

**Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish
Grand Rapids, MI
Synod Listening Sessions Summary March 2022**

Core Question 1 - Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission:

As baptized persons in the Catholic faith, we are called to actively participate in the Church's Mission (to care for one another with love as Jesus taught and to extend that same love to those both in and beyond our community, especially to the poor and most marginalized in society). How does the Church help me live out this calling in society in a missionary way? As a faith community, how well are we living up to this mission call? There are so many fallen-away Catholics and disaffiliated Catholics. How might they understand or misunderstand the mission of the Church? How can the Church make its mission more explicit?

Central Themes:

- 1) We have great ministries, but we need to reach out to the poor and marginalized.
- 2) We need to be on the offense more, not feeling as if we have to defend or "protect" God. Fallen-away Catholics need to be invited back, but the Church needs to be more honest about its own mistakes.
- 3) Education and Catechesis is important to sharing the Church's mission.
- 4) Make the local Church more alive and welcoming.

Explanations:

- 1) We appreciate the many service ministries we have at our parish: funeral luncheons, meal ministries, community dinners for the neighborhood, mobilizing Habitat for Humanity volunteers, Advent Angel Tree program; and our offertory collection to international partners. However, we are still not reaching the marginalized, such as the LGBTQ population and African-Americans. The religiously-minded Millennials and Gen Z population are also being marginalized because they want a deeper relationship with Christ and His Church and may tend to be more conservative in religious practice. A personal invitation or a kind greeting may be the key to helping those who are marginalized to feel more welcome.
- 2) It feels like we are always on defense. The world portrays the Church as unwelcoming to certain populations. We need to go on the offense, focusing on the Love of God. Too often we aren't the ones proclaiming who we are to the world, we let the world tell us who we are.

In addition, we need to generate a greater sense of trust. The leadership of the Church needs to usher in a new era of honesty and transparency. An apology for wrong actions goes a long way. When mistakes are made, don't cover them up. Accept responsibility and move forward.

- 3) Authentic faith-filled Education and Catechesis is extremely important in our Catholic schools, Religious Education and RCIA programs as well as at Sunday Mass. Various modes of media, such as Catholic radio, apps, and podcasts can help to re-educate people. We need to utilize them well. We need to get the message out that Catholic Education is ongoing, a life-long process.

- 4) In order to share the mission of the Church, we have to make the Church more alive on the local level. The Church needs to be seen not as a big organization but as a small community that touches people. Having an authority figure is challenging for people. Today some ask – “Who does the Pope think he is? And, “Why does he get to make decisions for everyone?” If we don’t articulate the mission of the global Church well, we get caught up in that defense mode.
- 5) We need to realize that all of us are sent forth to be missionaries. We will articulate the mission of the Church better when we witness that mission of Love and Truth lived out in our lives. Al Kresta often says, “The Church is great at sacramentalizing people. We occasionally do ok at catechising people. But we are lousy at evangelizing people.” We need to focus on evangelizing people again.

Core Question 2 - Celebration

How do prayer and liturgical celebrations nurture me (e.g., deepen my personal faith life, inform the way I make decisions, influence the ways I interact with others, support my engagement in our shared mission, etc.)? How can we more actively inspire greater participation in the mission of this community?

Central Themes:

- 1) Many have deep love for the Faith.
- 2) Liturgical celebrations done well are essential to the lifeline of the Faithful and nurture our souls. Daily Mass is also a very treasured gift to the Faithful.
- 3) Promoting a deeper prayer life brings great fruit.
- 4) Personal invitation to attend Mass and to become personally involved in ministries is important to making people feel welcome and engaged. Becoming a community means knowing each other’s names and making connections on a personal level.
- 5) We need to better communicate what is going on in our parishes.

Explanations:

- 1) Many attending the Listening Sessions expressed great love and deep joy for the Faith. They thank God that they are Catholic. They cannot imagine life without the Catholic Faith. If the Church can help people to truly fall in love with the Faith, then community life and involvement might increase.
- 2) Many expressed that they love the Celebration of Holy Mass. It nourishes and restores them and gives them a reset for the day or week so that they can be a light to the world. They find that good music during Mass, reverent priests, and quality sermons are key to providing meaningful liturgical celebrations. The more a person prepares ahead of time, by reviewing the readings of the day before they come to Mass, the more impact Mass has on them.

In addition, when people are personally involved in the Liturgy through Lectoring, Cantoring, Ushering, EMHC and other means, this helps them be more prepared, connected, impacted and changed. Some appreciate how the Catholic church offers Mass so many times during the day. Mass is a reminder of how one needs to be living, it's a grounding place and reminds us we're not alone.

- 3) There was an overwhelming sense of how powerful prayer is. Some commented on how they used to make daily decisions without prayer, relying on knowledge and data, but now prayer centers them and reminds them to call on God more often. Taking breaks during the day to pray helps them to be centered and to be a better version of themselves. It was stated that we should pray together more often when a difficult situation is at hand. Don't wait until later, pray now with the person in need. It is essential to put God first and see what He wants me to do, not just what I want to do.
- 4) We need to personally invite people to become involved. People are having a hard time coming back to ministry and Church after the pandemic, so a personal invitation is key. An idea was presented that if people knew who people were and where they live, this might develop a greater sense of community and celebration at the local level.
- 5) The communication of events is not good in the Church and amongst Catholics. Just putting something in the bulletin is not the answer. We need to have more personalized invitations encouraging people to participate.

Core Question 3 – Listening and Dialogue in Church and Society:

What are the places and means of dialogue within our local Church, especially when there are divergences of vision, conflicts, or difficulties to be addressed? How should these dialogue experiences help us to gain mutual understanding and acceptance for differences of beliefs, experiences, opinions, world views, etc.? How is God speaking to us through voices we sometimes ignore? How can we create space for the voices of the marginalized? How can the Church, as a whole, better reflect a spirit of listening?

Central Themes:

- 1) Our parish does a good job of listening, but what about other parishes?
- 2) Be intentional about listening. Continue to provide Listening Sessions on various topics. Better articulate ways for parishioners to share ideas and strategically plan for the future.
- 3) Diocesan decisions seem to be without input from parishioners. How do we balance the top down mentality and listening to the Faithful?
- 4) Make sure that all are welcome to submit ideas, new parishioners as well as long-time members.

Explanations:

- 1) Even though many in our sessions felt that our parish and pastor were doing an excellent job of listening through the Pastoral and Finance Councils, some expressed concerns that conflict

is ignored or decisions are made without all sides being able to give input. Others mentioned that they did not know where to go with concerns.

- 2) The Church needs to be intentional about listening and creating a safe place, especially for those marginalized by appreciating the backgrounds of others and avoiding being judgmental. Seek open-mindedness. The Church is not a democracy, though. It is hoped that as a community we can rise above our own opinions. It is easy to ignore God's voice. We need to look upward, not necessarily inward.

Some wondered what we could learn if we actually held listening sessions on a periodic basis or at least surveyed parishioners, seeking their opinion more often. Listening starts with a very simple principle of the dignity of the human. We should listen to all comments without a rebuttal. We should hear, pray, then respond. This starts with knowing people's names.

We need to determine best practices and mechanisms to share ideas and then implement these. People need to engage in healthy conversations and still make sure that the views/beliefs of the Catholic Church are articulated lovingly.

- 3) One person commented that it seemed coincidental that after a person (from another parish) had signed a petition which was addressed to the diocese, that this person was let go from their parish position. It doesn't seem as if others were open to her voice.

It was suggested that the Bishop should get more involved with the parishes. People should know the process of submitting concerns to the Bishop or their individual parish. Our leaders should be servants, serving God and serving parishes. When our priest and leaders give us that example (as our priest does), we are reminded to ask Jesus for guidance.

- 4) Length of service and age have not been a prerequisite for leadership at our parish, but it does for some attending other parishes. People need to believe that their voice matters no matter how long they have belonged to a parish. To have dialogue you have to get to know fellow parishioners in order to really understand who they are and their point of view. Continue to evaluate how to create a voice for the people who are marginalized and provide a safe space for those who have concerns, either about the parish, the diocese or the greater Church.

Core Question 4 - Companions on the Journey

How is this "journeying together" happening today? How is the Holy Spirit inviting your community to grow in "journeying together"? In our local Church, who do I "walk together" with and who are those who seem further apart from me? In the Church and in society, we are side-by-side on the same road. How are we called to grow as companions on our journey?

Central Themes:

- 1) We journey together through participation in ministry and building community.
- 2) The Holy Spirit is inviting us to reach out and bring people either back to Mass or invite them into the fold.
- 3) The Holy Spirit invites us to see the movement of God both on a global level and a local level.

Explanations:

- 1) We journey together by celebrating liturgies together, being part of committees, teaching groups and studying together. There is a JOY in our parish and in participating in it. New people who come into our Church tell us that we are very welcoming. New people here feel accepted and don't have the feeling that the parish only belongs to the longtime parishioners. All of these culminate in relationships! But are all parishes this way? Are all welcoming? If people can quickly become involved, they will feel connected. Knowing each other's names through the usage of name tags either in Church or at social events would be a great start. We have many wonderful, set ministries; but are we open to new ideas and gifts and starting new groups? We need to be inclusive of not just school families, but also singles and retirees who often feel excluded from activities, so that community can be built.

- 2) We are called to invite as many people as possible back to Mass and to the Faith. Approaching challenges with hope and joy gives a great example to others. Those who have converted to Catholicism can sometimes seem more excited and active than those who have grown up in the Faith. Often this is because they are learning so much when converting. Everyone can benefit from learning more of the Catholic Faith!

- 3) We need to remember that we are journeying together as a world. Everyone has been at one another with Covid, politics, war in Europe, yet so many groups are praying together. So much outpouring of love and grace. Humanitarian effort is bringing the world together. Hope that people become united within the Church, not worried about trivial differences. We have to spread out and broaden our interactions with each other. We are all different ages, genders, etc. and we have different experiences in the Church. Through these sessions we've been able to share and listen to each other. It would be nice to figure out the interests or needs of other groups of people because there is intimacy that grows from that.

We should try to partner more with our local community. One person commented that his former parish in Washington, D.C. did that a lot. He was proud to be Catholic and work with people who were not Catholic on really important common goals. We need to do a better job of telling our stories and serving together. When thinking about a marginalized group, it is very hard to understand their plight unless you walk in their shoes. We have to really fight for our existence now. We have to get up and get moving when God calls us to stretch. He gave His life for us, are we doing that for others?