

Global Synod on Synodality
2024
Listening Sessions Readout

St. Thomas Aquinas Church
Alpharetta, Georgia

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1. Introduction

The Parish Pastoral Advisory Council of St. Thomas, Aquinas Church initiated a second round of listening sessions in March, 2024 in response to the ongoing administration of the Global Synod on Synodality. As was the case in the initial round of listening sessions conducted in 2022, limited time was available for advanced communications announcing the initial meetings. The Council sought to collect some input from parishioners prior to the last of the Archdiocesan listening sessions so that as broad a perspective as possible could be represented in our discussions at the regional sessions.

Two general sessions were conducted on Sunday, March 10 – one in English and one in Spanish. 22 parishioners, responding to announcements that were made at all the masses on March 3 and March 10, participated in the sessions. The English and Spanish sessions were moderated by Council members, Stephen Sheahan, and Orlando Cruz, respectively.

A second channel of participation was opened with a request to the Small Faith Communities (SFC's) of the Parish to conduct listening sessions of their own at one of their upcoming regular meetings. All of the sessions were opened with a prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance in the work.

Additional responses have now become available from the ongoing work of the SFC's as well as from the ten additional general sessions that the Council authorized at its meeting in March. The summarized results presented in Section 2, below, reflect all of the input collected from all of the sessions that were held.

In all, 137 parishioners participated in one of 15 separate Listening Sessions that were conducted in March and April. 65% of the participants were in the Spanish language sessions and 35% were in the English language sessions. We thank all of them for their prayerful work on behalf of our faith community.

2. Summary of Participant Responses

The responses included were drawn from the synodal work of the 137 parishioners, who participated through either their Small Faith Communities, or by attendance at the general sessions that were conducted between March 10 and April 22.

Participants saw **successes** in **the increased engagement of young people** through liturgies and ministries. Many participants cited their **small faith community experience** as a successful element of their parish life. The **RCIA and Faith Formation** programs were also identified as successful. They expressed appreciation for any **education** that was made available and felt that **the many opportunities for faith formation** were a key asset of the parish. Our **priests and deacons** were credited for **increased involvement with the community, accessibility when preaching,** and for being key drivers of our **welcoming** posture.

Participants experienced **distresses** in the overall **lack of educational programs**. A number of comments focused on a need to **reform the annulment process** and concerns about the **treatment of divorced and remarried Catholics** and the **rules applied to “mixed” marriages**. Concerns were also expressed about our current **lack of ways to engage and integrate our young people** in church activities. Structural concerns also included the views that:

- **responsibility is overly centralized** in the pastor’s role,
- there is a **lack of consistent performance management and accountability** to help our clergy grow their skills and increase their pastoral effectiveness,
- there is a **lack of communication and collaboration among all of the ministries.**

Ideas about **how the structure and organization of the church could better support its mission** were plentiful, varied and challenging to summarize. They ranged from the small and practical (**change the mass schedule, organize Bible study groups**) to more complex or ambitious undertakings (**develop a ministry to evangelize outside the parish, adopt new models of church based on charisms**). Certain themes and ideas did recur and were heard in different meetings. These included:

- the need for **the structural church to model synodality for the entire church** (why are there no programs to facilitate inter-parish collaboration?),
- **the criticality of offering adult education, including Catholic social teaching, at the parish level,**
- **a need to integrate Spanish-speakers more fully into the life of the church**

The full value of the ideas produced by our participants in prayer will likely only be extracted from an organized approach to parsing the entirety of the detailed list. But the rich mix of proposals and the range of challenges they would address encourage us to view these results with hope and gratitude.

3. Detail of Participant Responses

[Note that comments have been lightly edited only as needed for clarification. Editor's grouping of comments by theme/topic was done to support readability.]

1. Where have I seen or experienced successes or distresses within the structure(s), organization, leadership, and life of the parish that foster or hinder the mission?

Successes:

Inclusivity

- Young people, and children have been taken into account during the mass.
- Inclusion of children as active participants in the liturgy has improved: collection baskets on the altar, children's homily.
- Opportunities for parish wide engagement, and education
- Ongoing personal invitations to encourage active participation
- Encouragement and participation in interfaith dialogues in our community
- Acceptance of varied styles of liturgy from one parish to another
- Welcoming
- When the priest welcomes newcomers asks about birthdays and anniversaries at the beginning of the month.
- Creating a welcoming and engaging community: This involves having a welcoming atmosphere (ushers), strong leadership (like Idalia and Father Juan), and activities that build unity (retreats, prayer groups, young adult ministry). Feeling welcome and supported is crucial for people to feel comfortable exploring and growing their faith.
- Encouraging active participation in the church: This includes ministries (like conquistando las naciones), attending mass, participating in the sacraments (reconciliation, Eucharist), and serving the community. Active participation allows people to connect with their faith on a deeper level and feel like they are contributing to something larger than themselves.
- Prayers that include our brothers and sisters in different faiths.
- Our parish is more diverse

Clerical Staff Effectiveness

- When the Priest, or Deacon comes down from the altar, to give the homily speaking directly to the congregation rather than from the ambo.

- The community has grown thanks to the preaching of the priests who are more involved with the community.
- Pastoral sensitivity to making all people feel welcome
- Pastors with a vision to marshal and equip the baptized for mission
- Engagement from pastors who are invested in the people.
- Strong pastoral leadership

Communication

- There is better communication.
- The ministries have become better known among the community from the Ministry Fair.

Ministries Effectiveness

- Small Faith Communities (*cited multiple times*)
- Knights of Columbus
- The Seniors meeting is getting larger and the exercise classes are well received
- Places where the baptized can grow in their baptismal call: Small Faith Communities, RCIA, and Adult Faith Formation.
- Worship of the Blessed Sacrament has increased.
- Forming strong foundations in the faith: This includes Bible studies, Lectures, Apostolic Groups for all ages, Catechesis, and Children's catechesis. These programs provide opportunities for people of all ages to learn about the Catholic faith, fostering a deeper understanding and connection.
- The Jobs Ministry (20 years +) and the Prison Ministry (30 years +) ran successfully here for decades led by strong individuals. Succession from such leaders has been a challenge.
- Campus ministry/FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students)
- Parishes where the sacraments are available and accessible (weekday masses at different times, early for those who work for example; confession multiple times a week)
- Beautiful churches and liturgies.
- Priests/religious/lay men and women living, exemplary lives, profound, spiritual, and prayerful lives that overflow into service.
- In-person CCD (Faith Formation).
- Children's Liturgy
- Having Hospitality Ministry active before Mass – I like the greeters.
- Lay leadership involvement
- The push to revive Cursillo
- Small faith, communities, and other ministries as a way to engage people in the Church. Other ministries, such as Choir and the Lector ministry, give people a 'home' in a large church like ours.
- The hospitality ministry

- Our excellent readers

General

- The response to Covid
- Appropriate time for personal prayer
- Bible study
- Advent night of reflection
- The bells are back at the consecration
- I like the decorations and big displays at the holidays.
- Church outside during Covid.

Distresses:

Inclusivity

- We need more ways and activities for young people to integrate and feel part of the church: responses cite several challenges related to young adults feeling unwelcome and excluded. These include: Feeling judged by older parishioners, lack of opportunities to participate in leadership, teaching, or showcasing talents, and a desire for more youth-oriented activities and spaces (like a LIFE teen room). Engaging young adults is crucial for the future of the church. The responses highlight their potential for bringing energy and new ideas.
- We focus on who is coming to church, rather than who could be coming
- Opportunities for fellowship are not easily accessible by families with children
- Obsessive focus on the nuclear family, leaving out single adults, and a lack of opportunity for single adults to connect about living their faith in that stage of life
- No welcome lunch/brunch invitation
- Large parish/getting to know each other
- The church has a significant Spanish-speaking population with specific needs. Their insights mention a desire for: more Spanish-speaking priests and masses and better integration of Spanish speakers into the overall church community. Addressing the needs of the Spanish-speaking population will help them feel welcome and participate more fully in the church's life.
- One participant said she tried to be a money counter on Monday morning. They told her they didn't need her and she felt rejected. She is now afraid to approach Friends of Martha thinking she may be treated the same way.

- The Senior meeting is only for English speakers
- We need women deacons.
- The separateness of the English and Spanish speaking populations is troubling

Clerical Staff Effectiveness

- The current structure lacks any kind of clerical accountability. A priest or pastor appears to be free to do whatever he wants. – pastorally, theologically, liturgically – even if it is injurious to a parish, and unless he has crossed a line of abuse, no action is taken.
- A new priest wanting to change how the church community functions.
- Lack of a performance management program to support church leadership. There is an unmet need for ongoing formation and development of leadership skills at all levels.
- Clericalism
- Weak pastoral leadership.
- Power and responsibility too centralized in one person in parishes
- Poorly trained priests and deacons
- Poor communication skills among pastors
- Pastors not seeing the value in faith formation.
- Rapid turnover in pastors
- Would like the homily message to be more relatable to everyday life
- Our deacons are getting old. They are not being replaced at the same rate (same as all clergy).
- Lack of focus on social justice; corresponding lack of young people at Mass
- Disbanding of the Parish Council.
- Several very poor pastors with personal/ substance abuse issues. Pastors who changed our culture and not for the better. The bells!

Communications

- There seems to be a lack of communication and collaboration across different areas of the church. This is evident in: Ministries not being aware of each other's activities, limited communication among parishioners except for close circles, and feeling a lack of support from priests and some ministry leaders. Improved communication and collaboration can foster a stronger sense of community and purpose.

Ministries Effectiveness

- No women's Bible study
- No diocesan office to support lay ecclesial ministry

- No Bible study
- The reduction of staff support for important ministries
- The archdiocese does not have an advisor role to focus on Senior ministries
- The unreliability of the elevator is a hindrance to the senior ministry
- There are things that keep us from ministry
- leadership positions: we need to know they are for a limited time, we need to groom a successor, if we can get co-leaders, then the leadership position would not be so daunting for those who travel, work, or have other commitments. And there is a lack of proper training for the role.
- Leadership is often ineffective with leaders out of touch with concerns of the volunteers.
- We have no 'bench strength' with respect to ministerial leadership candidates and too many of our leaders are in their 60's and 70's.
- Our Life Teen ministry has really struggled for the last several years.

Education

- No opportunity for a 'teaching' mass
- The lack of adult education (*cited multiple times*)
- The continued absence of adult faith formation in our parish
- The unmet need for more missions on Church education, mass, tradition, and precepts.
- Why don't we have more adult education opportunities like Rob Ingebretsen's Adult Scripture Study?
- We lost our education department, which used to be a strength. Many parents left our church when this happened.

Marriage

- The annulment process remains complicated and burdensome. It presents barriers to souls deserving baptism. (*cited multiple times*)
- Lack of pastoral discernment regarding those who are divorced and/or divorced and remarried.
- Treatment of mixed marriages.

General

- We have an opportunity to become more united, between priests, ministries, and the community.
- It would be nice to have a columbarium at Saint Thomas Aquinas.

- The communal penance services focused more on expediency than on facilitating a prayerful encounter with God's mercy
- That people have not returned to mass after COVID. Harder to feel the community. Why don't we hold hands at the Our Father? Shake hands at the Sign of Peace?
- Parishes too large (to be pastorally effective)
- Clarity of doctrine
- Older members (in my SFC) feel that sports are replacing the local parish as a hub for community activity. The local parish is not the center of life anymore.
- Where are the bells that ring on campus as Mass starts/ends?
- During COVID, the uncertainty about priests being available for the sick and dying
- Too many changes in our pastor.
- Church finances are very concerning; there doesn't seem to be an awareness of that.
- Churches across the nation/world are losing members, especially among young people who see the church as out of date and irrelevant.
- The infighting among Cardinals is disconcerting

2. How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

Inclusivity

- Encourage adults to mentor a teen.
- Seek good leadership to create activities for young people, such as sports, music, dance, etc.
- All must be welcome, all the time, with no judgment or expectations. This message needs to be modeled from the top down and supported at all levels.
- Provide more opportunities for women in ministry leadership roles
- Increase and sustain encouragement and personal invitations to involve more active participation in parish life.
- More opportunities for young adults: Provide a space like a LIFE teen room, promote youth ministry participation, and create opportunities for them to lead activities and showcase talents.
- Increase the number of Spanish-speaking masses and priests to better serve this growing segment of the community.
- More interfaith gatherings like we do at Thanksgiving. Communication is not great.
- More inter-denominational mission work, like NFCC
- Provide a social structure, that accommodates, both young and old

Clerical Staff Effectiveness

- More pastorally focused training for priests and deacons that includes a focus on more effectively ministering to divorced people. (Cross-referenced in the Marriage category).
- Do priests want to be invited to SFC dinners? We'd love to have a priest come to have dinner at one of our gatherings. Would love to know priests personally like many of us did growing up.
- Homilies need to be tighter. No more than eight minutes.
- Look to our bishops and priests to apply the standard leadership tools (goal setting, measurement, performance feedback) to set an example for a more effectively administered church.
- Ensure that bishops, priests, and religious provide a good example
- Homilies should focus on love and mercy as a contrast to judging and hatred.

Communications

- Create a communication method that works in the Hispanic community – e.g.- WhatsApp
- Improve communication to support broader participation
- Improved communication and collaboration: Organize events where ministries and the community can interact, and provide more information about ministry and community service opportunities.
- Improved communication: Establish clear communication channels to share information, address concerns, and promote a sense of community.
- On the website, the last Bulletin to have been uploaded is March 10. Our SFC members have not received emails since the middle of February. Suggest we have a large graphic in the paper bulletin on how to sign up for the emails.
- Bring back the listing of ministry leaders in the bulletin.

Ministries Effectiveness

- Create a ministry to evangelize outside the parish.
- Ministries need to be guided by the principle of ‘what have you done for the least of your brethren?’
- A renewed focus on lay ecclesial ministry and support for it at the diocesan level
- Developing engaging and honest evangelization programs: Reach out to new people and existing parishioners alike with relevant and inspiring messages.
- Expand the ministry fair to include a skills registration table where parishioners might identify skills they’d like to contribute that don’t map to any particular existing ministry.
- There is a critical need to engage young people in ministry and to invest in the leadership development programs that will replenish our aging team of leaders.
- Encourage the formation of lay ministries.
- Need to resurrect Commissions to help ministry leaders

Education

- Conduct a “teaching” mass on occasion. Have the celebrant explain each step as it unfolds. Encourage all parishioners to attend and bring guests. – especially guests of other faiths.
- Provide opportunities within the parish for adult faith formation
- Have Bible study meetings to prepare us to be able to announce the gospel.
- Provide more education
- Offering more Bible studies and religious education classes: This will equip parishioners of all ages with a deeper understanding of their faith.

- Ensure catechists are well-supported and have access to resources for effective religious education, especially for children.
- Leadership development: Encourage new leaders to emerge and provide opportunities for ministry leaders to improve their skills.
- Offer Spanish religious education: Provide religious education classes in Spanish to cater to the Spanish-speaking community.
- We need to have adult faith formation.
- We should have a teaching mass and why can't we have the priests explain things during mass? When Father Adamski took a minute on Sunday to explain the readings (Why did they leave out verse 16 in the Acts 3 reading?) that was very much appreciated.
- Faith Formation needs better communication. Parents for the sacrament retreats don't know they need to stay for the retreats.
- Bulletins need to have fewer words and more graphics with bullet points, including phone numbers and web addresses
- Develop and deploy good catechists
- You can't share what you don't know. Create ways to educate and inform parents as to how to share their faith and understand more deeply, their Catholic faith.
- "Teach" parishioners how to live out the Gospel message. Offer practical examples in
 - o homilies
 - o Faith Formation
 - o Bulletins

Marriage

- More pastorally focused training for priests and deacons that includes a focus on more effectively ministering to divorced people. (Cross-referenced in the Clerical Staff Effectiveness category).
- Work for reform of the annulment process (*cited frequently by different groups*)

General

- Have another Mass on Sunday.
- Have a Spanish morning mass.
- The church should provide clarity as to what is expected of us. All parishioners should have access to a list of requirements:
 - o Formation
 - o Participation in adult education
 - o Evangelization
 - o Interfaith meetings/ interactions. i.e. Catholics/ Muslims/ Jews
 - o Social activities (parish picnics, social events)
 - o Personal education
 - Reading

- Questions and answers
- Catholic social teaching
 - Peer outreach
 - Each person at least once a year
- Create additional fellowship opportunities, and ensure that they are accessible
- Focus less on creating silos and more on systems of connectivity and cooperation
- Model what a community of love and mercy looks like. The divisiveness of the rhetoric among our bishops and Cardinals is destructive.
- Commit to organizational changes that support a synodal inter-parish collaboration model, rather than maintaining the current system of isolated fiefdoms. Challenge the Archdiocese itself to function synodally.
- Why don't we have events with other local Catholic parishes?
- Why are parishes labeled traditional/ conservative/ liberal? Why aren't we one Church?
- New models of church based on charisms.
- Models of shared leadership based on discernment and development of the gifts of the baptized
- Recognize and appreciate the efforts of volunteers and ministry leaders.
- Upgrade our physical plant. Other Catholic churches keep updating their buildings and grounds, but we do not. We need more classrooms and bigger meeting spaces.
- "Living as a community of love and mercy" needs to be prioritized over structural and organizational changes.
- Provide moral leadership and education.
- The lack of priests will require a new structure.
- There are various churches that use Latin within our own Archdiocese and this is problematic. We aren't living out Vatican II. To better fulfill the mission described in this question, we would need to live that fully.
- Clericalism is the opposite of the goal described in this question. Church members matter and everything we do should underline that.

4. Plan of Action

As the guidance originally provided by the Holy Father and the Global Synod team made clear, synodality is not a project but a process. We understand that the 2024 Synod activity will be a milestone, not a conclusion of our synodal journey.

We are committed to ensuring that the input we received from our parishioners in this round will serve as the source material and basis for further development activities in our parish. And as those activities are launched, they will be planned and shaped through the same collaborative, prayerful, synodal process that has led us to discover the insights recorded here.

The Parish Pastoral Council discussed and adopted the following recommendations.

1. **Transparency.** Following the first round of listening sessions in the spring of 2022, a similar report of the insights provided by participating parishioners was prepared for review and approval by the pastor. Upon his approval, the report was translated into Spanish and the Council authorized the posting of both versions on our website. Links to the report in Spanish and English were included in our bulletin.

We will continue this commitment to transparency by taking a similar course this year: Our clergy and the members of the Council reviewed and approved the translation of this report into Spanish and the posting of both language versions on our website. We will notify parishioners of the report's availability through the Bulletin as well as STA Today of their availability.

2. **Operationalize the insights.** While not all of the comments found in the report warrant further action, (and some in fact have already been implemented), many of them seem to point to actions we might take that would extend and support the mission of the church. Identifying those that suggest further action is a task that will, itself, be undertaken through a synodal process and a sub-committee of Council members has been impaneled to complete that task and to begin to associate actions with likely parish resources who can join that effort. For example, the work to action the many insights submitted that relate to our education programs will be informed by members of our education staff. The proposed action items and assignments will then be submitted to the whole Council for review and approval.
3. **Standardizing a synodal approach.** Lastly, additional applications of the synodal process will be used by the Council to augment our capabilities with the work of engaged parishioners who can collaborate to complete other tasks that the Council may determine need to be completed

- Stephen Sheahan, STA Parish Pastoral Council

5. Appendix of Session Materials

Materials prepared for use in the sessions are included here on the following pages. These materials include:

- a five-slide introductory file that moderators used to:
 - remind participants of the overall Synod objectives and guidelines,
 - provide a recap of the results of the initial consultations that took place in 2022, and
 - offer instructions for the management of the discussions, and

- A handout that was used by moderators in the small group discussions to record their groups responses.

Global Synod on Synodality

March, 2024 Questions
St. Thomas Aquinas Church
Alpharetta, Georgia

Adsumus, Sancte Spiritus

**We stand before you, Holy Spirit
as we gather together in Your name.**

**With You alone to guide us,
make Yourself at home in our hearts;**

**Teach us the way we must go
And how we are to pursue it.**

**We are weak and sinful;
do not let us promote disorder.**

**Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
nor partiality influence our actions.**

**Let us find in You our unity
so that we may journey together to eternal life
and not stray from the way of truth
and what is right.**

**All this we ask of You,
who are at work in every place and time,
in the communion of the Father and the Son,
forever and ever. Amen.**

Initial Round (2022) Recap

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.”

How is this “journeying together” happening today in our parish/community? How is the Holy Spirit inviting our parish/community to grow in “journeying together?”

We believe the Holy Spirit is inviting us to take positive steps to secure and extend our experience of Church by:

1. creating **new leadership opportunities** within our ministries so that new voices may be heard,
2. developing **more consistently effective spiritual direction and education** across the full range of parish opportunities: homilies, Faith Formation, and adult education, particularly in Catholic social teaching, and
3. promoting **more frequent and fully transparent communications** about our operations, decision making, and opportunities to engage.

Two New Questions

1. Where have I seen or experienced **successes—and distresses—within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life** that encourage or hinder the mission?
2. **How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized** to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?

- 1. Where have I seen or experienced successes—and distresses—within the Church’s structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?**

Successes

Distresses

- 2. How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?**