ideas for improvement. Here are some of them, a number of which are reflected in both the Participation and Mission segments of the discussion.

A permanent Spanish speaking priest.

More Spanish Masses.

Catechism in Spanish.

Bring back the Latin Mass.

Bring back community-based events like dinners, meet and greets, bible study, lectures, etc.

Have mini-lessons before Mass.

Ministry pages on social media.

Fix the sound system. It is difficult to hear and understand the priests.

More information on Catholic Apps, websites, and technology for youth.

More access to priests. Everything needs an appointment.

Do bilingual Masses, like at Easter vigil.

Bring back the Mass greeters.

More adoration.

Follow-through for Ministry is poor. Messages get stuck in the office.

Name tags and/or pictures of people who help at a given Mass: Reader, Sacristan, Choir, etc. We don't know anybody's name.

Ban able-bodied people from sitting in the front rows. Deaf people attending Mass can't see the interpreter.

Confession before Mass.

Social opportunities for kids and adults after Mass.

Participation

Highlights from the discussion:

Parishioners were appreciative of the synod process because it gave them an opportunity to express their ideas and to feel they're being heard. Some said it felt like the first time they'd been listened to.

People are looking for ways to participate in ministries, such as serving the poor, RCIA, becoming lectors, but often face time constraints. Community service helps people feel involved. Others feel unwelcome because they're not married in the church or are divorced. Some of those who are involved say they are at their limit and can't do more, despite seeing needs.

They are also looking for ways to engage more with their spiritual selves. Reading the bible, going to confession, and praying. They're seeking answers to questions about their religion and scripture. Some – adults, young people, children - don't know how to participate in the Mass, or fully understand it. While many who have gone through RCIA are well educated about the church, others aren't, and don't understand the meaning of the Mass and the Eucharist. Parishioners aren't aware of the training and learning opportunities that are available. For some, belonging to a rosary group and being able to attend daily livestreamed Mass is important.

The church has been more responsive to Spanish-language parishioners through added prayer groups and Wednesday evening Masses. More Masses in Spanish, as well as in Filipino, were suggested.

It's important to feel you have friends at St. Catherine. A lack of interaction, fellowship and events like barbecues has hurt participation. Christian churches make it easier for people to connect with each other. People need to be greeted when they arrive at church. The community should be invited. The parish needs more activities and volunteer opportunities to bring people together.

Discussions in the main focused on the following areas.

Young people

For young people, retreats, confirmation classes and Life Nights all presented opportunities to be heard.

Young parishioners appreciate homilies that address problems they face, if its relatable or addresses a world problem or current events they're interested in.

Some young people feel peer pressure when it comes to church, fearing they'll be made fun of if they attend. They worry about being judged by those who don't attend church, and afraid to openly discuss their religious beliefs. Only a fraction of Catholic school graduates continue to attend Mass. "Modern liberal society" makes it difficult. It's easier to attend church when your friends do. Faith formation should be a choice for teenagers, and it should be interesting and appealing.

Confirmation process for young people takes longer than at other parishes. Teens want classes that are more fun, more energetic, less boring. Some don't want to commit to LifeNights and give up a portion of their weekends. Some feel that learning about religion is too hard, they're not good enough and they give up. Some make other priorities, such as school.

St. Catherine and the Catholic church faces competition from other religions that use praise music, entertainment, social media, technology, homilies that are "more of a conversation," programs for children. They may move away to attend college. The parish needs to take steps to encourage them to participate in ministries. Some find Mass boring, and incomprehensible, and it didn't get the emphasis that generations past did. Millennials – people born in the 1980s and 1990s – have fallen away. "People find what they need in other places," one said. "I love the music at the 8:30 Mass," said another.

Children and families

More needs to engage and teach children. This includes young families and families with children. The church needs ministries that can provide activities for children and activities while parents attend Mass, as well as childcare for mothers. Children need to be taught the Mass or to have their own worship aides, so that they know how to participate in it, and feel comfortable and part of it. More effort needs to be made to explain the Mass. The youth choir should be restored. One cited the special concerns of children with autism.

Parents need to take their children to church, and support the faith formation of teenagers. Some families are not raising their children in the faith or encouraging them to go to church. If parents aren't involved, their children won't be, either. Participation helps them to understand their faith.

Special needs

The LGBT community is ignored and feels unwelcome. It needs the church's support and an opportunity to engage. This issue isn't going to disappear. "They are children of God," one participant said. This community includes people who are LGBT themselves or have family members who are LGBT.

The poor and homeless have not just material needs but spiritual needs. They also have physical and mental health care needs. Parishioners asked how they can bring God into their lives, how to spread the word that St. Catherine welcomes and wants to help them. They recognize the diversity within the homeless community, which includes Latinos and young people. In addition, the parish should do more to address the needs of convicts and drug abusers.

Elderly people, people in hospice, people who cannot drive themselves to church tend to be neglected. The parish used to have a senior ministry to provide support and to utilize their talents. Participants thought that more could be done to provide social opportunities for elders so that they can become acquainted with each other.

More opportunities need to exist for women. Women considering abortion need support.

The placement of the deaf interpreter can be a problem. A screen might help deaf people see. A deaf reader and a signing priest would be improvements. Families with deaf children and the Hispanic deaf community have not been coming to Mass.

Why people turn away

Staff, priests, and volunteers need to be more welcoming. Some parishioners felt that the staff “talked down” to them. The parish needs to find ways to welcome newcomers.

Some people don’t want to be included. They have lost their sense of connection, or they have lost their faith in God, or feel they don’t have to attend church to connect with God. Some have become Catholic in name only. Some feel the church is too rigid. They may feel too busy to come to church or focused on their own interests. Some may have lost their faith because of the bad things and suffering that has taken place in their lives. They want something that moves them emotionally.

Divorced Catholics, single mothers and unmarried Catholics feel the hurt of being excluded. Some couples may find themselves in a marriage where one is Catholic and the other isn’t, leading to conflict. Some people have had a negative experience at some point in their lives and turn away from the entire church they feel “hurt by the church.” Some feel judged and that the church is close-minded. Some felt they didn’t get the support they needed when dealing with loss or crisis.

Some feel that the outside culture doesn’t support “rules and regulations.” Some people don’t want to put on the proper attire to attend church. Some feel that the fees and expenses they may be asked to pay are out of reach.

Some don’t understand the homilies or disagree with what a priest said in a homily. Some said they wish the priests were more interactive and energetic. Some have found it difficult to understand our priests. “Many times, their dialect and accent inhibit their ability to express themselves in English, and there are many people they get very irritated and upset with that. How many of us encourage our boys to become priests? That’s the problem.” One parishioner observed that priests need to slow down their cadence; the issue isn’t cadence, it’s speaking clearly into the microphone.

Catholics continue to feel the pain of the sexual abuse scandal and turn away. They may not be aware of the steps taken to deal with it. They may be limited by what they see on television, and in advertising by lawyers seeking abused clients.

Covid has kept or pushed some away. They’re either fearful to attend or have gotten out of the habit of attending. People want a place where they can pray, meditate, and pray the rosary – even 15 minutes after Mass.

Mission

Highlights from the discussion:

When asked how you live your faith, the overwhelming response is "prayer."

Mass is our most important prayer.

Among other ways we live our faith are by reading the Bible, taking classes and learning, and through such practices as adoration, holding family discussions about our faith,

We live our faith by treating others with kindness; being respectful. We live our faith through our service to others and through our work in ministries, taking part in prayer/small faith groups, fasting, and learning what we can through social media and television programming.

The inspiration for our faith primarily comes from family members: mom, parents, grandparents. And also priests and teachers.

There are societal issues that the Church needs to address: discrimination; homelessness; sexual abuses: domestic violence; physical and mental health; climate change; abortion.

There are some communities that are not talked about as much, but parishioners wanted to know how we could better discuss and work with them, including LGBTQ and divorced Catholics.

Other topics mentioned: immigration issues; the political divide; elderly; the sick.

The mission of the church should be bringing people together, unity, and evangelization.

More events like these listening sessions would be helpful.

When it comes to religious education, some wanted to know why there is no consistency in preparation for the sacraments? Why do different parishes have different number of years to prepare?

Among the fears parishioners felt was losing adherents: who is going to keep the church going?

Some cited the need for teaching/catechism about our faith, on sacraments.

We tend to see the same people involved in ministries. Some would like to see more volunteers and allow others the opportunity to serve.

Get people to come back to church; offer more gatherings.

A better connection with youth is important.

More Spanish Masses and a native Spanish-speaking priest would better serve our community.

We're not here to entertain and be entertained. Catholics need to learn the basics of our worship and the tenets of our faith. Many people are uneducated about their faith.

Observations about the Synod process

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, we heard responses such as "I miss the church" and "I wish we could meet in person." But many have not returned to Mass. Many did not know the difficult decisions that were made to close the churches to keep us safe; pandemic affected the entire world, decisions had to be made at all levels: federal, state, county, diocese, parish.

Looking back at what was accomplished during this phase of the Synod with the available time and all that we accomplished, we did not reach everybody. We tried through questionnaires to reach people who are no longer coming to church, along with non-Catholics. We invited parishioners to take questionnaires to their family and friends so they could fill them out, but we only received a few back. So not all the voices among the marginalized were heard but we did the best we could with the time allotted and availability. Zoom helped us hold discussions safely but the better and more effective option is in-person gatherings that allow us to gather in community. Nevertheless, we got to know each other and discover that we have more in common than differences as we journey together.

Next step, from the Synod Prayer: "Holy Spirit, With You alone to guide us, make Yourself at home in our hearts; Teach us the way we must go and how we are to pursue it."

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