

Archdiocese of Newark Disability, Life, and the Church Synod Synthesis Report



Process and General Overview

The Office encouraged parishes to seek and support participation in the synod process by persons with disabilities (PWD) and their families regularly through its pastoral newsletter. They were referred to the ministry website for a number of resources for parishes to use. [Click here for main synod section and note additional sections with in it.](#) Newsletter and social media communications encouraged PWD and their family members to participate in their parish's listening process. They were also invited to participate in listening sessions concerned particularly with their experiences with disability in life and the Church. Listening sessions provided a brief overview of what a synod is, synodality as a way of being that Pope Francis is calling the Church to, and showed video clips from "I AM CHURCH," by Vatican Dicastery for the Family. There was one in person and one virtual listening session. People were also offered an online survey and opportunities for conversation if they preferred or could not make one of the sessions. This report reflects the experiences and reflections gathered through these methods.

People who participated: 2/3 were women, 1/3 were men. Vast majority were parents. Age ranges: 10, 18-25, 26-39, 40-60, 60-74. Ethnicity/ Race: Caucasian, Hispanic or Latino, and Asian.

Core Question #1: How is this "journey together" happening in your parish?

- What happiness do you experience in the Church?
- What difficulties and challenges have you experienced in the Church?
- What are your perceptions of the Church based on your experiences?

Core Question #2: What steps does the Holy Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our journeying together?

- What ways do you think the Church needs to change or grow?

Last Thoughts:

- What's one thing you want your pastor to know?
- What's one thing you want Cardinal Tobin to know?
- What is one thing you want Pope Francis to know?

CORE QUESTION ONE

HOW IS THIS "JOURNEYING TOGETHER" HAPPENING TODAY IN YOUR PARISH?

Experiencing Happiness: Theme #1 – A Sense of Belonging (mentioned by 94%)

Feeling valued, cared for, supported and a part of things in the parish, accepted "as I am." This was particularly strong for parents when their sons or daughters were accepted and appreciated within the parish, and were able to participate in the sacramental life of the Church. Being able to come to mass as a family was reported as very important. They appreciate the Inclusive Family Masses, which help many persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) to feel comfortable attending mass. It also makes them feel valued.

It must be noted that the above positive experiences took place in parishes that collaborated with Office on the listening sessions. However, it isn't the participants' experience 100% of the time, and they still feel marginalized in the Church. Also, most parents reported changing parish because their son or daughter wasn't accepted or treated well. One parent reported family no longer attends mass nor belongs to any parish because of the *lack* of a sense of belonging.

Happiness: Theme #2 – Communal Activity Participation (mentioned by 100%)

Participating in community activities helps people feel like they belong and also that they are a part of something bigger than themselves. They reported the importance of having a sense of shared values. Types of activities mentioned were faith formation, Bible study, social events, social justice outreach such as food pantry, distributing food in a soup kitchen, etc.

Experienced Challenges and Difficulties: Theme #1 – Ableist Attitudes (100%)

Ableism establishes normative expectations based on ability, yet only sees persons with disabilities based on what they can not do, without acknowledging what they can do.

- Insensitivity to the details of their lives from priests, deacons, other pastoral leaders, and the person in the pew
- Reported instances of disrespect and lack of patience with PWD as they were participating in the mass or other activities hurt deeply. This includes pastors, other priests, religious, lay pastoral leaders and parishioners.
- Parents reported weariness from feeling that "it's all up to them." For example, one parent said, "I had to fight for my son to make his First Communion."
- Others also reported their sons and daughters being denied access to the sacraments in different parishes.
- Don't feel welcome as they are – not valued or wanted
- Avoided, feel isolated – "Our son at times made noises. At mass we came in and people in front of us moved their seats. This made us very sad."
- Catholic schools don't serve students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD).
- Pastoral leaders may be great, but the person in the pew is often still very hurtful without clear example and education from pastor and other leaders

Challenges and Difficulties: Theme #2 – Hypocrisy and Irrelevancy (100%)

- "The Church's teaching on the value of every person seems to apply to everyone except my son and other people like him."
- Homilies and parish activities don't apply to real life needs and experiences
- Unrelatable spirituality
- Cynical attitudes about society are not helpful.

CORE QUESTION TWO

" WHAT STEPS DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT INVITE US TO TAKE IN ORDER TO GROW IN OUR JOURNEYING TOGETHER?"

1. Notice who is missing. Demographic data about numbers of children/teens/adults with disabilities is readily available. Compare this to presence and participation in parishes. Many are missing. [To this parent's point, within the four counties that comprise the Archdiocese of Newark, the number of children and teens receiving special education services from NJ

Department of Education that are expected to be Catholic is 28,700, and the number of all people with disabilities five years or older is 111,725.]]

2. Reach out intentionally to:
 - a. Persons with disabilities, their families and adults living in group homes.
 - i. Have more Inclusive Family Masses and include fellowship afterward and promote interactions with more members of the Church.
 - ii. Intentional support for increased participation in the Church and comfortable relationships between adults with IDD and other members of the parish.
 - b. Teens, young adults

Reach out intentionally continued.

- c. Other groups of people who are not valued in society or the parish and are then marginalized.
3. Live the Faith Proclaimed:
 - a. Persons with disabilities and their families need what the Church profess.
 - b. Be interested in individuals with disabilities as a person in themselves, not just focused on parents and family members.
 - c. Teach what it means to live as a disciple of Christ, according to Catholic social teaching
 - d. Value differences – in abilities as well as culture, economics, language, etc.
 - e. Be credible
 - f. Do more ecumenical and interfaith collaboration

Fidelity to Faith Proclaimed, continued.

 - g. Welcome persons with disabilities in all masses and activities
 - i. Parents shared an experience of their son, who is blind. When he attended his parish ministry program for middle schoolers, the kids were playing kickball. No one approached him, he was left on the sidelines all alone.
 - ii. Have peer mentors and teen mentors to help and model
 - h. Be consistent across different parishes
4. Develop a Welcoming and More Open Attitude
 - a. Support PWD in participating in their parish, to feel they belong.
 - b. Welcome people who are 'different.'
 - c. Foster more community identity and relationships within parishes. A man with intellectual disability said, "it feels like other Christian churches do this better. Being church is more than attending mass and receiving sacraments."
 - d. Drop the cynical attitudes about society.
 - e. Be synodal – ask people what they think *regularly*.

Summary

The above themes, challenges, and comments are consistent with hundreds of other conversations over the years with individuals with disabilities and those who love them, including parents, caregivers, siblings extended family, teachers and human service providers. A very poignant quote by Renee Wood, a retired blogger and 'pit bull' disability activist from Ohio, who has cerebral palsy and uses a motorized wheelchair "You say I belong because I'm baptized, but I don't feel like I belong often because of the way I'm treated."

It must be noted that the above report reflects input from individuals with disabilities and parents who are currently engaged with the Church. Therefore, it is important to realize that we are still missing the many voices of those who are not engaged with the Church because of such issues as noted above. We have much work to do.

*Spirit of God be with us! Let us pray:*ⁱⁱ

May your light break through dark clouds, O Lord!

May your hope grow in our hearts – even when the skies feel ominous.

Fear, isolation, individualism, conflict: these are the winds that blow gusts of [ableism], racism, and inequality in our “throw-away world.”

But we are saved together; not alone – So teach us, Lord, to hope.

Show us the goodness you continue to sow. Show us the boldness of love to reject fear and embrace our neighbor.

*We pray to recognize the promptings of your Spirit that are most active between each of us, As you call to every one of us through each other, to new ways of reflecting your love in the world, “to promote a culture of life that constantly affirms the dignity of every person ... especially men and women with disabilities of all ages and social conditions.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

Amen.

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Last Thoughts

What do you want pastors to know?

- Invest in adult faith formation
- Support parents after baptism: keep in touch
- Rules should be the same at different parishes around the archdiocese.
- Be welcoming and pay attention to little details.
- Credibility is important and there has been a lack of it locally and in the universal Church.
- Inclusive Family Masses are great, but it'd be nice to have during regular mass schedule, so people with different needs feel like they are truly part of the community and be more connected with other members of the parish.
- Appreciate individuals with disabilities, each as an individual person.
- Listen to fears of parents and care givers. Don't dismiss them.

What do you want Cardinal Tobin to know?

- There's not a lot of Christians working together.
- Focus more on outreach to individuals with disabilities – recognizing the diversity in disabilities, teens and young adults.
- Credibility is important and there has been a lack of it locally and in the universal Church.

What do you want Pope Francis to know?

- Thank you for being so inviting and welcoming!
- We need to drop the cynicism
- Thank you for making us feel like a family
- Credibility is important and there has been a lack of it locally and in the universal Church.
- Continue outreach to people who are marginalized, like individuals with disabilities.
- Would like to see married priests.

ⁱ Numbers reported come from NJ Department of Education 2019 report and University of New Hampshire 2019 State Report by County-Level Data Prevalence for New Jersey. Estimate of Catholic population is based on 41% of total population for each group.

ⁱⁱ *Inspired by Fratelli Tutti*, and adapted from “A Call to Social Friendship in a Time of Isolation,” *USCCB Study Guide*, nos. 30, 54-55.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pope Francis, “*Message of the Holy Father Francis for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.*” 12/3/2020.