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To the Community of St. Thomas More Parish:

We, the STM Synod Committee, submit the following report as the “first fruits” of the parish listening process that took place from January through March of 2022—the first phase of our response as a parish to the call of Pope Francis in convoking the Church of God in this synod on synodality. This report, along with our parish response via the archdiocesan Synod Reporting Form, has been submitted to the archdiocese to be incorporated into the hierarchical input process leading up to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October of 2023, to be followed by an implementation phase. However, here in our parish, we intend to act upon what we have learned through this listening phase as soon as possible. We pledge to continue to work with you through ongoing listening, dialogue, and community discernment to more fully live out the call of the gospel as a parish—to live communion, to achieve participation, and to open ourselves to mission.

Parish Listening Process

Publicity & Sign-up

The parish listening process began with a call for all to participate. The call was issued via the publishing of bulletin, e-newsletter, and website synod announcements and information before Christmas, with steady follow-up notifications and advertisements throughout the schedule for sessions, ending in late March. The pastor spoke about the synod listening sessions at all the masses one weekend in late January, followed the next weekend by addresses at the masses from committee members. An online sign-up system, easily accessible from the parish home web page, was the main channel for registering participants. This system was leveraged by committee members manning a “Synod Table” in the narthex after masses for several weeks in February, answering questions and signing up participants on the spot with laptops. We also created a synod email-box that fielded questions and problems with sign-up.

Sessions & Participants

The parish held 22 listening sessions (virtual and in-person) for parishioners and other interested parties, including 4 two-part sessions of 1.5 hours each and 18 single sessions of approximately 2.5 hours each. There were 10 sessions made up of members of specific groups/ministries, as well as 12 general sessions. The special affinity group sessions were as follows:

1. Young Adults
2. IGNITE (High School)
3. RCIA
4. Social Justice Committee
5. St. Vincent de Paul Society
6. Women’s Bible Study
7. African Immigrants
8. School Staff
9. Parish Council
10. Finance Council

Approximately 175 people participated in the parish listening sessions. In addition, we provided an online prayerful examen as an alternative forum for participation and a way for friends and family of parishioners to provide input, garnering 11 responses.

In keeping with the synod’s aim to look not only at the internal life of the Church, but also to focus our gaze on how the People of God journey together with the entire human family—including believers of other religions and people distant from the faith—we made efforts to include

these groups. We are mindful of the fact that despite our efforts to include all voices, some were unable or chose not to participate in our parish listening sessions. Nevertheless, there is mention of the marginalized and excluded in the voices that did participate, and we have included them in our report

Limitations

It should be stated that the results in this report are encumbered by many limitations. We know that we fell short of our goal of broad inclusion and participation in the synod listening sessions. We realize that we missed identifying some groups within the parish, such as middle schoolers, and that other groups were underrepresented. Although we had many ideas for additional sessions, we were constrained ultimately by the timelines set by the Archdiocese and the Vatican, limiting us from tailoring discussions more for certain affinity groups or extending our “marketing” reach much beyond our own walls. Also, our interpretations were of summarized notes taken by volunteers, not direct transcripts of participant’s words.

The Questions

Participants were sent the questions to be considered in advance of their listening session, along with a link to the parish’s synod web page, which offered links to a wide variety of resources for further study. The 3 questions were as follows:

Question #1: *As you reflect on your own experience of “journeying together” in our local church community, what joys does that provoke? What difficulties, obstacles, and wounds are brought to light?*

Question #2: *As you reflect on your own experience of “journeying together” as part of the universal church, what joys does that provoke? What difficulties, obstacles, and wounds are brought to light?*

Question #3: *As you listen to these experiences, where do you hear the voice of the Spirit? What is the Spirit asking of us? What are the points to be confirmed, the prospects for change, the steps to be taken? Where do we hear consensus? What paths are opening up for our church?*

A Prayerful Tone

A parish *Synod Listening Sessions Facilitator Guide and Resources* document was created to support the facilitators in their task and to promote a consistent format and tone for all the sessions. In its construction, we drew from the resources of the Vatican and the Archdiocese, and other parishes’ models, to develop a thorough and user-friendly guide in alignment with the global inquiry but tailored to our community. (Many of these resources can be found on the Catholic Lay Interparish Partnership synod page: <https://aquinas.emory.edu/synod-2021-2023-resources.html>). Ground rules were shared at each session to focus participants on the task of listening with respect and reverence. Whether virtual or in person, the sessions were conducted in a prayerful atmosphere with silent time for reflection on the questions and on what was heard from participants. The sessions incorporated a passage from Acts of the Apostles, about an early experience of synod in the Church, to set the context for the group’s reflection. Each participant had an opportunity to share their experiences in response to the first 2 questions, and then to express their sense of where the Spirit is calling us.

Session Notes

Facilitators and scribes/note takers for the listening sessions were invited parishioner volunteers. A common template for taking notes was used by the scribe at each listening session. Scribes were instructed to not record the names of individuals as they took notes, but the template included information about the number range of participants as well as age groups, cultural heritages, and

languages represented by the participants. The parishioners on the committee each served as facilitator and/or note taker for one or more of the listening sessions and attended others as well. The notes are not transcriptions of everything that was said but include—to the best ability of the volunteer note takers—main points made by participants. Some scribes were also participants in the session for which they took notes.

Report Methodology

Committee members read the notes recorded from all the sessions. To assist with analysis and synthesis of themes, the notes were also transcribed into a spreadsheet document. This file of the notes can be found on the parish website here: stmgaparish.org/synod

- Question #1: Joys experienced in the local/parish church
- Question #1: Difficulties/ Obstacles/Wounds experienced in the local/parish church
- Question #2: Joys experienced in the universal Church
- Question #2: Difficulties/ Obstacles/Wounds experienced in the universal Church
- Question #3: The Call of the Spirit

Committee members were also able to draw upon their full experiences of the listening sessions they observed, either as participant, scribe, or facilitator, to interpret and develop more fully ideas outlined in the session notes.

From their individual analyses of the body of responses to the 3 questions posed in the synod listening sessions, the members of the committee agreed upon a group of major themes that were seen to emerge from the responses:

- Community/Welcome/Inclusion,
- Leadership,
- Gospel Message & Core Values, and
- Transparency & Accountability

The body of the report is organized primarily by the 3 synod questions, and secondarily—within each section, by these 4 major themes. The report attempts to convey a sense of the experiences and insights shared by participants, organized according to these themes. It is our hope that this organization will make the responses more accessible to the parish—including parish leaders—as it seeks to learn from them and develop plans for the future.

Committee

A committee was formed in early December 2021, initially to implement the parish listening phase of the synod. In addition to parish staff, it was made up of several parishioners—also active members of the Catholic Lay Interparish Partnership (“CLIP”)—see website for more information: <https://aquinas.emory.edu/catholic-lay-interparish-partnership-clip.html>—most of whom had reached out to the pastor to express interest in taking an active role in the synod on the parish level.

The committee began all their deliberations with the Synod Prayer, invoking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all synod undertakings.

Parish Staff—

Rev. Robert Hussey, S.J., Pastor

Andy Otto, Pastoral Assistant for Faith Formation
Darija Pichanick, Parish Administrator

Parishioners—

Monica LaBelle
Jane McNabb
Peggy Saunders
Callie Tabor

Question 1: *As you reflect on your own experience of “journeying together” in our local church community, what joys does that provoke? What difficulties, obstacles, and wounds are brought to light?*

INCLUSION, WELCOMING & COMMUNITY

The overarching theme in the responses to this question can be summarized in the words, “**Inclusion,**” “**Welcoming,**” and “**Community.**” The majority of the joys mentioned here relate to the experience of participating in an active community of faith and feeling a sense of welcome, inclusion and belonging. At the same time, the responses also implicate the *lack* of sufficient experience of inclusion, welcoming, and community as one of the greatest obstacles to our faith journey together as a parish.

Joyful experiences relating to the theme of inclusion, welcoming and community begin with a basic foundation—the joy of “being together,” praying and worshipping together with people who share common beliefs, mission and purpose. Many mentioned the joy and gratitude experienced from the availability of streaming masses during the pandemic and the ongoing joy from attending the outdoor Mass on Sunday together.

Other community experiences cited include the joys of serving in parish liturgical ministries such as being a eucharistic minister, a lector, an usher, assisting in the livestreaming of Mass, or singing in the choir. There were also many mentions of how people’s experiences of **service to the STM and wider communities** have given them a feeling of belonging and purpose—bringing them great joy—for example, through social justice ministries, Serviam and calling seniors during the pandemic, Martha’s Ministry (for support of bereaved families and funeral receptions), Catholic Heart Work Camp (for high-schoolers), the STM nursery ministry, ushering, St. Vincent de Paul Society (serving the poor), Knights of Columbus, food drives, outreach ministries, the S-Factor for seniors, the Young Adults Ministry (YAM), our parish sponsorship of a refugee family, the AIDS ministry, the “young moms” group (whose children are now grown), and working in the STM garden.

Overlapping with the joys of service to the community were the joys that many said they had found in participating in or leading parish **faith-formation or devotional groups** at STM. These groups were all mentioned as examples: the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA), children’s faith formation programs, scripture study group, Christ Renews His Parish and RENEW (small-community faith programs), Women’s Bible Study, women’s faith circle, the rosary group, and eucharistic adoration. Many experienced a deep sense of spirituality and connectedness through their participation in these communities of devotion and formation. Some mentioned the importance of finding a smaller faith community within the larger parish family to developing a “rich” experience. Many spoke of building long-term personal relationships through participation in these groups. In fact, “joining” was a word used frequently in these experiences of joy. There was also an expressed appreciation for participants’ having a say in shaping the direction of some of these experiences, such as in selecting a guiding text for the women’s bible study.

Perhaps some of the more general but meaningful joys of community were described as experiences of “**finding family**” at STM, feelings of being welcomed and cared about, a sense of “stability” that the faith community brought to their own childhood or family life, the joy of watching “our children” grow up together, experiences of being supported in times of difficulty or need/ joys and sorrows, supported in their role as parents, “feelings of love, invitation and

welcome in community spaces,” a sense of connection and being recognized, demographic diversity found here, and the joy of welcoming others to our community. These responses indicate that many have found a long-term faith community at STM that makes them feel “at home” and supported. People speak of their experiences of the parish as a center of family life, a place to “step out of yourself and into something larger,” a place to grow spiritually and socially, and a place where you can find opportunities to serve and give back to the community.

Also mentioned was the joy experienced by participants who perceive that the parish is or has become more diverse and more welcoming to and inclusive of all people. Many mentioned the joy of seeing a diversity of ages, races, family status, and cultures present at the Masses and activities at STM. Inclusion of LGBTQ persons was also specifically mentioned as a joy.

As robustly joyful as many described their experiences of community at STM, many others responded with elements of their experiences of community at STM that they saw as obstacles to our journeying together as a parish. Although the pandemic was sometimes mentioned as a contributing factor, the theme of community shortcomings was strong.

These experiences range from difficulty getting to know people to feelings of exclusion and rejection by others. As one participant put it, “we are not journeying together; everybody is doing their own thing.” Another was concerned about how the parish would repair the damage to community inflicted by the pandemic.

There were many responses that relate to feeling a general **lack of welcoming** and belonging that is an obstacle to the experience of community at STM. These experiences not only focus us more keenly on the needs of the marginalized, but also help us to understand that our true community consists of more than “people like us” and the other Catholics in the pews.

In what ways have participants experienced not feeling welcomed in our parish? Many are seemingly insignificant happenings that have had a lasting negative effect on people’s experience of community. One person reported that they had no word of welcome as a newcomer and that her first experience of outreach from the parish was a request for money. Many cite experiences of “coming and going” to and from Mass without any meaningful interaction with other people. “No one talks to you. No effort is made to invite us in.” Others report experiencing feelings of exclusion in our parish, whether intentional or subconscious. Some find that not living in Decatur makes it hard to find a social circle in the community. To some newcomers, groups of parishioners who know each other can appear exclusive and “cliquish”—making others feel unwelcome and “unseen.” An example cited by several was the experience of signing up for the Advent by Candlelight event for women of the parish: If you didn’t know one of the “table leaders,” you felt like an outsider and didn’t know who to sign up to sit with. It also should be noted that some members, especially in the immigrant community, spoke of feeling “disconnected” and uninvited. They also told of how not having personal transportation can be a barrier to full participation in a community where everyone assumes everyone has a car. The experience for them is embarrassing and less than welcoming.

One group specifically mentioned were the **non-Catholic spouses** of parishioners, who are often supportive members of our parish community for many years but towards whom no intentional act of welcome or outreach is ever made. This lack of notice has been a painful experience to some families. Do we even know how many families are integrated across multiple faiths? One person commented that there should be more ecumenical opportunities (for service and worship) since there are so many such families. Also mentioned was the “captive audience” of parents during Sunday School time that goes unutilized because they don’t “belong.” We also heard from **former**

Protestants that our parish leaves a lot to be desired in this category when compared to the Protestant tradition of welcoming. Some reported an initial impression of STM as an “unfriendly” place and of not feeling loved as they adjusted to this difference. Other Catholics reported attending programs at other (Protestant) churches for the experience of community there.

Another important sub-theme was the lack of invitation to/welcoming of those **outside the community** to our parish, which is also seen as a failure of mission. There are non-Catholics who are part of our community—attending mass and participating in activities—who are “off the radar” because they are not registered members. They are being drawn by the Spirit to our faith, but they are not being welcomed in. What about others? Also, how can we engage with other faiths to become one larger community?

Some cited the effect of **changes in parish affiliation** (i.e., from archdiocesan-staffed to Jesuit) and **changing pastors** as damaging to our experience of community as a parish and an obstacle to our faith journey. For example, many mentioned how such changes have resulted in large groups of parishioners leaving, causing pain and suffering as our community was torn apart. There is still sorrow in the community stemming from the reassignment of both of our parish priests at the same time last year. People form important bonds with the parish priests, and it is difficult on the community when they leave. The issue of the effect of changing pastors will be addressed further under the theme of Leadership.

Many relayed experiences of feeling isolated, uncomfortable, or excluded in the community due to their **age, gender, or marital/relational status**. For example, it seems to some that single people, especially those who are childless, are generally left out—not part of the “in crowd”—and that all the focus seems to be on couples and families with children. One single woman lamented that “no one would sit next to you in the pew,” and others noted that single people are never asked to bring up the gifts to the altar. Others, especially young adults, have experienced difficulty getting to know others and uncertainty about how much of their true self to show others and how to find their place in the church community. Many families with non-STM School children report feeling “on the out,” while some empty-nesters have experienced difficulty in finding community at STM after the kids are no longer in school. Some non-STM School families feel less supported in their role as Catholic parents as compared to STM School families. Some in senior living communities also report difficulties with feeling included. Other people mentioned that they have experienced or perceived a lack of acceptance of LGBTQ persons either in our parish or in our Catholic schools.

Others have pointed to difficulties experienced by **people with disabilities** and a lack of community support for families of children with special needs such as Downs syndrome and Type I diabetes. They would like more understanding and support from the parish community. Some described experiences of how difficult it can be for a family to adjust to the birth of a child with special needs and how desperately they need the support of their faith community at such a time. There were several mentions of the inability of STM School to accommodate children with learning disabilities, developmental disabilities, and many other types of special needs. To these families, the rejection of their children by the school is a deep wound. Others question why we can’t find a way to include more diversity of learning styles in our school. Our inclusiveness of adults with disabilities has also been questioned: What have we done to include the deaf in our community, for example?

Many see a lack of outreach to and focus on our **youth and young adults** as a grave failing of our community. Some say that kids have a hard time making friends here if they don’t go to school here and see other churches “siphoning off” our youth with their greater offerings of community-

building social programs. This notion is supported by those who expressed feeling that our parish opportunities for engaging our youth are just too limited and are not providing a way of “connecting” them to the parish and each other. For example, there is a long gap between First Communion and sacramental preparation for Confirmation, yielding “dropouts.” These families keenly feel a need for a more seamless and enveloping parish support network for their children as they grow. There are many who voice a concern that we are “losing the younger generation” and are calling for homilies that “target” the young more intentionally and more programs and planned activities that give the young a reason to “hang out” more at church—for service, for socializing, and for learning what it means to be part of our faith community. In our STM school, some teachers are issuing a call for more community-building activities both within the school and into the community (e.g., food preparation for the homeless, Blessing Bags, etc.) in response to students’ needs to see “faith in action.”

Tragically, some have experienced **rejection because of their race**. These experiences range from general feelings of not feeling comfortable and welcome, to “always” having some people looking at you “as if you don’t belong,” to reports of seeing and experiencing painful, “overt racism” here at STM and even being rejected as a eucharistic minister at a hospital because of race. Historic segregation in the parish churches was also cited as an obstacle to our journey as a parish. One participant finds it an obstacle that STM is mostly White and affluent, and suggests we could engage more directly with the greater community (including communities of color around us). Some school staff expressed concern that the archdiocese is not doing enough to support a clear call to be anti-racist. While our STM school continues to stand up and stop individual occurrences, several have asked for more support and clear direction from the diocesan leadership regarding tie-ins to teaching standards, training for teachers, and a clear directive to teach children to stand up to racism. It was noted that a recent incident involving diocesan leaders showed there is a lack of understanding at their level about the importance of addressing this issue and how it is wounding our community.

The **liturgical experience** of community at STM was also mentioned in the context of inclusion and community. The absence of full participation in the Eucharist and receiving communion during the pandemic was expressed as a hardship. Some expressed a desire to include more varieties of “quality music” that would appeal to different members of the community, as an avenue for greater inclusion. Others mourned the loss of the Life Teen Mass as a vehicle for building community, especially among our young people. Still others expressed their appreciation for the past experience of hearing women’s voices giving reflections at Mass and cited the recent absence of female voices as an obstacle on their faith journey.

Finally, there were mentions of the very great obstacle that consists of **ideologies that divide** our parish community. Whether regarding politically “liberal or conservative” or ecclesiastically “progressive or traditional,” there is great concern about the harm of divisiveness in our midst. To be clear, people are not expressing that we should hew to one ideology or another, but rather are expressing that the parish does not always succeed at being the big tent it might aspire to be. There seems to be a clear call for tolerance and acceptance, and resistance to the forces that would divide us by taking our focus away from the gospel message.

LEADERSHIP

A second theme that emerged in the responses to Question #1 about our journey together as a parish is Leadership. These responses focused on joys and obstacles that speak to the leadership of not only clergy in our parish and archdiocese, but also to school leadership and lay members in

leadership roles in the local context. Perhaps in illustration of the challenges inherent in church leadership structures, participants have found much joy, inspiration and meaning in their positive experiences with clergy in their lives, but they also speak of negative experiences that could be summed up in the word “clericalism.”

Many cited the “**coming of the Jesuits**”—our clergy and their perspectives—as a source of joy on their local faith journey. Some have experienced “changes for the better,” appreciation for the “post Vatican II perspective” of love, improved quality of sermons, and a sense of enlightenment, refreshment and openness in the parish since the Jesuits’ arrival. One participant spoke of clergy bringing new “opportunities to discuss things,” making them “more curious” about their faith. Many also cited **actions of leadership** taken by **STM pastors** as joys in their experience. These included an overarching focus on fostering community, the initiation of parish spending on social justice, the “courage” to bring in James Martin (the Jesuit author) to speak at the parish in the face of negative publicity and local protests, support of leadership roles for women—including arranging for women to share their perspectives with the parish through reflections during Mass, encouraging the congregation to greet each other and socialize in the sanctuary before mass, and instituting the practice of all processing to the front of the church during communion as a symbol of inclusion and solidarity. People also expressed appreciation for the guidance and leadership of our clergy, homilies that “make God’s word and God’s love applied and relevant,” as well as pastors who reach out and get to know parishioners, and the good pastoral care provided by the Jesuits at STM. This question also elicited experiences of the love and positive, formative influences that clergy have had on participants throughout their lives—not just here at STM.

Lay leadership in the parish was also mentioned as an experience of joy for many. Some expressed the joys of serving the parish in leadership roles, while others expressed appreciation for others’ service in roles of lay leadership, including an “involved” parish council, directors of the RCIA program, faith formation leaders, women who have shared their reflections at Mass, and the ministry of former Pastoral Assistant (Ann Dugan) to the young moms of the parish in years past. Appreciation of lay leaders making announcements at Mass was also mentioned.

Accompanying the joyful experiences of the coming of the Jesuits to STM and appreciation for individual pastors was the recognition of **failures and obstacles to our faith journey in the way leadership changes are implemented**, including the negative effects such changes can have on the community when people are not treated with caring and compassion. Some spoke of the difficult “learning curve” that accompanies a change in pastors, and many related experiences of parishioners being alienated by abrupt changes in leadership when the Jesuits came, inflicting deep wounds on the community. Some spoke of the “shock” of losing long-time parishioners and families because of the change. In one example, a participant experienced a pastor being dismissive of a traditional form of devotion, causing friends to leave the parish and resulting in great pain. Others referred to the “difficult and jarring” experience of losing both parish priests at the same time during the pandemic. Still others lamented the lack of parish input or “say” in the decision to bring the Jesuits to STM. But the difficulties stemming from changes in parish leadership did not begin with the coming of the Jesuits. One former STM parishioner shared his experiences of the pre-Jesuit days when he left the parish because he felt it was “too conservative” –he was not alone. Such division and breakage of the community due to leadership and ideological changes has been a source of lasting pain and suffering in the parish for some time. Perhaps a common sentiment was the hope expressed by one participant that this synod might bring about a way to help us maintain more “continuity” in the face of parish leadership changes in the future.

Another topic that was mentioned as a persistent deep wound in the experience of the parish community is the crisis of **priest sexual abuse**. Although not spoken of as the exclusive responsibility of current parish leadership, it is an issue that cries out to church leadership at all levels for solutions and healing. One participant reminded us that abuse was perpetrated (decades ago) in this parish, and the community still experiences suffering because of it. Other parishioners have left the Catholic Church because of abuse suffered elsewhere or as a result of the failure of the Church—including the local (Archdiocesan) church—to respond appropriately to this evil, in their estimation. Our faith community has been wounded and fragmented by these experiences of loss and betrayal. This scandal and its implications for parish leadership have not faded, and many wait in frustration for it to be appropriately addressed on all levels, including in our seminaries. Certainly this is an issue for the universal Church to address on a grand scale, but is there also a role for the local church to play in healing the wounds of the past and making well known our current protections for the young and vulnerable?

Some have also mentioned that in their experience, parish leadership still has more to do to support the inclusion and welcoming of the **LGBTQ community** (“It’s why people leave.”) and to address the sin of **systemic White supremacy** (“allowed to be put on the back burner”). One participant cites the continuing, largely segregated make-up of parishes in our archdiocese and asks where the leadership support for “authentic unity” of the church is. Another sees a lack of Black representation and “paternalism” in the church. What role does parish leadership play in this shortcoming?

Some participants told of very negative experiences of the local church in the context of the **annulment** of their marriage, implicating the legalistic and uncaring nature of the process and sharing the deep wounds and exclusion they experienced through taking part in it. Although proceeding from Canon Law, is there a role parish or archdiocesan leadership can play in improving this experience for our faith community?

Other areas of difficulty expressed in the theme of leadership relate to **homily messages** and **liturgy practices**. In some experiences, homilies don’t speak to “holy” single people, focus too much on negative messages, or fail to reflect the authentic struggles of real people. Others cite a need to include more diverse perspectives in leadership and liturgy practices, including more women.

It should also be mentioned that the responses of the **African immigrant community** expressed a longing for more support from parish leadership for their families and youth. They told of experiences in their former churches, where the parish church was the center of community and family life. In their culture, the pastor plays a much larger role as articulator of parishioner needs and general advocate for families. They look for support from the church community in times of difficulty, and they have not found it here at STM, “Where is your church?” they ask each other.

GOSPEL MESSAGE & CORE VALUES

It is not surprising that an overwhelming number of participants’ experiences of the parish and local church speak to how our parish community embraces and lives out the Gospel message and core values of our faith. Although also mentioned in the context of building community, these experiences illustrate the fundamental importance of that community being rooted in the Gospel. Many have experienced joy in finding core gospel values expressed and nurtured at STM. These experiences include acting on the gospel message through parish and other local social ministries, as well as participation in and appreciation for the Mass, baptisms, and other sacraments at STM.

At the same time, others' experiences would indicate that there is room for improvement in the way our community lives the Gospel message, with participants citing rigidity of perspective and practice, lack of proper focus and engagement, struggles with social issues, and disillusionment of family members as obstacles in this context.

Many participants expressed joy in finding the STM community a caring, accepting, God-centered place to make their spiritual home, with an **emphasis on the spiritual**. They cited many different aspects of the message of the gospel: relationship with God, Christian values, living the "core" of the gospel, opportunities to perfect our faith, actions following Christ, meeting good and holy people, studying the bible, being deeply rooted in Jesus, and moving down paths of understanding that help us with the complexities of today's world. Some also spoke of a lack of "rigidity" or less focus on "rules" in the parish approach to faith life, aligning with others' expressions of feelings of acceptance, joy in seeing God in everything, and a comforting feeling as if "finally coming home."

Many participants cited the joys of participating in **ministries** that relate directly to the gospel message of love and service. "The parish is a gateway "to living the gospel through service," said one participant involved in our Social Justice committee. Others mentioned their appreciation for STM's past process for parishioner inclusion in the Social Justice committee's discernment of how it allocates its funds—giving them a great sense of participation in these good works. Mustard Seed Ministries, teaching religion classes, Jerusalem House, Christian Family Movement (years ago), and teaching in a Jesuit high school were a few other ministries mentioned in this context. Participants stressed the spiritually meaningful aspect of helping and serving others in the context of answering the call of the gospel: "The Holy Spirit calls us to give of ourselves." Some stressed how these "opportunities to serve others and live our faith" extend STM's reach beyond parish boundaries, citing work at the DEAM Pantry with other local faith communities and the parish's social justice ministry's focus on "struggles outside of the parish and the broader world as a whole." Also mentioned was the value placed on the ministering of our parish priests to the sick and dying and their families and how vital this ministry is to the parish community.

Our parish priests have also provided the foundation for joyful experiences of the **Mass and sacramental life** at STM. There were mentions of joy in the sacraments of baptism and marriage and how the community experiences God's grace and inspiration by taking part in them, particularly when celebrated within a Mass. There were also many responses that spoke of the joy and sustaining spirituality of participating in Mass at STM. These included joys found in the "relevant" homilies, experience of worship as focused more on community than the individual, and the way our Eucharistic celebration "brings us back to inclusion." Others spoke of the joys of attending daily Masses, praying in small groups, eucharistic adoration, the availability of sacraments, and the comfort of our Catholic rituals and traditions. One particular parish liturgical experience was mentioned many, many times as a source of joy for our community: the Outdoor Mass. This liturgy, born of the pandemic but with a still-strong and loyal following, seems to be addressing some kind of gap that is not primarily related to the pandemic. It is particularly safe and welcoming for very young children, and there is a sense of authenticity or essential elements when the gilt and marble—or even the hum of the air conditioning—is absent. One participant expressed her great spiritual joy in the experience of Outdoor Mass, as one in which one is "hyperaware of nature and God's gifts" and can imagine being close to the way the early Church celebrated the Eucharist.

The **STM School staff** in particular cited strong experience of joy in the gospel message taught by the Jesuits: love and acceptance. Those working with our STM school children expressed appreciation for the consistently emphasized foundation of love as the "centering value" around

which community is built and from which we reach out to the world as the “hands of Christ.” They cite their experiences as a community focused on the gospel message of “love one another” as a useful guide for students to helping each other. They also mentioned the transformative joy of embracing the Jesuit perspective on the sacrament of reconciliation, “not about guilt but about reaching out to rebuild community.” However, teachers also shared their experiences of a sense of dissonance in relaying the church’s teachings while personally feeling uneasy about some of them (e.g., on the ordination of women, and LGBTQ persons). When students are disappointed in what they hear from Church teachings, teachers find it challenging to give a satisfying response.

Faith formation at STM—both in the school and the parish at large—must also be mentioned in this context. There were several mentions of positive experiences of not only teaching “Sunday School” or religious education classes, but also of having been raised by a “faith community” that was precious and nurturing, including an education in the “intellectual tradition” of the faith. Interestingly, some of these meaningful and formative experiences were related by young adults who find themselves on the margins of the Church for other reasons.

Experiences of the joys of living out the Gospel message and our core Catholic values in our local church community are accompanied by some’s **experience of “shadows”** that would indicate that we could do better. Some participants question whether our community is making enough room for traditional forms of devotion that are meaningful to them, while others see that we are not doing enough service, devoting enough resources, and prioritizing the practice of the faith in our families. Several mentioned how our lack of sufficient “outward” focus—for example, looking outside the parish to “find the lost,” engaging outside the Catholic community in ecumenical service with Decatur Cooperative Ministries, and serving the poor (outside the parish)—is a failing and obstacle to our faith journey. However, others, especially in our African immigrant community, questioned what seems to be an *overly* outward focus while they see so many in need *within* our parish community. Similarly, there were mentions on both sides of the divisive issue of what it means to be “Pro Life,” as well as a recognition of how struggles with social issues and general cultural divisiveness in our midst serve as obstacles on our journey together as church.

There were many who related experiences of difficulty in the local church due to **“rigidity”** in the practice of the faith, which can obscure the Gospel message and perhaps lead us away from our core values as Catholics. Mentioned in this context were experiences with clergy around the availability and administration of sacraments (e.g., “rules” around marriage and funerals, whether one is “deserving” of reconciliation or the eucharist, etc.), as well as rigid teachings about what you “must believe” to be a “real” Catholic. One participant told of a long-ago but still painful experience of having had the sacrament of reconciliation withheld because she was not following a church teaching. Others spoke of the failure of mission that they see in so many of us “just checking boxes” instead of truly living the gospel and showing empathy to others.

Many spoke of painful experiences or fears of **losing spouses and children from our faith** community due to this rigidity—not only in the local church, but also in the universal church—that threatens to overshadow the joy of the Gospel message and ends the faith journey of so many young people before it has begun in earnest. Perhaps these types of observations and experiences were what prompted some to advocate for “relatable” homilies focused on love and joy, “every homily” targeting the young (teens and young adults), and reflecting current issues while also “meshing” with the Gospel.

In the final analysis, participants put their faith and hope in the message of the Gospel and the core teachings of our faith, expressing belief that if love is the focus, we will find a way to stay on our journey together.

TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

The final but significant theme expressed in the responses to Question 1 relates to the need for parishioners to see their leaders functioning in their roles with transparency and accountability. Although this theme intersects with Leadership and the experience of Community, it puts the focus on what we are allowed to know and understand about how our local church functions and how our leaders—both clergy and lay staff and volunteers—are seen to be held accountable for decisions they make.

Many have seen a **lack of clear communication** from the Archdiocese and the parish as an obstacle to trust and progress on their faith journey. It starts at the top: One School staffer asks, “What is the mission statement of the Archdiocese?” Another participant, from the social justice community, states that, “Scandals continue when things are left in the dark.” On the parish level, some participants have experienced less than sufficient publicity of parish activities, both within and outside of the parish. This perception is also expressed by those in the African immigrant community, who would like to see more announcements at Mass about what different groups are doing, “We want to hear. We need to know.” Might these responses hint at how differing modes of communication may be preferred by different cultures?

A further development of this theme is under the category of **parish finances and future planning**. One participant warns of troubles that can result if stakeholders are not brought together to listen and discuss issues when plans are being made for the future of the parish. Another expressed concern about parish finances and our prospects for supporting the future of our mission. These responses speak to the need of all parishioners to have access not only to information about parish plans and finances, but also to contextualized explanations that give them a true understanding of how we are doing and where we are going as a parish.

Finally, it is clear in the responses that parishioners have a need for **accountability**: to feel heard and for those in charge to take responsibility when things in the parish or Archdiocese don’t go well in their estimation. This need for accountability in all areas of the local church can also be seen under the theme of Leadership. An example is a participant’s questioning of whether all children have received a “loving experience of God” from their religious education teachers, citing a bad experience that they witnessed. Another participant describes changes in religious education under the Jesuits as “a loss.” How should such feedback—and indeed any feedback on how the parish or Archdiocese is being run—be gathered and addressed going forward? How can the parish and the Archdiocese function with greater transparency and accountability to those who fund them and place their trust in them?

Question 2: *As you reflect on your own experience of “journeying together” as part of the universal church, what joys does that provoke? What difficulties, obstacles, and wounds are brought to light?*

INCLUSION, WELCOMING & COMMUNITY

Many participants expressed their joy in the church being a **“big tent” where there is room for diversity of cultures, politics, and opinions.** There is a sense of the universal nature of the church and a global family that can be experienced wherever one might travel. People are seeing—with hope—the Church making efforts in social justice work, racial justice, and even a new openness to welcoming LGBTQ people. One participant noted Pope John Paul II’s outreach efforts around the world and another noted Pope Francis’ work in promoting dialogue between faith traditions and his demonstration humility. Others see the church as important to promoting family life moving us away from the more individualistic culture.

At the same time, participants of all ages found struggles in the Universal Church’s welcoming stance, calling it “stagnant and not inclusive.” In regards to **LGBTQ community**—a predominant theme—, many felt that the church needs to “grow up” around this issue, and that because of the treatment of this group many young people leave the church. “The younger generation wants a church that is relevant to peoples' lived experiences, and the more it shuns certain groups/individuals, the harder it is for the younger generation to feel welcome or have a good reason to join/stay.” One high schooler said the Catholic Church is not inclusive of women and LGBTQ people compared to other churches, though one person noted that the German church is “leading the way on inclusion and reworking the teaching of same-sex attraction.” A member of RCIA said, the Church “needs to revisit the idea that LGBTQ persons can only be faithful by being celibate.”

Adults are recognizing that **young people are leaving the church and are not served well.** A few commented that some Protestant churches serve youth more effectively. “We should learn from the Mormons,” one young adult said, as the Mormons “radiate joy when they see each other—they are wrapped up in community so intensely.” A school staff person feels that the church has not caught up to the changing culture and as a result, young people see the Church as not relevant to their everyday experiences. Others said the Church’s rigidity, exclusion, and even all-male celibate priesthood as reasons young people leave. One high schooler commented about the practice of excommunication: “A community that might throw me out makes me not want to say something [witnessing and speaking up courageously].”

The theme of **exclusion of marginalized groups** dominated conversation. People felt **women** needed to be included more in leadership and opportunities to preach, including the possibility for women deacons or priests. One person commented that Catholic institutions can be hypocritical by not allowing more leave flexibility for pregnant and new **mothers.** When Pope Francis recently expressed that the purpose of marriage was having children, one participant said, “It feels like this is invalidating my whole life”. Other groups that participants felt are marginalized or excluded are the **divorced, the laity, non-Catholics, non-traditional family models, and people of color.** Two people, including one high schooler, commented that the Church in their eyes is primarily **white and European,** especially among bishops, priests, and seminarians (in the US context). A Black Catholic said that when they say they are Catholic, they are asked, “Why?” An African immigrant shared that women in their home country were not allowed to serve as lectors,

Eucharistic ministers, or servers. This person found the differences in inclusion, practice, and “teaching” between their African church and the local church “confusing”. “How can we teach our children when we don't have a consistent teaching by the Church?” Overall, the consensus was that the Church needs to be more accepting and open to learning the diverse reality of its members.

Communion was another area of concern when many were made to feel excluded. One participant sees exclusion from the Eucharistic table as a lack of accepting people of other faith traditions. This creates an unwelcoming environment. Another person said they were refused communion because of wearing a gay pride shirt. Using the participation in the Eucharist as a way of showing who is acceptable was deeply wounding for many who had experienced rejection, whether from Church policies or individual priestly decisions.

Finally, there was also an acknowledgement of how church culture varies with **location**. A couple people mentioned that it's difficult to be Catholic in the South, and that depending on where in the US you are, it can feel difficult to integrate into the church.

LEADERSHIP

The joys coming from leadership of the Catholic Church were quite often words of praise for the direction taken in the leadership of Pope Francis for being “a breath of fresh air”; “less focused on rules and more focused on love; “moving us into the 21st century”; “inspirational” and “courageous” in considering new ideas. This Synod process is one of the joys bringing hope that the people are being heard (though there is much skepticism woven into these comments whether or not change will really take place). There is a strong appreciation of his taking us away from focusing on a pro-life single issue priority or other “black and white” issues toward a multitude of social movements including the environment, promoting dialogue amongst factions and different faith traditions, and in general seeming more pastoral for all the people. “His concern for the Earth and social justice is refreshing”, and he is giving the outside world a more positive view of the Catholic Church.

Likewise, many voiced the joys brought to many by **women religious** who have been both powerful and good, modeling Christ's teachings or serving others as teachers, nurses, and humanitarians. “Our Catholic nuns are visible around the world in all settings, lifting up the poor and the lowly.”

The history of the Catholic Church is both a source of great joy, and unfortunately, also sorrow. A metaphor described the Church as a ship whose course must be regularly tended to keep it on course. One suggested that like Jesus flipping the tables in the temple, sometimes we too need to **not be afraid to change** how we do things. “Vatican II brought more spirituality and wisdom in its teachings”, making the Church more “relatable”, pulling us “toward a more mature understanding of our faith”, and calling us to a deeper commitment and participation as the hands of Christ serving others.

The rituals and diversity of the Universal Church have also brought much joy. Having the Rosary and the saints to guide us brings peace to many. There is an appreciation of different cultures but also of what unites us. We are able to connect to our faith wherever we go to Mass, whether in a different country or simply in a different cultural setting. However, some also recognized that while Mass seems universal, parishes and priests operate quite differently in America versus many other countries represented in our parish. Many appreciate the ecumenical alliance as being fruitful, enriching the exploration of own faith traditions. Additionally, many

recognize the incredible contributions of Catholic social justice initiatives worldwide, many organized by women religious, Catholic Charities, and local parishes to literally feed the poor and clothe the naked. This focus of actively being Christ for others and developing a servant leadership speak to many as the reason they are Catholic in an unshakable way. It's not a cloak they put on but an essential part of who they are!

These joys unify us and give us a universal and historical connectedness wherever we go, and participants in the Synod spoke often of being pleased to hear how other parishioners have actively experienced their faith. However, many spoke of sorrows along their journey with the Universal Church, often sharing specific wounds that have come about from a breaking of trust or connectedness with the hierarchy at various levels. The concerns often came from an undercurrent of clericalism that suggested the Universal Church often does not listen to the people. **More than any other sorrow, the frustration stated frequently was about the voices missing in the leadership of the Catholic Church as well as local parishes.** This is a group that includes most prominently women, people who identify as LGBTQ, divorced Catholics, couples without children, people of cultures or races different than the majority, and young people. Many spoke of wanting to feel included by the Universal Church, but traditions and rules seem to take precedent over Christ's love and inclusion of everyone, especially those most marginalized.

The absence of women in our Church leadership cannot be ignored. In almost every session, many asked for change to the policies and traditions "that exclude women from the priesthood, the diaconate, and the hierarchy." "We wonder why if we reject a literal interpretation of scripture, we cling to a literal interpretation of history, which is the basis of the argument for excluding women from ordination." Concerns were many: We are "missing out on good priests and leaders"; "If women and mothers had been priests, the sex abuse crisis would not have happened, and any indication of abuse would have been handled differently and immediately, saving untold numbers of victims"; "Male domination clearly isn't working"; "There is a shortage of priests, and it seems nonsensical and unsustainable to exclude women from ordination." Additionally, by not including women, is the Church "subjugating" and being dismissive of their unique yet crucial perspective? Some worry that this is clericalism; is the hierarchy simply fearful of losing power. It is hard to reconcile the leadership roles women have in the secular world while they are not allowed similar authority and voting rights in the Universal Church and local parishes. For a woman to even offer a reflection at a Mass, they must be given permission and approval from the male priest. These reflections may take the same Gospel but give a unique female point of view well-worth consideration by the congregation. Many participants voiced sadness at the lack of movement on this issue, and feel Catholics are simply "waiting for the leadership to catch up".

Along a similar vein, people expressed in numerous ways their **concerns about the restrictions for joining the priesthood.** The celibacy requirements seem limiting, even "absurd" to some of the laity as it denies a form of love to priests for what seemed like "antiquated," and "bureaucratic" reasons: "Do we only have unmarried priests because it is cheaper to support them?" Also, many felt that the unmarried and childless priesthood does not provide for the most helpful pastoral counsel as all decisions are ultimately made by "unmarried men who don't understand family in the same way I do". As one stated, "The world is so complex today, it really bothers me that people in the pulpit are not able to experience family life. We need pastors who are female, and married men too."

Along these lines, some asked why **the Universal Church is so "slow to respond"**, and "lacks nimbleness in making decisions or changes". More than one suggested the Church is the world's

“largest and oldest bureaucracy”, and another suggested, “It seems we are following when we should be leading”. Sadly, there is a “rigidity to the hierarchy that excludes people” when there are many voices that should be heard. While people often express local leadership in a positive light, the impression for some was that the Universal Church leadership is “too political, even arrogant”. “The U.S. bishops are too clerical, and are not listening to the pope.” As one stated, “The Church needs to be able to look at itself and see the problems in order to make progress towards solving them. It can’t just pretend there are no problems.” A call was stated by one to “be bold”, to lead in taking a stand on issues of such import.

Our Synod participants had quite positive feelings about our own priestly leadership, especially in recent years with the Jesuits and the Ignatian focus on relationship building. However, many agreed **that parishes operate differently depending on the local pastor or bishop**, and this has caused much frustration for people along their spiritual journey. The movement of priests between parishes, especially with no say from parishioners, has been jarring at times. It has led some to ask if the leadership is willing to listen to the needs of the people. Some thought the structure of Church leadership seems to be putting too much pressure and too much power into the hands on one person, the pastor. When he leaves, the environment of the entire local parish can change significantly, driving away some, perhaps to another parish, perhaps to another denomination. Can a lay parish council have final control over finances, ministries, and parish policies, leaving more room for a priest to be pastoral for his (or her) flock? Would this give parishioners more stability, comfort, and ability to grow in service to others?

One way parishes are affected by changing pastors is in the messages delivered from the pulpit, which may include **political undercurrents or outright directives**. “The weaponizing of the Eucharist must stop!” was said more than once. Participants stated that “Christ’s love shouldn’t be political”, and “the Church needs to stay out of the political arena”. It was clear that these concerns were not on the local level but on the level of the U.S. bishops and the Vatican hierarchy. Many recognized that they may only be getting part of a story when they hear these accounts of communion being denied to a politician, but often personal stories were brought up where a priest had denied communion to an LGBTQ person or a person already in pain as they dealt with a divorce. Abortion, said many, seemed like the “only” issue for leadership, to the point where some asked where is our leadership when the living are being harmed in numerous other ways? If this is a distortion of the Universal Church’s message, it was suggested we need to consider using social media to “tell our story better, the Good News of love for all!”

Beyond the secular political arena that distracts, several concerns about the politics of the Church were brought up, much that had to do with **clericalism**. People recognized this is not a concern without local priests but in the structure of the hierarchal system that perpetuates a disconnect between the parishioners and the leaders. This separation leads to mistakes on everyone’s part when “priests are put on a pedestal, often unintentionally, and people feel let down when they are found to be imperfect.” Obviously, it is painful to hear of the abuse of power by those we want to trust with our deepest thoughts. A call was made for “humility rather than arrogance”, a heavy, daily burden for any man to shoulder; are priests being given the needed mental health support so they can be counseled before harm comes to them or anyone else? Participants asked does the requirement of titles and elaborate vestments encourage this. “Our Jesuit priests often encourage the use of their first name rather than Fr. _____,” keeping us all on the same level. Nuns also often ask to be called by their given name, allowing for more personal relationships to form. One suggested that these incredible women have “been treated like free labor” by the Church leaders. Is this also a sign of the arrogance of only men having a seat at the table? Would giving **women**

religious voting rights change this, and encourage more women to serve a rapidly dwindling community?

Not surprisingly, concerns of **lay involvement in Church leadership** were mentioned often. Lack of lay power in decision making not just at the local level but also in the governing structure of the church was at the forefront. Some mentioned parishes with no advisory council at all which others agreed was not acceptable, but is that what we have as we move further up the hierarchal structure of the Catholic Church's leadership? Is clericalism keeping laity out of the hierarchy? As one stated, "The lived experiences and opinions of the laity need to be included when considering rules and regulations to be implemented/changed within the church." Additionally, people were asking for more coordination between parishes and dioceses. Could the confusion of messages and the concern of parishes being so different based on one pastor be alleviated if there was more interaction between both leaders and laity?

When discussing so many concerns and challenges pertaining to the Universal Church, it is easy to become cynical. The "**failure of the Church to resonate today**" and the heavy burden created by the sexual abuse crisis caused many to say the Church is "corrupt", "out of touch with today's world", and "resistant to change", all touching on this undercurrent of clericalism. This reputation has become an obstacle because of the abuse crises around the world still coming to light, the "sins of white supremacy", and "lack of support to those during the AIDS crisis". These have all been ways people have felt wounded by their own Church. Multiple people made statements about feeling LGBTQ people are made "no less in God's image than me" and should not be called by this institution as disordered. The Church's stance on this one issue alone has driven away too many young adults from the Catholic Church.

Another wedge issue that has wounded many is the process for annulments. Several called the experience grueling, rigid, and legalistic. While understanding divorce should not be done casually, additional harm was experienced by both the complexity of the process and an often seemingly "uncaring" approach. A divorce is already an emotionally distressing experience, especially when there are children involved. Additionally, households are broken along with friendships and long-time family ties. People voiced experiences of great pain with little pastoral care to help them through one of the most difficult decisions they have made. Then to have their adult children be asked to be witnesses to declare the marriage was never valid made it all the more painful. One asked, is there really a need for this process at all? Can't divorce be about helping to bind the wounds felt by the breaking of a once loving relationship? Is this an area where a married priesthood could have more compassion and understanding?

There is a call, even an urgency, for many participants in this Synod to implore the leadership of the Church to "update" and "evolve" its policies and procedures so they are more in line with the faithful who greatly value the joys the Church provides. People essentially asked, "How can we be bold leaders who model love for everyone unequivocally as Jesus did, as God does?" Can we truly live the directive to serve others as the hands of Christ without hesitation, not to change them, but to accept each for who they are? As Christ's Church, how can we improve our Church structures to enable us to all grow as servant leaders for others?

GOSPEL MESSAGE & CORE VALUES

Many of the comments in the listening sessions overlap in our four broad themes. One area that underlaid all conversation was how the Church stays true to its core Gospel values as taught and lived by Jesus. One participant said, "We are Christians before we are Catholic... We need to be

steeped in the Word of God. God's love.” There is a sense that many see the Catholic Church as not living up to its values as witnessed by an **unhealthy exercise of power, use of fear and guilt, a preoccupation with dogma, its “outdated” views of sexuality, and its secular politics.** At the same time people see the ways the Church is committed to serve the needs of all people and how it seeks to connect life to faith. Some noted that the Church can be—like Jesus—a source of comfort in difficult life transitions through **pastoral priests, rituals, and prayer.** They are proud to be Catholic. “Church is my connection to the person of Jesus.” One person shared that she was pregnant when she married her husband and that while her parents did not handle it well, their priest pastorally said they should be celebrated. However, another person said “the Church kicked me out” and was not allowed to marry because she was pregnant.

Parishioners stated that they find great joy in the Universal Church’s core values of **social justice and care for the poor, art and ritual, tradition and history, the intellectual tradition, and the sacraments.** “Can the church use its history and art to promote [faith] and bring back the Masses?” one participant asked. For another person, the writings from the Church tradition nurtures souls. “The Church has shaped how I see the world, how I understand that all people have dignity, my image of God,” said another. And another participant: “I chose the career path I did because of my Catholic identity—a desire to serve immigrants and the poor.”

Worship as a place for comfort and connection held as a core value for many. “Eucharist a powerful draw for me,” one person said. Lots of people liked how the Mass was the same everywhere. “The rituals - I wouldn’t want to throw it all out”; “I get to Mass at least 4 times a week”. But there was a concern voiced that some may be trying to return to a pre-Vatican II form of worship and a kind of rigidity that forces people out of the church, contradicting Gospel values. A **weaponizing of the Eucharist** contributes to this also. One person mentioned their sadness over the legalism around the “invalid” baptisms reported in the news. “I start to wonder, do I fit in anymore? Do I want to support the legalism of the Church?”; “Divorced, and did not take communion for years because of it.” Communion can be seen in the negative, withheld until “fixed”. Rather than a preoccupation with rules and dogma, one person commented, we should “focus on loving each other.”

While listening session participants acknowledged the goodness of the Church’s universal community, many lamented about the **division** they see that often follows political lines, “seeing the nastiness and divisions that aren't charitable.” “How do we differentiate [ourselves from] the evil and sin around us and in the world?” one young adult asked. Others see how American culture has crept into the church. “Polarization of society has come into the church,” someone noted. “There are great factions.” There is worry about schisms. Some see the criticism from Catholics of the US president over policy decisions. “Church mission is to bring people to God, not to get into politics.” Unfortunately, the secular media can tend to focus on negative sides of Church news, not getting the whole story, one person commented. **Abortion**, not surprisingly, is a divisive issue. “I don't like that Catholics seem often to be single-issue Christians. There is more to being Catholic than being against abortion.”; “What I care about is part of church teaching but feels like a footnote in the Universal Church compared to abortion.” Many expressed a sense of a “classism” and “categorizing” in the Church. “We look the other way for some sins but not for others.” Another participant said the “pro-life” stance is narrowly focused on abortion. “What about the lives already born? Are we looking to support these lives?”

Division within the Church can also manifest itself in the **different ways people wish to worship.** “[It’s] challenging to be judged for not experiencing Mass in a traditional (vs. contemporary) [practice]. [It’s] not always welcoming when groups of Catholics judge (with prescriptive ideas) the

way I practice my faith.”; “The message of ‘love and relationship building’ gets lost in the doctrine of rituals and routine, both in the Mass and in the messaging.”

Another predominant issue people question around the Church’s core values is **sexuality**. “Church’s view on sexuality are driving me and my peers away,” one participant shared. Another said the focus on Mary’s perpetual virginity is unhelpful. “We are a church built on repressing sexuality.” The way the Church addresses **LGBTQ** sexuality is seen by some as “out of synch with current understanding of human development.” “The church is terrible at welcoming gays,” one person said. “That’s not Jesus.” One assumes youth go elsewhere to find acceptance when they don’t find it in the Catholic Church. “As a gay man, I don’t think the church journeys with me, or is interested. (Not the pope, but the Church). I think the Church wishes I didn’t exist. Because I am ‘intrinsically disordered;’ I can’t have a normal relationship, can’t have children, can’t work in a Catholic school. The church is not sorry for how it has treated us, not sorry for those it abused.” Others lamented the shame placed on people who use artificial birth control. “Being allowed to only use NFP to space our children,” one person said felt “oppressive.”

“**Catholic guilt**” was also an area of lament. “I always feel like I’m supposed to feel bad.” While many participants praised Catholic education, some remembered Catholic school nuns who were “very rigid” and how the pre-Vatican II church felt “oppressive” and “fire and brimstone”. “For many years, I felt like I gave to the church but it was a one-way relationship—the church did not give back to me or replenish me.” One person, who had a non-Christian father, said as a child that they were worried about their father’s salvation because they were told that if you are not baptized you would go to hell. Another remembered being taught as a child that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church. “I grew up with a very judgmental Catholic Church. Very strict—not going to heaven if not Catholic. I couldn’t even date or go to church with a non-Catholic.”

Our parishioners hold the Universal Church to a high standard – that of Jesus and his Gospel. “[We] need to emphasize ‘true message’ of the Church,” one person said. Some see that the Church could do more to reach out more to people who “need salvation” and that the Church should focus more on scripture and a personal relationship with Christ. We are “willing to listen to the heart and spirit of others,” one woman noted. “We are all on the road to Jesus.”

TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

How has the universal Catholic Church become more transparent and accountable? During these challenging times as many crises of the past have been revealed, where has the Church made changes to address past wrongs that allowed the abuses to not only occur but be hidden by the very people we trusted to be “above” this? **No event in recent Church history has rocked the faithful more than the sexual abuse crises and the other abuses coming to light** in orphanages, convents, schools, and churches around the globe. Therefore, this recurring theme brought few comments of joys but many calls for continued work on transparency and accountability, asking for immediate and intentional effort to make changes so such painful harms can never occur again.

Three joys did come to light: First, some recognized that the U.S.C.C.B. put in place protocols and procedures for educating people to both recognize and report abuse and the potential for abuse, causing the number of cases to be sharply reduced (as far as we can tell). While not mentioned by name, some knew of the John Jay report, Virtus Training, and other changes implemented. Second, some have heard of programs in seminaries meant to root out men who may have psychological issues that could lead to abuse. Finally, a few mentioned the importance of

education and transparency of Church practices to shine light into the darkness of these abuses and ensure accountability of leadership to the faithful. The trust of many has been broken, some irreparably, but hope springs as the laity become more aware and participatory.

Obviously, **the sexual abuse crises** came up often in Synod discussions as people discussed their own family history of abuse by a priest or that of other victims. The abuse was described as “heart-wrenching causing a crisis of faith”, a “stain” and an “embarrassment”. A parent of young children said that despite a long family history of Catholic school education, she would “never send her children to a Catholic school now for fear of their safety”.

For those who were not victims, the cover-up seemed almost more soul-crushing. Knowing how much suffering was caused, many found it painful to see how the local parishes, the bishops, and the entire leadership of the Church seemed to prefer hiding and “moving past” the knowledge of the harm as the way to solve the problem. Whether this was out of ignorance of the psychology of the perpetrators, concerns for scandal, or because of financial concerns, the hurt remains, and the suffering continues for many. Some say we have never responded adequately to this crisis, with the all-out condemnation, transparency, and accountability it deserves. This seems to come from the continuing reveals of additional incidents across the country and the world.

Participant’s reactions included **intense discomfort at the hypocrisy** of this. “Evil abuses of all kinds are magnified when they are committed by the Church.” “Clericalism allowed this to happen” as people, both priests and congregations, assumed clerics could do no wrong. Additionally, the fact that “gay people are condemned” yet priests were participating in same-sex acts intensified the anger as well as drove even more away from Catholicism. “We were supposed to be better than that.” Finally, when the Church models avoiding responsibility for its failures, what does that teach our young people? Several indicated that there is a crisis in the Church about **how we serve our young adults and asked how we can keep the Church relevant to them.** This crisis has resulted in a generational “mistrust of authority because of how that authority has been used”. When they see the leaders as hypocritical, many no longer see the Catholic Church as having an internal moral compass to which it is accountable, and have “lost respect for the institution”. They are opting instead for finding their own communities outside of church. Sadly, this crisis of abuse has led many to a crisis of faith and concern for the continuance of the Catholic Church.

How do the people ask that the Church move on from here? Concerns about the bureaucracy of the institutional church came up again as a reason for its moving slowly and not being transparent. Are “legal fears” keeping us from responding with immediacy? Participants entreat the leadership “to deal with scandals head on – don’t wait for the media coverage”, but admit it and truly help those who have suffered. Many believe that having women and parents “at the table” when these abuses came to light would have substantially changed the trajectory: abuses would have been stopped, victims would have been fewer, and protocols would have changed. Additionally, **many wondered about seminarian training.** What are the qualifications for candidates, and have these standards been reassessed by external overseers? Is psychological testing done to ensure good mental health for a strenuous and emotionally demanding job as a priest? Do all orders of priests have the same standards? What protocols are in place to offer continuing and necessary support to our clergy?

Beyond this single issue, other **concerns about transparency were voiced.** Each seemed to be asking for education and greater involvement with the process of decision making so they could understand and collaborate as equals. For example, participants expressed a need for more clarity

regarding the leadership structure of the Church. They wanted to understand how decisions are made about, for instance, the closing of a local church or school; there may have been a legitimate reason, but parishioners felt left out of the process. Why are priests moved from a parish, and often so suddenly? Who is managing the finances of the local parish all the way up to the Vatican and how are those funds being used? While many have personally experienced decisions in their own lives made by one person in power, the hope is our institution is better than that. Are our policies and procedures created through a collaborative process of discernment?

Without clear transparency, the people of the Church voiced concerns of feeling adrift or left out, even ignored. **The path towards healing perhaps lies in this Synodic call** to be more inclusive of diverse voices in leadership, and provide continuing opportunities for parishioners to grow collaboratively with the Church in the decision making process.

Question 3: *As you listen to these experiences, where do you hear the voice of the Spirit? What is the Spirit asking of us? What are the points to be confirmed, the prospects for change, the steps to be taken? Where do we hear consensus? What paths are opening up for our church?*

Participants heard a call to deep and active **listening**, to Gospel-based **love** and care for all in our community and extended community, and to embrace of humble, accountable, inclusive **leadership**. There was a palpable sense of **gratitude** among participants for what felt like a novel opportunity to come together and dialogue with others in the community in this manner, as well as a cautious sense of hope that the process would yield fruits. Some also expressed that they either did not hear the voice of the Spirit or were not sure that they did, perhaps reflecting both the novelty of dialoguing and listening to one another in this format and the weariness of waiting for change in the Church that feels slow or unlikely to come about. Overall, there was a sense that the synod **process has been worthwhile** in and of itself, regardless of its outcome, and is an “**opening**” for evolving and for cultivating what is good.

INCLUSION, WELCOMING & COMMUNITY

We desire that all kinds of people and family models feel welcome, included, known, and valued in our faith community. We see that **unity** need not be at the expense of the rich **diversity** that makes our community vibrant. Indeed, we recognize that divisive attitudes and politicization of issues weaken the bonds that undergird the community. We appreciate being asked to share our experiences and what we think the Spirit is asking of us. We like having a say in the future of the church, are grateful to connect with one another, and wish to work toward a more **synodal way of being church together** going forward, both here at STM and as a universal church.

LEADERSHIP

We have confidence in our leaders when they are **among us**, relatable and human, wanting to know us. We would like to see more **lay involvement** and engagement in church governance. We would especially like to see more **women** in leadership and hear from women. We have a sense that the world is changing and evolving all around us but are concerned that the leadership’s rigidity and preoccupation with rules does not allow openness to needed and appropriate change. We imagine modern solutions for ensuring that both administrative and pastoral responsibilities are in the hands of capable, qualified persons who have sufficient and appropriate support to succeed in those roles.

GOSPEL MESSAGE & CORE VALUES

We hear the Spirit calling us to ground all of our words and actions in **love toward God and all others**. The church should “address hopelessness,” “evangelize more effectively,” and not lose sight of our mission. We should be courageous and empathetic in our commitment to justice. We are called to emulate Jesus’ compassion. “The church is caught up in rules that feel unwelcoming and judgmental.” We are called to “...be tolerant of one another. Practice love, mercy and forgiveness—each of us and together as a people.”

TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

This practice of love, mercy and forgiveness in the vein of Jesus’ example extends to transparency and accountability; we are called on simultaneously to love those who have failed us and to hold

them accountable for their actions. We see transparency and accountability regarding the abuse crisis in the Church as requiring contrition, atonement, and accessible information about the Church's finances and financial decisions. We want the messaging from the upper echelons of the church hierarchy to reflect modern society and align with that of the people in local communities. We seek more learning opportunities so we can better understand how the Church works, including how seminarians are vetted and how they are formed. We hear a call for two-way communication in the form of lay inclusion, especially of women, in all levels of leadership in the Church, creating a shared respect for the concerns of all.

Listening session participants indicated gratitude for the opportunity to share their journeys with one another, seeing within the experience a future path for more dialogue and reason to hope for unity in the church. Participants found especial joy in connecting with one another on journeys that matter to them, particularly in the wake of a global pandemic marked by isolation and lack of access to the Eucharist. Participants, glad to be invited to share and listen, expressed happiness in that the call for the synod has come from Pope Francis, indicating the Holy Father's desire that we all participate in discerning the future of the Church. Participants' level of engagement in sessions that asked that they be fully present to and respectful of one another's journeys bespeaks a level of trust among fellow parishioners and in parish leadership that will serve us well as we integrate the fruits of the listening sessions into parish planning and life.