

2023 Synod

Saint George Church Worcester MA

In October 2021, two delegates from Saint George Church were selected to attend the 2023 Synod Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Paul in Worcester. These two delegates were members of the Spiritual Growth Committee, of Saint George Church, Worcester MA. Upon returning from this opening Mass and from additional information obtained with the Parish's Pastor, the Committee began to develop and plan Synod listening and feedback gathering sessions. Soon thereafter the Spiritual Growth Committee began to invite, listen, and note feedback from baptized Catholics for the purpose of compiling information for the 2023 Synod.

Invitations to listening and feedback sessions and gatherings began with our Pastor inviting younger parishioners (grades eight and nine) to participate in a listening and feedback session. Following the completion of these sessions, students from the parish grade nine religious education program or students who had received the Sacrament of Confirmation gathered in sessions. Student participants were comprised of those who attended Mass regularly and participated in parish programs and activities and those who attended Mass less frequently. All student listening and feedback sessions were moderated by the parish Religious Education Coordinators and members of their teaching program.

The questions used in the student sessions were formulated from the diocesan questions, however, the language was converted to be more readily understood by these younger age brackets, while still conveying messaging on the topics of synodality, eucharistic revival and evangelization.

The members of the Spiritual Growth Committee assisted in developing the adult listening and feedback sessions. Invitations to attend gatherings were extended in several ways: person to person (a personal invitation face to face); announced at the end of Mass; the weekly parish introduction given ahead of the parish livestream video of Sunday Mass; the weekly parish bulletin; on the Parish website and by postings/advertisements throughout the church buildings. Members of one of the parish's Faith Sharing Groups were also invited to participate. People who accepted the invitation to attend then choose one of three available gathering sessions, held throughout March and early April.

When the gatherings began there were introductions among attendees, each attendee was invited to introduce themselves and share about themselves. This allowed for all to be comfortable as they participated in these gatherings. Two members of the Spiritual Growth Committee served as recorders at each of these sessions. There were also two members of the Spiritual Growth Committee who were readers, presenting the questions at each of these adult gathering sessions. The meetings were scheduled to be 90 minutes long. The gatherings proved to be comfortable and engaging for people. And the lively discussions on the questions resulted in each of the adult sessions running longer by 15 to 25 minutes. Some of the participants did not know one another prior to attending the gatherings, as they attended different Masses (three are available over the weekend). Many were thankful to have been invited and some were surprised to have been asked to contribute. For some others this was the first time they were asked to or initiated becoming involved with something inside the church-outside of attending Mass.

It is important to note two things about the gathering sessions. First, all participant groups, the students, and the adults, were given the questions to be discussed two weeks in advance of their scheduled gathering session. This allowed time for individuals to pray and think about responses, as following the guidance of the Holy Spirit was paramount in preparing responses. Secondly not all questions were covered in all sessions. As noted earlier, language was amended (for understanding) in the gatherings for students and conversation (depth and length) differed on topics from session to session.

Overall, approximately seventy people participated in the listening and feedback sessions. The number of attendees was lower than the Spiritual Growth Committee had hoped for. When all meetings had been completed an open invitation was extended to anyone who had not yet participated. The Committee is sensitive to and continues to reflect on the baptized people who we may not have attended a feedback session. These individuals include the infirm and homebound who watch mass via livestream and parishioners who have not yet returned to parish life after pandemic lockdowns and restrictions. Some although aware the event was open to all, expressed they “did not have enough to offer” or “did not have the background knowledge” about the questions, and rescinded the invitation or the opportunity to be involved.

The Spiritual Growth Committee is thankful to all who accepted the invitation by the Holy Father ***For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission***. We the Spiritual Growth Committee prayerfully present to you our

findings on Synodality, Eucharistic Revival and Evangelization on behalf of Saint George Church, 40 Brattle Street Worcester MA.



Category I – Synodality


1. Do you read: <i>The Catholic Free Press</i> ?	Y	N
The St. George Parish Bulletin?	Y	N
The Diocesan Website?	Y	N
The St. George Parish Website?	Y	N

This yes or no question included more conversation paired with the yes or no answers. You can see more detail on this in Category I Synodality Q.2.

The results of thirty-four respondents to this question are displayed below.

Totals

Catholic Free Press	24	Yes	10	No
Saint George Weekly bulletin	33	Yes	1	No
Diocese Website	9	Yes	25	No
Saint George Parish Website	22	Yes	12	No



Category I – Synodality

2. What is your experience of the consultative processes in our Diocese and at St. George Parish and what other means might be provided at the Diocesan, and Parish levels to seek your input and hear your views?

Some respondents shared that being invited to a listening feedback session on the 2023 Synod was “the first time they had been asked”, to provide input to a consultative process in our Diocese and/or at Saint George Parish. Others felt that having a level of involvement, beyond attending Mass, has provided them greater connection and awareness to the consultative process within the church. This was similarly expressed if individuals were involved (beyond Mass attendance) at the Diocesan level. These connections were provided by work with committees at the parish level such as Pastoral Council seats, Partners in Charity, Finance Committee positions and at the Parish Ministry level or positions in Children’s Religious Education. For some involvement in the Saint Vincent DePaul, Youth Ministry, and Partners in Charity, helped to support knowledge of the consultative processes occurring at the diocesan levels.

There were several respondents who shared they “have no idea” what the consultative process was at either the Church or Diocese level. The Catholic Church being a “traditional top-down process” makes councils and communications from Church to Diocese nonexistent or invisible to the laity. While others noted the Pastoral Council at our church is a consultative process, another felt they hear “zero” from our own Pastoral Council. Others countered that such councils do not exist equally in churches from one diocese to another. “Locally we don’t have all processes in place”. “In the diocese, leaders provide that- and that changes as it depends on who is in charge at the time”. Diocese to Diocese, there seems to be different rules for some of the same processes.

Should the local Parish Council have a known and specific contact that connects a Diocesan Level Council with the Parish's Council for follow through of information and processes? This would add more connection but may alter autonomy. "The Diocese needs to get information down to the parish knowledge level".

For another who shared- negative experiences of trust, interrupt the consultative process. This person previously attended church in the Chicago area and told of a committee established to "envision the church in fifteen years". This "Renew my Church" committee information was used alternately, manipulated in the consultative process, diminishing enrollment, and merging parishes or closing them. This is a concern with Catholic schools as well. This is a loss or removal of "spiritual homes" without full disclosure to the parish's people. This creates anger. People must be able to trust in the consultative process. If there is not trust people leave. They move to other churches and faiths, believing their voices do not matter.

If the laity are not heard in consultative processes, they leave to go to church elsewhere. They want to be where they feel their voice is heard. These voices used to be heard in a variety of "lay board" positions. Do these boards exist any longer? Are there no lay boards anymore? At church, there are committees that listen.

Communication needs improvement, throughout the top-down ecclesiastical institution. Many suggestions came about if the ability to share and communicate were improved. This could be achieved by using some of the media from question one more effectively and adding to the offerings like streamlining information across all media sources: the Catholic Free Press, The Saint George Parish Weekly bulletin, The Saint George Parish Website, the Diocesan Website, and local online mediums including, video streaming, YouTube, Facebook, Insta. One individual has spent years involved with youth ministry – "the programs from the diocese are not filtered down to local Parish Bulletins." This would help to get more sign-ups for things.

"The diocese should seek feedback from parishes and share that with everyone".
"Letters from the diocese are shared in the Parish Weekly Bulletin".

Others offered that communication in the consultative process is made more difficult due to: "Current leadership ebbs and flows and dissolves or institutes new ideas i.e., family, peace, and justice". Or that differences in personality affect follow through as in this example: "Current parish priests' ability to reach out to

parishioners and groups creates a connection when individuals couldn't be in church" (covid pandemic). "Groups at the Diocese never connected during covid. We were left to wonder does it still exist? It hurts to have been a part of this group and then seemingly forgotten". Better processes should be in place to safely promote the "sharing of email and contact information of parishioners with parishioners in the Parish or Diocesan groups" to eliminate the barriers to communication at such times of separation. Obvious regard must be given to the consultative process as "personalization of emails of groups may be used inappropriately". This becomes a difficult privacy issue when one wants information released .

Finally, it was felt that Clergy and Bishops can appear and seem disconnected from the laity. This impedes discussion and openness on consultative processes between each other and with the laity. The following is a list of means to improve opportunities for Clergy, Bishops, and laity and to create deeper understanding of consultative processes, improve participation in, and provide opportunities to allow us to share our input and views: These views and statements are that of the attendees in various listening and gathering sessions held to discuss the 2023 Synod topics.

- Invitations to a monthly or quarterly coffee group. Maybe coffee with the Bishop in different locations. Like the Compass Lounge had for young people (Theology on Tap now closed and looking for new location)

- People liked family/house gatherings, and neighborhood meetings.

- When was the last time we had a suggestion box? This is something simple. A proactive / suggestive feedback mechanism is needed.

- Pizza with the Pastor or Bishop, ask questions about anything!

- Catholic Free Press could provide articles or open mic type gatherings. People could ask questions of the Bishop and he would reply.

- I don't know what the diocese provides. Maybe send out an annual survey.

- When consulting priests and Bishops include the laity just as much.

- Offer me something from the Diocese that I can attend regularly.

- Use Catholic Free Press to communicate what's going on at the diocesan level.
- Add questions in The Catholic Free Press (and other media) from the laity for the Diocese/ Bishop/Priest to answer.
- Every Diocesan program offered should include a post participation review.
- Create an open session (like a listening and feedback session) inviting parishioners, on a regular basis, to this type of sharing.
- Please present some of these ideas (that usually are never enacted) so we are not left with a feeling of hopelessness.
- increase activities for our children



Category I – Synodality

3. If we as Church believe that we are guided by the Holy Spirit in the synodal process, what do you think are the greatest blessings and challenges faced by the Church as we look to the future?

As baptized Catholics we are guided by the Holy Spirit. In trust we must allow ourselves to follow the Holy Spirit given to each of us. In doing so we follow Jesus and give true purpose to our lives. So, many in these listening and gathering sessions acknowledge, “Truth itself is a blessing and the basis of our Catholic faith”. “So many blessings multiply as the years go by” one parishioner lamented. Truth however is also a true challenge, over time, as repeatedly truth is questioned. The actions and behaviors of the church must be completely in truth. “The public does not see truth in all”; Church and school closings, financial dealings, and abuses by those in vocation, or in distribution of communion. When trust is violated, anger emerges, and the laity and the public lose faith in the Catholic Church. “Listen to the Holy Spirit”, however “the Church has a trust issue in the parishes and larger body of the church”. “Truth needs to be dealt with in society”.

As these gatherings occurred two years into the Corona virus pandemic, some appreciated the blessing of the weekly parish, Live Streamed Mass, while isolated at home. Others vocalized, “ the church is open!”, “coffee shop has returned!” , and the Holy Eucharist, the Sacred Traditions and the sacraments all counted as blessings.

In these gatherings to discuss questions for the Synod, many felt the blessing of the “sense of community, based on parish life” and the “Priests who care for their people” as blessings. “We care for people who go to Mass, are true to the parish”. “We are part of the community , we help each other” these statements lend credit to following the Holy Spirit and the shared blessings.

Another noted, “We belong to a universal church, walk into another Catholic church in the US or abroad and feel at home”.

“This sense of community is dependent on each parish and its communication success”. “If I’m not here, and I am on the list (coffee shop, greeter) I get a phone call- someone is looking for me”.

“At Saint George Parish “We are good at doing outreach, this is a blessing.” “Our coordinator does so much.” “We combine with other churches.” “A robust periodic listing of what is being done in church helps people see connections. The giving tree, mustard seed these are the blessings of our church.”

As some moved to discussing the challenges facing the church today, the challenges of a pandemic not yet fully over surfaced. “Where are the children?” “Will the families return?” “How do we fill the pews again?” “Over the last two years we have lost touch, we have little feedback.” “Some say they can’t come back right now.” “Covid has been used as an excuse to not come back to church.” “We must learn the needs of the people who have not returned post covid, to try to help them.” “People are so segmented this takes time to rebuild.”

Covid has exacerbated an already faltering Mass attendance. “ I like a larger community.” “A big challenge is trying to get people back to church.” “Maintain membership, while keeping it faith based, and keep inviting people in”. “How do we include and invite people on the edges in?” “Who are our members of the parish and how do we connect with them again?” “Is there a list?” “Can we reach out to people who are not here regularly to ask advice?” “We must keep the base involved and continue expanding it.”

“We need a rejuvenation – invite people in.” “Then people need to see the value to create a personal connection.” “Otherwise, they feel they are good on their own.” “An invitation to join in typically spans lifelong friendships.”

“Do we need to bring back the women’s guild? and the annual fair?” “Maybe this is a generational thing, that we don’t have today.” “We must find out what people are “generationally” interested in now.” “In times past there was more focus around church.”

How are we “getting young families in?” When “covid stopped many activities, these families didn’t return.”

“It’s as though we need new “lures” to get people back in.” “Every organization has lost people.” “Some have had illness- maybe reach out.” “What else can we do to help them feel the sense of community here?”

“Total confidence in the Holy Spirit.” Some believers feel “the biggest challenge is to maintain a relationship with Jesus” and a connection with the Holy Spirit. “Many people live a lifestyle that is outside the church, they are in a plastic / fake world.”

This leads to the larger problem of catechesis in the Catholic Church. Increasingly we are losing “lifelong” Catholics. The need for “lifelong Catechisms” exists. The idea that reaching the sacrament of confirmation somehow completes your religious education obligations until marriage is far too prevalent. “Catechesis drops off.” “How do we catechize throughout life?” “How do we invite and engage new confirmands? Keep young people after confirmation? And Remain “lifelong” Catholics?

A “personal connection with God is needed to be personally connected to the church. Otherwise, it is a total disconnect and they can’t make this connection to the body and blood.” Others shared; “the future of the church is with our young people, and young people need to work on that.” The common sentiment that the family unit is changing too rapidly, resulting in mixed religions in one household, multiple religions in close family units such as those that include, half siblings, second families, multiethnic and multi-generational living styles, do not support the “family church” or the “first church” in the home. “Not all of us are trained in teachings of catholic faith.”

Today we have fewer “lifelong” or “cradle” Catholics and people “seek their own answers, they are not taught like parents of our generation.” Without knowledge of the Word, one cannot grow in the Catholic faith.

Some parishioners suggested that beyond catechism parishes offer programs such as “Pen pals” for youth to elderly connections”, where there could be “Sharing of prayer life and experience” between the youth and the elderly.

While on families some attendees felt like the Sacrament of Marriage and the process for preparation for marriage in the Catholic Church a challenge for young couples. One parent remarked, “The twelve-month lead time on wedding preparation is horrific. Young people are just going outside the diocese to marry. Are these regulations different across the board?” This contributes to pushing another generation of Catholics away, creates misunderstanding and another family feeling “turned away”.

These conversations on the sacrament of marriage turned to the challenge of divorce still existing in the Catholic Church today. The “expense”, ‘stigma’, confusion regarding remarriage and communion for today’s divorcees, is not widely or easily understood. “The cost is too much.” Others felt “Annulled marriages, what does that say to the children of these relationships.”

If a child questions their legitimacy, through these annulled marriages, Catholicism loses value and trust for them. Children learn to avoid religion or reconnection with their catholic backgrounds.

“Pope Francis is a huge blessing.” “Pope Francis has an incredible capacity for love.” “Pray the Vatican works to get more priests.” The challenge is the “lack of vocations.” “We have clergy and deacons that request opinions from people going to Mass.” “Their homilies give us things to think and ponder about.” “I am watching the Anniversary of priests, decline dramatically.” “We must be willing to let others run with things.” “Should priests be allowed to Marry? Will this help with the shortage?

“I am not opposed to a greater role for women.” “Allow women more participation in more church levels such as the diaconate.” “Denying women, a role sends a message that women cannot find Christ as deeply as can be found with male leadership.” “Is this being heard?” “Allow women ordinations.” “Why not women priests?” “When women leave the church, their children go with them.” “What is the feasibility of admitting women to the diaconate?” “Women were in

the early church.” “We need to bring this forward.” “There is no role for females on the altar.” “How to introduce this without shocking the parishioners?”

“This is a divisive world – frightening times.” “In the past nuns were more apparent in the parish. They helped us feel the presence of God. Can we use nuns more fully here?”

“How do we include LGBTQ groups?” “Are we welcoming?” The first synod has taught us the practice of gathering and listening first before responding.

Category II – Eucharistic Revival

1. What does the Eucharist mean to you?

Of the roughly thirty-five participants, most did not hesitate in answering this question. Their responses are listed below, grouped by similarities.

-Unity. Unifying and healing. Part of the community, healing. It's a linking with Jesus and the community. Carry it with you. Basis of our actions through the week, carrying Jesus into the World.

-The body and blood of Jesus. So big its eternal. True body of Christ. Center of my faith. Source and summit of our Catholic life. Christ is present. Presence of God. The true presence of Jesus. Love of Jesus the true presence. Most important part of Mass. Essence of our faith. The center of our religion. Center of everything. Brings it home. Being one with Jesus.

- Consecration brings us into the presence of the Pascal mystery.

- Eucharist means thanksgiving.

- Sacrifice – Redeemed all of us.

- Chance to experience Christ in me.

- Intimacy and oneness. Getting closer to God.

- Goes through every cell in the body.

- Leave with lower blood pressure. Confidence from prayer. Feels very foundational. A connection to return to it.

-Peace and love, Love of Jesus that's soothing. It means life and love. Peace-community with Jesus. Being a part of Jesus.

- Spiritual Communion

- Faith

- Peace

- Being invited to the last supper every week. He hasn't given up on me.

- It's encouraging, asking me to follow him.

- Creates a feeling to be open and at Mass

- Redeeming and renewing.

- Process of coming to understanding. Receive so young it's a process to understand that happens over repetition and time.

- It is my Strength, Need to go to church.

- Jesus asking us to keep moving forward.



Category II – Eucharistic Revival

2. How can people come to a deeper understanding of the Eucharist?

This question was answered by most of the respondents in the group sessions along with two parishioners who mailed in their replies. A basic theme of teaching and learning or education in general seemed to emerge from the responses that were given.

- The parents of students currently in the Religious Education program, were not brought up on the church teachings. How can these families and parents support a good example in teaching understanding? The first Church should be the first, but this presents a difficulty for learning. Catechesis is lacking – a generation or two is missing this.
- Incorporate this teaching as part of the catechesis program. Years ago, we heard more from the altar “catechesis” sometimes in the homily. We need to hear this more often. Older individuals were not taught this, so it needs to be revisited.
- Run some seminars
- The role of the family is important as they needed to have learned to be able to teach their children.
- Encourage Children to lead programs.

- Offer Bible School and teach little by little. If we can educate children into their teens, it may stick(?).
- People need to be educated that this is not a “symbol”. Education that becomes an understanding that it is truly Jesus they are receiving. As such they must develop a personal understanding with Jesus.
- Better to explain or have in a sermon once or two times a year. Father can explain a little from the altar when opportunity arises.
- Return to Life in the Spirit (6wk) program - a lot of work - drew many into ministry.
- It needs to be understood that the Holy Spirit is present. We are not always looking for the Holy Spirit. We must be reminded and concentrate on believing the Holy Spirit will come forward. There are many distractions that cloud or block our hearing the Holy Spirit.
- Attend! Offer a personal invitation
- Audible can be hard during Mass. Some of what is being said is missed due to this difficulty.
- For some, the absence of the Eucharist during Covid resulted in the Eucharist meaning more to them when they were able to receive again.
- A 98 YO woman formerly a parishioner and lector at our church has found John 6: the Bread of Life discourse. She advocates spending time in prayer on this verse , as some of the disciples leave Jesus because of what he has said about his body and blood. (Would you leave me too? Peter responds “Master to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”) These words often sustained this person’s faith and kept her in the church.
- A write in response suggests that when the priest is seated in prayer at Mass after communion and before the final blessing, he says a few words about Gods gift of the Eucharist to us, such as: “ Let us pause for a moment in gratitude for the gift of Jesus in the Eucharist - followed by a moment of silence. This individual believes that if this is recited at daily Mass, it may plant and nourish in people’s hearts a deepening gratitude for the Eucharist and an increased awareness of his tremendous love for us. In these moments, may hope spring within us as renewed hope and the desire to share the Good News with others.

Category II - Eucharistic Revival

3. What do you think are the reasons why many Catholics do not attend Mass each weekend?

The expectation of trust immediately comes forth in the listening and feedback discussions of why Catholics do not attend Mass each weekend. Many attendees at these listening and gathering sessions brought forth the Catholic church's "issues" with trust. "Since 2000 there has been a dramatic reduction in attendance due to anger at the clergy sex abuse scandals", "distrust is prevalent", this "distrust is not compatible with Catholic living.

Locally trust is also at issue in various scandals "have you seen the issue with the employee at the St. Johns food pantry?" This is not the "Catholic" we want people to witness. Others felt that hiring an Inquisitor to investigate" is not the appropriate way to "manage this situation", "Is this an unbiased effort?"

Also cited was the inability for the public to have an expectation of trust in Catholic finances. People see the "Vatican is loaded." People question and mistrust grows, as high-profile financial settlements such as those resulting from clergy sex abuse, Catholic school, and parish closings. Individuals see their own parishes struggle financially, the equity not appearing to be distributed equally from the top-down. The need for additional financing at the parish often becomes the burden of the faithful at that parish. The lack of understanding and transparency in financial dealings have Catholics distrusting those at the Head of the Church. "Jesus was simple" he was willing to help others understand.

Some in the gatherings felt the Church cannot overcome the negative emotions surrounding these negative cases and this adds to the lack of attendance. We need to do a better job "inviting people back". As noted in Earlier Synod questions building a "relationship takes time". "The personal invitation is not tried enough."

We need to do a better job of “inviting those on the edges in”. “The Catholic church needs to do a better job “meeting people where they are at.” “More Christian witnessing must take place.” “Some are not ready to witness.” “Practicing one’s faith can speak volumes.”

Additional examples of obstacles arise when it comes to families attending mass regularly. “Many parents of children attending religious education have not been catechized themselves, thus losing the traditions and support to begin practice in the home.” “The children see this and follow the pattern. “ These issues certainly tie in with the examples given in previous synod questions....

“Some of the Catholic youth do not believe the Eucharist is the actual “body” and “blood” of Christ.” “We need continual education” “supporting Catholics as they grow in faith and understanding throughout their life.”

As noted in previous discussions for the Synod, others believe we are unable to communicate effectively or connect with youth where they are at. “The young are on media.” “Adults need to do a better job planting the seed.”

The remaining effects of the present coronavirus pandemic have also impacted the return of regular attendance at Mass. “The youngest members of families are still unable to be vaccinated.” “During times of covid many Catholics became comfortable with watching Mass on TV. Others feel many youths look at having reached the sacrament of confirmation as being “finished” they are “free from all church.” “This habit has not been reversed for many, post height of the pandemic.”

Through the pandemic many, “lost the habit or routine of coming to church weekly.” There is a lot of loss, “lost connections to people, loss of community, many have lost touch with those they knew in church.”

“As families grow, obligations change.” A Catholic lifestyle doesn’t match the “values” of today. “Values have changed.” In families, “sports have great value”, In today’s society there is little effort to support church on Sundays. “Sunday has become the day that is available and many high-school age individuals opt sports over church on Sundays.”

Additionally, “some young adults are put off by, “church language”. “This mismatch of language and meaning, it changes through time.” Language is vastly different for our youth and young adults today.

We have also mentioned in earlier questions, the obstacles of the divorced. Here too “Divorced Catholics lost sight of what it was like to be Catholic.”

“Misunderstandings about what the Vatican can change as far as rules to receive the Eucharist.” “Some believe they can only receive the Eucharist if they remarry.” This confusion leads to Catholics creating distance to Catholicism, experiencing confusion about their place in the Catholic sacraments and church post-divorce.

There were also a myriad of “habits and personalities” thought to increase the likelihood that an individual would not attend Mass regularly, these included: Laziness, mental exhaustion, fatigue, people have different habits, competing priorities and still one proclaimed, “Sunday is asleep in day.”

There are other obstacles that were noted that do not directly point to the attendee. Rather look more to issues the “church” needs to be aware of and figure out: people do not understand the importance of regular church attendance, parishioners are not seeing the value or connection between church and their everyday living, there are insufficient activities that appeal to different age groups in the parish, we need more community events like ecumenical invitations.

“As Catholics we are called to change.” “Individuals may be unable to successfully create and keep person to person connection over differences or personalities.” “Such as a relationship with the priest.”. “In times of conflict or disagreement” it was noted, some “choose to work these changes from within, some choose to walk away.” People may not have the ability to focus on Christ.” While another noted, “Some view the church as becoming too legal over pastoral.”



Category II – Eucharistic Revival

4. What can be done to invite and welcome Catholics back to Mass each weekend?

In our adult listening and feedback sessions for the 2023 Synod overwhelmingly the idea of the personal invitation is the best way to welcome back Parishioners. In our Parish it is that one to one, person to person invitation to become involved that is seen as our most successful way to welcome Catholics back to Mass. It embodies the relational connectedness so often needed to encourage someone seeking a deeper relationship with Christ. “This allows for witnessing in our faith life. Following the one to one or personal invite as our most successful way to welcome Catholics back, when practicing Catholics are witnessed “living an authentic catholic life”, “visible to those around them”, this speaks as an invitation to live the same way. There is a “feeling of happiness” when a parish is “pulling in one direction”.

“Training needs to be offered to parish boards and ministries within the parish. To help encourage a uniform feel for meeting the needs of parishioners. Some feel this would help to retain parish boards and ministry leaders and be more welcoming to new members.

Training and uniformity would also encourage the Catholic Church to bring forward the “softening of language” for youth and groups in LGBTQ communities.

“When Priests hyper focus on one issue” i.e., abortion, “This may turn some off from religion or attendance.”

The youth are the Church of the Future. To allow their valued participation and allow them to be seen in all aspects of Church life. An increase in youth ministry, youth music. Youth are “the backbone” and we need to “get young people involved, offer programs and pageants etc.”.

One participant who has a strong prescience with the Catholic youth Scouting and would like to see a program expanded. Allow our youth to earn emblems and recognition for their successes. A new outreach program is needed specifically for youth. Lifelong training in the catholic faith needs to be regularly offered. To continually retain young adults and keep them engaged.

“We must work with all groups to grow the Holy Spirit.” I “saw the success of Theology on Tap.” “This needs to be addressed at all levels – college age.”

“Spirituality can be fun, be inclusive. Pizza nights.”

Once families reach confirmation many say we are all set. The messaging needs to change. If these confirmands are now adults in eyes of church- the messaging needs to be what are you going to do now that you are an adult in the church? This is only the beginning. These young adults need to feel that they are needed.

Other ideas for welcoming and inviting people into the Catholic faith are more from the altar. These suggestions included: Regularly reminding those at Mass how the “host should be a physical reminder for why we are coming to church”. Begin Mass with a welcoming message rather than getting right to duties. Maybe a bigger welcome message. “God called you to be here and you answered the message.”

Deliver welcoming letters and offer neighborhood events regularly. Use Easter (or another religious holiday) to deliver pre welcome letters. “Remind people they are there on their own. Someone isn’t making you come”. “Begin by saying a prayer for a specific intention.” Leave people feeling “happy when they leave after Mass”. Leave with a prayer at end of Mass, a prayer for people to come back. Regular email contacts with reminders of what is going on”

Some feel that greater attention to training those in ministry is needed. There needs to be uniformity in language and involvement across our faith. All parishes should have a well-defined invitation that is familiar catholic parish to catholic parish.

It is important to keep our buildings maintenance up. Improvements in real estate and building grounds for curb appeal and for accessibility are also inviting.

Area neighbors and parishioners should be invited to attend festivals, ice cream socials, Spaghetti suppers, blessings of the animals/ rosaries, as this provides connect with our everyday lives, parishioners, and communities. Target these events for specific age groups/ or audiences.

Begin Neighborhood “helpers” programs where parishioners are witnessed helping others. Bringing connections to faith, family, and meeting needs.



Category III – Evangelization

1. What things do you think our Diocese and St. George Parish do well to spread the Gospel and to invite and welcome people to become Catholics and what things do we not do well?

Regarding the Diocesan level there were positive comments about the Men's annual Conference.

Participants saw needs on the Diocesan level such as the following:

- Need for outreach to divorced and remarried persons with respect to reception of the Eucharist. Further action needed by Vatican.
- Active pursuit of stronger Catholic school enrollment
- Diocese not represented at parish level. Communication needs to be improved and parishes need more support from the diocese.
- There is need for outreach from the diocese to all age groups- especially to teens and post-Confirmation students.
- More lay input is needed at the Diocesan decision-making level.
- Need to reach out to parents who are not catechized knowledge of faith is needed to support their children


Our participants commented on the ways St. George parish is doing well.

- Both pre and post COVID response led by our pastor has been positive

- Interaction by Fr. Charles, priests, and seminarians with parishioners in the coffee shop is welcomed.
- Weekly faith sharing groups
- Day of Spirituality
- There is much happening in our parish
- Annie Doyle's valued leadership in parish outreach
- The Mary Garden inspires parishioners to visit and pray
- The return of greeters is appreciated
- Children's liturgy generates good energy for the parish
- Educational programs offered at parish level
- RCIA program for those entering the church
- Availability of good videos and information on parish website
-

Our participants shared areas in which Saint George Parish has not done well.

- Opportunities for social meetings that could occur between masses for parishioners of all ages to strengthen the sense of community
- Inclusion of blessings for specific groups
- A need for greater community support
- Opportunities for hosting with the priest/ group gatherings in rectory
- Those who frequented the Adoration Chapel to adore and pray felt a loss with the chapel's closing
- Need for a wider variety of Mass times
- More help needed with outreach
- Would like to hear more about missionaries
- Opening of activities to the greater neighborhood/attaining speakers to draw people in
- Sponsoring a music festival
- Uplifting stories from personal witnesses
- Need for better messaging to retain post Confirmation students/invite them to help with parish projects
- Need to do a better job educating students about the Eucharist being the Body of Christ
- Need outreach to parents who have not been properly catechized so they can support their children and parish
- Need to link diocesan information with parish information



Category III – Evangelization

2. How comfortable do you feel in sharing your faith with others, inviting them to turn to Christ, attend Church and become Catholics? What are the obstacles that make you hesitant to do these things?

This question was shared with a small faith sharing group within the parish.

Some in this group felt that this format of small group sharing was a comfortable space to discuss topics. While others felt their lack of knowledge created an insecurity causing them to share less.

Some felt that the Ash Wednesday opening to Lent was a comfortable time to share their Catholic faith with others. The outward and visible sign of the ashes on the forehead helped to promote witnessing and evangelization opportunities.

Participants also shared meeting people in public was an opportunity to let people know you could pray for them.

Others offered that shared interest in things made it easier to share their faith. Knowing what people, you may talk with are feeling so that there is not a sense of intrusion or overstepping talking about faith.

If negative responses are returned to one who is trying to share their faith this is often a conversation ending signal.

Faith sharing groups are a comfortable space with which to discuss topics like this with each other.

More knowledge – more comfortable

As for the obstacles that make people hesitant to do these things, this small group speaking to this question felt it difficult to “just start sharing your faith”. There is hesitancy in talking to stranger as you do not know those to whom you may be talking. There is so much prejudging by large groups of people. “It is difficult to speak up in uncomfortable situations.” “ I Can share but only to those who have interest.”

It has been said avoid politics, religion, and everything else. Many people feel the church is to “old school” or has to many “rules.” These assumptions (when known) make me hesitate to share my faith.

Many agreed that offering to pray for others while going about everyday life is a way of sharing their faith without any discourse.



Category III – Evangelization

3. What type of assistance would strengthen your confidence to take the necessary steps to reach out to others?

This question was answered by a small group of five to 7 people but is echoed in the background of several of the previous questions. Assistance and support are needed by way of training and additional facilitators to regularly run scheduled bible studies, faith sharing groups, prayer groups and other small groups who provide needed education and witnessing of our faith. Confidence comes from knowledge. There is a lack of facilitators to increase offerings and effectively and continually run these types of gatherings.

This type of support allows people to continually educate themselves and their families.

Young adults from Saint George Parish attending high school were invited to join in listening and feedback sessions for the 2023 Synod. Their responses are separated out here from the adult responses. The questions were modified for greater understanding by the students. As with the adult gatherings the students received copies of the questions for review prior to the gatherings. Multiple choice questions were answered independently and in conversations, the questions were explored further. Most of these young adults were high school students with at least one student in the eighth grade and another a freshman in college.

Section 1- Saint George's Parish

Question 1. How often do you attend mass at Saint George Parish?

- a. Every Sunday
- b. One a month
- c. Just Christmas and Easter
- d. We don't go to mass at all

Student responses

- Goes weekly- parents “make them go” and now “it has turned into part of my routine”.
- “I am probably not going to church when I go to college”.
- “I like St. George because I help with the little kids”.
- Typically, I “go once a month”, it is “busy on Sundays so don't have the time”- “some things that I am doing instead are going out to breakfast, games (sports), and sometimes I like to have a break”.
- “Mom makes me go once a week”.
- As a College student “I have the freedom to choose”, because of sports I don't always attend the Sunday Mass, but will (choose an alternate Mass) attend Saturday.

- Some prioritize things other than church, especially sports.
- “I would rather be at a game than at church”.
- “Feels ok to play sports” since “I am good at it and God gave me a gift of being good at sports”.
- “I like going to church and teaching younger kids”.
- “I will probably still go to church when I am in college” (locally) “to help with the children’s liturgy”
“working with and teaching the younger children has helped bring church to another level” (for me).
- “Other churches are not as fun”. This student “likes to go to their own church to see familiar faces”.
- At another church they “had to sign into church”, and they did not like that- “this church feels more welcoming”.
- “Sometimes churches are too rigid”, “but I like Saint George Church”.
- A greater number of these students shared that they attend Mass every Sunday or at least once per week.

Question 2. Think of your closest friends- do they attend mass?

- a. Yes, most Sundays
- b. Somewhat- they probably go once or twice a month
- c. No, they might go on Christmas and Easter, but otherwise, not often
- d. My closest friends are not Catholic.

Student responses

- “None of my friends go to church”. “Some friends consider themselves Catholic, but don’t go to church”.
- “My friends go on Christmas or Easter”.
- As friends we “joke around about going”, but it is felt –“friends do understand and respect that they go to church”.
- Some shared, “ I have tried to get friends to go to church”. but “friends don’t want to get up in the morning” or have other “excuses”.
- One student has not really interacted with college campus ministry- stating, “it’s hard to find the time”.
- Most of their friends “do not take the time to go to church”.
- Most friends are Protestant or Atheist. “Protestant friends go to religious ed because their parents make them go”.
- Their parents don’t go to church, and they follow their parents
- One female student stated, “Some of my friends are not religious at all, but don’t mind that I am religious”.
- Atheist friends don’t really care
- Another’s Atheist friend, “is a little rude about it” and they “don’t talk to her about religion”.
- Sometimes friends seem “a little interested”, but they say “it’s not their thing” and “they don’t want to be a part of it”.
- Another comment was that they do not hang out with any Atheists because “they don’t understand each other”, and the “friend” doesn’t understand why they are “thinking in a Catholic mind set”.
- “My friends go on a major Holiday”.
- “I think they do”.
- “They are here because parents want them to be here”. “Not sure why parents want them to be here”.

Question 3. If you do attend mass, do you enjoy it?

- a. Yes, I very much enjoy going to mass
- b. Kind of- sometimes it can get boring, but I feel good about going
- c. No, I would prefer not to go at all
- d. I don't regularly go to mass

Student Responses

- "Sometimes it's a little boring".
- "I very much enjoy going". "I gain more understanding of the Gospel and What it is trying to teach".
- "I feel good about going but sometimes it's boring". "But I would be defeating the purpose of my own faith if I didn't go". "I got to commit" if I say I am (Catholic).
- "Church is boring and too long".

Question 4. If you had a chance to go to a sleepover, but had to leave early the next morning to attend mass, how would your friends react?

- a. It would all be good because they would be going to mass too
- b. They would be fine with it because they know that mass is important to me and my family
- c. They would think I'm crazy for waking up early to go to mass
- d. I would skip mass because of the sleepover

Student Response

- "They would be fine with it" is the general response from the one group of three students that answered and spoke to this question.

Question 5. Whether you attend Mass every weekend, once a month, only at Christmas and Easter, or not at all, do you believe that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist that you and every Catholic can receive at Mass?

- a. Yes, I do.
- b. I believe that the Eucharist is *just* a symbol of Jesus' presence
- c. No, I do not.
- d. I'm not sure

There were about eight students who answered and discussed this question. Five of these students answered yes. Another stated, "that's confusing". While two felt the Eucharist was more of a symbol but admitted to not "really" understanding "it". One of these two felt that it could have been "talked about more in religious ed to better understand it".

Section 2- The Catholic Church

Question 1. At your school, how do students react when you tell them that you are Catholic?

- a. My friends are also Catholic
- b. My friends at school are not Catholic, but they are also religious (Protestant, Jewish, etc.), so they get it
- c. My friends don't really understand what being Catholic means, and don't really care
- d. My friends at school don't really know that I am Catholic

Student Responses

- “My friends don’t really care”. “It doesn’t really come up”.
- “My friends are also Catholic”.
- “Most of my friends are Christian, they are fine with it”.

Question 2. At your school, (generally speaking) do people...

- a. Think the Catholic Church is a good and positive thing
- b. Think the Catholic Church is a bad or negative thing
- c. Don’t really know much about what the Catholic Church is and what it stands for
- d. Don’t even know what the Catholic Church is or what it stands for

Student Responses

- “They don’t think it’s good or bad”.
- “I guess people don’t really know, don’t really focus”. “If they don’t think about it, they won’t know how to relate to it”.
- “I don’t hear people talking about church”. “My atheist friend doesn’t think its bad, he just doesn’t believe”. “He’s into science”.
- “Nobody understands the meaning”.

Please explain your answer to Question 2. Specifically, if you go to school with people who are not Catholic, or are not actively Catholic, what do you think their impressions are of the Catholic Church and people who are Catholic?

- The view it like a “club”- like an “extracurricular activity on the weekend-something you do”.

- On-line they see the extremist- like Sister Cindy who is on-line and goes to college campuses and tells them they “need to be Catholic, or else”
- Her is an example, “Do you believe that if you eat meat on Friday during lent that something will happen to you”?
- They think it’s “strange” to think this way.
- “There are clubs at school that are more extreme”.
- Ex: someone doesn’t believe in Trans or Bi- so he turned away from his friends (this is a more religious person)
- “There is a Bible Study Club”- mostly Protestant kids-“ kids are judging each other- both those in the club an outside the club”.
- You just follow a book
- You condemn anyone that is not within your beliefs
- Sees church as a place where people go and read about what happened 2000 years ago
- They see protesters with signs saying, “God doesn’t believe in Gays”- and “they think we hate people”.
- “They see that Christians hate people”.
- At another school “religion is not talked about at all”.
- “It’s even barely talked about in history”.
- “They don’t know what it's like”, or maybe “they just don’t want to talk about it”.
- Friends don’t like to talk about it
- They see extreme people put out hateful things, but you don’t agree, but people lump you in that group because you are Catholic
- Maybe most of this is due to social media

Section 3. God

Question 1. Which of the following best describes your own personal view of God?

- a. I pray to God every day (or most days at least)
- b. I pray to God every once in a while
- c. I don't really pray to God
- d. I'm not sure what I think about God these days

Please explain a little more about your answer. If you pray, when do you tend to pray and what do you pray for? If you don't pray, did you used to? What led you to stop praying? And if you are not sure what you think about God these days, what do you mean?

Students' responses:

- “We pray before eating dinner as a family”. “When I want to do well” for example “a test”, “pray in church”, but “not really praying outside of that”.
- I Prayed to “get something when I was younger”. Now I “pray more for guidance in school, sports, decisions” Another asked “do you wait for a response?” and the answer was” no”.
- Another prays for “help with something”, and “doesn't pray every day, maybe once or twice per week”.
- “I Prayed more when was sick last year”, and “pray more now especially for patience and focus”. This student tries to look for an answer to the prayer,

like today woke up on the wrong side of the bed but at church a little kid in the pews made her day.

- “I don’t pray much” but I pray “before public speaking, I say a Hail Mary or Our Father to help”.
- Several students “pray every day”.
- One student prays “when I am about to go to sleep”. “Thanking Him for stuff”.
- “I pray for family, ancestors, people at the cemetery”.

Question 2. When you think of your closest friends, which do you think describes their view of God?

- a. They pray to God every day (or most days at least)
- b. They pray to God every once in a while, or they don't really pray
- c. They are not really sure what they think about God these days
- d. My friends and I have never talked about God or about praying

Student Responses

- “We don't commonly talk about God”. My atheist friend thinks about “big science”. “I think God causes the science”.
- “Every once in a while, we don't really talk about it”.

Section 4- Moving Forward

Question 1. If St. George Parish ever had the opportunity to offer any of the following, which ones would you be interested in participating? You can circle as many as you wish:

- a. Social events like pizza and movie nights
- b. Social events like bowling outings or trips to Apex
- c. Service projects in the community
- d. Service projects in other parts of the country
- e. Prayer nights for just people your age
- f. Weekend sleepover Retreats

- g. More youth-oriented music at masses
- h. More youth involvement at masses, maybe even doing a Youth Mass
- i. None of the above, I am happy with the way things are

Choose one or more of the things you circled above and describe a little more about why you circled it:

Student Responses

- “Community service projects, pantry work, helping the less fortunate”.
- “Service, youth involvement, music, maybe youth choir”. “More youth-oriented Masses before CCD, nice to start”.
- “Social events, service, sleep over retreats”. “I didn’t know about youth ministry”. “It is fun to sleep over with friends, it would be a bonding experience”.
- One student responded, “Youth ministry shut down with covid, we did a couple of service projects”.
- Trips bowling or to Apex.

One group of students discussed: What could help friends come back to Church?
Anything? Or a lost Cause?

- “Do some social events, but at the end of the day, it’s on the person”.
- “It takes will power to want to keep going”.
- “It would be good to connect religion to the world- doing more active things like volunteering to see how that helps others- that would be better than textbooks”!
- More service opportunities
- A lot of people are influenced by social media- a friend was part of the church but is now against the church because of the thinking against LGBTQ
- Feel like we can only do so much and then it’s up to the people to want to be there
- “The things you need to do are the things you don’t want to do”.
- One student asked, “Can we train people and then they want to continue”? “Almost like Drivers Ed” for example, “ you don’t like learning with the books, but liked practicing driving- end result is driving”.
- Helping at mass is using what you know- “hands on is very important”.
- This age group likes “doing” “Volunteer group at school is the largest club since they like helping people”.
- “Would it be hard to get kids to do more”? Or “hard to get them involved”? It depends on how it is presented. “Go to social media more- this is where the younger generation is now- not just a poster, and if a poster- at least have some pictures on it and make it more inviting”.
- For some there is “Not much of a personal relationship with God at home”.

As part of the process that Pope Francis wants to develop, do you think that St. George Parish should invite and seek out your input and viewpoints from time to time?

- a. Yes, I think that St. George Parish should do this
- b. No, I am happy to let the adults do this

If your answer to the above question is “Yes”, how often should this be done?

- a. Once a year
- b. Once every two years
- c. Once every five years

Student responses

- “Everyone should be involved, teens not as much as older people”.
- “Adults need young people’s point of view”.
- “They should seek our input; they do listen now”.
- “I am not mature enough yet”.

One of the recorders for a high school group meeting asked the students in her group, What are social issues facing teens and how does the church play a role regarding these issues?

Student responses.

- “LGBTQ, its overexaggerated”. God would want everyone to be themselves”. He put us on the planet to be ourselves”. “I feel like if a guy came into church wearing a dress, he would be judged”.
- “Social media can see the bad in things.” People who are “anti” are very vocal. See judgement rather than positivity.
- “I don’t know any trans people, but they are still people”. “ I don’t think my gay friends think negative”.
- “If you aren’t sure who you are, the church can help”.
- The “Catholic Church should be more open to the LGBTQ+ community”
- “Why are women not in more positions of power”?
- "Old white men" run the Church.
- “Equality is lacking in Catholic Church”.
- -The “Catholic Church has a bad image, but they don't see it because they never talk about being Catholic and don't really identify as Catholic”.

Students in another group discussed if these types of conversations (Synod) should continue. Five young adults spoke to this question. Four students answered Yes, their reasons are shown below.

- If discussions continue, then they (students) “can make some decisions instead of just the parents”. Ex: how to get young adults to get to church more
- “This is a way to show they can speak their minds and help at church”.
- Yes- they should be a part of the conversations
- “This is a broader conversation”.
- “Yes- especially on how to get the younger generation into the church”.