

Report To the Southwest Deanery

Re: St. Jerome Parish Participation in the “Synod for a Synodal Church”

From: Fr. Tom Morgan, Pastor and the Synod Team of St. Jerome Parish, Largo, FL

Methodology

Via a “Survey Questionnaire” directed to St. Jerome Parishioners in the Parish Bulletin and online, our Team sought to determine how parishioners seek to draw closer to God and to strengthen their faith 1) on a personal level, 2) by using existing opportunities in St. Jerome Parish and, 3) through new / additional opportunities they suggest that the Parish create.

The Survey Questionnaire also invited Parishioners to identify 1) any obstacles at the parish level to promote the growth of faith interaction with the community and, 2) how the global Catholic Church could improve its interaction with Society in general.

Responses to the Survey were received by the Parish between January 3 and January 24.

Pope Francis stressed that the Synod process is a time to “listen to what they have to say, to build rapport, to be sensitive to the questions of our sisters and brothers.” Thus, the following is an uncensored summary of the Survey responses; we heard what the respondents had to say. As is true of attitudes in the United States (and perhaps the world) regarding current issues, respondents offered a wide range of views, often polar-opposite. ***We are most grateful for the very thoughtful and thought-provoking responses we received!***

1. How Parishioners personally strengthen their faith and grow closer to God

Prayer. Overwhelmingly, the respondents believe that personal and community prayer strengthens their faith and their identity as Catholic Christians. Most specified that attending Mass (often including daily Mass) and receipt of the Eucharist were the ultimate examples of prayer. Many added that they were emotionally moved by the inspirational music during Mass – particularly at St. Jerome Church. Some appreciated that the St. Jerome Parish Chapel is “open 24/7” while others mentioned growing in faith by praying the “Liturgy of the Hours” and the rosary, partaking of the Sacraments, and attending the “Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament” and the Lenten Missions.

Parish Activities. Many respondents stated that participation in the numerous activities and groups available in the parish provided them with the opportunity to not only enjoy fellowship and interaction with “like-minded people” but also provided them with the opportunity to practice the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy. They and other respondents said that they were inspired by Parish Staff, including Fr. Tom and the priests, Sr. Lucia and Fr. Waters’s homilies. Of course, although not directly a member of our Parish, Pope Francis inspires many respondents, particularly by his emphasis on serving the poor and marginalized. On the other hand, a respondent stated that the Pope seems “more worried about social issues and climate change than on bringing more souls to the Lord.” Many stated that the Bible studies offered by the Parish are very helpful.

“Other” Activities. Several mentioned that their own childhood religious education continues to strengthen their faith while others believe that their faith is strengthened through involvement with their families, including grandchildren who are the “future of the Church.” Many respondents read the Bible daily or cited their use of Catholic books and Catholic media, including the “Little Books” of the Diocese of Saginaw, *America Magazine*, *Give Us this Day Magazine* and EWTN television, while others mentioned that walks “in Nature” provide them with gratitude and serenity.

2. How St. Jerome Parish helps Parishioners strengthen their faith and grow closer to God

There are always numerous opportunities to attend Sacramental celebrations. Many or most respondents praised the fact that St. Jerome Parish offers seven (7) Sunday Masses (all are livestreamed) and two (2) Daily Masses (one is livestreamed); respondents added that this schedule enables everyone to attend, at least virtually, given that recordings are also archived. Some added further that: Anointing of the Sick is offered monthly at the Church (and elsewhere upon request); Confessions take place in the Church every Saturday, and Drive-through confessions are available monthly; Exposition/Benediction is celebrated every Thursday, every First Friday and every Last Saturday of the month, and Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help takes place every Saturday in the Church and via Livestream.

There are many opportunities for personal involvement in ministries and groups. There are numerous opportunities for Parishioners to “get involved” in ministries and groups including: serving as a lector / reader during Mass, Eucharistic Minister, the Choir, Knights of Columbus, the Legion of Mary, FAST (Faith and Action Strength Together - an ecumenical effort promoting Social Justice and an end to Human Trafficking), Martha and Mary Guild, Marriage Encounters, small faith groups, and the altar society to name just some of the ministries.

Our Parishioners especially promote the goal of feeding the hungry via the Lifeline ministry that prepares weekly meals for Pinellas Hope residents and homeless teenagers and operates a non-perishable food pantry to provide food each week to those in need.

The Parish also provides non-religious opportunities in the Bethlehem Center, including gatherings focusing on such things as Exercise, Art, Tai Chi, Bridge, Pinochle, Yoga, Line Dancing and Mahjong.

St. Jerome was very pro-active in addressing the Pandemic issues. By continuing/increasing the use of Livestreaming for all liturgy - including funerals, and the offering of “drive-up” communion and confessions, St. Jerome Parish very effectively supported Parishioners’ spiritual life while observing the protective guidelines issued by the Center for Disease Control. The Parish even installed the “e-Blast System” that emails the weekly Bulletins to those who cannot attend Church.

3. Additional opportunities that St. Jerome Parish might offer

In short, Be More Welcoming. Many stress that when someone joins the Parish, we need to have them meet the priests and staff and to learn all of the many opportunities mentioned in the responses above. Some respondents state that it has taken a long time to be “allowed” to participate in various ministries, particularly the Liturgical ministries. One respondent replied, “Invite Me.” Several said we also need information – perhaps in the Bulletin, possibly elsewhere – about how to join Parish groups. One respondent suggested that including parishioner photos on the Parish website would help people to connect.

Some have said they would like to see the Parish, the Diocese and the USA Church be more welcoming – without qualifications – to LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and others) or other marginalized people.

Additional Groups / Activities. While some said that the Parish has enough groups already or cannot afford more, others said they would like to have: evening and weekend Bible studies, retreats, discussion groups about the Mass & Catechism, the Reformation, Apologetics, the History of the Church, Spiritual Meditation in a non-liturgical setting, and Ecology. Some would welcome having Couples Groups, Outdoor activities – possibly even a café, pilgrimages and more purely social activities.

Additional Religious Activities. Some wished to have more time for Confessions and some wished for more Expositions of the Blessed Sacrament.

Having the priests more “visible” in the Community at large. Some feel reluctant to approach the priests because they seem busy or aloof. To be approachable, priests need to be aware of what the people are going through, particularly their challenges and difficulties.

4. Obstacles at the parish level to their further growth in their faith

Circumstances. Understandably, several respondents said that Covid, illness and / or age, or lack of transportation hindered their involvement in the Parish and their spiritual growth. Some said that they are reluctant to attend Mass because many people do not wear masks.

Liturgical Ambiance. One respondent felt “behind the times” if they had been away for a while. While most people lavished praise on the music at liturgies, some felt that it was too loud or “concert level,” too much directed to young people while abandoning more traditional hymns, or too consuming of the Parish’s financial resources. Some feel that the inclusion of film clips or Power Point in the homilies is off-putting rather than inspirational.

The Church seems Exclusionary. Although we sing “All Are Welcome” there are limitations on “welcome-ness,” particularly with respect to women, LGBTQIA+ and other marginalized people. We are heartened by Pope Francis’s concern that we have become a more hierarchal Church that embraces clericalism and the top-down approach. We are cautiously optimistic that the Synod process will examine these issues.

5. How the global Catholic Church could improve its interaction with Society in general

Use of the Media. For the past several years, the Church has “gotten a black eye” in the press due to the pedophile scandal and denial of the Eucharist to politicians who do not condemn abortion. Many respondents said that we / the Church need to: 1) avoid criticizing Catholic leaders, 2) treat science with respect, 3) focus on God’s love of each person rather than offering judgment, 4) enter into more ecumenical activities, 5) promote social justice, 6) address climate change and embrace Pope Francis’s stance on ecology, 7) avoid being a one-issue church by addressing social justice in addition to ending abortion, and 8) other affirmative approaches. On the other hand, a respondent stated that the Church should avoid the “political correctness” of the press regarding social issues and climate change and should openly take a firm stand on issues like abortion, same sex marriage and

homosexuality. Rather than specifically addressing the “Black Lives Matter” philosophy, a respondent suggested that the Church needs to be more vocal on “equality for all” as children of God, as has Pope Francis has stressed.

In particular, many respondents said that the Church should use various mainstream media to publicize all of the good that the Catholic Church has, with God’s help, accomplished: the establishment of schools and hospitals, social services (such as Pinellas Hope), emergency assistance for those who have suffered catastrophes such as hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, wars, etc.

Apologetics – defending and maintaining our faith. Some respondents state that as Catholics, we need to be personally able to address non-Catholics’ challenges to our beliefs, such as the Eucharist, Marian devotion, the Mass, etc. We must be the “light of the world” not affected by passing ideologies.

Politics. Respondents state we should pray for the Unity of our country and we should not become over-politicized.