



# LETTING OUR VOICES BE HEARD



St. Vincent de Paul Church  
Baltimore

**Synodal Report**



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## Who We Are

St. Vincent de Paul is a small intentional Catholic parish in downtown Baltimore, USA.

We choose to travel from near and far to this place, to celebrate and worship in our home, founded in 1841, a historical, lovely old church. We, the People of God, the church on Front Street, are inspired by the work and the documents of Vatican II. We work to be faithful to its vision and promise. We strive to be a community of seekers, lovers, and servants.

When we gather around our altar, we are Word and Sacrament for one another. By so doing and by so being, we seek to reflect the Incarnate Christ in this place and time.

We express our faith through liturgy, Sacraments, and sacramental living, through full-throated singing, meditation, prayer, contemplation, and scholarship, and through our care for one another, our neighbors near and far, the poor, the marginalized, and the environment.

Our church campus, including our small park, has served for many years as a stopping place for homeless men and women. The persistent presence of the most vulnerable and needful in our midst reminds us of the demands of our discipleship, and of Christ with whom we are yoked: the Jesus who was anointed to bring good news to the poor, and who came to serve.

When we reflect God's Word and integrate the Incarnate God by the ways we worship and serve, we are the Body of Christ here and now. We have faith that this Church of those who are on The Way, proclaiming the Gospel, has a place in the suffering world. We choose not to surrender to apathy. We at St. Vincent's persist with compassion.

## Our Grateful Stance

We gratefully welcome this Synodal process. We believe the Spirit was trying to prepare the Church through Vatican II for this new millennium with its disorienting global change and the monumental political and social challenges we now experience. The work of becoming a world church, fully and fertilely enculturated in the diverse peoples of the globe remains unfinished. We are encouraged by the willingness to listen broadly and deeply, with faith in the Lord: 'Be not afraid,' and to open ourselves once again to the work of the Spirit before us. We acknowledge with appreciation the honor and respect being shown to the moral and intellectual agency of the laity: this, too, is of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-7).

*There is a storm over the church; we don't know how it will turn out. This listening project is a good step... and gives me hope.*

**NOTE:** All the voices shared in this document were collected during the Synodal Listening Project here in our parish. *Direct quotes are shown in blue.*

## The Heart of our Discernment

The Synod is asking us to discern how we are “living the faith” and how we, as Church, are achieving this together. We instituted a comprehensive listening project to hear each other receptively, relinquishing the tendency to deflect, debate, or defend. We collected heartfelt opinions and experiences, as well as the hopes and fears, the dreams and frustrations of our community (**our approaches and strategies are described in the Appendix**). In doing this, we discerned four primary calls of the Spirit to the Church in this critical time: a Call to Gospel-Inspired Inclusiveness, a Call to Servant Leadership, a Call to Authenticity and Humility, and a Call to Be a Synodal Church.

## The Fullness of What We Discerned

As we listened to each other on this journey, *a deep and persisting woundedness* wove its way through one personal story after another. For communities like ours who were inspired by the Vatican II Council and enthusiastically embraced its promise and potential, the retrenchment of the past half-century has been deeply painful. When this is coupled with personal experiences of being dismissed by clericalism, being offended by triumphalism, being hurt by legalism, and in some cases being spiritually, and psychically injured by sexual and physical abuse, the wounds in the Church are deep. The effect on the Church has not been acknowledged in any manner that remedies these failings. Consequently, *anger and mistrust* run deep.

And yet we love being Catholic, treasure the meaning of our faith, our rich tradition, its beauty, and the great cloud of witnesses we join in worship. We are Catholics *who have stayed*, celebrating, ministering, praying, and committing ourselves, through the roles and responsibilities conferred on us on the day of our Baptism, to Word, to Sacrament, and to Service.

*There are countless ways that we welcome, listen, share, reach out, support, respect, and love each other. Every one of those interactions is holy. Along with that, no one I know comes to our church out of obligation. That means that they don't come just to observe a Mass or to be a passive recipient. They come to celebrate, to learn, to be a part of what makes the Mass authentic and holy. Our Mass is a holy experience because it lives in all of us, and we actively and intentionally celebrate it together.*

We believe that the Church is the People of God, which exists both as community and as institution. Together, these express very basic human needs for personal relationship (community) and the fulfillment of those needs through organized structure (institution). There is a creative tension between these two human needs and when grace is received in humility and gratitude this tension gives rise to the flourishing of worship, spiritual transformation, and kenotic service.

In this discernment, we found *an abiding hope*. It is not tied to the expectation of a good outcome for the Synodal journey -- although that is a fervent wish. It is more a sense of presence, the immediate experience of being held in communion with something intimately at

hand, a mystical hope that the meaning we seek is already written in our hearts. The consultation among ourselves bore fruit within us, with gifts of strength and joy that arose. We realized yet again that we are fully constituted as Church here ourselves. And, if the only thing we can do is stay faithful, it will be sufficient.

*It's Catholicism – its spirituality, its mysticism – I find it nowhere else. I am not going to leave and I will not be disempowered.*

In this fidelity and in this hope, we offer these four calls.

## **The Call to Gospel-Inspired Inclusiveness**

### **What We Have Heard and What We Have Seen**

The single most repeated and deeply heartfelt plea was to open ordination to women and married persons, with no discrimination by sexual orientation. We heard many stories of women feeling dismissed and alienated by church practice. We heard from women in ministry at the bedsides of the sick and dying, bringing daily Eucharist and listening compassionately to painful admissions, but having to wait for the male priest to be called in, bringing the oil of the sick and the stole for absolution.


Some asked, “How can the Church call celibacy a *gift from God* and then mandate it for men seeking ordination?” (Canon 277)

*I've known the score since I was 6 or 7 – women can't be priests. Still, two years ago I attended an ordination of deacons at the Cathedral, where there was a parade of what seemed like hundreds of priests down the aisle. At some point it hit me in the chest – everyone on the altar was a man. It was so hurtful I couldn't believe it. Afterward, I ran into a friend who'd been at the same event. She had the same reaction.*

We heard stories of the sting experienced by our brothers, sisters, or children being called ‘disordered’ by the Church and refused access to two of our Sacraments because of their sexual orientation alone. The Church seems to believe it will lose credibility if its teachings in this realm were to evolve. So, the Church clings doggedly to antiquated teaching on sexual morality and natural law in the face of an emerging body of evidence and understanding of human sexuality and the great breadth of expression of the *imago Dei*.

*Those of the LGBTQ+ are the only group that are being locked out because of what God has allowed God's creation to make manifest within the human. The Holy Spirit is screaming that they should be made full participants in the Sacramental and Service life of the Church.*

*Our adult children don't even come for weddings and funerals because they don't want to be where their gay friends are unwelcome. The Church's acceptance of differences is essential if the Church wants to keep our kids.*



We heard from some parishioners heart-rending stories of hard decisions that Catholic families had to make at other parishes to forego Eucharistic Masses for funerals and weddings — because they refused to tell non-Catholic family members and friends that they would not be welcome to receive communion.

*What exactly are we doing by denying Communion to some? Protecting God? God doesn't need or require our protection.*

We have seen our Church try to make itself small, pure, and self-righteous in its legal adherence, perpetuate a Sacramental system through which grace is mediated, and further impose arbitrary rules of access to it for some.

*A priest can say a Mass by himself, but the laity cannot. To me, this is a sad reality. Priests are set up to be central to the Mass, yet there are not enough of them, so access to Communion by the laity can be limited. Access to the nourishment that is central to the faith is LIMITED? . . . limited by the Church itself? Do you think Jesus approves of anyone limiting access to Him?*

We have seen our Church dismiss Jesus' warnings against leaders who lay burdens on those under them (Matt 23).

## **What We Hope and What We Dream**

We discern the Spirit calling the People of God to ground themselves in the life of Jesus the Christ who in encountering others communicated an open-hearted God of presence, vulnerability, and compassion. Jesus invited open-table fellowship and turned no one away (Lk 19:1-10). He dismissed purity codes and exclusionary practices. He welcomed and broke bread with women and men, rich and poor, Jew and Samaritan (Jn 4). A Church belonging to him would be a Sacrament itself, a field hospital for the wounded world. A Church belonging to Jesus would be wildly and prodigally generous in Word and Sacrament.

## **The Call to Servant Leadership**

### **What We Heard and What We Have Seen**

The sin of clericalism, through which unilateral, authoritarian control of the governing, teaching, and sanctifying functions of the Church is exercised, is antithetical to the Gospel. In light of the New Testament, the current governance and power structure are indefensible.

*The diocese and the Church hierarchy seem to believe that they have all the authority. They tell us what we should believe, and while they say we should listen to our conscience, if our conscience disagrees with what they think, there are often serious consequences.*

Lay persons are no longer the uneducated masses of the medieval Church. The laity desire to live out the fullness of their Baptism as partners with the clergy in mission, and to be included in all the works (*munera*) of Church life.

*Let's keep in mind that Jesus was a lay person who had issues with the clergy of his day.*

We heard that when our leaders violate the model Jesus left us and betray our trust through the sexual abuse of our children (Matt 18:6-7), it tears at our souls. When they fail to hold offenders accountable or thwart the search for the truth, it erodes faith in the institution. When they transfer perpetrators and place other children at risk, it becomes a source of painful and irreparable spiritual alienation with repercussions for entire families — indeed, entire generations of the faithful.

*The Diocese reported that the priest who abused me had a history of "irregular activity", and so was moved to a more "rural area" ... As a 10-year-old, I was taught that priests were Christ on Earth (alter Christus). I cannot go into a Catholic Church and witness a naked, male figure of Jesus, without remembering what the priest did to me. How can I expect to have a relationship with a loving God after that? I have forgiven the priest who is dead, but his actions have taken a toll, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.*

We have seen the Sacrament of Orders become for too many like a secular career ladder, marked by increasing status, more ornate garb, and more subservient rituals for underlings. The clerics who approach their ordination in this manner already have their reward (Lk 18: 9-14). Clerics who prize the institution over its people in eschewing transparency and accountability when harm and injury have happened cause great harm to the Church they have vowed to serve.

### **What We Hope and What We Dream**

We discern the Spirit calling the People of God to open their eyes to the example Jesus left when he knelt to wash the feet of his disciples. No servant is greater than his master (Jn 13:16). The example of Jesus in his life and ministry is one that should ever be before us, his followers, but most especially for those among us who are called to leadership. In one Gospel story after another, Jesus does three things: he sees people as God sees them, he asks what they need or want, and he helps them understand that what they seek is already within them. This is Jesus as Servant Leader.

We yearn for priests and bishops who practice what the Church preaches in its social teaching: subsidiarity, participation, solidarity. When priests and bishops act in accord with these principles, the common good and spiritual life of the parish and diocese flourish.

### **The Call to Authenticity and Humility**

#### **What We Heard and What We Have Seen**

Opening ordination to women, married persons, and persons of any sexual orientation was widely supported. We do not advocate this to simply 'solve' the priest shortage. Numbers alone will not cure what is inherently wrong with the clerical culture. *Seminary formation must be*

*reformed.* The Church cannot open ordination and fail to attend to the nature of clerical preparation (including its very Sacramental theology) and expect the sin of clericalism — so painful, and now so roundly condemned — to disappear. New wineskins are needed (Mk 2:22).

*One of the reasons I left the seminary was how regulated it was. It was so controlling and closed-minded.*

Humility comes with knowing one's true self in the mind of God and discarding all externals that promote, project, or protect an inflated or mistaken identity. Some priests and bishops know there is a self who exists behind the Roman collar and the miter and staff. We know these men in a heartbeat when we see them: their authenticity shines through.

*Within our parish, the current pastor seems to be trying to listen, to work with us. But it seems to me that all too often clergy are locked into the conviction drummed into them by the clerical mindset, that they are fundamentally "different," more open to God, more representative of God than others.*

The story our Church tells about itself cannot be one of elevated status, kept free from error. No one with the slightest knowledge of Church history can believe that. Too often our Church's concept of God has been too small and too reflective of our worst human tendencies in judgment and condemnation.

*The clergy and hierarchy behave like a gigantic cult divorced from the rest of the world. They have even developed their own language that bears only partial relationship to the real world. This cultish insularity is self-destructive and must change.*

## **What We Hope and What We Dream**

We discern the Spirit calling the Church to raise up presiders who understand our worship as the priestly prayer of the People of God and invite active, engaged participation beyond the limited lay role prescribed in rubrics. We want preachers with souls afire who have committed to ongoing and deep spiritual formation. We want pastors with compassionate hearts. We want teachers whose doctrine reflects 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge and sensibilities that are relevant to our experience.

While this authenticity and humility start within the individual, they extend to the institution itself. As a Church, the story we tell about ourselves must be equally honest, one that acknowledges that we are a pilgrim people with a God who accompanies and sustains us in our human frailty.

We hope for a Church of simplicity and fidelity; a Church who lets God be God and sees its primary mission in changing people's hearts and minds into the mind of Christ (Phil 2: 5-8) so that the mission of the people of God can be accomplished in changing the heart of the world.



## The Call to a Synodal Church: Collegial, Relevant, Prophetic

### What We Heard and What We Have Seen

While lay people have the right and even at times the duty to manifest their opinions on matters pertaining to the good of the Church (Canon 212 § 2), the canon does not explicitly express a concomitant obligation on pastors to listen attentively. Too often letters and petitions, protests and movements are ignored. The *communio* envisioned in canon law has a dynamic nature and requires mutual trust and respect, cooperation, and interdependence. This ideal, if it ever was truly realized in the governance of the church, has seriously eroded in our time.

*The top-down nature of the church impedes the listening processes. It feels feudal and we're not serfs. We are educated; we want to be respected. The feeling in the pews is one of being judged and that judgement is coming from a great distance.*

We have seen the Church act as though it needs to withstand society, engage in a culture war of its own making, and safeguard the Truth which God has preferentially and exclusively entrusted to it. This is not how we are to live out our mission of being salt and light for the world (Matt 5: 13-15), divorced from the world.

*Hearing the truths of others helps us to broaden and deepen our understanding. It takes time to listen and a strength that allows us to consider new viewpoints and ideas without feeling threatened.*

The future of any institution is in its young generations. We reached out to the adult children of current parishioners through their parents. While these young adults uniformly have good memories of their childhood at St V, many no longer participate in the Catholic Church.

*All of my four children are angry about the sexual abuse cover-up, the lack of female diaconate and female priests, the stupidity of forced celibacy, clericalism and misunderstanding of sexuality.*

*A teaching program required us to attend masses at various churches throughout the Baltimore community. There were times when I felt extremely uncomfortable and out of place at Mass, seeing how what I knew/know and believed was at complete odds with the rhetoric used and the sentiments expressed. I felt as if my values were being attacked. It totally made me question what it meant to be Catholic—I still identified as Catholic, but it was my own bits and pieces of it. ... it was during my time in this Catholic program that I felt the least connected to the Church.*

We know of collegial bishops and faithful priests in deeply fruitful collaborative relationships with their people here in the United States and certainly in episcopal conferences around the world. We U.S. Catholics had the same experience with our own conference when they spoke with one voice on issues of war, racism, and the economy in prophetic and relevant ways. We grieve for the loss of that Catholic witness in the public square. The general experience with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in the past thirty years has been one where a graced collaborative tension has deteriorated through dismissive self-referential control,

competing agendas, and loss of mission. And although it is not to be this way among us (Matt 23: 8-12), we find ourselves, in the first century of the third Christian millennium, with many episcopal shepherds who lack vision and pastoral concern. We are losing generations of American Catholics, who long for engagement, vision, and a relationship between the church they attend on Sunday and the world in which they live every day.

*I'm not just disaffected but also angry — a lot of us have kids who don't go to church anymore. I come from a large strong Roman Catholic family and tradition that I haven't been able to give my kids. The reality is they find nothing of value in Roman Catholicism.*

It would be good if we asked ourselves why this is so.

### **What We Hope and What We Dream**

The ever-dynamic Holy Spirit breathes into us the dream and hope of a Synodal Church who will begin to journey as the whole People of God in *graced partnership for mission*, embracing servant leadership. This means welcoming, celebrating, and empowering the gifts the Spirit has given the whole community in shared governance. Leaders should be affirmed by the communities they are proposed to lead. It also means learning to trust the mercy and action of God in the work of salvation: the *sensus fidelium* and the requirement (and need) for teaching to be received. We want genuine listening.

*Change is coming, and this Synod is a good way to empower the laity, who represent the future of the Church. Those in "power" will need a conversion of heart to become servants to the poor, the oppressed and all of us. Otherwise, the Church will continue down a path of dwindling numbers, lack of priests and eventual irrelevancy.*

We dream of a Synodal Church *who is relevant* and who acts like the householder bringing out things new and old (Matt 13:52). This Church listens to the world, embracing the fullness of God's continuing revelation in other faith traditions, other cultures, the sciences, and the arts. In doing this, the imagination of the Church can be expanded to present the great and eternal truths of the doctrines in Christian revelation and free them from the constraints of the language and limited knowledge of the past.

*We must look outward: our traditions are meant to be paths to holiness and that holiness shines brightly for all to see, it is not meant to be wrapped up tightly and hidden away in rules and regs.*

We dream of a Synodal Church *who is prophetic* and makes the 'joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the (people) of our time' her own as *Gaudium and Spes* encouraged us to do. This is the Church of Jesus, the Prophet, calling out injustice, oppression, war, and racism with integrity and absolute fidelity, eschewing political or economic consequences. This is a Church who lives in accord with her own Catholic Social Teaching.

*Our Church provides many services to the poor and needy here and around the world. But the spirit of prophecy and public witness has been missing from our*

*Church for centuries. We think we do well enough caring for the people who have fallen off the mountain. But we are called to build the guardrails that keep them safe. We must be about the 'leaven' work of dismantling structures that keep people poor.*

We dream of a Synodal Church *who will listen dialogically* with the expectation (not the fear) that what is received will require change: change of mind, change of practice, and even change of heart.

*The Church has sinned against its flock. Historically, by being complicit with racism, and by the abuses committed against thousands of its followers. And currently, by its shameful, hurtful positions against the LGBTQ+ community. It is time for an awakening within the Catholic Church; an honest examination of conscience by all members, ordained and lay, who claim to be followers of Christ. Now is the time for a Re-formation of the Church so that we may truly be the disciples Jesus calls us to be.*

## Closing Statements

We in our parish community will indeed stay faithful to the promise of Vatican II through which our Church will transform from institution to sacrament, from hierarchy to the People of God, from absolute monarchy to communion, from one, true Church to Church as an ecumenical community, from Church as triumphant kingdom to Church as a pilgrim community, from a Church of word and sacrament to a Church who also embraces service. This is a transformation in the very way of being Church. And in the gradual dawning of that new day, we place faith in the understanding that "...if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5:17)

*I pray that the synod will result in more wondering and questioning, more listening and consultation. I pray that more bishops will be freed from their fear of losing power and may have the courage to speak out in favor of the gospel rather than adding to our culture wars. I pray for a time when all of us who are empowered to speak by virtue of our baptism may be given equal opportunity and taken more seriously when we seize that opportunity.*

We leave the closing words of this document to two of whom Jesus called "the least among us." Each was a part of the synodal process at St. Vincent's parish; Pope Francis indeed said that *the Gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake.*

A **child** spoke up during the children's synod liturgy to tell the whole assembly: "*God forgives.*"

And a **man who is homeless** assured us, in his synodal encounter on our granite steps: "*We need the church around for 700 more years for children and adults.*"



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## APPENDIX: Approaches and Strategies

St. Vincent fully embraced this Synodal invitation and saw this as an important opportunity to have our voices heard.

To ensure a thoughtful process that yielded rich fruit for thought and action, the following steps were taken:

- 1. A Synod Team was created.** This 6-member team met at least twice a week for three+ months to plan the Synodal process. One member was named Project Manager to ensure the work was completed in a timely manner.
- 2. Consultants were hired.** Global Learning Partners [www.globallearningpartners.com](http://www.globallearningpartners.com) collaborated with the Synodal Team to ensure a dialogue approach and helpful tools were used, data were properly collected and analyzed, and a clear report was developed.
- 3. An Editorial Group was created.** This 8-person team was selected from the community to offer a validating eye to themes identified in the data by the consultants and to decide the important messages for the final report that would be presented to the full community for affirmation.

The Synodal Team had the following goals for its work:

- 1. To ensure all voices connected to St. Vincent are heard** – those presently part of the parish and those who were in the past; those who attend regularly on Sunday and those who do not; those whose voice we especially needed or wanted to hear; and, those whom we serve and those who serve.
- 2. To invite everyone into deep listening of the Holy Spirit** – we saw the will of the Holy Spirit as key in this process.
- 3. To collect generative themes, wisdom, and insights** for the Church as well as for our community as a gateway to understanding.
- 4. To collect personal stories** – to realize how the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through our experiences
- 5. To dream big about the future of the Catholic Church** – to discern what the Holy Spirit is calling us to be.

St. Vincent mapped out a variety of ways to engage in the process:

### **1. Focus Groups**

These groups were intentionally offered multiple times to maximize the number of people involved. In addition to the 9 parish-wide focus groups, special population groups were organized to ensure high safety and respect: 1. one for individuals who left the parish and/or Church; 2. one for persons with various sexual orientations; 3. two for persons from ethnic and racial minorities; 4. one for young adults; and, 5. three for families with children.

Nine one-to-one interviews were conducted with those uncomfortable in the focus group format or were without internet access.

### **2. Prayer Prompts**

'Prayer prompts' were a way to allow parishioners time to discern what the Holy Spirit was telling them about the 10 Thematic Nuclei of the Synodal Process. They were delivered via email twice per week for 8 weeks for a total of 16 prompts. The prayer prompts were mailed to parishioners without internet access. Each prayer prompt started with a short scripture passage, followed by a call to reflect on a single question from one of the Nuclei, a short prayer, and an invitation to write what the Holy Spirit was saying. These were collected anonymously and yielded a qualitatively different and very rich set of information.

### **3. Parish Survey**

A general survey was sent via email to all parishioners and others receiving our weekly newsletter. The survey included questions about their experience at St. Vincent de Paul as well as questions about the larger Catholic Church, including one dream they have for the Catholic Church, to whom the Catholic Church needs to listen to more and why, and how the Catholic Church promotes open and authentic communication. A paper survey was provided to parishioners without internet access.

### **4. Adult Offspring of Parishioners**

Current parishioners were encouraged to interview their adult offspring and submit the notes from their conversation. Several specific questions were asked, including: What factors in the Church itself have caused you to step away? What do you need from the Church? If you were having coffee with the Pope, what would you say to him?

## 5. Interviews with Those We Serve

Individuals experiencing homelessness and others in need who access our special ministries were talked to 1-1.

These strategies produced broad participation:

Initiative	Numbers
Focus Groups	96 participants in 21 small groups
Prayer Prompts	Over 465 responses
Parish Survey	120 people responded
Adult Offspring of Parishioners	20 offspring interviewed
Individual Interviews	10 people interviewed
Young Children of Parish	8 children in dialogic homily
Poor and Homeless at our Door	46 individuals seeking service