



# Diocese of Sacramento

## Synthesis of Synod Listening Sessions

To prepare for the Synod of Bishops on Synodality in 2023, Bishop Jaime Soto asked parish pastoral councils, men and women religious, Catholic Charities agencies and many other Catholic organizations in the diocese to host listening sessions for the local phase - held both in person and online. Parishes and groups were asked to share the notes from these conversations. The listening sessions make up the initial phase of the two-year synodal process.

Parishes, groups, and organizations held two-hour listening sessions in English and Spanish. The meetings began with prayer, followed by videos on the synod, the reading of a pre-selected Gospel passage, silent reflection and time for sharing in small groups.

Participants reflected on the biblical image of the multiplication of the loaves (Matthew 14:13-21) and answered four reflection questions. Following are syntheses of the synod listening sessions.



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# QUESTION #1

## Reflecting on the image – What experiences of the Church come to mind that are life-giving?

### English Listening Session Synthesis

#### **SERVICE**

A good number of the participants commented and expressed in a similar fashion that the Church's service to the poor and needy is a life-giving experience.

- Some shared how this was particularly experienced in the last couple of years. There was inspiration to remain firm in their commitment to contribute and help the church financially. There was a recognition of the efforts made by organizations such as St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Knights of Columbus, etc.
- Some shared that having the ability to use their gifts/charisms as lay people to serve the church was life-giving.

#### **COMMUNITY**

The participants commented on the sense of community, communion, and harmony as a life-giving experience in the community.

- They recognized the diversity in their parishes and the need to continue working on the extending the outreach to more people. There are a number of participants that pointed out that the hospitality and welcome they experienced in their church/parishes was life-giving. Some saw the great need for extending the outreach efforts of the Church.
- A good number of participants commented on the necessity of greater inclusivity in the Church.

#### **SACRAMENTS**

The Sacraments (particularly cited were the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick), were life giving for the participants.

- As an example, they appreciated the efforts made by the priests to persist in administering them during the pandemic. They appreciate the nourishment they received through the Sacraments celebrated, to which some commented on the prayer and worship they experienced (e.g., music)

#### **FAITH FORMATION**

Faith formation was a life-giving source.

- Some recognized the importance of building up faith formation efforts especially to the current and subsequent generations of the church (youth and young adults). There was some who expressed sadness that their adult children no longer go to church or practice any faith, but still saw how the faith formation ministry of the Church can continue to be life-giving.
- Some were encouraged by efforts to reach out to families and build up the domestic church

- Some mentioned youth and young adult ministry activities and retreats
- Some preaching in the parishes were acknowledged as a life-giving experience. They saw the Word of God proclaimed and preached as a life-giving fount.

*\*Generally, people saw on the image how Jesus fed the multitude, the need and desire of the people to be fed, the diversity of the people in the picture (albeit some commented their inability to relate to the picture --- very European).*

## Spanish Listening Session Synthesis

Most of the participants were people who are already involved in ministry. They expressed their strong belief in the real and true presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and how the Church nourishes us with its rich teachings. They also emphasized how unity in the Church reflects the body of Christ. Unity in the community is reflected in solidarity and compassion for those most in need.

Here is an illustration: “The attitude of the people [in the image] reflects the reality of the Church: some people are working together, distributing the bread, looking out for others. Another group of people is attentive to the movement of Jesus, others gratefully receiving the bread and others who, despite being so close to Jesus, seem to be indifferent to his presence, his Word, and the food he is providing.

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## QUESTION #2

### **What do you bring to this encounter with Jesus that is burdening and challenging?**

## English Listening Session Synthesis

Synod participants brought burdens and challenges generally along the following three themes: distractions, identity, and worthiness.

### **DISTRACTIONS**

The secular world offers many competing priorities that draw attention away from Jesus. The patience to sit in prayer or await an answer from a prayer is in stark contrast to the busyness of balancing work and life, or the immediate gratification offered by social media and technology.

At the same time, distractions are not simply secular vs. church. Divisiveness within the Church is a growing distraction that draws attention away from Jesus. There are competing views on politics and its role in the Church, on how the bishops handled—and continue to handle—the pandemic, and on how Mass should be celebrated.

The pandemic sparked frustration in those who felt the bishops should never have closed churches. On the other hand, it brought about anxiety for those who are still trying to re-integrate themselves into a reopened world, even including Mass. The pandemic exposed the Church’s vulnerability in the ability to meaningfully connect to its parishioners without a habitual Sunday observance. Leadership and

parishioners will need to be able to put in the work to get back those that fell away and stopped going to Mass by being out of practice.

## **IDENTITY**

Some participants feel like they need to “defend” being Catholic instead of being able to joyfully share the Good News. The handling of the clergy abuse crisis has made it difficult to proclaim being Catholic in this culture. The lack of roles for women makes the Church seem out of touch. There is a disconnect between Jesus’ teaching of love of neighbor, and the Church’s practice of not welcoming certain groups. Being Catholic in the world carries a burden that is indefensible.

The Church needs to rebuild its identity and its trustworthiness, both inside and beyond its parish walls. There is a need to share what the Church is for, rather than focus on what people cannot do, or cannot be. Traditions and rules have become more important than unifying and loving our neighbor.

## **WORTHINESS**

Parents and grandparents worry that their children/grandchildren may never come back to Mass. They question if they have failed as parents. Participants feel ill-equipped to share their faith with others or defend their faith with their questioning kids and society.

Worthiness also manifests itself in the work that participants feel they could be doing but not feeling like the Church wants their gifts. LGBT, divorced and remarried, single parents, immigrants, and people of color—to name a few groups—feel that they’ve been placed on the outside with lack of opportunities to contribute to the life of the Church.

Participants also expressed concerns over those who feel unworthy to approach the Eucharist. Being chastised in confession, or believing preconceived notions of Church teaching are contributing to this feeling. There is a sense that there is more judgment inside the Church than outside of it, and so the outside becomes more appealing.

Permeating through each of these themes is a lack of invitation and welcome. Parish leaders do a poor job of actively inviting current parishioners to participate, or they actively turn away current parishioners by placing them on the margins because the priest or minister believes a certain way. Outreach to fallen away Catholics is scarce, which leaves their parents and grandparents with only a prayer to bring them back. It has become easier to judge someone than get to know their situation, their humanity. The pandemic has already increased the feelings of isolation and made it difficult to connect with others. The ills of the world continue to seep into the Church and turn us against each other. We, the body of Christ, are doing little to combat that and bring ourselves together.

## Spanish Listening Session Synthesis

The participants expressed their view that it is not easy to be a leader in a parish. Many of the current leaders do not create space for new people and invite only their friends and family into leadership roles. The lack of formation for ministry leaders is also a challenge for some of the people who participated. Another burden mentioned was how parents find it difficult to communicate with their children and transmit the faith to them.

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## QUESTION #3

### **Where do you sense the Spirit is leading you to grow more deeply, to engage more fully?**

#### English Listening Session Synthesis

A: In reading the answers to Question #3, it became obvious that there were five recurring themes or topics. These recurring themes were:

1. The desire to pray more
2. The desire for more faith sharing and faith formation opportunities
3. Acknowledging the impact and importance of small Bible prayer groups and Bible Study opportunities
4. The importance of service to others/ministries
5. Trust in God

B: In addition, the following desires were routinely mentioned as ways that could assist one to grow more deeply and engage more fully:

- Programs for kids, young adults; listen to where they are
- Support for young parents
- Create a sense of community - engage on a personal level
- Create spiritual growth opportunities
- Catholic counseling available at parishes

A: The most common response to the question was one's desire to pray more, as this was mentioned routinely. Participants also acknowledged that in order for them to grow more deeply and to engage more fully, they desired more opportunities for faith formation and faith sharing in the parish, deanery or virtual. It was expressed routinely how much a bible study experience has allowed the person to grow more deeply and to engage more fully. Many individuals mentioned that they are turning to Bishop Baron's Bible Lessons which is very telling of where the hunger is and what we are not providing locally. Many of the participants expressed the desire to serve others. Those who already do so, mentioned that this was a critical component to their faith. Others mentioned that they have a strong desire to do so, but haven't committed to anything. Finally, many expressed they need to trust in God more.

B: There were a few consistent topics that rose to the top regarding how the Church can assist with ways for people to grow more deeply and engage more fully. Providing a variety of programs for various ages of children and young adults was often mentioned. Some compared their stagnant parish to the mega-Christian churches that offer families so much. It was also evident that young parents feel the need and desire to be welcomed and supported so that the parish can feel like a second home. Creating a sense of parish community, so one could engage on a personal level, was also mentioned throughout. Many expressed that they wished there were more spiritual growth opportunities in their parish. Additionally, it was often mentioned the need/desire for available Catholic counseling through the parish.

## Spanish Listening Session Synthesis

Those present expressed the need for formation to go out and evangelize. They emphasized testimony as a concrete way to do this. It was a common theme that in some ways, the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, needs to reach out to youth and families, especially those who no longer attend Church. Respect for others, patience and listening skills were areas of growth expressed by the participants.

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## QUESTION #4

**After we heard all this: What touches you the most? What begins to emerge? What is the most significant moment for you?**

## English Listening Session Synthesis

### **A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE**

Overall, participants viewed the listening sessions as a spiritual exercise. There were frequent references to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit in their conversations.

Many participants expressed experiences of joy, inspiration and hope as a result of this spiritual experience.

### **COMMUNITY BUILDING**

Participants also viewed the listening sessions as a predominantly community building experience.

- The opportunity to be heard in this format was welcomed. Most participants felt the listening sessions to be safe environments where they could share without being judged.
- Many of the participants noted that they felt they had shared values and experiences with the other session participants. Specifically, they felt that most were alike in their struggles and stresses. This realization was comforting.
- Out of the shared struggles, many participants spoke of the need for continued trust in God.
- Also widely felt was a sense of connection with one another, the sense of belonging to the one Body of Christ.

### **DISCIPLESHIP AND HOSPITALITY**

This spiritual and community building exercise also led to an outline of what it means to be a disciple and what it means to be a Church.

- Participants commented on the need to be engaged in their faith. To use one's own gifts and/or to lead by example.
- Many participants felt a continued call to serve those in need.

- Participants touched on the need for the Church to be welcoming and inclusive of others. Specifically, the vulnerable, the poor, youth, fallen away, women, LGBTQ, other ethnic groups, etc.

## Spanish Listening Session Synthesis

### **IMPORTANT EXPERIENCE**

- We recognized the need to give space to elderly people, to deepen marriages, and expand families so they can find a place in the heart of the Church, to be a bridge of light and fraternity.
- We need to improve the use of technology to be effective evangelizers.

### **ENCOURAGING**

It is good to see that there are many people ready to respond to the call of this Synod. The Church has not withered in this pandemic, it has managed to rise to the occasion. A desire for renewal emerges, to create new things, not to wait for the synod to give us answers but to start moving ahead with the fruit of the conversations that took place in our parishes and communities. We, the Church, are asked to accompany the suffering of migrants, who are far from their loved ones, and to integrate into them in a new culture. We are called to help with their physical and mental illnesses. They can't go out alone, they need us. To help more comprehensively we need to be united and explore solutions.