



ST PETER AND ST. PAUL PARISH SYNODAL RESPONSE

“INVITING THE HOLY SPIRIT TO WORK WITHIN US”

In 2023, the Vatican will hold the Synod on Synodality. Pope Francis has approved a new three-stage process for the next gathering of the Synod of Bishops; this process continues his efforts to reform the Catholic Church in accordance with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. His aim is to involve the whole church at diocesan, national and continental levels through a process of “listening and discernment” on the important theme of synodality: “For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission.”

As part of the preparation, dioceses around the world are gathering input and feedback to send forward and share as a part of the crucial preparation. The Diocese of San Bernardino has asked each parish to submit feedback through prayerful listening and discernment rooted in the Holy Spirit.

In response to the Synod, the parish community of St Peter and St. Paul organized a team to spearhead our consultation events and to report to the diocese. The team included representatives from the clergy, ministry heads, office staff, youth representatives, parents of school children, parish council, and ethnic groups. Our parish priest, Fr. Henry Sseriiso gave us full latitude to design the parish Synod approach whereby the parishioners would be invited to give their feedback and views on the future of the Church through a local consultation process called the listening sessions.

St. Peter and St. Paul Parish Synod Process Plan.

With the aim to seek the views of as many parishioners as possible and to ensure that our synod findings truly represented the views of the parish, it was decided that every effort will be made to access either face-to-face or zoom online formats to collect quantitative data in a manner that will be true to the personal approach of a listening session.

The plan for the Synod process at SPSP included the following steps:

- A timeline was established that included publicity, creation of a pool of facilitators and note takers, development of listening sessions PowerPoints, issue invitations to parish listening sessions for parishioners, ministry heads and the youth. Efforts were made to even reach those no longer worshipping at our church and those who are at the peripheries. Finally, the formation of a synod synthesis team to write a report on the results of the Synod process was put in place.
- Publicity for the Synod - utilized huge streamers at strategic areas of the parish campus, parish bulletin announcements, announcements by the pastor and liturgy coordinator at weekend masses, several morning reflection and conversation events, coffee, and donut events after mass at the hall; prayers cards specifically for the synod at every mass, and the posts made in the parish website and Facebook pages. Parishioners were encouraged to conduct their own listening sessions among their family members.
- Members of the synod team underwent their own listening sessions first. After their experience, a short talk was provided as training for their task to be listeners and note-takers for future listening sessions (either in person or on zoom) during the months of January till the end of April.
- A Listening Session model was designed so that small groups of 3-5 random parishioners would respond to three basic synod questions for ten minutes each, without being interrupted while others listened. Several rounds of questions were presented in each listening session. The synod facilitators encouraged participants to speak on when time permits. At the end of the evening, all participants were invited to express themselves by speaking boldly and honestly with their thoughts, and encouraging those who seldom share their opinions to do so. The facilitator can ask clarificatory questions and encourage participants to express their opinions openly.
- Sessions by cluster representations (by ethnicity, age, parents, active ministries) were facilitated by the team. Great effort was exercised to reach out to those who were not worshipping with us anymore and those “on the margins”. Efforts were made to suggest that everyone, including the various ministries, engage in the Synod process
- The recorders notes taken in all the various Listening Sessions will become the basis of the report.

- A synod synthesis team collated and wrote the final report.
- The resulting Final Report of the parish sessions will be sent to the Diocese of San Bernardino and also presented to the pastor and clergy, parish staff, and the parish council .

Format of the Listening Sessions

We encouraged everyone to participate, young adults, seniors, those that feel marginalized from the Church, active parishioner and from those who may have drifted away. The synod documents ask us to **speak boldly** and **honestly** and to create space for those who seldom share to do the same. We are asked to be humble in our listening, to be open, to let go of our prejudices and stereotypes, and allow the Holy Spirit to be present among our discussions and for the voice of all baptized to be heard.

The Vatican Synod poses the following fundamental questions:

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, ‘journeys together.’ How is this ‘journeying together’ happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take to grow in our ‘journeying together’? (PD 26)

Each of the sessions utilized a specific protocol with opening and closing prayers and time allotted to address the following three questions which had been adapted for the parish:

1. What is your experience of church here at St. Peter and St. Paul Parish?
2. What joys and challenges have been a part of these experiences?
3. What steps does the Holy Spirit invite us to take here in St. Peter and St. Paul Parish to deepen our experience of being a church community in the future?

Respondents and Participants

There were multiple listening sessions organized either in -person or on zoom between January till April 2022. Across all methods of data collection, either by face-to-face listening session or online zoom sessions, there were a total of about 700 participants. Most of the respondents were parishioners but there were several who were “visiting” from other parishes; and who declared that they have attended mass both in person and online with us and in their home parish. Additionally, parishioners were also encouraged to invite others to participate, even if these folks were no longer active churchgoers. Everyone was encouraged to invite others to participate in the method with which they were most comfortable – in person or virtual sessions

Demographics

Number of small group sessions – 113 (verified by the number of recorder notes submitted)

Est Percentage women: We did not quantify at every session, but the estimate is: 65%

Est Percentage Men: We did not quantify at every session, but estimate is: 35%

Age range: seniors – 50+ and over
parish youth - (ages 12-18 yrs. old),
parents - (age 25-49)

Largest percentage were from what group: 56-74 yr. old – but we feel that all groups were well represented. There were about 70 parents of children in catechetical education and 120 youth in Confirmation classes participating too.

Race/Ethnicity – Caucasians, Spanish, Asians, African

Languages spoken at Listening Sessions: English and Spanish

Connections of those who participated: Parishioners, Faith Formation, Youth Ministry, Prayer Groups, Liturgical Ministry like the EMHC, Other – Small Christian Communities like ACTS, Marriage Everlasting Group, Women’s ministries like the Heart of Mary and rosary groups, Men’s Ministry, Knights of Columbus, Pastoral/ Finance Council, Synod Committee, Bereavement Ministry, Prayer Shawl, Rosary Makers, Spanish Ministries etc.

Cross section of Race, ethnic, culture and gender preferences? YES

Reach out to the disabled? YES

Reach out to the marginalized, unchurched? YES

Processing the Results

Despite efforts to inform the parishioners of the value of the synod listening sessions, the turnout of participants is low (about 700 participants) as compared to the number of registered parishioners of approximately 6000 families.

The responses to the invitation to participate in the listening sessions were varied. The majority were engaged and left wanting more time for such deep listening and sharing. There were some who expressed great disappointment and dismay over various approaches and practices of the universal church and were eager to talk about it. Some sincerely joined the sessions because they have points to raise which they believed were essential for the future of the church.

The 113 recorder notes of the facilitators from all the listening session were prayed over, read, compiled, and analyzed by a team selected to synthesize the results and to identify universal themes. The themes (which are presented in this report) represented those most often raised or encountered during these sessions.

Findings

To help people explore this fundamental question more fully, the following themes highlight significant aspects of “lived synodality” (PD, 30). The findings have been presented as a series of themes which have been commonly encountered by the facilitators.

Each theme is structured as summary paragraphs followed by a few quotes for each theme which have been taken directly from the recorder notes. Likewise, we tried to link the themes to the three dimensions of synodality as provided by the Synod documents (General Secretariat for Synod of Bishops site: <https://www.synod.va/en.html>) namely:

Communion

The Church is Catholic because she is sent to all, in order to gather the entire human family from every nation and culture, under the Lordship of Christ and in the unity of his Spirit.

Theme 1: Companions on the Journey

(Preparatory Document, nos. 1, 9, 20; Vademecum nos. 1.3, 1.4, 5.3)

Journeying together requires great commitment to listen to the voices of all who make up the People of God, but especially those who have often been marginalized, and the openness to discern the path forward that prophetically renews and enlivens. At SPSP, reactions were mixed.

Some have expressed delight at the welcoming atmosphere at the parish. Folks are greeted before mass and parishioners are friendly after the mass because they know each other. Some commented on the positive experiences of the involvement and participation in the activities within the parish like the Heart of Mary and the Adult Faith formation classes. Others praise the priests and community in making them feel welcome.

Others express concern over the dwindling number of parishioners. Others feel that the community has “silos” or cliques that alienate. Several respondents felt that they have experienced not being included and it is difficult to fit in. There is a sense that the parish did not “reach out to the members, making it difficult to feel part of or belonging to the parish. Politics is breaking apart the unity of the community.

There was a feeling that there are limited opportunities for people of color or those with language limitations to participate in activities aligned with the dominant culture. Additionally, frustration was expressed at the isolation that resulted during the lockdown in response to the pandemic.

There was concern about how to welcome those on the outskirts, especially those “sitting at the back of the church”. We need to welcome all, especially those who come to Mass

only during Christmas and Easter, rather than scaring/ pushing them away when we point them out even in jest.

Overwhelming concern was raised about the state of the youth and their participation in the church life. The respondents commented on the need to engage the young in three areas: First, increased participation of the young in the life of the church especially in their sacramental life; Secondly, formation of the young in their knowledge and understanding of the theology of the faith; and thirdly, the assistance of parents, mentors and catechist in the specialized way of reaching out to the children, teens and the young adults.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“SPSP feels like home. Special, welcoming community.”

“Everything at our parish has helped me. I feel spoiled, heard, and supported by the priests and deacons.”

“The community and the ministry leaders helped some of us during the pandemic

“Surviving, feels alone”

“I feel alone and ignored now at SPSP” from a senior

“Want hospitality committee that will walk with the new comers not just in one mass but for a period of time. To help integrate into the parish life.

“We need to show the parish benefits and make them available to the service of the entire community not a selected few.”

“If we want to be a welcoming church, acceptance is vital. The prayer life of the church is a unifying factor.

“The teens and the millennials require the most welcome”.

“Those between 25-35 years old require most attention. Creating programs for them is most urgent.”

Theme 2: Listening

(Preparatory Document, no. 26, 30; Vademecum, nos. 1.5, 5.3)

Listening with an open heart and mind without prejudices is what is being asked of us. The voices in our midst through which God is speaking to us include the clergy's Sunday

homilies and the activities of parish ministries. The voices on the periphery come to us from the many cries for social justice, the socio-political turmoil in our communities, and the natural disasters at home and around the world that affect millions of lives. Other voices include the wonders of science and technology which we often take for granted. We must pray so that the Holy Spirit will continue to help our parish grow in ministries of engaging with those who experience poverty, marginalization, or social exclusion.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“We voice our concerns, but we don’t feel heard.

“We would love to see our priest more personally involved in the Spanish ministries and be able to have direct interaction with him and talk with him at a personal level when facing a moral or emotional need.”

“Please, when you hear a parishioner say that a priest is being disrespectful toward the community or that he is less tolerant or offensive, have him supervised.

“The Mass and the faith bring me joy and outpouring of love. But being on the committee (Pastoral council) it seems like our voices fall on deaf ears. The council feels useless.”

“Lost connection with the parish during the pandemic.”

Theme 3: Speaking out

(Preparatory Document, no. 30; Vademecum, nos. 2.3, 5.3)

We speak up through communications and exchanges during prayer group meetings, bible studies, and the activities by the parish ministries. We also speak up by making visits and calls and sending mail or email to the Parish Office. We use technology for information but little by way of a mechanism for feedback.

Repeatedly we heard that one of the most damaging thing (specially for the senior parishioners) was the Church’s inability to address the priest abuse scandals, as well as the perceived manner of cover-up thereby protecting the Church, as opposed to openly protecting the victims. This has severely hurt the Church specially with decreased vocations. There are strong feelings about a lack of leadership in the church. Clericalism has deeply wounded the church. Observations were made that point to a lack of communication with the pastor by the laity and vice versa.

Overall, it was expressed that the Church is not living the radical inclusivity that Jesus proclaimed and modeled. Many groups feel excluded such as: the youth, ethnic groups, divorced, LGBTQIA+ persons, those with disabilities, women, and persons of color. We

are hopeful that many wonderful things will result when parishioners are allowed to gather, to listen, to speak and to better know each other.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“The political climate has contributed to division”.

“There is limited interaction of the flock with its parish priests who needs to shepherd them. He needs to talk to us about parish related stuff.”

“There is grave concern regarding the youth leaving the church and the youth not attending the mass. How can we best include them? It is by giving them responsibilities in the church”

“I find myself not belonging. I long to be myself and not feel marginalized.” from an LGBTQ

“We lost good priests due to the priest scandal.”

“Concerns of past molesters in the church is not being addressed”.

“There is a lot of division within the community as well as resentment, jealousy and gossip. Therefore, we need leaders who can bring the community together.” From the Spanish community

Theme 4: Celebration of Faith

(Preparatory Document, no. 30, Vademecum, 5.3)

The Eucharist is at the center of our parish life. The Liturgy of the Word, the Eucharist and the Perpetual Adoration constitute the powerful nourishment to spirituality that inspires and informs parishioners' personal decisions and commitment to parish activities and ministries. It was expressed that the joy and identity of the parish/ church is expressed in its liturgical and its sacramental life. Parish prayer groups and ministries are supplemental sources of inspiration and fellowship that strengthens faith and personal commitment to parish life.

Some respondents felt that SPSP provided a wide range of spiritual activities for all ages (before the pandemic) and they look forward to these activities resuming. There were several suggestions that we continue meetings/ activities that could run on multiple platforms, both online as well as face-to-face so that parishioners who are compromised can participate and continue to feel as though they belong.

Since the strength of the Church are her traditions, modes of worship and spirituality, parents reported the need for more formation, participation, and willingness by the leaders to include children in liturgy and service.

Our parish is diverse, and it tries to provide opportunities for celebrating cultural diversities in its parish life. But it's the prayer life (the Eucharist and the religious celebrations) of the parish that help unify the various cultures.

Some youth find some celebrations restrictive and not appealing. It was noted that parish leaders must find better ways to promote parish activities that can immerse the youth into the active life of our Church.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“The Advent and the Lenten mission should include children”

“There was “zoom fatigue” during the pandemic. Parishioners miss the fellowship, coffee and baked goods.

“The music is important during celebrations of the Eucharist. Praising hymns bring joy and strength to life's sad moments.

“What I like most about my Catholic Church are the sacraments.

“ It's the mass and the Eucharist that bring us together.

“Children ... where are they? There is frustration about the lack of participation at mass from the families who have children enrolled at the parish school. We need to bring back the children's liturgy.”

“More culturally based celebrations. Simbang Gabi and Posadas is a good start”

“We would like more celebrations for our Mother Mary; so our children can learn more from our faith” from Spanish speaking group

Participation

Participation - all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit. The authority of the pastors is a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ for the building up of the entire body.

Theme 5: Authority and Participation

(Preparatory Document, nos. 1, 30; Vademecum, no. 5.3)

The People of God must examine together how authority is exercised within the Church. Additionally, they need to determine the practices that promote the diversity we find therein.

The most common theme noted, is the relationship between the clergy and laity. There is a desire by the laity to share in the governance (decision-making) of the parish. The respondents felt that it would free ‘the clergy to respond to the spiritual needs of their congregation’. There is a sense (from several of the submissions) that being unable to contribute to the governance of the parish, has directly impacted on their participation in the life of the parish.

A further challenge is the lack of access to the clergy (parish priest) by the parishioners. They want his leadership to powerfully shine through especially during the pandemic. An additional concern is for more powerful homilies that connect biblical passages to everyday life.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“The priest’s homilies can improve by making it more exciting.”

“The pastor needs to be parishioner - centered. He does not interact with the parishioners after the mass”

“The clergy needs the help of the laity.”

“We need to get more people to participate in the Church’s ministries. There is poor communication from the top”

Theme 6: Discerning and Deciding

(Preparatory Document, nos. 26, 30; Vademecum, nos. 2.3, 5.3)

Discernment is an integral part of the decision making in life and similarly within the structures of the Church. The entities and organizations work with their members, to discern, plan and implement ideas and activities that would invigorate the life of the parish. These are presented to the Pastor for approval.

The parish priests and leaders of our ministries and organizations need to proactively and regularly call on and encourage parish members to get involved in parish activities. Such proactive measures can encourage and empower hesitant members, including those who are on the peripheries, to actively participate in parish life.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“The Holy Spirit spoke to one respondent of the need to be cognizant of other cultures within the Church. While participation is open, there is a need to be mindful of the needs of the less dominant cultures within the parish. “

“Be mindful of “cliques” which may make the others left out.”

“Sometimes, when it appears that the Holy Spirit is speaking, we question whether it is just our own ego speaking.”

“Need to speak the teachings of the Church bravely again.”

“Seek the intercession of the laity. The Holy Spirit speaks and acts through them too>”

Theme 7: Forming Ourselves in Synodality

(Preparatory Document, nos. 25, 30; Vademecum, nos. 1.2, 5.3)

This Synodal process is the best way to get parishioners to participate specially when the wisdom of the graced community is necessary.

Many respondents credit Pope Francis for navigating the church during these very crucial times in its history. This Synodal process allows him to get a sense of the leading of the Spirit who similarly works in and through the laity. This assuages the cynicism and relevance issues that have plagued the Church recently. The idea that every role within the church should be viewed as service rather than power is important to build greater trust.

In SPSP, in many Synod responses, there was a strong sense that the Church must be there for all, a ‘hospital for sinners and a haven for saints. There was a strong sense that the Church should embrace all its members..... those at the point of entry, those on the peripheries and those bruised by our hurting world. It is a good idea for the church to gather at all levels, to learn of their thoughts and ideas. Marginalized groups may have ideas, too but they are not always welcomed; or they have no courage to just speak out their ideas.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“We need to get out of the “me” mentality and look at the wider church which is a “hospital for sinners and a haven for saints”.

“It is here at this table where we can see the Holy Spirit working in each of us, making a difference in our community”

We pray and we are hopeful that through the Holy Spirit, we are able to open our hearts and minds to guide us in what the Lord wants us to do in the Church”.

“Allow the marginalized to speak”.

Mission

The People of God are on pilgrimage through history and moving towards the heavenly homeland. Each one of the baptized is to be honored with the same dignity as children of God and appointed to the same mission, the proclamation of the Good News and the building of the Kingdom of God.

Theme 8: Sharing Responsibility for our Common Good (Preparatory Document, nos. 20, 27, 30; Vademecum, no. 5.3)

Growth in our parish life is a shared responsibility. Catechesis is important and we have many ways that it is happening in the parish. We participate actively in the mission of the Church through Sunday liturgy (the work shared with our parish priests and staff), religious education, parochial school, and various parish ministries. Hosting seminarians and interns help us prepare them for service and leadership.

COVID-19 has hindered many people from being active in the parish. Other people cite lack of time to commit to parish activities. To fully participate and share in our common mission, we must get out of our comfort zone.

The ministries tend to operate as “silos”. Ministries should understand that they exist at the service of the parish and the wider church.

We need better communication and less competitions among the ministries. The challenge for all members of the parish is to engage with and encourage each other to get involved in something in the parish so that everyone in the parish does something for everyone else. The Holy Spirit brings hope and joy to the parish only through the hope and joy that every parishioner can bring to the parish community.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“We find community at work in the ACTS and the Marriage Everlasting groups”

“The parish needs to clearly communicate the issues it faces”

“Lack of congruency between church leaders and parishioners creates doubt and instability. It becomes difficult to be “ONE” as church.”

“We are alright when we walk together and participate. We need to encourage more participation even if we have limited time ourselves”

“Ministries tend to operate like “silos”.

Theme 9: Dialogue in Church and Society

(Preparatory Document, nos. 23, 28, 29, 30; Vademecum, no. 5.3)

Communication is important. The call to “journey together” invite us to enter into relationships of listening and dialogue where we can share our different realities and experiences of suffering and joy to help promote not only collaboration but also to foster the work of the Spirit.

Dialogue is an important dimension of making the Church relevant in the world today. We need to better communicate with one voice specially the church’s positions on different issues (e.g., abortion, homosexuality) with clear direction; and not with so many scenarios/options that create confusion. On our Church journey together, we need to be witnesses, to be kind, be a good example, be holy, find joy in life. We need to respond to science by discussing how to merge science and our faith life.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“We need to remain vigilant regarding sexual abuse: provide training, provide a voice for victims, and be transparent.”

“Communication is important. Parishioners should feel comfortable speaking up if they have questions and observations. The church staff is kind and willing to listen,”

“Bishops need to provide clarity. During Mass, don’t beat around the bush. We need strong messages about gay marriages, abortion and contraception.”

“We need to support, dialogue with, and welcome LBGTQ individuals and families.

Theme 10: Ecumenism

(Preparatory Document, nos. 29, 30; Vademecum, no. 5.3)

Respondents commented that accepting and sharing our faith with the unchurched and those from other faith groups is important. However, there are limited opportunities to deal with this and not enough courage to undertake this conversation.

Quotes from the Listening Sessions

“The Church should work more closely with other faiths and other denominations”

“We attend mass at SPSP. But our son finds Water of Life services more engaging.

“Maybe looking at what the other churches around us are doing right, can help us serve our parishioners better.”

“Developing common social activities should be a gentler way to start sharing and camaraderie”

“Church is soft on non-Christian way of life.”

“More apologetics classes as part of confirmation”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

As we embarked on the Synodal process, we invited the Holy Spirit to work within us to open our hearts and minds to its leading. As we conclude our report, it became clear that, in the Synod process, the Church was being asked to learn or rediscover something anew. The practice of communal discernment, familiar to parts of the Church but quite alien to others, is not a survey, nor a vote, nor a consultation, but rather an invitation to **learn how to listen**, a gift of the Spirit to the Church.

For the team, this has been a rewarding and enlightening journey and we feel privileged to have played a part in launching the Synod locally here at St. Peter and St. Paul. Clearly, the Spirit has surprised us at the consistency of the messages. **First**, the expressed need for the Church to be more inclusive and welcoming to people whatever their situation in life; **secondly**, the divergence between the Church’s teaching and present societal views and lived experiences; **third**, the overwhelming concern over the engagement of the young in the life of the church of the future. **Finally**, a consistent theme is the desire to see the parish ministries, and institutions of the Church play pivotal roles in the future. Better communication, faith formation, welcoming environment, outreach to the marginalized, clear cut roles of the laity, more vocations (priesthood and religious life), and dynamic ministries were highlighted as areas of growth.

While the respondents continue to display affection for the Church and SPSP; the submissions clearly suggest a keen desire for change at the parish, diocesan, and universal levels of the Church. There is a renewed hope that their efforts to participate in this listening process will not go for naught, since change is long overdue. However, there is also a growing sense of cynicism that nothing will change because of the Synod.

Our plea is for a clear and sustained effort, not only to continue to discern together but to wrestle with some of the difficult themes mentioned in the synthesis. Over time, the parish can decide to act on them, where competence and resolve permits.

The team will share this report with the clergy, the parish and with the diocese. The Synod process so far has been about listening, the next stage must be about action.