

Synod Report from Women In God's Spirit, "WINGS", of St. Theresa Oakland, CA.



We are a group of women who meet weekly from October through May. We have been meeting for 18 years. We are comprised of predominantly lay women though we have had some Religious with us at times. We have several retired Lay Ecclesial ministers, Spiritual Directors, therapists, medical doctors, lawyers, PhD theologians, women with MA's in Theology and MDiv's, many other PhD's and teachers among our membership. We are married, divorced, single, widowed. We are mothers, wives, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, daughters, and friends. And we are passionate about our faith.

Our group held a 2 hour listening session with 44 women on March 9, 2022. We asked our scribes to make note of the women's more affective moods and responses. Here are some of the adjectives noted by the 9 different scribes: appreciative, thoughtful, at times hesitant, emphatic, frustrated, sincere, sad, joyful, tender, probing, disappointed, angry, grieving, very real and very deep. What follows is our report of that session.

We heard many words of thanks and praise for Pope Francis and his ministry for us since 2013. We are so very grateful for this Synod and the inclusion of The People of God. We would like to begin our report with a little note to the Holy Father, the content of this note comes from the comments in the listening session.

Dear Pope Francis,

Thank you for your wise gift of listening and calling all of us to listen to each other. You were mentioned many, many times as one of the joys by the women of our group. Over and over again we heard words like, "I am so grateful for his leadership!" Most of the women shared their dream for the church (our second question) in a particular vision – she is sitting with **you** and pouring out her heart in her longing for what the Church might be. "It's because we have all experienced his vision and his prophetic voice. He models a kind of alternative Church we all long for: More accountable to the poor! He has spoken out against racism and named the first African American Cardinal, Wilton Gregory. He chides American Bishops (ones we are so frustrated with) but lauds Bishop Seitz for his work with immigrants. Thank you Pope Francis!" "Pope Francis we thank you for your outreach to the LGBTQ community... We thank you for your boldness, your ability to listen to the Holy Spirit and bring change... You are the Pope for our time. Be brave and don't give up."

You will hear in this report from 44 women in the United States who are life-long, faith-filled, super-active Catholic Women, our prayerful and carefully discerned convictions. We send them with our love and ongoing prayers for you.

Blessings, Peace and much Love,
The Women of WINGS (Oakland, California)

We asked the women two Questions; each question is asked in 3 different ways so that each woman could “get at” the question in language which worked best for her personality.

#1. We’ve all had joys and sorrows in journeying with the Church, so, in your lived experience...

- A. What have been YOUR joys? What have been YOUR sorrows?
- B. How has your heart been filled by the Church and/or how has your heart been broken?
What’s your story?
- C. What has been positive and nurturing? What draws you in? What hinders your engaging with the Church or what pushes you away?

#2. Based on what you have said and heard in Question #1....

- A. How might the Holy Spirit be prompting us to dream of a better future for the Church?
- B. If you could have a “sit down” with Pope Francis, what would you say to him? What must the church do or be if it is to respond to today’s world with all its challenges or to your own concerns?
- C. What steps would you suggest the church should take, steps you are willing to take yourself, in order to more fully walk with one another, in the light and mission of the Gospel.

Question #1- part 1 What did we hear of how the Church has nurtured and brought joy?

One of the greatest gifts reflected on is the gift of community experienced in this particular WINGS group but also in other small faith communities. Feeling known, accepted, and loved is extremely nurturing in these small faith sharing communities. “The speakers and discussions we have are much better than most sermons I hear at mass.” Sharing our stories and our lives with each other. Learning from theologians, pastoral ministers, and prophetic voices in our WINGS sessions, but also on our own. Also mentioned was the gift of being able to share questions and frustrations with the Church. “We are asking questions, finding answers and continuing to seek God’s Truth together. My faith community shares in this search, so I feel less alone and flailing.” Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM was mentioned about 10 times as a source of great sustenance and hope.

The liturgical life of our church often brings great joy and solace. The message that death doesn’t have the last word, the Triduum and Easter Vigil embracing the whole of our humanity. The experience of singing in the choir, of preparing and proclaiming the Word as a lector, and serving as a Eucharistic minister bring great joy.

When homilies touch our hearts and expand our understanding it is great, though all too rare. We value the prophetic teaching of Social Justice in the church and organized ways to practice social justice.

Liturgical and spiritual music, art and good liturgy bring great joy to many women! These are women who are very moved by the beauty of our faith. This report will convey much pain and sadness for where our church is today, but please know, there was great joy expressed for the beauty and goodness of our faith. “Our liturgies, done well, can be so thrilling – these rituals are nourishing for me.” “Our rituals remind me of my humanity and my desire to get close to the Divine.” These are women of deep faith whose entire lives for the most part have been rooted in the Catholic Church. Many have had priests and religious in their families. They felt great joy for Vatican II and the more accessible experience of the liturgy in the vernacular and the scriptures. One of our women commented that with the theology of Vat. II, “It was the first time I realized that God loved me!”

Several of the women mentioned wonderful pastoral priests and religious who were personally and pastorally connected to their families and who made a huge impact on their lives, who helped them through very difficult life experiences. “I loved the nuns – their goal was to raise engaged women!” One of our women had a personal relationship with Sr. Thea Bowman, and shared of her great joy to have walked on this journey with so many holy men and women with prophetic vision, who speak truth to power.

Some mentioned the way in which wonderful priests invited them to greater ministerial roles, and called forth their gifts to be used for the community. Women cited examples of being called to lead RCIA, to preach on various occasions, to take significant leadership roles in their parish. They often spoke of how when that priest left and another less pastoral priest came, all was lost. After leaving one parish because the priest complained about crying babies, one woman joined another parish where the priest said “crying babies are part of our church!”

The Church’s emphasis on the love of God was a major theme we heard. “Love is the bottom line. My joy is in focusing on God and on Jesus’ teaching.” Focusing on the Works of Mercy and struggle for justice and peace in the world.

Many spoke of their joy for the role of women who are active in ministry today and the great organizational skills of women and the beautiful example of women in ministry who are so committed to living their faith, who also, by the way, are incredible wives and mothers and grandmothers. And some of these very women just mentioned, spoke of their joy in doing ministry and bringing their gifts of leadership to the Church.

Some women spoke of having worked with RCIA and the joy of journeying with people who are coming to deeper faith – “It fed my soul!” A couple women had come through the RCIA and some had spouses who had come through RCIA. They felt very nurtured through this process. Some spoke of the love for the universality of the Church and of the Catholic (universal) nature of the church. “There is room for all.” “Wherever in the world I go, there is a Catholic Church.” We heard of the joy and intimacy of “family church” when we could have liturgies in the home. Her brothers were priests and she knew them as human and compassionate. She added, “I want all people of the church to feel this intimacy.” Several mentioned their joy of the sacraments, even mentioning their First Communion (70 years ago).

Many spoke of the joy and nurturance from their spiritual reading and retreats: Ignatian Exercises, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, Thomas Merton, Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB, inter-faith reading and sharing, Cursillo 4th day groups, and Spiritual Directors.

And several women spoke of the greatest gift they could possibly have which is their faith itself and God’s sustenance through the very difficult times life brings us all. We heard great joy that the Holy Spirit is working in the Church! One of the single women in our session shared that

even with all the “bad” of the Church, she’d never thought to leave because “My congregation is my joy, my place to call home. The Church is my community, my tribe.”

Question #1- Part 2 - After our question 1- part 1 we asked our participants to share what have been their sorrows in the journey, how has their heart been broken by the Church, what hindered their engagement or pushed them away. What follows is a combined narrative of the 44 women.

The Church:

“The Church has lost its way and focus, has become too big, stodgy, and hard to change. It’s obsolete. The Church is missing the point: it should be about love but instead, is caught up in rules and judgment.” There should be the opportunity to hear all voices. Outreach to others is missing, which misses the message of Jesus toward service and acceptance.

The Church is not living in current reality. All assumptions need to be reassessed and brought into modern times. There is resistance to changes in liturgies and rituals that have become flat, as if the Holy Spirit is not alive and thriving. The Church needs to change, quickly.

Church doctrine does not come from the core teaching of the Gospel – *to live in love*. For example, the Church often does not recognize the sacredness and dignity of God’s whole creation, including care for the environment, respecting the dignity of all humans, encouraging full participation of all regardless of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, etc. “This creates so much pain and alienation that I weep for those suffering.”

The Church today is divided and promotes division and hatred. This is in practice and in doctrine that does not represent God’s love and truth. Rather, it exploits, discourages, demonstrates favoritism and hostility, and diminishes the value of each person.

The concern that came up the most is related to the role of women in the Church—the lack of appreciation for the gifts of women, the feeling of women of being dismissed because of their gender, the lack of women in leadership positions in the Church, and the inability of women to answer the call to ordained ministry. (15 responses) One participant reported that recent bishops took away the opportunity to preach at Mass, which had allowed her to share her faith with others. Rules get in the way of being pastoral and allowing her to live out her call to ordained ministry. Not being allowed to use her gifts is heartbreaking. Another participant mentioned her pain at the excommunication of a Roman Catholic Women Priest friend.

The Church’s lack of accountability for the sex abuse scandal and subsequent cover-up by bishops has caused heartbreak for many participants. (13 responses) Two participants reported that they stopped going to church because of it. One participant is heartbroken that her husband has decided to leave the church because of the abuse scandal and lack of women’s leadership. She now worships with him at the Episcopal Church as well as the Catholic Church.

The Church is not addressing youth and their concerns. Many teens and young adults do not feel welcome and are not connected to the Church. (8 responses) Most feel heartbreak that children and grandchildren are no longer part of the Church. One participant said “It saddens me that my children (educated K-12 in Catholic schools) have fallen away from their faith. They see the Church as antiquated, irrelevant, and unnecessary.” Women also commented that these children who have left the Church are deeply moral, spiritually mature, kind, compassionate and active for the common good of humanity. The Church’s position about sexuality and the

acceptance of people in the LGBTQ community needs to be updated. (8 responses) It is a major reason for keeping our young people away. If not so themselves, they have many friends who are LGBTQ and they are offended and horrified by the Church's official stance. One participant shared she has a gay grandson who does not feel welcome in the Church.

Many talked about the position of the Church on divorce and remarriage, and the lack of support for individuals going through divorce. (8 responses) One participant reported that her divorced friends no longer feel welcome and are staying away from mass, communion, and confession.

The Church creates barriers to entry, remaining, and re-entry. It's hard for a person to enter when they don't see themselves represented. Representation shows inclusivity.

One participant said the Church needs to use the latest scientific, sociological and psychosexual information to broaden understanding and teaching on birth control, abortion, and assisted reproduction/embryo adoption.

Participants also called for more transparency of the Vatican in relation to doctrines and financial stewardship, and were saddened by the history of the Church during the Holocaust; they mentioned the rejection of dissenting voices throughout history, such as Galileo, Hans Kung, Karl Rahner, Charles Curran, and Matthew Fox. Several participants were disappointed that racial equity and segregation were not discussed more in the Church.

One participant reported that she would like to see more celebration of Mary who is the mother of the Church. There should be more Rosary groups, more acknowledgment by priests. It took a long time to get a statue of Mary in our Church. God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, our Savior. Why not celebrate her more?

Several participants reported that ministries have been discontinued because of COVID.

Priests:

Many priests are positive and welcoming and have great faith, and the loss of those priests was difficult for parishioners. However, some priests are not welcoming, are too rigid and lack compassion, and seem unwilling to listen to thoughts or concerns.

Several participants reported that they do not feel valued by priests or staff and they are not being called to serve. They feel isolated and do not feel a personal connection to the Church even though they participate on committees. The scourge of clericalism was mentioned by several participants. (4 responses). The homilies by our priests often don't feel prepared or relatable and are quite boring.

Clergy are dominated by Rules, Power, Money. They are sometimes too busy trying to court donors and not offend donors that they forget the bigger picture. This often prevents growth and evangelization and renewal in our churches. People leave because they are not shepherded.

Young priests from developing countries are very politically and theologically conservative and don't understand the culture in the United States. There is inadequate seminary and ongoing formation for priests especially in the areas of psychology, sociology and other life sciences.

Bishops:

A number of participants mentioned that most US bishops seem out of touch, removed from their flock, and have little awareness of lived human experience. (8 responses). The politicization of Communion was a concern for several participants. (4 responses) One woman decided not to take Communion anymore because of Bishops shaming President Biden. One participant reported that it feels like even the Pope, who is aligned with so many of our values, sometimes shrinks in the face of opposition. Several people reported that our local Bay Area

bishops do not seem pastoral and do not seem to put people and their needs first. (4 responses)
One woman shared that after her daughter's confirmation when people were greeting the bishop, she extended her hand to Bishop Cordileone, and he withdrew his hand. It left her stunned, hurt, and embarrassed. It was 14 years ago and she still thinks about it with great pain.

Our current local bishop, Michael Barber, "has a fear of alienating the dominant powers," is timid and unwilling to act, shows up for photo-ops but has no prophetic vision; for instance, the lack of funding to support any of the 14 pastoral ethnic and cultural communities in the Bishop's Appeal. This is an "enormous sorrow". Other concerns are that the current bishop fired a beloved pastor which caused many people to leave the parish. He refused to let confirmation candidates do social justice work in Mexico in a tried and true very safe day-long house build, and would not meet with the kids and the leaders to talk about it, which resulted in fewer teens and young adults in our parish remaining after confirmation.

Question #2 Our Dreams of What The Church Can Be

The women in our session were full of vision for our Church. What follows are the individual comments we heard for our Dream melded together in a narrative of hope:

"One True Church" means to me a much bigger and more inclusive Church with open arms, open hearts, open ears.... I am dreaming of a church always in Synod and prayer, leading us once again to evangelize the great grace and gift of the Eucharist. The beauty of the Eucharist is the center of our dreaming.

The Church provides structure in tough times in and through community. At the center of the congregation and community is our joy. The Church is all of us. The Church shall be a place we call home. The Church shall be the joy of mass, with the liturgy coming from the people. The liturgy will be our work.

I dream that Jesus would recognize us as the kind of people that also challenge legalism, and that we invite and embrace everyone, especially those who are unloved. We need to not just tolerate but celebrate people who are different from us. We should all be full of loving kindness. The Church should be about love; not caught up in rules and judgements. *"The bottom line should be: Is it love? Is it loving? Is it **of** love?"* When we look at our decisions, that should be the only criterion.

I dream of a more humble church where every day we "decrease" so that Christ may "increase". I dream of shepherds that listen and see the Spirit moving in their flock and see the gifts of the parish community...of a church where our bishops are better pastors and sit and meet with their flock. There should be an open door and a welcome mat. Clergy, including bishops, cardinals and the Pope would continue to listen to their flock and sit with them and invite them into all that is the Church.

In my dream, I would sit down with Pope Francis, look him in the eye, hold his hands, and say "Jesus is calling me to be a Deacon. What should I do?" I think the church does need to take steps now. I see the church needing a "re-do", but this is a beginning. Synodality and prayer to see how we can once again evangelize the great grace and gift of the Eucharist.

The Church needs to call women and commission them as Jesus commissioned Mary Magdalene to be Apostles to the Apostles. Women can infuse a new spirit of compassion and tenderness and once again call the church to pastor and hold and welcome all. The first person to

preach the resurrection was commissioned by Jesus and was a woman, but we don't let women preach at our Eucharistic liturgies. I dream we soon will.

I dream our Church would truly celebrate women's gifts. Women need to have more of a leadership role in the Church and in the pulpit. Women's voices are needed as nurturers. Their perspective in leadership roles need to be heard. I dream of a Church that allows women to have a greater voice without having to shout it. I dream of women active in all levels of church, and women who are willing to do Church differently. Maybe, we don't need women clerics, maybe we don't need any clerics, just all God's people doing God's work.

Small church communities are our future because many people need to be known, loved and held more. I dream of a church that reaches out to God's people especially those who are suffering, in great need and those who are marginalized. I dream that our Church would be guided by a moral imagination that thinks outside of the box and that is based on loving kindness. That's what Jesus offered – a moral imagination to challenge the rules and legalism of his faith at that time. I dream of the church as a community ... with small house churches, a vibrant welcoming parish, a diocese that is pastoral with doors wide open, a global universal holding of many.

I dream of a Church that holds and calls back our youth... of a church that is living in current reality. I dream the Catholic Church all over the world would mean a community of sharing, acceptance, of loving one another regardless of any distinctions. It would be open to diversity, supporting diverse multi-cultural communities. I dream our church would always invite others into community, welcome the stranger and newcomer.... Reach out to LGBTQ community. I dream we would get rid of the concept of "other."

To attract young people, the church must reach them where they are. We must listen to the youth; let's have more synodal sessions with them directly. We've got to serve the youth. We need youth-structured connections beyond Confirmation classes.

I dream of faith communities supporting marriages in creative ways, with more discussion and listening to young families. And also supporting our aging community especially when it is time to grieve, supporting families locally within their congregation. I don't see this anymore. In essence I dream of us journeying together in community. Seeking God's truth together. Walking together in this faith journey. I dream of us having more small faith sharing communities, together seeking answers but also embracing questions. Doing good works together, united in the call we've received from Jesus.

I dream the church would have a healthy recognition that a marriage might not work for a couple; so please just provide pastoral support, rather than judgement; invite people into the fold instead of not letting them receive the sacrament that heals them. The church needs to hold lovingly those who have been divorced. I dream the Church would at the very least bless all loving and committed relationships who seek the blessing of the Church.

We need to nurture connections with parish priests and staff. I dream of consistent pastoral leadership across churches and dioceses, and of more voice and influence in decisions of the parish from pastoral council and finance councils.

I dream that Liturgy will truly be the work of the people. As such there would be greater diversity in the way we worship honoring all cultures and age groups. I dream of participating in liturgies that are meaningful, beautiful and where I feel the Holy Spirit moving among us, more personalized liturgies. I dream of music that can bring the Spirit into mass in a profound way. Good music touches people. The people need to sing, so having a variety of music that speaks a

little to everyone. This is important especially to the young people. Young people are looking for music that is relevant to them.

Oh, how I dream of homilies that touch our hearts and expand our understanding...homilies that help us leave with wisdom to take into daily life...homilies from the lay people that can provide different perspective on faith that touches our daily lives. There should be the opportunity of hearing all of our voices and allowing someone other than a man who spent a few years in a seminary to be THE interpreter of scripture and how to live the Christian life. Homilies have got to be more relevant. I want more than a lesson on mortal sins especially in light of the abuses carried out by clergy.

I dream of more celebration of Mary and meditation on the rosary. I dream the Laity would be invited to take a much stronger role of leadership in the Church.

Our dream in regards to Sacraments:

Many want to enjoy journeying with their kids and their community of families as they are graced by the sacraments – Baptism, Holy Eucharist, Reconciliation and Confirmation.

I dream our Bishops would recognize that Holy Communion is holy, not a political tool; a nurturing part of church has been the grace and gift of Jesus in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is what I cling to. Many people remember their first Eucharist and the joy around it.

I dream our Church will listen to ALL who are called to Holy Orders, including women, and married people. I dream that Pope Francis would reverse what Pope John Paul II said, that we cannot even talk about the ordination of women, because of course people talk and share and dream about it. I dream that women would be ordained deacons NOW; then we can move on to what comes after that. I dream we eliminate the College of cardinals, ordain women deacons, priests, and bishops, limit the tenure of bishops and even the Pope. I dream that congregants should help in selecting their pastors and bishops.

I dream there would be enough clergy who could represent and come from our own community not necessarily from another part of the world. God IS calling women and men who are married to the priesthood, so clearly that is what our community needs. I also dream that priests would be trained in social skills, be kind and compassionate. The female half of the population and their gifts are needed to renew the church, a Church that remembers that women hold up half the sky.

Anointing of the Sick:

I dream the local church would walk with the aging and those grieving, providing support at a local level, and funding grief ministries in each parish.

Social justice:

The church community has an incredible desire to serve the poor. We dream of our church supporting this effort especially modeling it for our youth. Also, we need to be a united voice for social justice globally and speak louder, we need to be in communion with creation.

I dream the Church would create a vehicle for young women and men to serve 2 years in another city, state or country. Consider more programs like Jesuit Volunteer Corps, maybe a youth corps for young Catholic workers. This needs to have though broad and amazing advertising. Many love the beauty of the Eucharist and want to live out the Eucharist, focusing on the Works of Mercy. We need more opportunities for sending out witnesses of God's love. This would provide young people the gift of community, in which we all have different gifts, experiences, and voices. It would give more accountability to the poor. We need to distribute the loaves and the fishes equally, and our young people want to help.

I dream of a Church who boldly speaks out against racism... a church that

begins divesting some of the material treasures of the Vatican... that makes a priority of ending homelessness. I dream of a Church, clergy and laity, who live the Gospel radically.

I Dream of a church that makes the world safe for children, going beyond sexual abuse prevention, providing reconciliation, reparation, and accountability from and serious consequences for Bishops who have not protected their communities...they should suffer legal consequences. Abuse cases must be reported directly to the police. NO exceptions!!

I dream of blessings of human sexuality... of a Church knowledgeable of the latest scientific, sociological and psycho-sexual information to broaden understanding and teaching on the issues of birth control, abortion, assisted reproduction/embryo adoption , LGBTQ acceptance... the Church should learn about women's health. The Church I dream of would acknowledge that sexuality is not evil. Providing healthy discussions about sexuality in the Church and in the seminary; expanding to healthy teaching to youth as well. I dream of a Church that supports people's sexuality; has a healthy theology of sexuality, has open discussions regarding sexuality.

Demographics:

44 Participants

Age 35-50yrs: 1; 50-65yrs: 7; 65+: 36

Ethnicity: Chinese: 1 or 2%; Filipina: 1or 2%; Latinx: 3 or 7%; African American:3 or 7%;

Caucasian: 36 or 82%