

Diocese of Helena Synod Synopsis

Maggie Phelan, Bishop's Delegate for the Synod

The two-year process for the Synod on Synodality is an invitation from Pope Francis which began in October of 2021 and will conclude in 2023. This unique opportunity for listening and dialogue in the Diocese of Helena began with the inaugural Mass on October 18, 2021, at the Cathedral of St. Helena. The video of the Mass includes Bishop Vetter's homily and is still available on the Cathedral's YouTube channel.

The first listening session was March 20, 2022. Bishop Vetter invited those in the Diocese to gather in person and attend listening sessions as Bishop Vetter joined via zoom. There were listening sessions in each deanery, one with married couples at the Cathedral of St. Helena, a session with the priests of the Diocese of Helena, the LGBTQ Community at Carroll College, and one with the attendants of the SEEK 2022 gathering which included college students from Carroll College, the University of Montana, Montana State University, Montana Technological University, and the University of Montana Western. There were approximately 650 people who participated in these listening sessions. Additionally, there was an online supplement which produced over 75 responses and letters that were sent directly to Bishop Vetter from February through May of 2022.

Each of the listening sessions began with time of prayer followed by time to discuss the questions in small groups before sharing individually with the large group and Bishop Vetter. The questions posed were as follows:

1. How has the Church accompanied you well?
2. How has the Church failed to accompany you?
3. In what ways would you like to see the Church accompany you better in the future?

When asked how the church has accompanied you well, some common answers included:

- The Church has always been a part of my family life.
- I can't imagine where I would be without the Church.
- The Church has supported me and my family through the most challenging times.
- Catholic education has been vital for raising my children.
- I have always felt welcomed in the Church.
- There is a sense of unity and camaraderie within the Church that is unlike anywhere else.
- The church's universality is unique and very special.

When asked how the church has failed to accompany you, some common answers included:

- Feeling underprepared to share faith because of education and catechesis background.
- I don't feel like my Catholic education (or my children's Catholic education) prepared me/them very well.
- Religious leaders seem to be bending to fit political agendas/the Church seems like it is becoming more polarized and more politically driven.
- The abuse crisis.

- People feeling unwelcomed and judged especially marginalized groups - immigrants, divorced couples, widows, and widowers, those who have been remarried, LGBTQ community, those devoted to the Latin Mass.
- Children not practicing the faith anymore.
- Not feeling supported or cared for by the Church in hard situations - family member's deaths, divorce, annulments, children struggling in faith.
- The Church not admitting to mistakes/trying to cover up mistakes and remaining secretive.
- Lack of resources and support for adults coming from the Church.
- Lack of continued education, especially for adults.
- LGBTQ individuals and other marginalized individuals feel judged and have experienced hurtful words spoken to them from those in the Church.

When asked how the church can better accompany you in the future, some common answers included:

- Provide more adult education.
- Improve Catholic education and the consistency of what is being taught in the education systems.
- Leaders and the members of the Church need to not be afraid to speak up and speak the truth.
- We need to reach out to all of God's children, but especially the marginalized populations.
- Bring back those who have left the Church, especially the youth.
- The Church should be loving all people, practicing what we are preaching.
- Figure out how to be in the world, but not of it.
- Increase regular access to the sacraments.
- Improve the resources available to us and help promote more of them for us.
- Improve the uniformity in catechesis being taught to children and congregations from the pulpit.

Notable groups:

The Priests of the Diocese of Helena

- Many shared that the church has been their anchor and that the church has allowed them to feel at home.
- They shared about the joy that their parishioners have brought them.
- They discussed the hardship of the scandals and the tension, fear, and anxiety that came with this. They also discussed the abandonment that they felt and the way that there was a shift from always being trusted to having to earn trust and being assumed guilty until proven innocent.
- They hope for greater unity for the church, but also a greater unity and increase in fraternity within the presbyterate.

The LGBTQ community at Carroll College

- They shared some of their disappointments and confusion with the church specifically loving everyone but not being allowed to love someone who is the same sex.
- They described the underhanded and hypocritical actions of clergy.
- They shared the Church not supporting the LGBTQ community and never talking about how they are oppressed.

This listening session provided a space for many of the students to dialogue about the small-scale church at Carroll College and the situations they have experienced during their time at Carroll College. Many of the students who were present at this listening session stood up and told their stories for the first time. They described hurtful words that have been spoken to them from various groups including students and professors at Carroll, as well as family and friends. Some of the students who were hearing these stories for the first time thanked the group of students who were vulnerable and courageous enough to share.

I had the privilege of attending each of the listening sessions and documenting the comments shared. The sessions that were clearly led by the Holy Spirit were very beautiful. The people of God were able to share without reservation. It was a wonderful experience to watch and listen to the faithful share about how the Lord has blessed them in their lives and share with courage and openness about where they have been wounded in a variety of ways. It was very encouraging to hear many people striving to be part of our Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. I was also very affirmed by the desire from so many to bring back fallen-away-Catholics and reach out to communities who are on the fringes.

The comments were compiled to create a synthesis for the Diocese of Helena, then submitted to the regional committee. I was also privileged to be part of the Region XII Synod Team. I met weekly for the month of July via zoom to pull together the syntheses from each of the dioceses of Region XII. Our region includes all the dioceses in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. There was a great range of urban and rural areas within the reports, and representation within the team from both settings. It was a pleasure to meet the other members and get to know them over the month of July. It was also beautiful to watch the way that the Holy Spirit would move and make it simple for us to draw out common themes and topics to include in the final regional synthesis. Much of what was discussed in our diocese was also common in other dioceses

The report from our region was then submitted to the USCCB where there will be another round of compiling and synthesizing. Each time that a new report moves forward, there will also be discussion about how best it will be made public.

Thank you to everyone in the Diocese of Helena who participated in our diocesan synod.

The regional synthesis for Region XII is published on the website of the U.S. Bishops at:
<https://www.usccb.org/resources/Region%20XII%20Synthesis%20Final.pdf>