

Saint Thomas of Villanova Parish Synodal Summary Inputs

St. Thomas of Villanova Parish (STV) held four parish-wide Listening Sessions. In addition, our women's Walking with Purpose Bible Study group and our Men's Group conducted Listening Sessions during their regularly scheduled gatherings, and we held one session off-site at an assisted living facility within our parish boundaries. In all, 153 persons participated in person or via Zoom, of whom 66% were female and 34% male. Additionally, our youth minister circulated the questions to members of our youth group and our Confirmation Class. She received 22 responses (all submitted electronically and/or in writing). Finally, we received a number of written submissions, some of which were provided by those who had attended a session and 8 of which were provided by those who did not attend. In all, STV received input from approximately 183 persons, of whom 14% were under 30, 8% were 31-50, 37% were 51-70 and 41% were over 70.

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia has asked that all Parish inputs be submitted using the format of the six questions put forward during the Listening Sessions. Therefore, our STV Parish inputs are organized below into the six questions discussed during each Listening Session.

1. What fills you with joy about the Church?

Many of our 183 participants gave emphatic praise for Pope Francis, his leadership for a more inclusive church and this Synodal process, expressing strong sentiments for Pope Francis, his leadership towards a more inclusive church, his willingness to live the teachings of Jesus, and his call for this Synodal process. This positive opinion of Pope Francis was noted by a significant majority of our participants. Many participants commented that they had never before been asked for their views and they viewed this effort very positively. One participant noted that his wife had been “convinced by Pope Francis to embrace Catholicism.”

A large majority found joy in the universality and 2,000+ year history and traditions of the Church. Many expressed a love of the Sacraments, particularly the sense of gathering together as a parish community to celebrate the Eucharist through Sunday and daily Mass (and outdoor Mass). Liturgy and music brought joy to a large number. Of particular note was the number who felt great joy due to the Augustinian presence in the parish and also due to being part of the Villanova University community.

One respondent noted that “I often feel out of place in the world, but I feel at home in the church.” Another observed that “it is comforting to know that we worship as a universal body of Christ in a multitude of languages around the world.” Many praised our Parish Pastor and priests, the sense of community within the STV Parish, as well as the opportunity to share their faith with their family members. Many noted there is great joy in seeing younger people fully participating in the Church, but as noted in response #2 below, there is great concern about the dwindling number of younger people participating in the Church. Numerous respondents observed that the Mass and the supporting homilies and music ministry bring joy to many.

Several others commented that the opportunity to serve within the Church (as catechists, lectors, etc.) and through the Church to those in need brings great joy as well. Others noted the joy of discovering new insights 1) into Scripture through Bible study and homilies, 2) via Advent and Lent Reflections, 3) visiting shrines and grottoes and 4) in Adoration. Catholic schools were praised by several respondents. Others noted joy in the Church being more open to change and accepting of differences. Several voiced praise for the Church's position to support protection of the world's climate. A small number were unable to find much joy in the church due to concerns expressed under question #2. As one noted, "I do not feel I have walked away from the Church. I feel as if the Church has walked away from me."

2. What concerns do you have about the Church?

Our participants noted many, many concerns. While a few concerns were contradictory, most concerns were consistently noted. First, a vast majority of participants described a great concern for the lack of priests and the dwindling number of active Church members. It was observed that this trend is most obvious in the dwindling number of younger people with children actively attending Mass. Second, there was overwhelming concern for the treatment of women by the Church, including the lack of leadership roles for women within the Church. Third, there was much concern for Church leadership, beyond our Parish level but not Pope Francis, as the cause for many to leave the Catholic Church. Fourth, many participants noted that the Church at many levels was not a "welcoming" or "inclusive" Church, not perceived as "relevant" to many people's lives. Finally, many observed that the concerns listed above for the Church are in fact driving the largest concern of all, the lack of priests and the dwindling attendance at Mass.

As to the first concern about lack of priests and dwindling church attendance, this was noted by almost all respondents with some calling it a "mass exodus of the disillusioned and youth" from the Church. The pandemic exacerbated this trend as more families stayed away from Church. While STV Parish is blessed to have several priests including a recently ordained Augustinian, many respondents see with alarm the dwindling numbers and relatively advanced age of priests throughout the Church. These two issues were listed by a significant majority of respondents as a chief concern.

Second, the lack of leadership roles for women at all levels of the Church was almost universally highlighted by concerned parishioners. Many share a great sense of pain associated with this concern and are deeply offended by what they consider "demeaning treatment of women." Many believe that women are not accorded a rightful opportunity to participate, and some noted poor treatment of nuns. Many noted that women are treated as "second class" members of the church. One parishioner noted "I need to hear my experience as a married woman handling career, children and faith. Beyond tired of a white-male-celibate-only perspective." Another respondent observed that the church is run by an "old boys network" who "treat women horribly."

Third, many participants voiced concerns about Church leadership. Numerous respondents said that Cardinals and Bishops have taken actions and failed to take actions that have driven many people away from the church. Several noted that they “believe the bishops have lost all moral authority. Governance in the church needs to change.” The Church sex abuse concern still injures many faithful members of the Church. Need for more accountability among Church leadership was expressed by many people. One person said “the way the church has handled pedophiles and the lack of accountability; how the hierarchy was not held accountable. A lot of youth have stepped away because of that.” Another said the “sex abuse crisis in our church highlighted an ancient, old, out-of-date- structure and organization run by an unchecked old boys network of priests”. It is a “disgrace and totally offensive to women.” Another noted concern for the “on-going sex abuse scandal” while someone else summarized it all as “bad leadership”. Several observed that clericalism with a view of superiority of priests was widespread in leadership and noted few Bishops participated in service work. Some said the Archdiocese can appear “pompous”. One suggested that clergy only have pastoral roles, not administrative roles which laity can fill. Similarly, Pastoral councils should play larger roles in church governance. One suggestion was to open the College of Cardinals to laity. One respondent, however, voiced no concerns for Church leadership as the sex abuse problem was “a failure of individuals, not of the Church.” Another view asked for a “more clear and public stance against sexual sin.” If the church “cedes ground or fails to combat such destructive views on sex and gender, it loses legitimacy. It is possible to remain firm while still being compassionate to those who disagree.”

Fourth, a vast majority observed that the Church is “not inclusive” in both its word and in its deeds. Most comments on this point focused with great passion on the lack of meaningful roles for women. Many support making women ordained priests and/or deacons. Several observed that in the early Church history women had many prominent roles, yet today many have been marginalized by the Church and few women have leadership roles at any level today. Others voiced concerns that married men should be included as priests. Some supported inclusion of LGBTQ people. Another noted that “divorced/remarried Catholics” are not welcomed and neither are Baptized non-Catholics. “Not allowing divorce is hurtful to so many Catholics.” Several mentioned the Church seems hypocritical in its strong support for anti-abortion efforts, while not offering comparable efforts to oppose the death penalty for crimes. Another noted that the Church “is not a consistent witness to its own teaching or to the teaching given directly by Christ”. The Church’s “lack of lament for miscarried babies and natural deaths of children” has deeply injured faithful members of the Church. Another view is that the Church “does not sufficiently minister to and affirm Catholics who live their baptismal vocation through the single life, leaving them feeling lost and disregarded.” One respondent said, “speaking for myself and other Catholics I know who struggle with infertility, our struggles are often minimized and we are offered platitudes instead of Christlike accompaniment in our grief and striving.”

Finally, several respondents noted that the concerns mentioned above about lack of meaningful leadership roles for women, poor Church leadership, and intended and unintended exclusion of some people, has directly led to the chief concern of the remaining laity about

dwindling Church attendance and a lack of priests for the future. These views and concerns were voiced by those who are most committed to the Catholic Church.

3. In what ways or moments has the Church encouraged you to speak up? How does the Church listen to you or hear what you are saying?

Nearly all respondents said that the Church has never before asked the people that make up the Church for their views. One responds that she gathers with Catholic women, “more on a personal level,” to be heard and to listen. People were overwhelmingly positive about this synodal effort. Most noted that “priests at STV Parish are open and willing to listen.” At least one observed, however, that “I don’t believe in this Synod, prove it to me.”

While our local Parish was credited with listening efforts such as around the sexual abuse scandal, the wider Church was almost universally criticized for not listening to the people of the Church. In particular, it was noted that “people spoke up early about sex abuse crisis but they were not heard.” Also, the Church “did not apologize, still hurts.” There is “skepticism that Archdiocese hierarchy only listens to big donors.” One noted that “trust between the archdiocese and the Parish is not good.” Another noted “lost in a sea of people, my opinion doesn’t count.” Still another observed that “only the loud aggressive voices are heard.” Finally, one lamented that “I am not sure that the Church cares to hear what I say.”

In contrast, one respondent noted that “I do not need to be heard. Jesus didn’t ask for a vote.” Another said the “Church has never discouraged me to speak up.”

4. How can the Church create greater opportunities for people to be heard?

Our respondents offered numerous suggestions for the Church to better listen to its people. These suggestions can be organized into five categories, namely 1) provide better leadership, 2) create more opportunities to gather together, 3) continue Parish-specific listening, 4) utilize modern communication methods, and 5) be more inclusive across the entire Church hierarchy.

First, numerous respondents criticized Church leadership for failing to listen and suggested practical ways for this to improve. The first priority would be to take some sort of concrete, visible actions in response to this Synod. Many noted that if the Church leadership does not do anything to respond to the concerns raised in this Synod, then there will be a negative response among the laity that further undermines the faith in Church leadership. There is a fear among many that “unwelcome feedback will be ignored.” In addition, Bishops should be more visible, with visits to local parishes to talk to church members. Church leadership “should create mechanisms for lay people to engage Church leadership at all levels.” Leadership should make “people feel safe to come forward with concerns.” Leadership should also create more opportunities for cross-Parish interactions. Leadership should “use Diaconate more effectively to listen to people’s concerns.” “Better accountability through Church hierarchy” was recommended too.

Second, there was a near unanimous number of respondents who recommended the Church create more opportunities for the faithful to gather together in multiple ways with each other and the clergy. For the higher levels of hierarchy, there were many suggestions to have parishes communicate and work together, as opposed to each parish being an “island” to itself. From a technology perspective, there were suggestions to have a more uniform website system to enable better use of technology and to make things easier to find, such as where to find Mass times on different parish websites. There were also many suggestions to continue this path of Synodal listening so it is not just “one and done.”

At the parish level, there was tremendous support for more social activities where parishioners could gather together with and without clergy to get to know one another and to grow in faith together. Perhaps especially after the forced isolation of the pandemic, there is a tremendous longing to come back together again in social settings of all kinds. For our parish, many called for “coffee/donut sessions” after Mass as one way for parishioners to gather to talk to one another and to clergy. Another idea was to have the Pastor invite a small number of parishioners each Saturday evening for dinner at the Parish Center. Similarly, there was a suggestion for parishioners to invite the Pastor to homes for small group dinners. There were many suggestions for more small group sessions like Bible Study or Catholic book clubs, led by laity and clergy at times convenient for all parishioners. Some asked for more service opportunities so parishioners could work together while creating a greater sense of community within the Parish and across other Parishes. Another suggestion was to use or perhaps revitalize a new parishioner’s welcome committee. Another noted that “suggestion boxes work, but no one knows to use it.”

Third, many respondents asked for this Synodal listening to continue in multiple ways. At the parish level, listening sessions on a periodic basis and annual surveys were suggested. Several suggested that Parish Council meetings be open to all to attend and speak. Others suggested that “Parish Council members and their work be more visible to parishioners.” Lay members should be welcomed to speak more at Mass. Encourage lay engagement in all Church activities. Several suggested that priests hold “office hours” after Mass for parishioners who might want to discuss the homily or ask questions. Others suggested the Church add “more channels for the lay faithful to speak publicly within their parishes and dioceses, such as through offering reflections on Sunday readings/religious topics.” Another suggested the creation of “community engagement ambassadors.”

Fourth, many respondents suggested that more modern communication channels be used. At the wider Church level, it was suggested that a media platform be created that would stress unity within the Catholic Church. Our Parish website was described as “functional” but “not modern or welcoming,” “not inspiring”. Several suggested greater use of podcasts and more interactive, dynamic, engaging technology methods like Chat Rooms. In general, several suggested that the Church needed to “go to where the people are at, rather than waiting on the people to come to Church.” Today’s youth are “on-line” for much of their lives, so the Church

needs to be active on social media and other modern communication channels. Others suggested “more structured way to use the internet for all parishes to share ideas and work together.”

Finally, an overwhelming number of respondents urged the Church to be more inclusive and welcoming at all levels. Many urged significant changes to current positions such as allowing females to be priests and male priests to marry. One noted that “women are to be embraced for the wonderful people they are, individuals who are just as much God’s children as any man!!” Many others suggested there are numerous ways for the Church immediately to be more inclusive without taking such significant steps. For example, Church hierarchy could include many more women in leadership roles from Parish Council leaders, to Archbishop advisors such as the leader of the Synodal efforts, to Vatican bureaucratic leadership positions. Another view suggested that the Church “increase openness to Catholic families of all types – blended, same sex, etc.” As one respondent noted, “it is possible to remain firm while still being compassionate to those who disagree.”

5. How can the Church help you and others grow in your relationship with Jesus and your relationship with the Church?

Almost all respondents provided concrete suggestions for improvement at all levels of Church hierarchy. At the outset, several noted that “this question is really two different questions” where “relationship with the Church and with Jesus are different. Problems with Church won’t affect relationship with Jesus.”

At the wider Church level, several noted that “major changes need to be made to grow relationship with hierarchical Church.” Several urged the Church to “keep Vatican II relevant”. One noted support for “Pope Francis’ effort for change.” Another urged the wider Church to “focus more on spirit of joy, love and community and less on the minute observances of outmoded, excessive and materialistic practices; seeing rules as guidelines but love has to be considered first.” Several urged the Vatican to be more transparent on the financial aspects of the Church in order to build greater trust. Another said the Church “needs to be willing to accept some flexibility but be clear about areas where we cannot deviate from church foundation.” Another urged the Church to “better challenge the ways in which centuries of male-centered, white-centered leadership within the Church have negatively impacted people’s relationship with the Church.” Another urged the Church to “reduce sense of Church hierarchy (i.e. ‘your excellency’).”

At the parish level, there were also numerous concrete, detailed suggestions in response to this question. There is a strong desire to create more community engagement opportunities, especially learning engagement opportunities for all age groups within the parish including prayer opportunities like daily rosary and adoration. Some want to connect to other parishes and to others of other denominations. Many said there should be “on-going catechesis for adults”, “RCIA for all”, “adult education needs improvement.” As noted above, there is a strong

desire for more educational opportunities for all to study together in small groups for Bible study and/or Catholic book clubs. It was noted these need to be convenient times for all members of the parish. Many praised the streaming of Masses via the internet and urged this to continue. Several noted the need for better training of priests as communicators. Others urged “teaching homilies, without politics.” There was also a strong focus on improving youth education. “We need to re-think programs for kids to make kids want to be there.” Several noted that the Church promotes youth education up to the time of confirmation, but then that encouragement/education falls away at exactly the times in their lives where they most need religious instruction/confirmation. “We hurry up to get them confirmed and then do nothing to support them.” One suggestion was to offer youth religious instruction and engagement to older teenagers, or to push the age of confirmation to 17.

6. What can the Church do to support people on their faith journeys?

There were similarly multiple concrete suggestions for improvement in response to this question. Some were quick to note that “priests cannot shoulder all of this. The Church must find an effective and realistic way to expand vocations beyond the current means. There are many qualified and gifted women and married people!” Several respondents urged the Church to be “more relevant” to the daily life of parishioners. One lament was the “wish parish priests were more accessible, they seem out of touch, especially with working or non-working mothers.” Many others suggested technology improvements with statements like “keep up with technology!” Another view suggested the Church “needs ways to draw people to reflection and prayer life”. One person urged “correction with love, rather than indifferent tolerance of sin.” Several suggested the Church should help create more Catholic retirement communities. Many parishioners praised modern technology efforts like “Bible in a Year” podcasts and Bishop Barron videos. Once again, many parishioners called for more small group religious education opportunities for adults. For example, many asked for more explanations of the symbolism of Mass components. Others asked for “more joyful Mass ceremonies.” Others urged a focus on issues that are not “wedge” issues such as “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and minister to the poor.” Another suggested the Church to “be a better voice of the marginalized.” There was a call to “raise more voices from parish community ---e.g. laity giving sermons.” Finally, others said the “Church needs to be universally welcoming, supportive and instructive (rather than condemning).”