

**St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Niagara-on-the-Lake
Synodal Listening Report
December 2022**

Introduction

In March and April of 2022, seven groups of parishioners met in the parish hall of St. Vincent de Paul Parish to respond to Pope Francis' call for synodal listening. In the words of one of the participants: "The Pope heard the call of the Holy Spirit as the Church is in dire need of a listening Synod in order to grow. Participants heard the voice of the Holy Spirit in the call to participate and share in this Synod."

This document is a summary of participants' concerns with the parish and the Church, the joys which continue to sustain their faith, and their recommendations to help parishioners and Church leadership move forward as a faith community.

In every session, and in spite of differing opinions and sorrow at the state of the Church today, participants were moved by a joyful sense that the Holy Spirit was present. In this spirit, the final section of the report summarizes the many ways participants experienced the presence of God.

Our Concerns

There were four fundamental concerns raised by every group and almost every participant. These are: the minimal participation of youth and younger adults in the parish and the Church overall; the scandal of sexual abuse by priests and subsequent coverups; the treatment of indigenous peoples especially with regard to the residential schools issue; and the rules with respect to the role of women within the Church.

Participants expressed the view that the latter three issues were significant causes of the first issue (an exodus of young parishioners, a diminishing and aging congregation). Some spoke of the difficulty of exercising our faith in a positive way outside our faith community with non-Catholics and former Catholics, family members and friends, because the issues of sexual abuse, indigenous mistreatment, and women's rights take centre stage in any discussion. Others mentioned that the "old rules of faith" did not address the pains and concerns of young people. One person said congregants don't truly believe in forgiveness and acceptance, and therefore friends and family [former Catholics] do not feel welcome. It should be noted a small number of participants were concerned about growing liberal attitudes toward gender and divorce.

There were several issues which together could be broadly categorized as loss of community and loss of outreach. Participants felt there were fewer opportunities to be involved in the parish community. One participant said, "We don't have the 'journeying together' activities which preceded Covid - bible study, choir, soup dinners."

Although many people mentioned the loss of social activities and communal prayer and study, others were concerned we had lost sight of a mission to serve the less fortunate together as a community. One participant worried we no longer have a culture of volunteerism.

Participants frequently mentioned fear of judgement and rejection as a factor in lack of participation. There were a number of issues underlying this fear. Traditional Catholics felt they were “looked down on”; liberal people felt they were not heard. There was some feeling that new ideas would not be considered and new opinions were not welcomed. Overall, a number of participants felt newcomers were excluded. Some participants said they didn’t know how decisions were made in the parish. *Note - at the time of the sessions the new Parish council and the committees of the parish had recently been formed.*

Our Joys

Despite the concerns parishioners voiced, there were many, many, expressions of joy in the parish.

The fundamentals of our faith remain. Over and over again, participants expressed their joy in receiving the Eucharist, some on a daily basis, especially after the restrictions of Covid. Although participants were appreciative of diocese and parish efforts to maintain connections through online mass, being physically in the church, having a time of peace without outside distractions was very important.

One participant said they appreciated “the genuine nature of our pastors who seem to really care.” This sentiment was echoed by others. Almost every participant found solace and joy in the homilies of Father Peter and Father Ron. Father Ron’s “open your missal” method of preaching was particularly enjoyed and Father Peter’s welcome, warmth, and openness, greatly appreciated. “He knows our names!” they said. Both priests were seen to be contributing to the spiritual and personal growth of parishioners. Participants mentioned their support of new approaches - the revitalized parish bulletin and pamphlets and the formation of parish council and finance and heritage committees.

Some people were happy with their long-term connections with a small group within the church. Choir members expressed an enormous joy and sense of belonging in the choir (mirrored by a sense of loss when the choir was silent during Covid). Other participants expressed joy in hearing the choir’s music. Others mentioned their appreciation for those who ministered in the parish. Those who ministered said serving the parish brought them joy. Some expressed happiness at seeing young families and children at mass. Someone else loved bringing their children to mass.

Also mentioned as joys were the offering of the Spanish mass, the historical church building itself and its lovely location, the benefit of being in a small diocese with an energetic bishop, and our pre-Covid connection with other faiths and inter-faith communities in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Finally, the synod process itself brought joy to those who participated.

Recommendations

Participants offered suggestions to help build a parish community which listens to the voice of God, serves its own members, and ultimately, serves others outside our community.

The first task, suggested participants, is to know and understand one another better. There were many suggestions along this line: bring back first communion breakfasts, formally welcome newcomers, have Sunday coffees, soup dinners, events for children, events for migrant workers. One suggestion - to form a social committee - might give structure and thought to these ideas.

Participants said parishioners needed to be personally invited to serve in the parish in a way which will make them feel valued. A general call to participation is intimidating for many, while an invitation to serve in a small team or group builds community. One person suggested there are humble ways to serve (cleaning, taking care of linens, flower arrangements, etc) which might appeal to some people, especially if the tasks were to be done in teams.

A better understanding of the needs and skills of the parish could be ascertained through surveys [*Note: this has been done*], and a suggestion box with responses.

There were several recommendations regarding youth: create a youth ministry, bring school children to the church for mass, have volunteers go into the schools.

Participants suggested, until there is structural change within the broader Church, ways should be sought to include women and members of other underrepresented groups as leaders in the parish.

One participant echoed the comments of many when they said, “We need to go out into the community to serve — Christ didn’t stay in the temple.” Participants reminded one another that acts of service reflect the mission of St. Vincent de Paul and bring us closer to God. The parish should look for ways to serve as a community. An example of an outreach in Hamilton was given. The parish served breakfast and lunch to the needy, grew to touch thousands of people, and invigorated the parish and increased the faith of those serving.

Many times, the need to listen was raised. The need to listen to one another. The need to listen to the voice of God. Some concrete suggestions on listening were given. One was for Father ask for prayer intentions from the congregation. Another was to create opportunities [*perhaps in a communal setting - after mass*] for people to speak out and be heard. Another was create opportunities for communal discernment, perhaps using the Jesuit spirituality and decision making to facilitate single day retreats or seminars with a skilled spiritual director.

Other suggestions made by participants were: the communal celebration of reconciliation; more opportunities for personal reconciliation, more traditional liturgies with candles and incense for feast days.

The Voice of God

Participants were asked how they heard the voice of God. Their responses reflect the diversity of the participants and the limitless grace of God.

One group spoke for many others when it reported, “We hear the voice of God through the homilies of Father Peter and Father Ron which helps us see the bible readings in a different way; through Eucharistic adoration that gives us time to sit, reflect and listen to God; through private and communal prayer; through reconciliation and conversations with our confessor; through the receiving of the Eucharist; through the spirituality of those we meet and through music.”

Other participants heard God through children, through people who serve the needy, in the wisdom of other religions and people of other beliefs, in one-on-one and small group discussions, and, as one participant put it, “When kindness and goodness spontaneously breakout *[during crisis]*.”

All groups reported feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit in the listening sessions through the voices and attentive listening of participants. Some indicated they had never felt more welcome or happier in the parish than in these sessions. As one person put it, “Through the act of listening to one another, we invited the Holy Spirit in.” Exactly, one suspects, Pope Francis’s intention.

Submitted by Pam Nowina, December 2, 2022