

Synod: Final Report Sacred Heart Academy

The Synod of the Roman Catholic Church called for by Pope Francis in which Sacred Heart Academy (of Hempstead, New York) participated, took place in our school during the season of Lent in 2022. The process we used was deeply spiritual and prayerful in nature.

We began the Synod formally with a Mass on Ash Wednesday in which a portion of the homily of Father James Wood was devoted to it. In addition, two student facilitators spoke of their enthusiasm for what we were about to undertake.

The sessions took place within our Theology classes. After introducing the students to what a synod was and providing a little bit of history behind them, we began our discussions. Our Lenten Theme of being on a “Journey Together” was emphasized.

All sessions began with appropriate scripture readings, an invocation of the Holy Spirit to guide us, and a period of silent meditation on the questions to be pondered.

Students then broke up into groups with a facilitator, who was to ask the questions and move along the discussion. A scribe was then appointed to record and summarize their responses. This process was used because we wanted to make sure all voices in the student body had the opportunity to be heard, as Pope Francis has expressed.

The results revealed a great love and appreciation for the Church but also some deep concerns, as well as a vision for what the Church could be. These will be summarized in the body of our report.

Love and Appreciation for the Catholic Church

Many of the student comments revealed a love, respect, and appreciation for the work of the Church. A common theme among the participants was that the church was a place where they could come together in a “loving and supportive community to pray and become closer to God.” The sense of community was expressed several times as a joyful aspect of the Church. It is “a community that unites us through our spirituality,” “You never feel alone, and always feel like someone has your back,” “Everyone gathers together in a loving community to celebrate the Eucharist, sometimes supportive of one another.” Others expressed appreciation for the Church as “a sense of community grounded in our faith in God,” “A place that can uplift your spirit,” “A place where I can feel free and feel loved,” and “a quiet place where people can gather together to meet God.” “What fills me with joy about the Catholic Church is the feeling of being closer to God in a holy setting where everyone is coming together to share their love and passion for the church.”

Many expressed joy and appreciation for the fact that the Church is always there for them, while others went further saying, “The church has supported me through very hard times throughout my life.” Still another shared, “It has been with me as I changed from public schools, it has been with me during hard times when we lost family members, and when we have needed a place to feel welcome.” Again, “The church has been with me in my times of need and hardship.” Joy was expressed “Because the whole community comes together to help with your struggles.” It is “a place where you can go to get through a struggle.” “It has offered comfort through the bad and good times, it has given me a second chance.” “The Church has taught me who I am today because it brings a sense of comfort in hard times.”

These statements from the students evoke the words of the Prophet Isaiah, “Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.” (Isaiah 40:1)

Others were thankful for the guidance of the Church and its strong beliefs when they had to make tough decisions. Some expressed an appreciation for the “objective truth” as a guiding force.

Many students spoke about the importance of praying as a church community. Among the comments, “If we use prayer and church celebration the way God meant it to be, as a unifying practice, it can be easy to direct our journey together. The celebration of the Mass can bring us closer together and live out the Gospel of God.” Again, “Prayer helps guide us, it can bring us closer together and closer to God,” “Prayer connects the members of the Church together and connects us with God. Having the support of Prayer is influential to many people and gives them assurance in their faith.” It “unifies us as a community, uniting us and making us whole by worshiping the Lord with congregational singing.” “The prayer can bring us together as a community and the liturgy can help us navigate and better our relationship with God.” It creates “a family brought together under God”

Still others expressed appreciation for the Sacraments. “Baptism brings new life into our church to help our mission.” A strong sense of “The Eucharist, sharing a meal with our brothers and sisters” as a Christ centered community was expressed. “We share the same communion, gather in the same place, say the same responses, share the same faith.” Another sacrament mentioned several times was The Sacrament of Reconciliation. “We can always go to reconciliation” was related by a participant. The Church has “been with me when I need sacraments like reconciliation for my sins.” You can witness the importance of this sacrament at our school during Lent when an overwhelming number of our students participate during our two days of Reconciliation.

There was also an appreciation for the work of the church among the poor and oppressed communities. An important sign is “caring for those who are oppressed, following in the footsteps of Jesus, lifting up the oppressed and seeing everyone as equals in one community.” It is “A community based on inclusive love.” Catholic social teaching, part of our school curriculum, is seen by some as the “Jewel of the Church.”

One participant wished to share with “Pope Francis, how grateful we are for him and his care for the Catholic Church community. We would also ask him how we could live a more God oriented life and how we can spread the word of God more efficiently.” Another student wished to thank Pope Francis for his inspiration by sharing, “I want to travel overseas (Haiti, Africa, and other places) to help people who are poor and need care and nourishment. In my life it is one of my biggest goals to be able to help the people in the poorer countries, because even the littlest help can make someone's world a better place. Basically I would like to thank him (Pope Francis) for being a great influence in my life.”

When summarizing the thoughts of her students on the synod, one teacher wrote, “There are a vast number of things that fill people with joy from the church. Within the church, the community that is formed has provided people with joy and comfort because they know that they will always support them. There are many activities that the church community does that fills people with joy such as the fact that everyone, or almost everyone, comes together on Sundays to pray to God and celebrate God, the meals shared between Church members, and the acceptance and love that the entire church community provides. Many people find joy in celebrating the Holy Trinity through song and the music as a community. The music of the Church helps to provide people with a sense of relief and happiness. When church-goers see everyone coming together as a community it makes them feel a great amount of joy because it shows how unifying God is. The Church, to many, is a place where one can let go of the stresses of their everyday life and just feel God being with them. This provides joy and relief to many. Many find joy in receiving the Eucharist, because receiving it brings people closer to God, which fills them with happiness because they feel God's love and presence. One may also find appreciation within the church because of the ornate decorations especially during Liturgical seasons.”

An appreciation for the Synod process itself was also shared by several students. “This is the first time in my life that the church has displayed an opportunity for us to voice our concerns and listen to the people.” Another student commented, “I have had a very positive experience with the synod. As a group facilitator, I feel like I can not only live my school mission of

inclusive love but that I, even at such a young age, can have a say in the church. The synod has helped me grow in my faith as well, with a greater appreciation of how the church runs and values the clergy, I have found it easier to truly give my whole heart to God. The synod has not only impacted me spiritually but socially as well. I value hearing my peer's opinions and their explanation as to why they believe such. The intriguing questions led to great, in-depth conversations about reforms that we someday might be able to lead.”

Many also expressed an appreciation for the inclusive nature of the Church as revealed in the teaching of Jesus. One of the sources of the greatest concern however, were the times when this inclusive nature was not being realized. One could easily say that the word “inclusive,” in one of these connotations, was the word most often mentioned by the students.

Concerns About the Church

While there was a great deal of love and appreciation for the work of the Church, there were also major areas of concern. Much of that stemmed from the idea of a Church community journeying together where some people were seen as more important while others were treated in a way that excluded them from important positions, or even the sacraments. “The Church can live out the Gospel more fully by not excluding people that do not fit the stereo-types and by listening to the people’s needs.” “It can sometimes be unintentionally ignorant of specific groups of individuals, focusing on a selected few.” Perhaps, in this regard, it would be helpful to consider St. Paul’s vision of “ekklesia,” the Body of Christ, where one could not say to the other, “I do not need you.” (cf. 1 Corinthians 12)

Some of the student comments highlight these concerns:

- “The lack of inclusivity in many churches today.”
- “Sometimes not everyone is accepted and bias plays a role in the church.”
- “The selective compassion in the church is concerning. Why does the church choose certain groups of people to help, but ignores minorities?”

- “They are unaccepting of a lot of different types of people even though God teaches us to love everyone and that we are all his children no matter who we are.”
- “It concerns me that they haven’t yet adapted to the 21st century and changed to be more inclusive to all people.”

Women were mentioned most often as being among those left behind. Women have been excluded from many leadership positions within the Church hierarchy (our student synod was completed before the reform of the Curia by Pope Francis), and it was especially hurtful for some to be excluded from the ministerial priesthood. Among the student comments that expressed this disappointment:

- “I need the church to be more inclusive for women, for example, allowing women to be priests. This will help to grow our relationship with Jesus.”
- “Women aren’t especially excluded from the church but they can be excluded from the hierarchy of the church.”
- “Women can’t be priests or deacons; this is an outdated tradition.”
- “Women can’t be priests, they can’t be a bigger part of the church like men are.”
- “The Church should be more inclusive of women and accept them as priests.”
- “Women are left out of the worshiping community because they are ineligible to be priests.”
- “One student asked Pope Francis, “Do you think there will be a woman pope or women priests in the future?”
- “Why can’t Pope Francis appoint women Cardinals?”
- “There’s no reason women cannot be deacons.”

In his Apostolic Letter, *Ordination Sacerdotalis*, Pope John Paul II stated that the Church had “no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women,” the question must be asked, “Does God?” If the Holy Spirit has been asked to guide us during the Synod process, is it being revealed to us that women can hold such a role? When Jesus sent forth Mary Magdalene to announce to the apostles the greatest news of our history,

that he rose from the dead, did he open up such a role to women? It is important to ponder these questions in our journey together as a faith filled community.

Another group that is mentioned often as being excluded from the Church are members of the LGBTQ community. Students said,

- “Something that concerns us about the Catholic Church is the lack of inclusivity regarding certain groups. Disabled people and the LGBTQIA+ community are sometimes seen as rebelling against God. Everyone can be a child of God. God will love us regardless of our disability and choices. The Church should not be so judgmental.”
- “LGBTQIA+: “they’re looked down upon, oppressed, looked at as sinners, can’t be married in the church.”
- Some churches interpret the bible literally and exclude members of the LGBTQIA+ Community.”
- “Sexuality (LGBTQIA+)-For example, if they are not allowed to get married in the Church, they will feel excluded.”

The young, members of minority groups, and others were also among those who felt left behind. Among the comments of the students:

- “I don’t feel that my voice is heard because I am a girl and a child waiting to be heard. I feel like decision makers listen to adults because of wisdom, but we are the youth. They sense we are naive but we are the future of this community.”
- “The young are our future so they need to be listened to.”
- “Lower Class members are not seen as important.”
- “Immigrants or people who don’t understand English, and can’t interpret the bible.”
- “People of color in some churches.”
- “Racism is a problem within some churches. They discriminate against people and keep them from loving and being close to God.”
- “The impoverished and less fortunate, immigrants, marginalized groups, sex workers and criminals.”

Another important area of concern regarding the Church was the lingering tarnish of the abuse scandals where many students expressed a fear about safety, and an unwillingness to trust members of the clergy. Students expressed concern regarding:

- "Clergymen sexually molesting and emotionally abusing minors in the church and rarely facing punishment/excommunication by the Catholic Church."
- "Clergy being tried in their own courts as if they are above everyone else."
- "The Church not taking accountability and hiding rape cases. Some Church officials are fake and aren't as "holy" as they claim to be. To more fully "live the Gospel", we should have people who everyone can trust with their safety."
- "The Priests are suspicious sometimes (sexual abuse scandals)."
- "The scandals that go on, priest sexual scandals, are a major concern to us."
- "Hypocrisy, sexual abuse, the people in power who are abusing it, these are all disturbing."
- "The way some of the priests act; Sexual abuse scandals."

Some of the other concerns included a perception that corruption is keeping the church from being Christ-like:

- "What concerns me about the church is how corrupt it has become due to society and the people involved with the church. The church is not as inclusive and welcoming as it used to be."
- "At some times, we feel the church has been unsupportive and greedy."
- "Clergy turning a blind eye to real corruption in the church."
- "The church is asking for money all the time while not caring if we are feeling like we are really wanted at church."
- "I would suggest to the Pope that money donated to the church should not be spent on extravagant churches, but to more important causes."

Other concerns:

- “Choosing to support certain presidential candidates and political figures just because of their stance on abortion without taking into account any of their other beliefs.”
- “All too often judgment is stressed rather than mercy. I feel Jesus was about mercy.”
- “It concerns me that the Catholic Church still holds back with certain things because of covid.”
- “The big institution is not really supporting Catholic schools that are under attended. The money goes to the building of huge churches and not to the people and the programs needed to support the future of the church, the kids.”
- “It concerns me that the church is dying out and less and less people are going. It concerns me that many people don't even go to Church anymore and they don't wear nice clothes when they attend.”

A final area of concern but one that was expressed frequently was that “The mass is “boring.” Among the many statements in this regard, one student said, ““The mass is boring and is a turn off to church attendance.” Some of the students shared that the language used didn’t conform to the modern English language too well. Although they were stated in a slightly different context, the recent words of Pope Francis to the Pontifical Liturgical Institute seem to address these concerns when he says, "I would like to underline the danger, the temptation of *liturgical formalism*: going after forms, formalities rather than reality, as we see today in those movements that try to go backwards and deny Vatican Council II itself." "In this way, the celebration is recitation, it is something without life, without joy." (National Catholic Reporter- “Pope Francis highlights danger of staid liturgies that 'deny Vatican Council II'” May 11, 2022)

On a school trip to Costa Rica, students experienced a Procession on Good Friday evening and Easter Sunday Mass. Many students

expressed joy at being engaged in the Mass. Students asked why our churches back home don't do processions and/or mass in the same way. Students loved the cultural aspect of mass and the engaging energy.

Visions of What the Church Could Become

Because of their love and appreciation for the Church, and despite their concerns, there was the hope or vision among the students for a better Catholic church on the horizon that would "Live as Jesus did."

- "My vision of the church is one where unity, love, and reconciliation prevail, and that it can be a place for everyone to feel accepted, no matter their background or past."
- "I hope it can be a community where everyone can feel equally welcome and listened to, regardless of race, gender, or sexuality."
- "I envision a church that is inclusive, where we realize that Jesus loved all regardless of any other factors."
- "My hope is for a church where everyone can participate."
- "I envision a church that is more inclusive because Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor."
- "I believe that if we all come together as Christians to make the church a more inclusive and welcoming environment we can go back to the way the church used to be."
- "By emphasizing Catholic social teaching in homilies, and the moral aspects of modern problems such as racism and injustice, we can begin to live as a more inclusive church."
- "We dream and hope that the church can be a sanctuary or safe place for the world. In order for this wish to come to fruition, the church needs to be a more inclusive and welcoming community that values uplifting its members over the enforcement of a doctrine."
- "Living by God's "rules" to the best of our ability."

The major concern about the lack of inclusion in the church and the feeling that women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and others are

excluded was met with a hope that this would change and that our journey together as a faith community would be one that would truly be inclusive.

- “We hope the church can be a place where everyone feels comfortable, a place where people can go to find peace in the midst of their chaotic lives, and a place where we can advocate for equality. We dream it can be a welcoming place for all people to come together and pray, worship, and grow in their faith and relationship with God. We hope it can be more holy and inclusive of all kinds of people, even individuals of other religions and not exclusive because then it becomes an unsafe, selective, and uninviting environment. God teaches us to love all and it's not right for the church to exclude people who don't meet their standards while they will always be God's children. It can be a place where everyone can feel comfortable going to, a place where everyone can feel loved and welcome, and a place people feel more comfortable to turn to without judgment. Finally, we dream it to be a place where women can be more integrated into the church.”
- “Be more inclusive, especially of women, and offer women more roles in the church.”
- “The Church can live the Gospel more fully by not discriminating
- We believe that the church should be more inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community and that women should have equal rights as men.”
- “Be welcoming to all people and be there as a place to turn to in times of need.”
- “The church can more fully “live the Gospel” by loving everyone and celebrating achievements. They can be more welcoming and include all people so they don't feel left out by accepting everyone as children of God. They could also be more inviting and allow adolescents to have a more active role in the church. The Church can more fully live the Gospel by inviting all people to celebrate the Sacraments, Mass and religious holidays, instead of excluding some people. They can

take inspiration from Jesus' work with marginalized communities, and embracing the meaning of love thy neighbor by being kind to all."

- "I believe that the church needs to be a place where I am accepted for who I am, with my hopes, dreams, and interests."
- "I dream that one day the church can be an inclusive place for people all over the world and that it keeps spreading."
- "By making the church more inclusive we would make the Catholic community stronger."
- "I see a future with a greater appreciation for diversity that would help us to grow in our relationship with Jesus."
- "One student inquired what Pope Francis envisioned for the future of the Church."

On the need to create a "safe space" within the Church, students stated:

- "It should be a place where adults and children can feel safe."
- "I dream that "church" can be a place that I am comfortable enough to go into everyday and be able to worship and pray as I want to."

The need to modernize was another important theme.

- "The Church can fully live the Gospel by following God and forming communities among friends to spread God's word through social media, everyday conversations, praying to God in your own comfortable space, and treating everyone with love, forgiveness, and unity. Christianity is all about being one and I hope that one day the Church will evolve back to what it used to be especially for younger generations coming in."
- "We also believe that the church should offer more opportunities for the community to participate."
- "We need it to be supportive and collaborative with our decisions and show that we love all people."
- "The Church needs to become less institutionalized, more modern, and focus more on love than judging others."

- “Change with the times, continue to grow.”
- “Accept new beliefs since the world is changing.”
- “Following Jesus’s example.”
- “There should be more ways for the church to reach modern audiences and progress with time, while growing with the general population. This is key for building a strong church community.”
- “Make the homilies more relatable and interactive, shorter, more lively, including other languages, accommodating to other languages, adding sign language, making it more inclusive.”
- “Church needs to be more exciting and needs to be something that everyone looks forward to at the start of their week.
- “Make the homilies more relatable to lay people.”
- “Make it easier to understand, modernize it, modernize the messages.”
- “By making the Homily more interesting, it can be less boring.”
- “If Mass was like the service in the Disney movie, “Let it Shine,” everyone would go.”
- “Do more kid friendly activities after church.”
- “Create more Church community events that bring people together.”
- “Sharing a meal after Mass makes it more about becoming friends with people.”

For people who are excluded from receiving the Eucharist:

- “The Church can give a special blessing to those who choose or are not able to receive the Eucharist by bringing them up and offering a special blessing.”
- “For those that do not receive communion, they can still be invited up to the altar, to receive a blessing from the Priest. They will still be able to be included during the ceremony of the Eucharist.”

Conclusion

The appreciation for the work of the Church and the community that gathers in the name of Jesus Christ is a strong point that has come out of the student responses to our “Journey Together.” This appreciation demonstrates the value of the Church as a “Pearl of great price,” but does not mask that there are important aspects of it that could be strengthened, particularly with respect to how the inclusive nature of Jesus’ teaching is not being lived out in the reality of Church life. So much more can be done to include women, members of the LGBTQ community, people from various racial groups, immigrants, the poor and the young. While students expressed a love for the sacramental nature of the Church, there was a strong call for a Liturgy that would appeal to the young and to a variety of people. Citing the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, the American Bishops declared in their landmark Pastoral Letter of 1979, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, “The Church must ‘respect and foster the spiritual . . . gifts of the various races and peoples’ and encourage the incorporation of these gifts into the liturgy.”

Additionally, the sexual abuse scandal has tarnished the Church in very deep ways. Much more needs to be done to heal the damage of this scandal. Transparency would be a good starting point.

We are all thankful to Pope Francis for calling this Synod and allowing us to journey together as a people of God. In one voice we say, “May God Bless you.”