

STAR OF THE SEA PARISH SYNOD RESPONSE

In 2021, our Holy Father initiated a two-year consultative process entitled "Synod for a Synodal Church." The literal translation of the Greek word, "Synod," is "on the same path." The Holy Father asked the whole Church to "journey together on the same path," and to enter into dialogue and to listen to one another in order to discern God's will for us. On October 18, 2021, Bishop Knestout introduced the Synod to the people of the Diocese. Bishop Knestout requested that each parish begin this consultative process with its advisory bodies and to include a broad and inclusive cross section of the parish in that process.

Father Steve wrote to many parishioners earlier this year, inviting them to participate in the Synod. Father explained that the Synod was comprised of three themes: Communion, Participation and Mission, and Discussion and Dialogue. Along with this invitation, Father sent selected questions among the foregoing themes to seniors and young adults, to liturgical ministers, and parents of religious ed students. Father's invitation to participate also was posted on the Parish's Facebook page, and the Evangelization Team hosted a well-advertised dinner event on March 9, 2022 to discuss all of the Synod questions and to engage as many parishioners as possible.

Father Steve's letter and the Facebook posts elicited seventy-nine written responses to the questions posed, and forty-five parishioners attended and participated in the Evangelization Team event. From those responses, and from the feedback from the exchange of thoughts and ideas during the ET event, a "Synthesis of Feedback" was compiled and submitted to the Diocese. A copy of "Synodal Themes: Synthesis of Feedback from Parishioners" follows below. If you are reading this in the Bulletin or via email, you can access a copy by going to the parish website, www.staroftheseaparish.com, or to the Parish Facebook page.

Our goal is to continue this journey together, in communion with one another, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, understanding that through dialogue and listening to one another, we as parishioners of Star of the Sea can best assist the church in her mission of salvation.

Your questions and input regarding the attached, "Synodal Themes: Synthesis of Feedback from Parishioners," are welcome and encouraged. You may address your questions and provide input to: grace@staroftheseaparish.com

Parish Council and Evangelization Team

SYNODAL THEMES: SYNTHESIS OF FEEDBACK FROM PARISHIONERS

Participation and Mission Questions

How is the parish equipping and empowering people to go out and be on a mission for Jesus Christ in their regular lives? What obstacles do the faithful face in living in professing their faith publicly? What opportunities is the parish providing to help the faithful face those obstacles? What is still needed?

Respondents were largely positive on the extent and manner in which Star of the Sea equips and empowers people to be on a mission for Jesus Christ in their regular lives, citing how attending mass, receiving the sacraments, and Father Steve's homilies promote this, and how Star of the Sea's New Evangelization Team empowers parishioners to strengthen and share their faith through faith sharing groups and education. Obstacles to living and professing one's faith publicly include fear of how one will be perceived by the secular world of friends, neighbors, and work associates. A common theme expressed by some was that "living one's faith" and setting an example was preferable to public expressions of faith which could promote divisiveness and controversy and, in the long run, reduce the body of the faithful rather than increase it. While all respondents felt that Star of the Sea provided many ways for parishioners to strengthen their faith and be on a mission for Jesus Christ, some observed that these opportunities were availed only by the same small group of parishioners. We should strive to empower more of the faithful to embrace these opportunities to better understand the tenets of their Catholic faith in order to better to live it and profess it.

How are our lay leaders given responsibility and to what extent do they have the authority to make decisions?

The consensus among respondents was that lay leaders are given considerable responsibility to complete tasks assigned to them, and to organize and lead the ministries they preside over, and also that lay leaders do good work. Respondents believe that the role of lay leadership is to provide input, to collaborate with members of their ministry, and to provide advice and guidance to the pastor, but that the pastor is the ultimate decision maker. A majority of respondents felt that this was how it should be.

Respondents expressed disappointment in the lack of transparency regarding the deliberations, work, and recommendations made by lay leadership and also conveyed the sense that lay leadership rarely changed and that it would better if lay leadership changed over more frequently.

What opportunities does your parish or community offer to raise people up into leadership positions? How are those in leadership roles formed to make them more capable of journeying together? How do you offer opportunities for those in leadership to listen and engage in dialogue with those they are journeying with?

All respondents agreed that parishioners at Star of the Sea have ample notice of opportunities to become involved in lay ministries, including to aspire to leadership positions within those ministries. Parishioners are regularly advised of openings and needs through bulletins, announcements at mass, and social media, and personal invitations are extended to those who have a talent to lead. All respondents agreed that open forums to discuss what ministries actually do, and the roles of Parish Council and other leadership entities, would improve dialogue and understanding of all parishioners as they journey together. Formation, town halls and forums dealing with available ministries should be encouraged, as should leadership from a young age.

How are decisions made for the Parish or Community?

Decisions for the parish are primarily made at the pastor level by pastoral design. Star of the Sea has an active Pillar Ministry that provides and encourages freedom of decision making at those levels. The evangelization team also is very engaged in the decision-making process by holding gatherings of particular importance. Differences of opinion are brought to the Parish Council or Finance Council or to the Pastor. Staff, ministry members, and volunteers are active in this decision-making process. The Bishop and Deanery also have an obvious influence. There is a call for more transparency and openness /disclosure of the decision-making process.

Discussion and Dialogue Questions

Under what circumstances and in what ways are Catholics communicating in the world today? How does the prevalence of digital and social media affect communication?

There are tremendous opportunities for Catholics to communicate and participate in and with special interest groups on line. Rosary apps and Facebook Catholic and Bible groups are thriving, of note: The Bible in a Year; the Catholic Thing; Hallow; and Bishop Barron’s Word on Fire. The downside is all “meaningful relationship(s) are one-on-one.” Serious conversation requires a personal touch. Star of the Sea is a “Welcoming Parish’ and continues to do well using social media platforms to effectively reach out to those we serve to express our faith, with an eye on educating our parishioners, particularly the children and young adults.

How is the church dialoguing, collaborating, and resolving conflicts among its own members in the church?

There is strong and meaningful dialogue within the parish as we celebrate Jesus' message of salvation. To that end, while celebrating mass or engaging in any parish gathering or event, differences are "left at the door." Faith groups are strong and "feeding the sheep." Respondents noted room for improvement within the deanery, diocese, and ecclesiastically.

More adoration and reconciliation "collaboration" within the Virginia Beach -Norfolk deaneries would be warmly received. The Catholic Virginian was recognized as a wonderful source of information and communication. As for "conflict resolution," most feel we have power within the parish and less so as we expand to the deaneries and vicariates, and beyond the Catholic Community outside of the Dioceses.

How is the church dialoguing, collaborating, and resolving conflicts with members of other Christian denominations, people of other non-Christian religious traditions, and people with no religious affiliation? What have been the fruits of doing so and what have been the difficulties?

Positive fruits identified are that our parish welcomes everyone; there is good social ministry outreach to the homeless in collaboration with other Christian denominations; strong values are promoted, and there are good deanery team discussions with other parishes. Difficulties and recommendations for improvements include problems serving Virginia Beach's large homeless population, using social media platforms more effectively, not knowing how to express our faith, and how to best educate our children.

What areas and issues in the wider society is the Church focused on? Are there areas or issues we need to pay more attention to?

Areas needing attention include promoting the preciousness of life at conception and the need for the church to more directly challenge the modern culture, politics, and abortion; to accept all people, pay more attention to the poor, promote equality for all, and encourage the church to be more like a family. We also need ways to encourage fallen-away and divorced Catholics and young people to come back to the church. Many responses indicated that the parish and Father Steve are doing a great job overall.

Communion Questions

How would you characterize your church community-the people who are journeying together? What persons or groups are left on the margins? How is your parish inviting those on the margins into relationship?

Our parish is derived of all ages, income levels, ethnic backgrounds, the school's families, and visiting tourists in the summer. Marginalized groups are identified as youth (ages 18-30), and non-practicing Catholics of all ages. We offer various engaging programs including evenings of church teaching through several ministries that entail videos, presentations, interactive discussions, pastor leadership, and meals. Establishing more fun friendly and social caring activities for youth may ingrain a better sense of purpose, commitment, and connection.

Who does our Church currently listen to? Who is not being listened to? Which groups are less likely to be listened to? Who is being left out of the conversation?

Respondents believe that Star of the Sea openly welcomes input from all voices through parish staff and our Pastor, Father Steve. Reaching out to folks who are disengaged with mass and church events is a ministry that demands attention by the entire church. Providing effective forums that encourage communication, exchanging ideas and answering questions amongst non-practicing Catholics and prospective parishioners, particularly those in their 20's and 30's, would improve interest and education of Catholicism. Examples include chat lines, social media, and active websites where people can initiate dialogue and ask questions to be answered by a knowledgeable and welcoming church representative. Our younger adults could benefit from better promotion of regional Catholic social outings that include speakers addressing and answering questions on pertinent topics. We should consider more actively marketing these venues outside normal church mediums.

Do our liturgies promote the active participation of all the faithful in the liturgy and encourage them to live lives of faith? Does the homily draw from the Word of God and inspire the faithful?

Father Steve celebrates a beautiful mass and his homilies are educational, inspiring, and relatable, and promote active participation in the celebration of the Eucharist. Parish staff and volunteers are welcoming and participate with many ministries offered. We can improve interest and faithfulness by generating and promoting an active list of the many effective educational and Catholic resources available on the internet such as podcasts from Bishop Barron, Father Mike Schmitz, and other programs that embrace enthusiasm and enlightenment. More vibrant music at mass can increase participation and elevate one's experience, particularly among the youth and young adults, who are the future of the church. Providing parishioners more expansive communicative and informative tools to be active and confident evangelizers will help grow the church.