



SUMMARY

Visitation Parish Contribution to the Synod on Synodality

On March 26 (in person) and March 28, 2022 (online), Visitation parishioners answered the call of Pope Francis to participate in the international Synod on Synodality. Altogether, 160 persons met in 25 groups to pray, reflect, and discuss the set of eight questions below. The goal of these gatherings was listening and speaking from the heart about our hopes and aspirations for the Church.

Our Synod discussions converged on several themes. One prominent theme across all 25 groups was a hope that the Church be seen as inclusive and welcoming, beckoning new members to the Church and reconciling with those whom we want to return. Locally, our parish was valued for many reasons: an open-hearted spirit, liturgies that are beautiful and meaningful, and plentiful opportunities for involvement to which parish members bring abundant gifts. At the same time, there is more to do: engage younger adults in the life of the Church, welcome those who may feel excluded for their way of life, and find ways for the parish and school to mesh better. People take joy in our liturgies for many reasons. They value, as well, opportunities to discuss and reflect on faith. Viewing Catholicism in general, polarization appears to be rising across the Church at all levels. Participants had regret that the Church is seen, contrary to Jesus's message of love and mercy, as judgmental and exclusionary. There was a common desire that the Church gain more clergy—to include women and married persons—in order to enrich its sacramental life and pastoral perspective. A final theme of our discussions was a sincere desire for institutional change, a hope that the Bishops grasp the urgency and opportunity of this Synod process.

Specific conversations about the eight questions are summarized below. Some questions were aired more thoroughly than others, and certain themes arose under more than one heading.

1. In “journeying together”... What does our parish do really well?

- Participants credited Visitation as a friendly and welcoming parish, extending kindness and generosity to others. People are made to feel a part of the community, though some have yet to be woven in. We do well making connections within our community and with the Kansas City area. We have a rising commitment to diversity; we are grateful for the LGBTQ folks in our midst. People “are proud to be a Visitation parishioner, and that pride creates a broader presence in the Kansas City community.”
- Our liturgies are beautiful and dynamic, and they blend old and new traditions. Baptisms at Mass, in particular, are valued as a whole-community welcome. The rituals of Holy Week and

Easter are powerful and moving. Our priests' homilies on current issues have been appreciated. Multiple modes of prayer are available, e.g., daily Mass, adoration, the rosary. Special mention was made of the music as a key part of the Mass experience. The efforts of the choir are a gift to the parish, making our liturgies joyful, prayerful. It is likewise wonderful to hear parish members sing and "little kids belt out songs, off-key, with passion."

- Participants saw abundant opportunities for volunteers to be involved and engaged in ministries and programs. There are many avenues for journeying and making connections with others, for utilizing our talents and gifts. Specific mention was made of Faith Formation offerings (such as the Lenten book, Lenten small groups), Social Concerns, support to parish families who are sick or grieving, Christ Renews His Parish (making connections between generations), the Racial Justice Committee's efforts, programs for older adults, and more. The parish staff was acknowledged as having a big role in motivating and activating people's involvement, yet more could be done to explain ministries and their time commitments.
- Visitation also motivates volunteers for charitable and outreach activities in the wider community. Our parish tithe to other local ministries and agencies, as well as our sister parish in El Salvador, assists those whose needs are great.
- As another way of journeying together, our Visitation School helps to pass on the faith to new generations. The School connects the parish with young families and those bonds are a gift to us.
- Communication can also be a way of journeying together. Our parish is transparent about Visitation's finances and facilities. The bulletin, newsletter, weekly videos and other media help to inform everyone.
- "The COVID pandemic made me realize how important the parish community is to me."

2. In journeying together.... What could we do a better job with?

There are people with whom we wish we were journeying more closely (with allowances for the last two years of the pandemic).

- Young Catholics received prominent mention. Once graduated (from grade or high school) how can we keep youth affiliated with the parish? We need to work harder to integrate all students into parish activities, and focus on areas of engagement with them, pulling them into the "church side."
- Participants said that we need a more inclusive, representative parish. We can work against the economic and racial segregation of Kansas City to engage with other parishes and not become insular. Our recent exchanges with St. Monica's Parish (discussions, celebrants, choirs) help transcend this insularity. In addition, we do not want divorced Catholics to feel as outsiders. Is our welcome of new families as effective as it could be?
- A disconnect between school and parish was discussed—the two communities could mesh better. With more emphasis on parish life at the school, the hope is that school families could prioritize parish life and value Mass attendance more highly. The post-graduation participation of former school parents and children alike is an area for development.

- Visitation, some felt, can be a difficult community to get inside for those new to the neighborhood where some relationships are generations deep. Non-school families can find it a challenge to engage if they are not in the “social vortex” of the school. People have questions about parish boundaries, about who may belong and receive sacraments at Vis.
- School-age parents are continually evaluating where their children will attend school. Thus, the academic competitiveness of Visitation School is continually in question.
- Some asked whether our liturgical celebrations could have a stronger role in pulling people in and making youth and adults alike feel included. Music and its instrumentation could be more varied, less traditional, more “rousing.”
- Some saw benefits in teaching the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, and in promoting a stronger emphasis on vocations.
- What else would make us welcoming? Examples: The return of Sunday Morning Pre-school; a children’s Liturgy of the Word; opportunities for smaller group prayer and reflection; programs for youth; the return of Club Vis for young adults; help for people, one-by-one, to connect with ministries appropriate to their stage of life; help for persons with limited mobility. “We cannot rest on our laurels.”

3. What is a source of joy or sustenance for you, spiritually?

- Participation in the Mass was cited as a source of comfort and sustenance by many. The experience has many dimensions: simply being among people who have gathered to worship; the reverence of our rituals, especially Holy Week; the reading of the Word of God; the thought-provoking homilies by our priests; the music and choir. The church space itself is a comfort: inviting, open, safe, peaceful, engaging all the senses of sound, sight, smell, and touch.
- Other occasions for prayer are valued: daily Mass, the school Mass, the rosary, bible reading, devotional music, centering prayer, the Lenten reflection booklet, and being out in nature. Participants have been inspired by encounters that provide opportunities to discuss and reflect on faith, as at RCIA, Just Faith, Lenten small groups, and Christ Renews His Parish.
- Joys are found in our parish staff, news of our sister parish, our outreach to persons in need, and the pleasure of being among the community.

4. What is a struggle for you, personally, in the faith?

Participants heard the question two different ways, as referring to *my* faith and as referring to *the* faith, i.e., the Church as an institution.

- Personal answers about “my faith” described doubts about God and tenets of Catholicism, and the struggle to find time for one’s faith in daily life. Some were uneasy about the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, namely, confessing to a priest in wake of the abuse scandal.
- Some people have pain because their adult children are alienated from the Church; the practice of Catholicism does not seem relevant. The abuse scandal, closed mindedness about

homosexuality, and the status of women were reported as pretexts for adult children's indifference to the Church.

- Institutionally, participants had struggles with the Church. Some acknowledge that LGBTQ persons are not welcome in all parishes as parents, as employees, and as married couples. "Can we support an institution that holds gay lifestyles in contempt?"
- Among some discussion groups, the culture wars were seen to be rising across the Church and dividing Catholics at all levels—over abortion, over sexuality—distracting them from Jesus's message of love and inclusion. Some figures in the Church are viewed as overly judgmental, creating a negative image of the Church in the media.
- Finally, participants reported difficulty with the Church's failure to recognize the equality of women, denying their prophetic voices and entry to full sacramental ministry. Gifts and talents that might benefit us all are going unrecognized.

5. When you come to Mass, what one thing are you most looking for?

The worship life of the parish has been mentioned above as "a source of joy or sustenance." This question was specifically about the Mass and it called forth other elements of our communal celebrations that matter to people.

- Receiving the Eucharist itself was paramount for some. In addition, people cited the comfort of consistent rituals that include bodily participation in standing, kneeling, responding, joining voices in song, and the greeting of peace. Fellowship in the narthex is an important ritual, too.
- People valued being with others as participants and witnesses in the communal praise of God, seeing them and touching base with them. There was likewise joy in seeing children at Mass and joy in the efforts that parents make to bring their families. The way that families engage in Baptisms at Mass gives hope.
- People seek inspiration from the Scriptures and are grateful for the homilies of our recent pastors: Norman Rotert, Patrick Rush, and Bradley Offutt.
- Mass was valued as a time for centering, contemplation, and reflection.
- Throughout the discussions, the Mass was felt to provide "uplift," "rejuvenation," and "renewal."

6. What gifts do you, personally, bring to the Church?

- I bring these personal traits: love of Church and its people, doubts, optimism, gratitude, trust, perseverance-tenacity-energy, sociability, presence and faithfulness, courage to challenge, organizational ability, enthusiasm, love of our priests, a generous heart, openness to mystery, dedication to the mission of the Church, compassion, a loud voice.
- I bring knowledge and understanding from: a multi-ethnic background, experience from other Catholic communities, longtime affiliation with Visitation, a business perspective, a background in finance, the perspective of a scientist, the outlook of someone raising a family, my youth, my life experiences.

- I bring service to: liturgical ministries, the school community, older adults.
- “I bring my children.”

7. What breaks your heart about things going on in the Church?

There was a recurring theme of general regret that the population of the Church seems to be declining and fewer people are attending Mass, especially young adults. Because of certain exclusionary stances, the Church may be turning people off or giving them rationales for walking away.

- Some felt that the Church prioritizes rigid rules and presents itself as judgmental, something that is inconsistent with Jesus’s message of love. Some divorced Catholics, for example, feel judged and unsure of their status.
- The scandal of clergy sexual abuse is a “black cloud” that continues to hover over the Church. In the wake of the scandal, Church leaders cannot seem to recover their moral authority.
- The political divisions of the culture have seeped into Catholicism. Participants have been saddened by hostility toward Pope Francis. Bishops have become polarizing figures in emphasizing the issue of abortion as “preeminent” for voting, some Bishops even suggesting that communion be withheld from politicians. The Bishops’ leadership on other life issues and matters of social justice are not apparent.
- The Church as an institution is perceived to be overly focused on sex and sexuality.
- According to some, there is a need for more clergy whose composition would include women and married people and the perspectives they would bring. The exclusion of such persons from leadership and ministry narrows the pool of leaders for faith communities and restricts access to the Eucharist. The Church should have a priesthood that reflects the People of God. Catholicism would be profoundly richer, in particular, if women’s voices were not muted. There was also a concern that young men presently are coming out of seminaries to contend with, rather than engage, the modern world.
- For the priests who do serve us, some participants were concerned about a lack of support for them, and about the well-being of retired priests.
- Other heartbreaks were seen in rising secularism and in the theological incuriosity of many Catholics.

8. What specific hope do you have for the Church moving forward?

Replies here addressed topics raised in #2, #4, and #7 above, looking to reverse various tendencies that hobble the growth of the Church. One theme recurred across discussions in all 25 separate groups; it was expressed by the words *inclusion*, *acceptance*, and *welcome*. A Church that is seen to beckon everyone is necessary for the evangelization of the world, and for reconciliation with those who have left the Church. “We are a Church that gathers—not scatters.”

- A hoped-for Church would have Christ’s message of love and mercy at the forefront, encouraging members to follow his example, live the Beatitudes, and serve others in the world. Members of a loving Church would be open-minded and listen to people with other views. One hope is that the Church not lose sight of its foundational elements and encourage respect for traditional Catholicism. One hope is that the Church can remain united and not break apart.
- Participants aspire to membership in a faith that is open-minded and welcomes people regardless of sexual orientation, race, and marital status. The modern status of women should be honored.
- Some hoped for a re-articulation of Catholic priesthood to encompass married persons and women in order to serve and represent the whole Church. They want priests present and to come to have joyful lives. A healthy priesthood will bring stronger practice of the sacraments.
- Others hoped that the Bishops listen to the Holy Spirit speaking in all the baptized and grasp the urgency of this moment. People would like to see open and truthful communication about the Synod process—bring its fruits out into the light and act. Church leaders should pay heed to Pope Francis’s vision for the way forward. As one group concluded: “The consequence of being unwilling to honestly consider serious reform is a Church in decline and a Church with a widening gulf between its leadership and its body.”
- “I hope the Church does something big and bold as a result of this Synod.”



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A version of this summary has been sent to the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph. This summary has also been sent directly to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and to Vatican’s Synod Office.