

Final Draft

Synod 2021–2023 Report

Archdiocese of Los Angeles

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles is a family of families over four million Catholics strong, residing in 120 cities across Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara counties. The Archdiocese of Los Angeles comprises 288 parishes, including 16 Eastern Rite Catholic Churches, where Mass is celebrated in 42 languages each Sunday. Likewise, the Archdiocese has 214 elementary schools and 54 high schools. The people of the Archdiocese form a rich tapestry of cultures with a common thread joining them as one: one mission to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and one Catholic faith to be believed, celebrated, and lived.

The Holy Father, Pope Francis, is calling us to become a synodal Church, in which we journey together, both clergy and laity, each according to our roles and spiritual gifts. To actualize the diocesan phase of the Synod in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, a leadership team was formed, comprising lay leaders and clergy of varying ages and ethnicities, to design and implement a process.

Isolation from community life was among the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. With providential timing, the Synod provided an opportunity to draw people together again—to build relationships in Christ, both old and new. Synod listening sessions throughout the Archdiocese assembled Catholics and non-Catholics, young and old, lay and clergy. The synod process intentionally invited the voices of all to be heard, especially the often neglected or forgotten. Through prayer, reflection on the Word of God, and dialogue in Archdiocesan, parish, and community listening sessions, the family of God in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles walked together as companions on the journey of faith.

Listening sessions were hosted from January through April, 2022 in 155 parishes and many communities within the Archdiocese, including in and among religious congregations, apostolates, schools and communities. They were encouraged to host either a series of three two-hour listening sessions or one two-hour listening session (in person or virtually). The session opened with prayer, followed by the reading of and reflection on a passage from the Gospels in small groups. Then in small groups, participants shared their present experience of the local Church and where Jesus might be summoning his Church to go under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This format grounded our dialogue in a spirit of prayer and a common hearing of the Word of God. Resources for listening sessions were available on the Synod website of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Over 18,000 individuals participated in listening sessions. The following is a synthesis of the hundreds of reports submitted to the Synod Steering Committee on their behalf. In addition to this Archdiocesan report, five additional synthesis reports are being produced for each of the pastoral regions reflective of the parishes and communities in each locale. Statements within quotation marks are excerpts from synthesis reports submitted by parishes and communities or direct feedback from participants.

Listening and Speaking

Synod participants convey the great joy in listening and speaking to one another with open hearts and minds, kindness, and encouragement. Through a spirit of prayer and with mutual respect, we learn to appreciate our different faith journeys, experiences, and social contexts. “The Holy Spirit is inviting us to journey together more fully by speaking as a community with humility and charity.”

Many relate hesitation to speak out within their Church communities due to an inability to articulate clearly or the fear of being misunderstood, especially when expressing a different view. “We don’t speak because we are afraid of being judged or offending someone. Jesus tells us not to judge, but as Catholics we do a lot of judging.” Some participants express a perceived lack of knowledge of their faith as another obstacle to speaking with confidence and courage. Many people seek understanding and mutual respect to speak on matters important for the life of the Church. While not everyone feels heard by their pastor and Archdiocesan leaders, there is great appreciation for priests who provide the space for listening—this gesture of pastoral care is so desired by parish communities.

Women are limited to certain leadership roles, with their spiritual gifts not being fully recognized and utilized. Many voices advocate for offering greater opportunities for women to serve in leadership; some raise the possibility of women deacons.

Participants desire to share their spiritual gifts and grow in faith by serving their communities, but at times feel unwelcome by clergy, parish staff, and ministry leaders. At many parishes, ministries operate in silos and appear closed to new members. To be welcoming, vibrant communities of missionary disciples, prioritizing hospitality and extending open invitations for participation in ministries and parish life is key.

A common observation is that some individuals and groups experience marginalization in their parishes and communities. Many youth (ages 13-17) and young adults (ages 18-39) describe parishes and communities as unwelcoming and even judgmental. They desire parish leaders and the community as a whole to listen to their voices and invite them to participate in Church life, specifically in parish ministries and leadership councils. Oftentimes, young adults will seek out other organizations, apostolates, or groups and other Christian denominations because they show greater hospitality and offer a community with a sense of belonging. Young people yearn to come together in community through small group faith sharing and social gatherings. Additionally, they express a strong attraction to Catholic social teaching and a desire to serve, following the example of Jesus.

Participants also note marginalization in our communities flowing from the realities of life in society today. The divorced long for participation in communal life. Likewise, the divorced and remarried yearn to return to sacramental life but feel the annulment processes are too burdensome. Individuals without housing or jobs, recent immigrants, the elderly, those with disabilities, those suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction and mental health issues, and the incarcerated and their families also live on the margins of our parish communities. At times, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and their loved ones experience judgment and rejection, and are confused and hurt by the harsh words and actions by some Church

leaders. Some participants feel the Church and parish leadership listens disproportionately to those with money, media access, power, and influence.

Many participants appreciate the rich diversity of the Archdiocese and call for fostering greater cultural awareness and unity. The current reality within and among parishes is described by some as “diversity...but also segregation.” The ethnic and cultural diversity of a parish is often not represented in ministries, councils, or leadership. Parishes and communities need to be intentional in creatively overcoming language barriers. “Our parish is blessed with many different cultures. We need to continuously celebrate as one family...solidarity with a mission in mind.”

Parish communities that listen and reach out to those who feel marginalized create welcoming environments where everyone can walk together with Jesus Christ. “The Church must not be ‘tone deaf’ to those who feel rejected,” and should instead be, “a model of welcoming, inclusion, hospitality, and God’s love for all.”

Celebrating

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected our experience of common worship yet has presented opportunities for liturgical renewal. Many found that live streamed Masses and other prayer services united parish communities and families at a time when we could not gather physically. Maintaining or even expanding live streamed Masses for the sick and homebound, as well as for weddings and funerals, and other celebrations could be pastorally beneficial. Many of the faithful still access livestream opportunities to join communities from afar, resulting in a stronger connection with the global Church. At the height of the pandemic, disconnection from community, along with the inaccessibility of churches and the sacraments, weakened the spiritual life of many. Participants laud priests, parish staff, and volunteers for their efforts to sustain connection with parishioners and to offer the sacraments as much as possible amid restrictions. Various prayer groups formed during the pandemic continue to gather. While most parishes have returned to many pre-pandemic, in-person activities, the creative means to connect with people and provide opportunities for participation offer an inspiration for future pastoral outreach. A desire remains to utilize technology to respond to different needs, such as auditory and visual impairments. In addition, some participants acknowledge the grace of slowing down: “Many people now have renewed appreciation and greater zeal for Mass and the Eucharist, as well as their Church community.”

Of great concern is that Mass attendance has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, revealing a crisis of faith that aligns with an ongoing trend of religious disaffiliation. While some remain anxious and nervous about gathering with others, there is a desire to truly welcome all to the table of the Lord by better addressing mental health and providing outreach to those with special needs. This unique moment presents an imperative to all the faithful to invite people home to the Eucharist and Christian community.

As we invite people to return to Mass, participants note that while “Mass brings joy as people come together to celebrate,” “our ‘celebrating’ has been very flat and it has been difficult to keep coming week after week.” Our celebration of the liturgy should show the sacredness, richness, and beauty of the Eucharist. Intentional and prayerful preparation for Mass by liturgical

ministers can deepen their participation in the liturgy, as well as enhance the experience of the faithful. There is a need for more ministers for the celebration of Mass and sacraments. Likewise, there is an overwhelming desire for formation on the Mass to enrich and enhance participation by all the People of God: assembly, ministers, and clergy. Participants cite beautiful music and reflective silence as necessary during Mass. They further request increased access to the sacraments, formation, and sacramental preparation: “Liturgical prayer, Eucharistic Adoration, Holy Hours, and communal experiences of prayer in groups are nurturing the faith of our people...the practice of Lectio Divina is helping parishioners receive the word of God.”

There is a clear longing to celebrate our unity as the Body of Christ through our rich diversity. Many participants request opportunities to bring different cultures together in worship at the parish level, incorporating multilingual and multicultural experiences such that the liturgy appropriately reflects the worshipping community. “Being able to hear the Mass in one’s native language gives individuals a better understanding of the Word of God and gives them a greater opportunity to participate in the liturgy.” At the same time, “The discussion of liturgy at our parish revealed from both the English and Spanish groups that we feel we are a very divided community; there are two separate parishes, Spanish-speaking and the English-speaking, instead of one. Both groups said we need and want to come back together.” Nonetheless, some dislike bilingual events and liturgies and express frustration with priests with strong accents or an inability to converse, especially in communities with significant numbers of non-English speakers. In addition, participants call for greater consistency in liturgical celebration and organization in the coordination of liturgical ministries.

Diversity in the celebration of the liturgy also includes an appreciation for different forms of the Mass. Some participate in pre-Conciliar rites and express concern that “more traditional liturgies are labeled as divisive.” Participants in general indicate a confusion on the appropriate use of different forms of the Mass and expressions of liturgical piety.

Participants recognize that the devotion with which priests celebrate Mass and fervor with which they preach have the potential to be impactful, formational, “nourishing and life-giving.” To this end, the proper preparation of the priests is necessary, specifically public speaking skills and ongoing formation. There is a great desire for well-organized homilies that “connect the Scriptures to the everyday lives of the people sitting in the pews.” Many express appreciation for priests and deacons that provide a spirit of welcome and inclusion in their homilies. Likewise, many request homilies that address issues of life in society in the light of the Gospel: morality and justice, the dignity of human life, the preferential option for the poor, locally and globally, and crises such as the pandemic. In addition, some desire to hear reflections from the laity.

Going on Mission

The mission of the Church is to evangelize—to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the aim of forming missionary disciples. Yet, many share that our common mission of evangelization remains misunderstood or even unknown among Catholics in general. Synod participants agree that in this time of social upheaval and political division, declining Mass attendance and alienation from the Church, a clear sense of mission is necessary: announcing the Good News afresh to the baptized who are missing from our communities and going forth into the world to

proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. Many see technology, such as social media and video recordings, as an especially effective way to communicate the Gospel far and wide.

Synod participants indicate that the top priority of parish life needs to be formation in relationship with Jesus Christ through the preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of the faith, the celebration of the sacraments, and service to the needy. Many participants see prayer, Bible study, regular spiritual retreats, and ongoing catechesis for all ages as ways to promote growth in discipleship. Some also notice a pattern: while many parishes invest resources for growth in the life of discipleship, there is a lack of formation to equip all the faithful for mission in the world. Mission is not only for the “professionals” but for every baptized person, and there is a clear desire to empower disciples to confidently share the story of Jesus and the story of their faith in witness.

Evangelization generally occurs within the context of relationships in our families, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and parishes. Trust is the foundation of relationships in which the Gospel can be shared. Building trust with people starts with listening to them with open hearts to hear their concerns and aspirations. In particular, participants insist that the Church has to be attentive to the voice of young people in order to accompany them to and in faith. Likewise, answering their questions with confidence and clarity can open their minds to the truth of Christ. Many participants further express a desire for parishes to accompany young married couples beyond formation for marriage. They also call for support to young parents in educating children in the faith of the Church while affirming them as the primary educators of their children.

Some participants mention that mission is not mere involvement in parish life. They say an ongoing experience of Jesus in our communities of faith should impel us to go forth to witness to his love beyond the confines of the parish. “The Church should return to being a missionary church that reaches out to the world rather than insulating itself from the world.” Participants stress service to the poor and suffering as a response to the teachings of the Gospel and an opportunity to give witness to Jesus. Engaging in corporal works of mercy, is a concrete expression of our love for Christ. In addition, the promotion of justice in society affords the Church credibility in preaching the Gospel.

Participants acknowledge that the Holy Spirit has given unique spiritual gifts to all the baptized by which to build up the Church and advance mission, stressing the need for pastoral leaders to accompany individuals in the discernment of these gifts. Pastors have the responsibility to recognize and call forth the gifts of the members of their communities. Likewise, participants recommend that the ministries entrusted to individuals should correspond to their gifts, since fruitful mission flows from sharing them.

Many believe that prayer fuels mission, and so, parishes should be communities where people learn to pray in many ways. Some note that teaching the practice of praying with and for others can be an especially powerful way to experience and communicate the closeness and love of Jesus.

Dialoguing

Synod discussions reveal a strong desire for more intentional dialogue and collaboration with other religions, as well as with the “nones” (religiously non-affiliated) in our local communities. “We are eager to engage in dialogue with other faith communities” and to “see the face of Christ in others, be tolerant and inclusive, and to help us learn how to talk with people who are different than us.” Many recognize the need for formation on how to engage in fruitful dialogue and grow in confidence in speaking about our Catholic faith. “The Archdiocese and its parishes should create dialoguing opportunities between other local Catholic parishes and other faith traditions. This would allow collaboration and form connections with people who have different perspectives within and outside our own faith.”

While people have lacked opportunities for interreligious gatherings in recent years, some recognize that such dialogue happens in daily interactions. Catholic elementary and secondary schools provide an inclusive environment to non-Catholics where all students and staff learn about different religions. At the same time, some perceive a lack of willingness to dialogue with other religions. “The Church does not do enough to encourage us to be open-minded and welcoming of those from other faiths, beliefs and traditions.” Many see interreligious cooperation as a way to make a difference in our communities. “We can learn from others just as they can learn from us...we have more in common, than we [have] differences,’ and we need to share in those commonalities and even the differences.”

In addition, participants express a desire to dialogue and pray with fellow Christians, yet “there is a general apprehension in discussing faith with other denominations for fear of argument or debate about scriptural interpretations.” Many perceive an antagonistic attitude toward the Catholic Church among some Christian denominations as an obstacle to dialogue. Nevertheless, some highlight collaboration in mission with other Christians though pro-life efforts and outreach to the poor and marginalized. Examples of Christian unity in the service of charity include construction of winter shelters for the homeless and Habitat for Humanity builds, food bank drives, walks and prayer vigils for the end of abortion, and disaster relief and international crisis assistance, such as war in Ukraine.

While the Church has implemented many measures to prevent sexual abuse, the scandal remains a “stumbling block” for some Catholics and non-Catholics alike because the Church has not held sufficient open dialogue on accountability for such widespread failures and harm. Many feel uncomfortable and unequipped to discuss this issue.

Many participants further perceive a tension over when and how the Church speaks on social issues. Dialogue within the Church is polarized, much as in the rest of society. Some insist that the bishops “should stay out of politics,” whereas others desire bishops and pastors to speak with clarity and unity when applying Catholic social teaching to current issues. On the one hand, some call for consistent preaching on the dignity of human life and the evil of abortion, and on the other hand, some feel abortion receives exclusive focus among the many life issues. Many also relate a desire for the Church to actively address racism within Church and society, as well as racially motivated violence — “not just added to the general intercessions.” Pastoral letters from the bishops on social issues need to be communicated to the faithful in the pews. Furthermore, “workshops or seminars will prepare us, parents, catechists, and others” to understand and live our Catholic faith in society and respond to current issues with an eye to the common good and the dignity of the human person, above all, the overlooked and neglected.

Discerning and Deciding

The process of discernment necessitates pastoral accompaniment grounded in prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit. Participants acknowledge that we do not always want to listen to the Holy Spirit but that the Spirit can be found working anywhere and through anyone. There is a desire for unity and inclusivity among and within communities, which welcomes the diversity of ministries, spiritual gifts, cultures, and experiences. “We need to create and foster an atmosphere of respect, dignity and trust so that the process of discernment is fruitful.”

Participants note the need for both personal and communal discernment: individuals listen to God’s call and respond to the invitation of relationship in their lives and, likewise, parishes and communities discern what is bearing fruit and what is not, as well as where the Spirit is guiding them. Communal discernment requires the full participation of all the baptized. Some participants point to the writings of Pope Francis and his summoning of this Synod as models of Spirit-led discernment. Many further call for guidance and formation in discernment.

Fruitful decision-making in the Church will occur when both pastoral leaders and the faithful acknowledge the gifts and prompting of the Holy Spirit in their lives as disciples of Jesus. Decisions by pastoral leaders, above all clergy, should reflect spiritual care for their people. In addition, some long for priests to be more “open, honest, vulnerable and relatable,” with greater emphasis on formation in and assessment of interpersonal skills.

A tension exists between those who defer to the clergy on all decisions and those who long for more consultation and collaboration. To overcome any sense of exclusion of the voice of the laity, many call for greater consideration of the laity in pastoral decision-making. There is a consistent request for consultation and transparency in decision-making in all areas of the life of the Church, including pastoral activities and finances. “People are eager to come together, to be a part of the consultative decision-making process for the betterment, but more importantly the future of the Church.”

Representation matters with respect to decision-making structures and processes in the Church, and the lack thereof discourages participation. Marginalized communities, including young people, need to be heard, accompanied, and included in communal discernment and decision-making that result in equitable access to space and resources. Some participants comment that there is insufficient transparency and diversity among those who make decisions at all levels of the Archdiocese, in particular membership in councils. Similarly, some question the process of selecting speakers for events and conferences.

While this Synod provides a unique opportunity for consultation and faith sharing, the process also offers a model by which the Church, both laity and clergy, can participate in ongoing dialogue. “An opportunity to voice our opinions, to learn how to be a participant, and to express ourselves without retaliation. We see that the members of the Church have some input, and Church leaders are hearing what topics are important to them.” Some participants request a listening process annually in the Archdiocese, as well as in parishes and communities to discern intentionally together how the Holy Spirit is speaking through the laity and clergy.

Growing in Synodality

The participants in the Synod feel a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunity to gather to pray and to reflect on the Word of God together, as well as to engage in sincere and respectful dialogue. “Journeying together doesn’t always mean seeing eye to eye on things. It means understanding our unity in Christ while loving others who don’t see things the same way we do.” Yet, many participants do not see regular opportunities for wider consultation in either the local or global Church. The experience of Synod offers a fresh way of engagement within the Church characterized by deep communion with God and one another, along with wider participation in the life of the Church. The Synod not only highlights pastoral needs in the local Church, but also provides new insights on our participation in the mission of Jesus in the world.

The Synod proposes that a spirit of dialogue and discernment infuses communication at all levels of the Church with an intention of listening to all voices, especially those who feel excluded. A consistent theme from the Synod is the need to meet people where they are and accompany them in faith, hope, and love. Above all, participants desire the Church to evangelize young people and form them for leadership in Church and society. Likewise, the Church can offer experiences of authentic community for which people of all ages long. Ongoing experiences of prayer and dialogue can strengthen Christian community and model a way forward in a culture in which mere disagreement breeds division. This spirit of synodality should imbue assemblies of the Church, such as parish pastoral and finance council meetings. To this end, formation in mission and synodality should be offered regularly to council members, as well as to parish leaders and ministers.

Synod participants yearn for parishes to become welcoming communities for all people, continually assessing who is not journeying with them and reaching out. When people feel welcomed by the Church, they will be open to hearing and embracing the Gospel. Similarly, when people feel a sense of belonging, they will voice their concerns and dreams openly and with charity, including to clergy and pastoral leaders. Such participation can build a culture of co-responsibility for the life of the Church in which consultation and collaboration become the norm for decision-making processes.

Growing together in our journey of faith requires an ever-deepening knowledge and understanding of the mystery of Jesus Christ and the teachings of our Catholic faith. The Synod reveals the consistent desire for solid catechesis that raises up missionary disciples, inspiring and beautiful liturgy, and a commitment to evangelization and service in the world. Participants long for compelling homilies that connect the Word of God with life.

The Synod process has enlivened the Church in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, again summoning us to our mission to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed, to support Catholic families, to serve the poor and suffering, and to reach out to those on the peripheries. If we allow the Holy Spirit to transform us and guide our steps as we walk forward, we will become “partners in the mission of Jesus,” impelled by the love of God and his people.