



We seek changes that will provide all Roman Catholics
the opportunity to participate fully in Church life and leadership.

Dear members of the USCCB Synod Team:

Please find our synthesis for the interim stage of the Synod attached.

FutureChurch is an organization of Catholic individuals from around the United States and other countries committed to seeking changes that will provide all Roman Catholics the opportunity to participate fully in Church life, ministry, and governance. Our members are lay people, members of religious congregations, and clergy. They have a deep and abiding love for the Body of Christ and engage in a variety of ministries and activities in their local communities.

This past Lent, FutureChurch organized three listening sessions for the interim stage. More than 100 individuals responded to our invitation to engage in Conversations in the Spirit based on the questions offered by the USCCB and to discern the movement of the Spirit in our midst. An additional 88 responses were collected through our online questionnaire, which posed the same questions.

We have undertaken the task of synthesizing our listening sessions and questionnaire responses as a sacred responsibility, and it is our privilege to share the fruits of our conversations with you.

Our conversations revealed a sense that the Church best lives into its call to be a community of love and mercy when all the baptized are involved as co-equals in the life and mission of the Church. We fail to live into that call when we rigidly cling to dogmas and practices that deny or diminish human dignity, and the Spirit that dwells within, thereby preventing dialogue and encounter. We sensed that the Spirit is calling us to move forward as a synodal Church rooted in the teachings and spirit of the Second Vatican Council – free of clericalism - with an empowered laity, an open and reformed priesthood, and a commitment to engaging and living Catholic Social Teaching in the world.

Overall, despite naming numerous and significant distresses and challenges, participants maintain a strong sense of hope. These Catholics love and nurture their faith, are committed to their Church, and have an abundant energy and desire to take up co-responsible partnership to live as a community of love and mercy in a world in desperate need of this credible witness to Christ.

Submitted on behalf of FutureChurch members and conversation partners, in faith, hope and love,

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Guiding Question: Where have I seen or experienced **successes** within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?

Our conversation partners overwhelmingly agreed that the Church lives into its call to be a community of love and mercy when all the baptized are involved as equals and are empowered to contribute their gifts to the life and missionary work of the Church.

The Synod Itself

There was near universal support and appreciation for the Synod on Communion, Participation, and Mission; its structure and processes; and the synodal way of being Church it heralds. The Synod was frequently described as “hopeful” and “energizing.” This was especially true for those who lived in parishes and dioceses that engaged in listening sessions and shared information about the Synod. Others lamented that listening sessions weren’t offered – or were even actively resisted – locally and were thankful for virtual opportunities to encounter and participate in the Synod.

Participation in the Synod has fostered a strong sense of community and solidarity with Catholics at home and around the globe. And the inclusion of lay people - women and young people in particular - as voting members of the Synod Assembly was welcomed as an important step toward becoming a truly synodal Church:

- **“I am hearing and seeing ever more discussion from more varied voices, perceiving that actual listening is taking place in Rome.”**
- **“Our experience of God is ongoing and expanding. Questions raised and insights provided allow us to see even more of God's power and Love for us.”**

Islands of Hope

Looking locally, participants had a greater variety of enthusiasm for their experiences of Church in their parish community. One participant captured the conversation well:

- **“There are rays of light and candles in the darkness in assorted dioceses and parishes, BUT they are often islands of hope in a swamp overflowing with clericalism and administrative indifference.”**

Another participant adds that “empowerment of the laity, in all areas: pastoral ministry, liturgical ministries, faith formation, preaching, social action and peace and justice initiatives” is a shared quality among these communities. Others note that, given their tremendous canonical authority, the pastor currently plays a critical role:

- **“If they are open to sharing, communicating, empowering, including women, and welcoming anyone labeled ‘other’, the parish life will flourish.”**
- **“A few pastors reach the hearts as well as minds of parishioners because they live lives of prayer and model the gospel mandate of love. They imitate Jesus' compassion and mercy and not the legalistic attitudes and practices of Pharisees and Scribes.”**

Beyond parish life, many raised efforts and organizations led by women religious and other lay people. A number of participants credited the formation they received in schools sponsored by religious communities and ongoing formation through retreat houses. And they specifically applauded efforts to promote environmental justice and care for creation; providing services and advocacy for immigrants at the border and beyond, the unhoused, and those struggling with food insecurity; and outreach to the LGBTQ+ community and young people and students.

- **“All forms of outreach to the poor and disadvantaged groups undertaken mostly by religious and lay persons lend credibility to us as Church.”**

In addition to their good work in the world, religious communities often excel in communal discernment and shared leadership, and we would do well to seek their wisdom and guidance moving forward on our synodal journey:

- **“The Church needs to embrace more fully the experience of religious communities, including their lay associates, who are seeking to live a style of the Christian call that is relevant to today's world.”**

A number of our participants are members of and pointed to the example of small, intentional communities that are forging new pathways forward in terms of shared leadership, opportunities for spiritual growth, egalitarian forms of liturgy, and engagement with the community around them. They have found community in places like Catholic Worker houses, house churches, women’s groups, and book clubs.

Guiding Question: Where have I seen or experienced distresses within the Church’s structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?

Our conversation partners agreed that the Church fails to live fully into its call to be a community of love and mercy when we are rigidly oriented towards dogma and rules rather than listening, learning, and growing together.

“Rigidity”

In our conversations, the word “rigid” came up in a variety of contexts from dogma to simple administrative processes. Participants lamented a Church “where the 'rules' and 'rubrics' become more important than the needs of people.”

- **“I have been disappointed and stressed by clergy and church structures that I have experienced as inflexible and judgmental, especially when they focus on trivial matters such as how much fasting is done, how much money is donated and how many prayers are said, where the tabernacle is....”**

Of particular note in this regard is the Church’s teaching the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community:

- **“Our official teaching on 'disordered' affections of LGBTQ persons is a major stumbling block in light of science and reality. I knew when I was 10 that some of my gay friends were 'just that way.' How we do not see this in 2024 is unreal!”**

They desire “a culture of encounter and listening instead of just teaching ‘truths.’”

- **“Before we can proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we have to identify ourselves as disciple-followers of Jesus, rather than adherents of church doctrines. A community of love and mercy will flow from our self-identity as followers of Jesus – ‘See how they love one another!’”**

Clericalism Compounded by a “Retreat” from Vatican II

Clericalism is a major and overarching distress. Participants are disheartened that parishioners have no voice or authority in parish matters or recourse “when a new pastor or bishop comes in and changes everything.” Too many parishes have become places “where the pastor is the be all and end all” and parishioners are seen as mere “volunteers”:

- **“I have seen less and less support for lay ministers to contribute their gifts. From formation programs being reduced to ‘seminarians only’ to entire gutting of parish positions with a living wage for a lay married female minister with a family.”**
- **“I hear from many, many people who find that their pastors do not encourage lay involvement and leadership in the parish. There are a few parishes that buck this trend, but too many pastors still have mental habits that come out of the ‘pay, pray and obey’ era.”**
- **“There is no serious consultation with the laity in the selection of pastors and bishops.”**

Clericalism is compounded by a retreat from the Second Vatican Council:

- **“I was a member of a parish community that was quite 'progressive.' The new pastor was not. It was clear that things were going to go backwards to pre-Vatican II.”**
- **“I saw successes after the Second Vatican Council. Windows were opened to other faith traditions, to women who were included in the preaching, to other forms of worship like liturgical dance. My soul opened like a spring flower to this blossoming. Then it was all snatched away.”**

Participants laid blame on structures and practices that perpetuate clericalism rather than individual priests and bishops:

- **“Clericalism in seminary training allows priests and bishops to develop a mentality of ownership, acting as if this is ‘my’ parish/ ‘my’ diocese.”**
- **“Without question, the insistence on a celibate male priesthood has incredible costs. Why we hold onto this is quite troubling and costly. It costs the priests themselves, often isolated and overworked. It is not the cause, but definitely a factor, in the priest abuse crisis.”**

They have compassion for priests who are shaped in a clerical culture and express a desire to work with them. **“Let our priests be pastoral,”** they said. And **“tear down the pyramid. Join the circle.”**

The Exclusion of Women

While our conversation partners applauded recent efforts by Pope Francis to place women in positions of authority at the Vatican, this needs to happen at every level. Moreover, the continued exclusion of women from ordained ministry is a detriment to the Church’s credibility and witness:

- **“The misogyny continues. I have 2 adult daughters. One only attends church sometimes; the other is searching for a different religion.”**
- **“Only allowing men to be ordained denies the Catholic community the opportunity to benefit from the rich and valuable experiences of women. I think women can offer special perspectives that the church is missing by only having the male point of view.”**

And while women have traditionally been the lifeblood of the domestic and local Church, serving as lay ministers, directors of religious education, coordinators of various ministries, their contributions are too infrequently encouraged, recognized, or supported by the Church:

- **“I see distress in not accepting women to preach and not encouraging women who have skills to make a difference in the parish.”**
- **“I believe the Church could do so much more and reach so many others if women were allowed to preach, administer sacraments, and have more direct contact with parishioners in a diaconate. I believe women should be able, within our Church structure, to accept the calling to the diaconate. I think it's important that the Church train and officially recognize (ordain) women so that all in the Church are aware of their special dedication and Church approval.”**

There was strong agreement in our conversations: **“We need women priests, bishops, and deacons.”**

A Lack of Inclusive and Expansive Language and Imagery

Representation matters. What we see, what we hear, and how we pray influences what we believe about ourselves and about God. At best our current language and imagery is limiting and constraining. At worst it is both harmful and dismissive:

- **“The exclusion of women’s stories from the lectionary is unacceptable in 2024.”**
- **“Patriarchal language/translations of Scripture and liturgical texts are offensive and prevent an accurate portrayal of God - presenting a male God. Surely this is heresy.”**

- **“When my Black and Brown students walk into a church and see the ‘whitest’ Jesus, they think to themselves, ‘This isn’t for me.’”**
- **“Poor Bible and Liturgy translations: As long as we have a male God, we will have abuse of children and women.”**

A Growing Sense of Disunity

In a world that is increasingly polarized, our participants want the Church to model a way of walking together through difference:

- **“We need to stop identifying ourselves as conservatives or liberals and get back to identifying ourselves as followers of Jesus.”**

Many were frustrated by the obvious divide in the episcopacy and resistance to the synod:

- **“Polarization in the American Church - bishops who fail to work in unity with Pope Francis are not living out the mission.”**
- **“Our institutional Church has Bishops who are not in union with Pope Francis and are blatant about it.”**
- **“Bishops (and priests) who are uninterested in or opposed to the Synod and synodal process have not encouraged (and sometimes actively prevented) discussions from taking place.”**

A Church that is Out of Touch with the People - Needs of the World

Our conversations revealed a widening gap between the clergy and the laity. The Church feels “out of touch - not just with what is important to us, but who we are”:

- **“The structure of hierarchy separates the clergy from laity in mindset, life experiences, and ability to compassionately understand and serve each other.”**
- **“Although our clergy mean well and try to meet the needs of their parishioners there seems to be a gulf between church and the realities of life.”**
- **“We need more programs to engage our intellect, spirituality, and socialization.”**

This divide is most felt nationally during election cycles and locally in preaching.

- **“The USCCB lacks leadership and courage and no longer has an impact on current issues. Their insistence that the threat of abortion remains the preeminent priority for their political guidance to Catholic voters.”**
- **“There is no speaking up on immigration, death penalty, incarceration, environment, the needs of rural communities, the needs of poorer communities.”**
- **“We rarely hear the Word of God placed alongside today’s ills of systemic racism and other injustices.”**
- **“Homilies are weak and don’t inspire anyone to do anything.”**
- **“Not enough effort to combat climate change.”**

They sense the Holy Spirit is calling us to engage and live out the rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching more deeply.

- **“The Spirit is calling us to ‘warm up’ the church - young people want a church that is alive and active.”**
- **“Be the midwife for the future of the Church, the people of God.”**

And to include more voices in the preaching ministry of the Church:

- **“The Church needs to open the pulpit to hear other voices: of women, of the marginalized, of the people.”**

Clergy Abuse Crisis

Church’s continued inability or refusal to sufficiently address clergy abuse demands explicit mention:

- **“Clerical sex abuse and the church leaders' indifference and cover-up has been very distressing, causing a loss of credibility in the Church leadership.”**
- **“The continued underplaying of clergy sex abuse has and continues to be the most scandalous/harmful issue for the Church in our times.”**

Guiding Question: How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

Our conversation partners agreed that the Spirit is calling us to address the sin of clericalism in our Church. Our efforts need to focus on embracing and empowering lay involvement and leadership, institutionalizing synodality, a reformed inclusive priesthood, living the Gospel mission, and a direct engagement with Catholic Social Teaching.

Addressing Clericalism and Lay Empowerment

Clericalism isolates both priests and lay people from each other and prevents each from reaching their full potential as human beings loved and nurtured by God. Many participants were concerned about the lack of humanity granted to those in clergy positions. In their seminary education, these men are taught to act differently than the laity and are considered to have an ontological and interior change that makes them superior.

In our conversations, many agreed that this does harm to both the priests and the laity. An adequate confrontation of the harms of clericalism will allow priests to be more fully human and will empower the laity to know and accept that their voices are valued and celebrated within their communities. This means that formation for ministry – both ordained and lay - must be reformed to foster knowledge and appreciation of the teachings of Vatican II and to embrace co-responsibility for the life of the Church. Current structures do not allow the laity to act with agency even as they try to act in accordance to their baptismal call, they bump against structural barriers.

- **“The Holy Spirit is calling ALL of us, including Bishops, to be fully human. Compassion that will require changing rigid laws that seriously harm.”**

Our participants highlighted the need for parish pastoral councils to have canonical authority in concert with the pastor of the parish. In addition, pastoral councils and parish communities should be given a deliberative role in the process of appointing a new pastor and new bishops to their diocese. To achieve this level of lay participation, our conversations explicitly named the need for good ongoing lay formation and education:

- **“Lay members, old and new, need to be nurtured, respected and celebrated as gifted baptized members who are trying to live the Gospel of Jesus, let alone spread it.”**

Institutionalize Synodality

Our conversations emphasized the importance of the synod process – listening and engaging with people from all walks of life, even those with whom we do not agree:

- **“To listen - truly listen without an agenda - to see God in ALL, even in people we don’t agree with, to meet all with compassion and mercy.”**

Institutionalizing synodality will require universal training in conversations in the spirit and educating Church leaders in community building that extends beyond arbitrary rules and obsolete traditions. Many see listening sessions as a practice that should be a part of all the Church’s decision-making processes at every level, from the local to the universal.

- The Church needs to maintain an **“openness to asking any question [and] dialoguing about it”**

The Ordination of Women and Inclusive Priesthood

In our conversations, ordaining women as priests, deacons, and bishops presented itself as an obvious balm for many of the wounds harming our Church. At the most basic level, our participants want to see women preaching at the pulpit so that their voices are heard, validated, and their wisdom shared. A clergy that includes women allows all who feel called to any leadership to live out their vocation:

- ***“We as baptized can respond to the call by living as Christ and loving all. This does not depend on having church structures [rules or limitations about who can govern]. But it is helpful to support and encourage one another in our work based on the gospel truths.”***

Our conversations also touched upon the importance of allowing priests to marry and be in loving relationships. Allowing priests to marry is one of many ways in which priests can be brought into a greater understanding of **“lived reality.”** Not only would priests be able to live in relationships with partners, but they would also better understand the experiences of the laity.

A more inclusive and diverse priesthood, according to our conversations, will allow for structural change within communities, but also better preaching overall, that will be more resonant with the needs of Catholics broadly.

Living the Gospel

Our conversations highlighted the needs for the Catholics to reaffirm our common identity as disciples of Christ. If we are to speak credibly about justice in the world, then we must model and exemplify justice in the Church in every regard – our language, our worship, our leadership structures, and our decision making.

- ***“If one truly follows the Gospel and not just proclaims it, then women would be treated equally in ministry and governance, LGBTQ folks would feel completely included. Hurtful words would be discarded. The tent would then be wide enough to embrace all, without judgment, but with acceptance and compassion. Justice would roll down like water.”***

Living the Gospel will also mean more fully engaging with Catholic Social Teaching. This can be done by integrating the principles into preaching, religious education, youth ministry, and creating opportunities not only for charity but activism and advocacy and interaction with communities outside the Church. Parishes might encourage encounters with marginalized communities in and around their cities.

- ***“The Spirit is calling the church to invite and welcome all people of faith and good will, offering respite from a world in turmoil.”***