

SYNTHESIS OF MEETING ON SYNOD ON SYNODALITY
ST. JOSEPH'S – ST. PATRICK'S COLLEGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

INTRODUCTION

The St. Joseph's-St. Patrick's College Alumni Association gratefully responds to Pope Francis' invitation to participate in the preparation for the 2021-2023 Synod on Synodality.

The Association is unique in the United States. The Association counts as members all bishops, priests, former priests and laymen who ever attended St. Joseph's College ("St. Joe's") in Mountain View, California. After the closure of the high school seminary program in 1980, St. Joe's was known as St. Patrick's College until its closure in about 1991 as a result of its destruction in the Loma Prieta Earthquake of 1989.¹ Because of that closure, the present alumni range in age from their 60s into their 90s, and what follows reflects that demographic.

Because of a love of the Church in general and of the priesthood in particular, the officers of the Association decided to give all alums a chance to respond to Pope Francis. There are about 1,100 alums across the country for whom the Association has contact information. (Alumni bishops were not expected to participate and in fact did not do so.)

On June 2, 2022, after a suitable preparation (questions were sent out in advance and training was held for facilitators and note takers), a national meeting by Zoom was held. Laymen and priests (both former priests and active retired priests) participated. Some wives of alums also participated. Many alums did not choose to participate. Why they did not is subject only to anecdotal analysis. It seems that many are disillusioned with the Church and do not have faith in the prospects for change. Others are put off by tech in any form, and a Zoom meeting with breakout rooms was a bridge too far.

¹ At the time of its closure, St. Joe's had formed men for priesthood for the Archdiocese of San Francisco and the Dioceses of Sacramento, Salt Lake City, Oakland, San Jose, Stockton, Santa Rosa, Reno, Hawaii and from time to time students from Los Angeles, Seattle and Denver.

The participants were broken into six breakout rooms to reflect on the “joys” and on the “obstacles” experienced in the Church and the “hopes” for the future. Summaries were prepared and this one synthesis of those summaries follows.

I

JOYS IN THE CHURCH

1. Many find joy in their spiritual journey with Jesus, especially in a prayer life facilitated by the Church, even in the face of disappointments and disillusionments (some of the “obstacles” to be described hereafter).

Many older alums have found joy in being able to use Scripture and spiritual reading to reject a spirituality from their earlier years of formation that portrayed God as a frowning, harsh judge and replacing that image with a God of radical mercy (e.g. the Parable of the Love of the Father), not terribly interested in judgment.

2. Many find joy in good liturgy, in a priest who can make Scripture come alive, in music that invites participation and is “singable”, in choir participation, and in art which touches us where words alone cannot.
3. Many have found joy in the reforms of Vatican II, especially the reform of the liturgy and in the broad promotion of the study of Scripture.
4. Many find joy living in a parish where the parish is felt as the People of God, not where the Church is seen as an institution, uninspired and uninspiring. Common to this experience is working with fellow parishioners to help others, whether through organizations such as the St. Vincent De Paul Society or simply with ad hoc spontaneity.

Community is best seen as loving when priests inspire and encourage lay leadership – and then get out of the way, enabling parishioners to minister to one another. There is joy too, however, in seeing priests serving and even dwelling with the poor.

Community is also more joyful when diversity of every kind is seen as an enriching influence so that all feel welcome and included as in Francis' image of a "field hospital".

5. Many find joy, and even take pride, in the outreach of the Church throughout the world to the disadvantaged (the starving, the destitute, immigrants, refugees, etc.) such as through Catholic Relief Services and similar organizations. Especially gratifying is that such help crosses all racial, cultural, religious, ethnic lines to become visible "good news" for all humankind.
6. We all find joy currently in Pope Francis naming one of our alums, Bishop Robert W. McElroy, to be a cardinal, thereby recognizing Bishop Bob as one who is close to the heart and mind of Francis.

II

OBSTACLES/ DIFFICULTIES IN THE CHURCH

1. Most find grave disappointment in that the impulses of Vatican II have been frustrated by bishops, priests and some laypeople who want to retain a more clerical and authoritarian Church.
2. The effects of the sex abuse crisis remain. While the laity understand all too well that priests are human and can sin even as gravely as laypeople do, the faithful still find the actions (or inactions) of many bishops to be of a different order. In general, the credibility of the American bishops for moral leadership has been lost, at least for some unknown period of time. And that is painful and not remediable by the faithful laity or the ordinary priest.
3. It is very painful to see Pope Francis resisted both in clerical and lay gatherings when he has given us so much hope.
4. It is painful to observe how many in our alumni have left active ministry because they fell in love. They usually went on to very productive and rewarding lives, but their service has been lost to the local Church now for decades.
5. The rigidity of the Church imposes canonical burdens upon those who are divorced and remarried outside the Church. Many have stories of aged relatives who could not take Eucharist, and then upon the death of their

- spouse, no longer wished to do so because, they felt, the Church had long before left them. They died without the sacraments.
6. Our gay children are told they are “intrinsically disordered,” and their attempts to live lives of intimate love and commitment are repudiated by the Church, all of which is another painful difficulty, almost too great to bear because they are our children.
 7. All feel the unequal treatment of women in the Church is a major obstacle to life in the Church and to evangelization. As one alum put it, “Mary Magdalene is still not believed.” It is felt that the reasons for the denial of ordained status to women as deacons and as priests are not intellectually compelling. Further, priests are often unable to relate to women as equals and sometimes not at all. Yet, they are ordained for a ministry for which they cannot succeed as to this one half of the faithful.
 8. The weaponizing of the Eucharist is seen as another canonical burden, hard if not impossible, to square with the “wwJd” test, i.e. “what would Jesus do”. The laity are confused as to why the Jesus who ate regularly with sinners and who refused to allow a prostitute to be stoned in order to satisfy the law should now approve what is being done by these bishops who are more interested in the law than Jesus was.
 9. Some participants see an obstacle in how bishops have been chosen in the U.S. Many seem to be “lawmen”, i.e. canon lawyers with no demonstrated pastoral experience. The difficulty, as one breakout group put it, is that this preference for “law” creates a temptation in our family members to say, “I am out of here” because they see “institutional law overrides spiritual quests, when obligation is stressed over conscience and community, when obedience is demanded over love from the heart”. The “Church becomes controlling rather than liberating, like the Scribes and Pharisees of old”, as that breakout group phrased it.
 10. Dependence on foreign-born priests, while seemingly necessary, has created problems for community building. Some are authoritarian and culturally out of touch. Too many have such pronounced accents that our children and grandchildren do not struggle to understand them. They simply drift away.
 11. Schism, de facto schism, is the most obvious obstacle, at least in the United States. Indeed, those who have left the Church are the second

largest denomination in the U. S. Many, maybe most, do value Gospel values but from outside the community and away from the Eucharist, the one place where they should experience unity in community.

III

HOPES AND DREAMS

1. We hope for emphasizing Jesus as the center of the Church and of our personal lives. We hope for more widespread experience of spiritual direction as well as exposure to Scripture in order to know Jesus, not just to know about Him.
2. We hope for a rekindling of the spirit of Vatican II and a further involvement of the laity, women and men equally, in all aspects of the Church.
3. We hope for a Church where women are fully equal to men in the Church including in the diaconate and priesthood.
4. We hope for optional celibacy for priests so that (hopefully) more exemplary families would be part of the experience of Church. We hope to see priesthood and celibacy as different charisms.
5. We hope for seminary formation that will produce men (and women) radically dedicated to servanthood in the model of the washing of feet by Jesus, not to clericalism and authoritarianism.
6. We hope that the Eucharist will be seen more widely as food for life's journey, not as a reward for obedience to rules.
7. We hope that the Church will allow the divorced and remarried to receive Jesus in the Eucharist and to be fully welcome in the community of the Church.
8. With respect to homosexuality and other issues regarding sexual orientation, we hope that the Pope will direct moral theologians to reevaluate the Church's current teaching in light of all relevant scientific information and to report to the Pope with respect to reaffirming that teaching or modifying it. We hope for this out of a conviction that truth cannot be divided nor its possible change feared. A teaching, if erroneous, is not made right by even centuries of being so held.

9. We hope that we will welcome diversity into the Church including the LGBTQ+ and that we will improve our welcome to people of other religious traditions, confident that Christianity is bigger than canonical Catholicism. We hope that we will experience the Holy Spirit at work in all our efforts at diversity and inclusion.
10. We hope to find continuing hope in the small islands of hope that we experience now, such the Catholic Worker Movement, Pax Christi, family and couples support groups, small faith sharing and small Christian communities, the National Catholic Reporter, our own Alumni Association, service groups like St. Vincent de Paul, etc., all of which can lead to a change of heart to a heart more like that of Jesus.
11. We hope that the Church's teaching on birth control will change so that it is not a sword over the heads of conscientious couples. We hope too that sexual intercourse will be seen as an expression of love and not something to be reluctantly tolerated.
12. We hope bishops will be defenders of "life" in all circumstances, not just the life of the unborn, even if such means they must clash with those who oppose regulation of other life issues such as capital punishment, guns, war and economic justice for those who work and for all the marginalized. The bishops, including in the United States, must cease being identified with the political right.
13. We hope that the Church, including the American bishops, will more aggressively pursue programs to change minds and hearts regarding the evil of abortion and will abandon trying to use civil law to impose our teaching on an unwilling majority who value individual choice.

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