



## People of God

Empowered by our baptism and embolden by Pope Francis' call to synodality, the Lay Synod Initiative at Glastonbury Abbey, Hingham, MA presents this document as a summary of five months of listening sessions open to anyone who wished to contribute their thoughts and ideas.

The cornerstone toward a synodal Church is found in the New Testament, where it is acclaimed that all baptized members have "different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit....To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit." (1 Corinthians 12: 4-11) We believe that the Church is a faith community comprised of the People of God. By defining the Church as the People of God, all those who are baptized have a responsibility for its mission and future.

Just as the People of God from both the Old and New Testament pilgrimed on a journey, we believe, as does Pope Francis, the journey continues within the Church today. Although the Church is divinely founded, it has been travelling for thousands of years, and, as in all journeys, it has existed within the human condition and has sometimes strayed from its roots and path.

The preparation phase for the 2023 Synod is intended for pilgrim travelers to walk together and learn from one another, to inspire people to dream about the Church that God calls us to be, to enable our dreams to be articulated, and to restore our faith. We believe that the Holy Spirit walks with us forging a path ahead. "The path is not there; it is solved by walking."

Because of our listening, dialoguing, and discerning, we have learned much from each other as well as from Church documents and Scripture. We feel this is a moment for us to contribute to Church renewal and to carve out a future path for the Church. "There is no need to create another Church, but to create a different Church," says Pope Francis, drawing on the words of the Dominican theologian Fr. Yves Congar.

It is within this context that we summarize our reflections and outline concrete steps that can create a path that will allow the Christ-centered mission of the Church to flourish. As expressed in the prayer on the anniversary of Oscar Romero's death, "We plant seeds that will one day grow, we water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development."

## Hierarchy

The Church was born as a community on Pentecost. With the enormous growth of the Church, roles, rules, and structures were created over time and the Church eventually institutionalized into a pyramid top-down model leaving behind the sense of synodality and community that was present in the early Church. With that evolution, the vitality of the message of Jesus was dampened or, some will argue, lost. Ilia Delio, a Franciscan writer, stated “For centuries the Church has operated like a well-oiled machine, but the oil is running low, and the machine is running down. “

The clear majority of participants at the Synod listening sessions expressed the feeling that many in the hierarchy view the Church as an entity in and of itself, an institution to be preserved, rather than a conduit for people to experience Christ and his gospel message. Many believe that the Church has become stagnant on its journey thus becoming irrelevant to some, especially the young. Instead of empowering its members, many Synod participants believe that some of the Church’s hierarchy are intent on clinging to the past and its traditions – slow to change and resistant to those who see a different path forward for the Church. In the United States it has become all too apparent that the bishops are split between rigid and pastoral or conservative and liberal with little consistent voice.

Many in the Synod sessions described the hierarchy as judgmental, aloof, and overbearing. Participants saw few vehicles to communicate with those in power. There was a strong desire for an effective method for Catholics to communicate with the hierarchy both vertically and laterally as equals. “We need a listening Church” was a common theme among the session participants.

The massive sex abuse scandals throughout the world that the Church either tolerated or condoned revealed a major flaw in the patriarchal governance model of the Church. In addition, considering the recent Vatican financial scandals, Synod participants felt that the Church needs to evaluate its wealth and be more financially transparent and irreproachable. Equality, subsidiarity, shared accountability, transparency, effective communication, checks and balances, and an overwhelming option for the truth, would reduce corruption and make the Church more fit for its mission.

Synodality, by its very nature and if genuinely implemented, will begin to move the Church away from its top-down structure and lead to a better form of governance. The latest document promulgated by Pope Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (Proclaiming the Gospel, 2022) is a hopeful sign that the Church is moving away from the pyramid model of governance toward a more synodal approach, one in which the governance of the Church belongs to the whole People of God.

### Recommendations:

1. Implement the steps toward a more synodal Church as outlined in *Praedicate Evangelium*
2. Resolve conflict/split in the Church both within the United States and globally

## Clericalism

Nowhere in the New Testament do you find the word lay or cleric as they were all a community of believers. “For as one body we have many parts. While believers have different callings and gifts, they are all servants of the Lord.” (Romans 12:6). It was over the course of history that the growing Church institutionalized the role of the laity and the role of priests.

In June 2019, the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests put out a white paper on clericalism . It defines clericalism as “an expectation, leading to abuses of power, that ordained ministers are better than and should be over everyone else among the People of God.” It is not just clerics who are clerical. The laity often foster clericalism by always deferring to “Father” and putting “Father” on a pedestal.

It’s hard to historically pinpoint where clericalism began. Some may say that clericalism has existed since the beginning, when the Apostles began arguing among themselves as to which of them was the greatest. According to Luke, Jesus showed them a child and said: “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest.” As the world became more patriarchal, clericalism took root and continues to the present time.

Pope Francis in his 2022 homily for the 400th anniversary of St. Ignatius Loyola’s and St. Francis Xavier’s canonization stated, “Let us not allow ourselves to be sucked into a clericalism that leads to rigidity or an ideology that leads to divisiveness.” The notion of the Church as the People of God means that each member, cleric or lay, has a legitimate voice and a truly significant role to play in the mission of the Church. This belief was also ratified in two major documents of Vatican II: *Gaudium et Spes* (GS, 43) and *Lumen Gentium* (LG32-37). These two documents didn’t end the jockeying for power and position but did provide a simple precept that should guide us as we rebuild our Church. As Pope Francis has said, “Jesus did not tell the apostles to form an exclusive and elite group.”

Since clericalism arises from an elitist and exclusivist vision of a vocation, many at the Synod listening sessions spoke of the need for seminaries to combat clericalism in the training and formation of future priests. Thomas Sergiovanni, a Lillian Radford Professor of Education at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, states that “Servant-leadership is more easily provided if the leader understands that serving others is important, but that the most important thing is to serve the values and ideas that shape the school”, in this case the Church. Participants at the listening sessions suggested that seminaries should again employ women faculty members or have seminarians receive their academic training at local Catholic colleges among a vastly divergent student body. In addition, many participants spoke of the need of priest to be required to have continuous education in order to be reenergized and renewed so to meet the needs of the faithful especially where so many priests are presently overwhelmed.

Lastly, participants in the Synod sessions were adamant that there is an obligation for the laity to not accept clericalism. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have a mix of married, formerly married, celibate, and women priests? This would allow priests to have common experiences that the faithful have. It works for other traditions, why not ours?”

#### Recommendations:

1. Establish different models of seminary training
2. Open priesthood to women and married men
3. Change the discipline regarding priestly celibacy
4. Require continuous education of priests

## Laity

When asked in our listening sessions about the place of the laity, there was a resounding response that “We are the Church.” Many often spoke of the disconnect between the clergy and the laity especially as it relates to their everyday experiences. The overarching sentiment among the Synod participants is that there needs to be a synergy or at least a hope for synergy between the laity and the parish priest. There was universal consensus that there needs a more pastoral connection with and a respect for the talents and gifts the laity bring to the Church.

Vatican II was the first Ecumenical Council to deal with the topic of the laity. Vatican II, through its documents *Lumen Gentium* (LG) and *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) emphasized the importance of the Church as a communion of grace and that the ministry engaged in by the laity is not something “given” to us by the hierarchy. Rather it is something we are called to by our God, by virtue of our baptism. By describing the Church as the People of God, the entire People of God share a common dignity and vocation and are on a journey together, each member playing his or her crucial role. (LG 32-34). The mission of the Church requires that the priest and bishops are to “employ the laity’s prudent advice... confidently assign duties to them in the service of the Church, allowing them freedom and room for action.... encourage lay people so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative.” (LG 37)

Catholic parishioners are hungry for priests who connect with and pastorally serve. With the hemorrhaging of young families leaving the Church, this is an urgent need. Often, participants in the Synod sessions spoke of experiences where priests seemed to have been moved into parishes with little or no thought to the needs of people. Approaches mentioned were that parish lay people be involved in the interview and evaluation process of parish priests to determine if there is a fit or synergy between the laity of the parish and the priest(s)’s unique style; that the parishes be administered by lay members thus allowing the priests to be the spiritual leaders of the parish rather than the manager or, in some cases, the owner. There seemed to be universal agreement among all the Synod participants that parish priests need to

embrace synodality and help promote shared responsibility for the Church among all the baptized.

As a corollary to this, Synod participants recognized that the laity need to be educated and encouraged to think critically, to allow reason to inform faith. Many participants expressed gratitude for their Catholic education at all levels as well as various programs such as Cursillos and retreats. The education of the adult Catholic, however needs to go beyond what they learned as a child.

The latest decree from Rome, *Praedicate Evangelium*, seems to open the door to the laity, including women, to take a more active and responsible role in the Church. The transition will be difficult given the human instinct to resist change but, if implemented, will provide a sound roadmap for the journey ahead.

#### Recommendations:

1. Involve laity in choosing and annually assessing their parish priests
2. Revise the parish structure by including the laity in the administration as well as the spiritual and social life of the parish
3. Create meaningful outreach to young families
4. Provide educational and leadership programs for the laity.

## Women

One of the most animated conversations that repeatedly occurred in our Synod sessions was the place women have in the Church today, or rather the exclusion of women from any meaningful roles in the life of the Church. People in the listening sessions strongly felt that, in the Church's journey, the role of women has been erased despite the prominent role they played in both the Old and New Testament and the remarkable contribution they have made and continue to make to the Church today.

From Jesus' own mother to the women who befriended him, to the women who stood by him during his passion and crucifixion, to those who proclaimed the Resurrection, Jesus treated women as essential to his mission. The female contribution in the early Church was in no way secondary. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (3:28) begins with the fundamental principle that "...there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." There were women deacons in the early Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles such as Phoebe. They proclaimed the good news; they served at the Eucharistic table; they ministered to the sick and impoverished.

Then in our lifetime there were women such as Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa who, though not having the title deacon, served the poor and ministered to the marginalized. In the United

States women religious built the Catholic educational and health system. Today the same is true of many women who lead parishes and serve as catechists, chaplains, and other ministries.

In light of the work of women in furthering the mission of the Church, participants in the Synod sessions agreed that even though Jesus wasn't sexist, the institutional Church is. Somehow amnesia set into the patriarchal Church along its way. Women are struggling to find a place in the pilgrim Church. Participants concurred that when an entire sacrament is denied you solely because of your gender, that is textbook sexism. What is preventing women from being able to receive all the sacraments?

Pope Francis has called for "a more inclusive presence for women" in the Catholic Church. Although Pope Francis stated the door is closed on the question of ordination for women to the priesthood, he has been emphatic in his call for a stronger presence of women elsewhere. While women have slowly gained certain leadership roles in the Vatican, you still can count on one hand those who hold top-level positions in the secretariats, congregations and pontifical councils. Sr Nathalie Becquart, Sr. Nicoletta Vittoria Spezzati and Dr. Flaminia Giovanelli are three examples of women who serves as Undersecretaries. There are other women of course, many of whom are theologians, but of those in positions of undersecretary and above, less than three percent are women.

If Pope Francis and the hierarchy are serious about a more inclusive presence for women in the Church, there needs to be a road map for the journey ahead. Implementing the steps outlined in *Praedicate Evangelium* would be one way of moving forward.

### Recommendations

1. Involve and respect the role of women in all levels of ministry and decision making
2. Open the sacrament of priesthood and the diaconate to all women

## Moral Theology

Among the Synod participants there was a consensus that moral theology comes down to what is right and what is wrong, how we live out what we believe, choosing the path of love that Jesus taught.

Many participants felt that over the years the Church's teachings have become too rigid and convoluted and that the Church needs to return to the basic teachings Jesus espoused. While the dogmas of the Church can never change, we believe that the doctrines and disciplines of the present Church are a product of the time in which they were developed and expressed. Pope John XXIII himself espoused this world view in his opening speech at the Second Vatican Council saying: "The ancient deposit of the faith is one thing; the way it is articulated in every generation is another." The Church needs to look at many of its doctrines and disciplines and raise the

question as to which doctrines and disciplines are divinely inspired and which are only man-made.

Today, some of the questions concerning moral theology are: 1. Who wins, 2. Who loses, 3. Who is affected as well as who is having the conversations concerning issues, decisions, and the people involved. Also, there is the concern of not only who is left out, but who are left in when it comes to making decisions concerning the moral teachings of the Church. Clearly, at this point, it is the bishops who are left in.

Catholic social justice teachings are grounded in Scripture and continue to be shaped by *Gaudium et Spes* and *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Francis, in *Joy of the Gospel*, states that he “prefers a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.” Jesus reached out to people on the margins even when it made others uncomfortable. That included a Roman centurion, the Samaritan woman married five times, and Zacchaeus, a tax collector for Rome. The question for the Church is “Where do we meet people and what do they need?”

The work of religious congregations, both male and female, were lauded by the Synod participants as true examples of a segment of the Church that took Jesus’ command to “Love one another as I have loved you” seriously. As Richard Rohr has stated in one of his meditations (March 24, 2022) “Love and justice go together. Love is the heart of justice and justice is the social form of love.” Many participants at the Synod listening sessions did not see their parish priests of the same mindset.

In the Synod sessions it was unanimously agreed that the Church should not exclude anyone. This would involve updating and resolving the issues of sexual morality, divorce, remarriage, pre-wedding sex, birth control, and attitudes toward LGBTQIA persons. It was universally felt that the boundaries of the Church need to be widened where everyone can be welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live the Gospels.

The Church, beginning with Pope John Paul II, has framed climate change as a moral issue involving the future of God’s creation. Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si* (Praise be to you) is a worldwide wake up call to help humanity understand the destruction that we are rendering to the environment and our fellow human beings. While the Popes have championed steps to address climate change, not all the bishops, at least in the United States, fully embraced Pope Francis’ encyclical.

The Church, like any human institution, has divisions. However, it was agreed upon by all at the Synod sessions that while the Church needs to have a big tent given its global nature, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops needs to be less divided; that the bishops speak more forcibly about pressing issues; that the bishops pay attention to the teachings of Jesus and be more pastoral and flexible in their decisions. The Church has become too big of an institution,

and we need to get back to basics, train pastors and bishops to consider the needs of the individual and the real needs of the people of God.

Recommendations:

1. Encourage the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to return to the methodology of inclusive consultation before making definitive statements
2. Reiterate support for immigrants and the poor
3. Sincere outreach to those marginalized such as LGBTQIA, divorced etc
4. Embrace diversity
5. Support emphasis on climate change and emulate appropriate practices
6. Revise the theology regarding human sexuality and birth control

## Sacramental Life

The sacraments are a hallmark of Catholic life. They are visible signs of God's invisible grace promised to his people in the gospel.

There was a lively discussion in the Synod listening session regarding the sacraments particularly the Eucharist. The age of those receiving first Reconciliation was also mentioned as not being the most appropriate and the purpose of Reconciliation sometimes burdensome, and often standing in the way of the reception of Eucharist.

Some of the participants at the Synod sessions were very much aware of and dismayed at the controversies revolving around who can receive the sacraments particularly the Eucharist. The response of the United States' bishops exemplifies the dichotomy within the bishops themselves. Some bishops hold the rigid view that receiving the Eucharist is a "prize for the perfect" while others declared it was "a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak." (Pope Francis.)

The recent situation in the United States concerning the wording of the Rite of Baptism is another prime example of a fractured response from the bishops. Some bishops decreed that the line must be held and that all baptisms performed with incorrect language are now invalid. Another group decided that, for the pastoral good of the people, the former sacraments can stand but that going forward the language needs to be uniform.

The controversy over the Tridentine form of the liturgy again exposes the chasm between those in the Church who want to cling to the past and those who want to move forward. Issues involved in ordaining women and married men, mentioned earlier in this report, all demonstrate a fractured hierarchy and the Church's need to look at the sacraments anew.

If the sacraments are the visible signs of God's grace, they must touch the lives of those who receive them. The Roman liturgical rite was developed in Western Europe centuries ago. With today's universal nature of the Church, and the need for the liturgy to touch people's lives, the



Church needs to develop liturgies with their local cultures in mind. Translations of the Eucharistic texts, scriptural readings, music offered are all essential elements of the liturgy and need to be revisited.

### Recommendations

1. Revisit who is eligible to receive the Eucharist
2. Redefine the Church's position on the Sacraments of Initiation
3. Develop liturgical rites more aligned with specific cultures

## Conclusion

Pope Francis has declared that "Synodality is an essential dimension of the Church." (2018) and, if truly embraced, will bring new life into the Church. We, the participants at the Synod listening sessions conducted by the Lay Synod Initiative at Glastonbury Abbey, are individuals who deeply care about the Church and take the call to be active participants in this process very seriously. Clergy and lay, walking together and guided by the Holy Spirit, will provide a path going forward for the future Church. The mere fact that the Church is opening its doors and windows to others besides the hierarchy and trying to invert its pyramid model is itself a hopeful sign for the journey ahead.

If synods have a purpose, questions need to be raised and addressed rather than be ignored. The work of the Church leadership is to reflect on the voices of those raising the questions and issues and, walking together as the whole People of God, carve out a path ahead. We are fully aware that many of the recommendations listed in this Report are doctrinal and fraught with controversy and that consensus may never be reached by the bishops any time soon. Other recommendations, however, are pastoral, based very much on the lived experience of the participants and more easily approached for discussion at the Synod gathering in 2023.

While the road forward is not clear, we, the Lay Synod Initiative at Glastonbury Abbey, are willing to do the walking and to "plant seeds that will one day grow.....knowing that they hold future promise."

The Lay Synod Initiative at Glastonbury Abbey does not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey but solely represents the views of those participants involved in the Synod listening sessions.