

## **Communion: Our Demographics**

Region XIV encompasses four states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Of the twelve Arch/Dioceses included, the following submitted reports which contributed to this summary: the Archdioceses of Atlanta and Miami; the Dioceses of Charleston, Charlotte, Orlando, Palm Beach, Raleigh, Saint Augustine, Saint Petersburg, Savannah and Venice. Three of the four states are what is known as the “Bible Belt,” where 80% to 82% of the population in these states claim to be people of faith.<sup>1</sup> These are predominantly Southern Baptist and other Christian faiths. The Catholic population is the minority ranging from 9% to 10% Catholic in these states. The fourth state has 76% of its people claiming to be a people of faith, and the largest religious group is Catholics (21%). Increases in the Catholic population largely resulted from immigration (from other Catholic Countries) or migration (from the Northeastern and Upper Midwestern States). A notable percentage in some areas – including among Catholic clergy – are converts to the faith. Catholics in this region are predominantly from rural areas (Catholic Extension Society dioceses), though we do have major populated cities such as Atlanta, Miami, Orlando, Tampa, and Charlotte. That dichotomy shapes our responses.

## **Participation: Our Participation**

Our Arch/Dioceses hosted 1,350 in-person and virtual sessions, engaging 37,300 participants in our eleven reporting dioceses. In addition, nine Arch/Dioceses offered a survey option to ensure no one was left unheard. Over 17,750 people participated in the surveys. Many dioceses began the process of discernment with catechetical sessions on synodality, consultation and listening, with the intention of bringing the faithful into a deeper understanding of our faith as well as the meaning and tradition of hosting synods. These sessions proved to be outstanding processes which assisted parishioners and cultivated a culture of synodality. The introductory phase was followed up with on-site (or over virtual media) listening and discernment sessions.

While most parishes and diocesan-wide listening and discernment sessions involved local Catholics active in parishes and lay movements, associations, and apostolates, some areas made extensive efforts to go to the peripheries. The following groups (though sometimes in admittedly small numbers) were sought out and listened to: migrant workers, immigrants, prisoners, the homeless, the homebound, the disabled, health care workers, youth, high school and university students, young adults, as well as young children and their parents. Cultural Catholics included: African Catholics, African American Catholics, Caribbean/Creole/Haitian Catholics, Hispanic Catholics, Native American Catholics, Portuguese-speaking Catholics, Filipino and Pacific Island Catholics, Korean Catholics, Vietnamese and other Asian Catholics.

Other groups to which the Church in Region XIV reached out, to varying degrees, include non-practicing Catholics, ecumenical faithful, Catholics who experience same-sex attraction and their

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, “2014 US Religious Landscape Study,” The Pew Research Center on Religious and Public Life, Washington, DC, 2014, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/>.

family members, single people, non-Catholic Christians (including a schismatic community), and those who claim no religious affiliation. Special sessions were held for priests, deacons, religious sisters, seminarians and lay ecclesial ministers.

**Mission: Themes that resonated in our Listening and Discernment Sessions**

**1. Personal Encounter with Jesus; The Centrality of the Eucharist and the Role of the Liturgy in Fostering Personal Relationships with Christ**

There was an expressed desire among numerous participants to cultivate a personal relationship with the Lord in the context of community. People noted experiencing an acute struggle with an awareness of Christ's presence in their lives. That struggle is manifested in relationships with others – how we treat one another – but also in terms of a need to feel Christ's real presence with and in themselves. Participants noted that separating themselves from God (making God less and less a factor in our lives) also led to separation from our brothers and sisters. There is a striking awareness of more and more people feeling marginalized. There also are concerns about more widespread occurrence of judgementalism and divisiveness, not only in the civic community but within the Church. If we can heal and strengthen our relationship with the Lord, we will have the strength to heal relationships with others.

Catholic respondents noted that relationship with the Lord is fostered through scripture, prayer, the sacraments in general and catalyzed by participation in daily Mass, Eucharistic adoration, the practice of stewardship in our daily lives, access to regular celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, and personal devotions and pious practices.

The greatest joy, and most distinct aspect of Catholicism, is the centrality of the Eucharist. Catholic respondents, the majority of whom richly appreciate the quality of their parish liturgies, emphasized celebrating the Eucharist as a sign of deep faith and unity. They noted, especially when various national and ethnic groups were represented, giving various cultural expressions to the most significant Catholic act. And they demanded renewed catechesis and reflection on the Real Presence.

While the most active Catholics appreciate the Eucharist as “source and summit,” there was general concern that a significant number of Catholics have lost or do not understand the basic centrality of the Eucharist and the importance of attendance at weekly Sunday or vigil Mass. Many feel that Catholics have lost reverence, and no longer understand that Mass is not only an obligation, but also an opportunity for the most intimate encounter with Christ. In fact, one of the most common themes that emerged during the Diocesan Synodal phase was a desire for a better understanding of, and need for, reverence at Mass, for the Eucharist and for the omnipresent God. Many noted that true reverence begins with the example set by priests.

Many noted appreciating the Eucharist not only through liturgical action but also regular adoration.

Solutions to concerns about the sense of Christ's presence and the celebration of the Eucharist included: the importance of engaging, spiritual and relevant homilies showing how a personal relationship with Christ and his Mission connects through practical life applications—and to

things occurring in our present world. A number of groups urged clergy (priests and deacons) to continue scriptural and homiletic studies in order to preach more effectively.

Multiple participants, spanning our dioceses and archdiocese, expressed hurt with regard to the recent changes to availability to the Latin Mass (Mass according to the 1962 Roman Missal, the Extraordinary form), though gratitude was expressed to the local churches and the Bishops for pastorally permitting the continued celebration of the Latin Mass, in conformity with the Holy Father's most recent *motu proprio*.

## **2. Hospitality, Connection and Inclusivity; Tending to and Healing Divisions among Us and the Wider Human Population; Service and Outreach to the Marginalized and to the Peripheries**

Inherently connected to our relationship with the Lord is our relationship with others. It became apparent in the process that there is a direct correlation between a lack of a strong, personal relationship with the Lord and how we treat others, how we welcome others, and our attitudes toward any who might be identified (or self-identify) as “other.” Being welcoming and inviting, building community and fellowship, connecting with the disconnected, and desiring unity were voiced as what we as a Church need to concentrate on—through word and action. Our respondents noted the need to rebuild relationships with those both inside and outside our own communities, including other Catholics who don't participate actively, for a variety of reasons, in the faith community and people of other or no faith traditions.

The Church, respondents noted, should be a vital instrument of hospitality, connection and inclusivity. Inviting and welcoming regular, registered parishioners is important but so too is inviting and welcoming newcomers and those seeking a sense of “home” in the Church; offering opportunities for involvement and participation, including ways in which people feel empowered in their parishes and connected with other parishes, the diocese at large, and the bishop or archbishop; capitalizing on the talents and expertise of women and members of minority groups.

There is a noteworthy perception that parishes do not prioritize outreach to those on the margins, particularly those of different races than the prominent race and/or culture within the parish. While many were very satisfied with activities available in their parishes, some participants felt that there are identifiable cliques within parishes as well as judgementalism within our communities. There was an expressed desire for better communication and relations between communities within the parish. We, as Church, are challenged to respond more intentionally to internal divisions and areas of conflict within the faith community (whether these divisions concern liturgical preferences, cultural and generational differences, questions as to how to provide ministry to LGBTQ+ Catholics and their families, etc.) – and to become defter at negotiating political differences without diluting Catholic teaching.

Catholics are called to serve and reach out to the marginalized and to the peripheries, and the Church needs to help parishioners understand the connection between Catholic social teaching and outreach beyond the borders of the parish; integrating service activities and theological reflection; being attentive and responsive to the marginalized (including the elderly, the grieving,

persons with disabilities, members of minority groups, the poor, migrants and immigrants, homeless, homebound, prisoners, LGBTQ+, single people, non-Catholics, those suffering from racism). Pope Francis has noted (and one of our dioceses quoted this observation made by the Holy Father in *Let Us Dream*) that we are challenged not only to adhere to our traditional doctrine but also to see “how this teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our times.”<sup>2</sup> This requires us to move away from our comfort zones and accompany those in our community who are lost to the Word of God. It requires a wholistic approach to the dignity of ALL life, all which is a gift from God.

### **3. Catechesis, Formation, Evangelization & Missionary Discipleship**

Perhaps the most common theme that emerged during Listening Sessions was that of the need for Catholic adult catechesis and formation. Many of the faithful, including those who have been Catholic since birth, did not know some of the basic tenets of Catholicism, including core parts of the Mass. It was suggested that, at a minimum, a primer be shared either in writing or vocally at the start of each Mass with some key reminders about proper procedures and the meaning of various parts of liturgical celebration. Of note, there were many who expressed the sense that they themselves knew and understood basic doctrine but that many others around them did not know. A frequent request was for more opportunities for adult faith formation, but it also became evident that many were unaware of the various options already provided. Those who were conducting sessions or analyzing reports noted that for decades adult Catholics requested faith formation, but that attendance is often minimal. It became clear that introducing or relaunching an adult “refresher course” on Catholicism and the Mass was something that would be widely welcomed and may be necessary for many. That having been said, it seems important to consider new ways and means of offering such opportunities. Some of our participating dioceses and archdioceses noted the popularity of various renewal programs, including ones which continue catechesis and faith-sharing after major events.

Recognizing that our faith is a gift from God and that the gift is meant to be shared, members of our region expressed the importance of teaching stewardship as a way of life, imitating the abundance of God’s generosity and self-giving. The importance of living the mission of the Church and evangelizing God’s Word to all the world is something which seems to have been internalized by many Catholics.

The topic of evangelization and activating the call to missionary discipleship came up frequently. One of the most urgent appeals was not just for content but for process—the need for people of faith to know concrete techniques of evangelizing. People simply seem to want more instruction and resources on the “how to” aspects of evangelization. Similarly, and perhaps more urgently – is the need for close attention to the ways and means of catechesis and ongoing formation for children, youth, young adults, families, and older adults, with an eye to solid catechesis on doctrine, morality, and Catholic social teaching.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2022), 84-5.

From forming faith-filled disciples comes the lived experience of activating the Mission of the Church, and our participants seemed to recognize this while also grappling with the above-mentioned questions about methodology. The Great Commission calls us to evangelization and missionary discipleship – committing to renewal in the basic teachings of the faith tradition, along with designing age and culture-appropriate formation of young people and older persons in how to share faith, explain their faith, be witnesses in their day-to-day lives, engage ecumenically and interfaith, and reach out to the unchurched, the lapsed, the seekers. This, many noted, includes members of Catholics’ own families.

A pervasive concern was how the Covid-19 lockdowns, and the absence of Eucharistic Community impacted the faithful. Many expressed gratitude for being able to return to the worshipping community. But there are also concerns about how to invite back those who have not returned to practice of the faith, and some suggested that there is a need to grow the Church in models and intensity similar to that of the early Church.

#### **4. Relationship with the Clergy; Communications and Transparency**

A notable finding is the respect that people hold for their priests and their bishops. Places that had remarkable participation were sites where the local bishop attended numerous sessions in a listening role; others observed that high participation of parishioners in the synodality processes in particular areas correlated directly with the investment and urging of their priests.

The need for vocations (priestly, diaconal, religious, lay) is urgent and was expressed often. Enhancing clergy engagement with the people outside of the Mass and building healthy relationships will positively impact the health of both clergy and congregation and serve as a role model to our youth that can inspire greater vocations to the priesthood and religious life. This includes finding ways to respond to people’s desire for more personal presence and increasing availability of and access to pastors, parochial vicars, deacons. More frequent access to the Sacrament of Reconciliation was frequently mentioned, but also informal contact – at parish activities, social and civic events, etc., – was also a strong desire. Some participants also noted that priests can be overburdened with administrative tasks and/or sacramental ministry at multiple worship sites, and this somehow needs to be addressed so that they can be more present to the laity.

Upgrading the quality of homilies and making them more relevant and practical in the faithful’s lives was a commonly voiced concern. The faithful want increased communication from the pulpit, diocesan offices, and the Bishop, and also have an interest in social and broadcast media with positive stories and posts from their local parish or mission and the diocese. It is imperative for the Church to respond to parishioners’ desires to be updated and informed.

More than one diocese/archdiocese had parishioners mention the need to continue to confront effectively and honestly the lingering effects of clergy sexual abuse scandals. As mentioned in the next section, some youth and young adults cited the scandals as undermining trust in clergy. Continued use of the synodal process can assist in improving communication and transparency.

## 5. Youth and Young Adults

The Holy Spirit calls the Church to do more in the way of outreach and evangelization, and there was nearly unanimous concern from the people of each diocese for the youth and young adults who clearly need accompaniment at critical and formative moments in their lives. Many commented on the rise in the number of “none’s”: those individuals who claim no religious affiliation whatsoever, and evidence (anecdotal or statistical) suggests that baptized and confirmed Catholics are increasingly represented in this group.

Many aspects of how the Church engages (or doesn’t) with the youth, young adults and college students surfaced. Participants in the consultations expressed concern about how we reach youth and young adults, how we support them, and perhaps especially how we form them in the Christian life. It should be noted that members of Hispanic/Latinx communities expressed similar concerns about the “formative” influence of culture and the future of their children and youth in the faith, even while *familia* – family engagement in all aspects of life and faith – is so much a tradition.

Some adult participants made suggestions about how to retain youth after they receive the sacrament of Confirmation, and they suggested that an emphasis on service would be key. However, young people themselves appeared open to various Church-sponsored activities. One concerned youth participant perhaps stated it best: the Church must “provide spaces and experiences for us to become more involved in the parish, parishes that are more welcoming to young people, experiences that are interactive and appealing to young people, need for the Church to truly reach out to young people, more presence on social media...focus on young people.” Many specific suggestions were offered, including greater support for parish youth ministry, new approaches to youth faith formation (particularly mentioned were models that include the entire family), the need for mentors, providing more opportunities for participation in the life of the parish and arch/diocesan events such as youth rallies and conferences.

The voice of the young people was heard to varying degrees during this process through the region. Many expressed their great love for Christ and the Church and the feeling of connectedness that they experience in their own parishes and schools. Still, several young people shared a concern that peppered with the messages of hope and love from the Gospels was, in their words, the fact that “the LGBTQ community feel[s] shunned from the Church.” A few students mentioned the Church sex scandals as a source for concern as well and expressed their desire for justice for the victims of sexual assault. One said, “It’s sad to us that we see God as an entity full of love and the people who portray His love sometimes hurt others instead.”

The extent to which concern for youth and young adults was voices in all of the consultations in all of our reporting dioceses and archdioceses points to the urgency of attention to invitation, inclusion, and appropriate degrees of empowerment of young Catholics.

## **6. Willingness to Confront Challenges to Fidelity to the Faith in Contemporary Culture; Support of Families and Healing Where Destructive Influences Might Be Found**

*“Although religious faith is a strong force in the lives of many Americans, our country’s dominant secular culture often contradicts the values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is a culture in which destructive “isms”—materialism, relativism, hedonism, individualism, consumerism exercise seductive, powerful influences. There is a strong tendency to privatize faith, to push it to the margins of society, confining it to people’s hearts or, at best, their homes, while excluding it from the marketplace of ideas where social policy is formed, and men and women acquire their view of life and its meaning.”* (Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response, USCCB’s Pastoral Letter on Stewardship, 1992)<sup>3</sup>

This statement by the US Catholic Bishops is as true today as it was thirty years ago. In fact, throughout Region XIV, people voiced this sentiment: the “isms” of our world are destroying the moral fiber our society. There was a willingness expressed to confront secular challenges that undermine fidelity to teachings of the Church. The Bishops of Vatican II intended, in *Gaudium et Spes*, for the Church to transform the culture. Instead, the culture seems to some to have transformed the Church, and we have become weaker for it. Our Catholic people recognize the need for the Holy Spirit to inspire the Church to live the Gospel courageously and influence the culture in a positive, faith-filled way, with believers serving as instruments of the Holy Spirit. We need to better address the misunderstandings of and misconceptions about what the Church teaches and begin respectful conversations about such “hot topics” as the role of women in the Church, married priests, same sex attraction, divorce and remarriage, gender identity, the clergy sexual abuse scandals, what some deem creeping “modernism”, and such core issues as the dignity and sanctity of life.

Beyond addressing these concerns, the call to serve indicates increased attention to include: ministering to families; both opposing abortion and participating in marches for life and supporting pregnancy services and centers; caring for the sick and dying and opposing euthanasia; and engaging people in other forms of pro-life ministry, including outreach to prisoners, care for the earth, opposition to the death penalty, war, etc.

## **7. Consultation/Synodality; Reliance upon the Holy Spirit and Advancing the Knowledge and Practice of Discernment**

A theological implication of shared responsibility is that the laity share with their pastors and their bishops the responsibility for guiding the mission to which God calls the Church. *Lumen Gentium* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speak of “the common priesthood of the faithful,” emphasizing the call received in Baptism. In order for the Church to have the fullness of God’s light and guidance, the laity needs to be involved in discernment and appropriate decision-making through the process of consultation and synodality. Consultative bodies

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<sup>3</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003), 5.

(councils, commissions and committees) are a critical means for participation and collaboration between the clergy and laity.

We frequently noted a call for activation of pastoral or parish councils and establishment of them if they were absent. Parishioners wish to be aware of the inner workings of such councils and, in a number of cases, expressed the desire to have a voice in the discernment and selection of council members so that the councils would represent diverse age and ethnic groups. The Church needs to help persons, parishes and active pastoral councils to move beyond political models of decision-making to true Christian discernment in goal setting, new initiatives, and invocation of the Holy Spirit's guidance. Participants cited a general need for active, respectful listening – to the Holy Spirit, to the hierarchy and magisterial tradition, to one another, to our young people, to our neighbors, to those outside the Church, with a sense of honoring God's people, no matter their age or condition, with attentiveness to the needs of the times and persons' God-given dignity.

Expressed repeatedly was a desire to see greater involvement of the laity in the governance of the Church. As mentioned above, this includes the formation of pastoral councils (with the mission and vision of synodality) and specific advancement in the knowledge and practice of discernment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## **8. The Role of Women in the Church**

Our region noted that women's role in the Church is critical to its life and health. Women are instrumental in the day-to-day life and service of the Church. The important roles played by lay women and women religious in the life of the Church should be recognized and valued. Just as there is a call to vocations for clergy, there is a call for vocations to the consecrated life, as well as to the role of women in marriage, ministry and the marketplace. There were a number of reminders that women in our dioceses and archdioceses have theological, pastoral, and professional training and skills that seem to go untapped. It seems to the faithful that women are visible in many Church spheres and the whole life of faith but ought to share more actively in responsibilities of stewardship and governance.

## **9. Recognition of the Hispanic/Latinx Population and Other National Groups**

In Region XIV, as in so many areas of the United States, the Hispanic/Latinx population is a rapidly growing one. Immigrating from Central and South America and the Caribbean, the Spanish-speaking population often finds refuge in the Catholic Church. We also note that many Hispanic/Latinx members of the Church have already been present for several generations. Their cultures are well established and well known. With this having been said, we also note that there are many newcomers to our parishes and dioceses/archdioceses. While some have been warmly welcomed, and churches and missions have reached out very intentionally, there are also numbers of Spanish-speaking Catholics who have expressed that, in some quarters, they feel barely tolerated. As the generations grow, and unless there is more acceptance of the



Hispanic/Latinx population in the local church, there is concern that families and youth in particular will find communities outside the Catholic Church that offer a sense of “home”. Others, it is felt, may simply abandon the practice of any faith. If and when that happens, we fail in our mandate to evangelize. We need to work together – interculturally, not as parallel parishes (within the same community), if we want the Church and God’s mission to survive and flourish.

Some of the faithful identified that strife occurs, not only between Anglo and Hispanic Communities, but also among Hispanics with different countries of origin. Spanish-speaking Catholics are not a monoculture. In addition, concern has been expressed that there sometimes are tensions between the Hispanic “historic member” and the “brand new” Hispanic member of the community. This strife needs to be addressed and reversed.

While the Hispanic/Latinx Catholic population promises to continue to be the most rapidly growing group—and, as some suggest, the majority of United States Catholics going forward, various groups participating in the synodal consultations expressed a mixture of gratitude and concern for the attention that has been given to African American, Native American, Vietnamese American, other Asian and Pacific Islanders, as well as other new immigrant groups. Where Masses are offered in a multiplicity of languages, this has been most welcome, as has been the invitation of these groups to plan and participate in devotions and programs focused on their populations and to join in these synodality consultations. Multiple language opportunities for liturgy and formation are wonderful ways to welcome the faithful and honor their heritage, but also present logistical challenges to unity—and can sometimes lead to the sense that “parallel parishes” are operating under one roof.

### *Some Concluding Notes*

Several of our reporting dioceses and archdioceses noted that they planned and set up initial structures to continue consultations and deliberations in synodal style. Others are looking to ways to continue the momentum that has been set forward in some quarters while educating people further in those areas where there was less understanding and less participation.

An intentional example of an outgrowth of the Synod process (and addressing some of the voiced concerns) is the Transformational Parish Growth Summit. It is an initiative in one of our dioceses to proclaim the Gospel and invite all to encounter the love and mercy of Jesus Christ. The initiative provides parish, school and diocesan participants who are serious about growing the Church the inspiration, resources, and concrete plans for growing engagement, evangelization and missionary discipleship within the diocese.

There is interest in seeing the conclusions of the USCCB as to next steps as well as watching for the formal Synod on Synodality to be convened in the Vatican. *Come, Holy Spirit!*

