

Response to Pope Francis’s call for participation in the synodal process leading to the 2023 Synod on Synodality

Submitted on behalf of The PAX Community, McLean, Virginia, USA

Abstract

An American IEC of 53 years offers a vision of a reformed Roman Catholic Church that is more inclusive and less hierarchical, more nurturing and less judgmental, more attuned to human problems and our natural world and less inward-looking. A laity-driven Church guided by trained pastors—women and men, married and celibate. A Church consisting of loving communities bound by Eucharistic celebration, meaningful liturgies, and a dedication to Christ’s message of love and promise of salvation over doctrine and rules. A Church that recognizes and rejoices in the diversity of human life and experience, and incorporates that diversity in its structure and forms of worship. A Church that engages with and learns from other faiths. Finally, a Church of the world that is active for justice in solidarity with those who are poor and disadvantaged, and promotes respect and love for our earthly home.

Introduction

The PAX (“Pilgrims after Christ”) Community is an Intentional Eucharistic Community (IEC) founded in 1969 and centered in Virginia, USA. Established by faith-filled Catholic parishioners in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, and believing in Vatican II’s yet unfulfilled promise of reform, PAX welcomes the synodal process and desires to share insights from our 53-year journey of meaningful Eucharistic celebration, community, and social engagement.

PAX offers this contribution because our community is convinced the Catholic Church has a universal mission to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ in today’s world. However, hobbled by scandal, clericalism, doctrinal rigidity, and a proclivity to look inward, large parts of the Church have lost sight of Christ’s core teachings.

Too often the Church defines itself by righteousness over inclusiveness, hierarchy over participation, moral certainty over discernment, rules over conscience, doctrine over compassion, self-protection over justice, and tradition over more meaningful forms of worship. Parts of the Church have sacrificed moral authority by seeking to make the Good News subservient to tradition and doctrine, as interpreted by a chosen few and not the whole people of God. The Catholic Church has reformed itself over the centuries and must continue to do so through an inclusive, faith-filled, humble, and laity-driven rediscovery of the Good News and Christ’s universal and always-relevant message to the modern world.

Informed by a long journey in community against the backdrop of the post-Vatican II American Church, PAX members have thought intensely and prayerfully about our vision of a renewed Church that more faithfully lives out what the Gospel calls us to be. Our methodology has involved multiple guided listening sessions, during which almost the entire community

participated, including members who identify themselves as Catholic, those who no longer do, and those seeking a Christian community and fellowship. We interviewed the priests and laypersons who routinely celebrate with us. We also interviewed family members and friends who are not part of PAX but were either raised in the Catholic tradition or have had some association with the Catholic faith.

In the following paragraphs, we share our experience of “Church,” what that term has come to mean for us, and the centrality of the Eucharist in our communal life. We share our experience of liturgy as a path to discernment of God’s plan for us through the words of the Old and New Testaments, and especially the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We share our experience with priests and laity collaborating in that discernment through the sharing of charisms in an open and mutually respectful way. We share our experience of realizing Christ’s message in the world of suffering around us by active service to our neighbors both near and far.

Finally, we share our hope-filled vision of what our Church is meant to be. We do so because we know that Church is not rules, scandal, and hierarchy. We—all of us—are Church, and are confident that the Holy Spirit will guide and strengthen us in our journey to transform our vision into reality.

Our Vision of What Church Is Meant to Be

Faithful. We believe in a Church that is **trustworthy and faithful** to Jesus’s message as conveyed in the Gospels; the meaning of His life, death, and resurrection; and God’s plan for salvation. We despair when we learn that Church hierarchy will withhold Communion from those who do not vote with the Church politically. A transformed Church is rooted in the Gospel, not politics. Our transformed Church leadership administers the sacraments as Jesus would, instead of withholding them as punishment. Judgment belongs to God, not the clergy.

Vatican II asked us to recapture the early Church as one that was informal, horizontal, and communal. Our transformed Church de-emphasizes the necessity for an ordained hierarchy. The early Church took distinctly different approaches to Eucharist—the centerpiece of the Roman Catholic liturgy. Some saw Eucharist as communion, a gathering of people sharing bread and wine that was sacramental because of those who came together to celebrate it. Others, called Jewish Christians by some, emphasized the notions of atonement and re-enactment, which could only be done by a high priest—a man. Women could not be high priests or serve in the temple because of the Jewish cultural mores of the time. Vatican II and its outgrowth brought us back to the communal vision of the early Church, but much more change is needed.

The liturgy should be an uplifting experience, much in the way we envision early Christians experiencing Jesus’s teachings and gathering after His death and resurrection. We should not come home from Church angrier than when we left, which is why many of our members left their parishes and came to PAX. The liturgy can leave us filled with the Spirit, nourished by Eucharist, and closer to our God.

Inclusive. We believe that the first and key step on the path to a revitalized Church is inclusion. As Christ embodied inclusiveness, we must follow His example and recognize the

richness and complexity of our one human family. The Church can move its focus from emphasizing hierarchy, the logistics of worship, admonitions, and rules to a focus on a pastoral ministry more like Christ's. A transformed Church is welcoming, listens without judgment, and serves all—the LGBTQ community, all who are vulnerable and on the periphery, the divorced, those of diverse cultures, and the young who have left the Church in droves in recent years. Authentic inclusion also involves not referring to God using only one gender (Father, He, Lord, King[dom]); rather, inclusive language is used (e.g., “Our Father and Mother”). And inclusion ensures that women's stories in Scripture and the history of the Church are highlighted. Let the Church meet all where they are on their journeys, with compassion, and help them go forward. Let the whole Church follow Pope Francis in reaching out to the LGBTQ community and extend that outreach to all who live on the margins.

Outward looking. Our goal is a Church that itself evolves and grows as it transforms and gives life to others. Because we the people are the Church, whatever moves us toward that goal is a necessary part of the journey, including structures that would enable more participation for all. In a renewed Church, respect for many expressions of our faith is evident. IECs and other small Catholic faith communities are part of the universal Church, grounded in the theology evident in the structures of the early Church. The small group structure and networking encourages expression of all members' gifts, enabling energy and growth in spiritual understanding as well as responding to community. Participatory liturgy planning and fresh approaches by nontraditional presiders strengthen our understanding of the Church's mission and prayer.

Reaching out to other faith communities is necessary and fruitful because we all have gifts and insights to share. A network of progressive Catholic communities can be facilitated to encourage sharing of resources. The Church and its people can learn valuable lessons from other people of faith, such as Quakers, Buddhists, Muslims, and Unitarians, and perhaps celebrate with them. In dialogue, all are respected and appreciated.

In addition, we look outward to the whole Earth, striving for conversion to a new way of relating to the Earth and harness the energy of all. Reflecting Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, we celebrate the beauty and creativity of the universe, and share our concern for preserving this planet, as reflected in our weekly celebrations. We seek to be models of good stewardship, understanding that the choices we make impact the world and that the resources the wealthy consume are taken from those who have much less. We urge our members to make better choices, supporting groups like Fair Trade, union organizers, and others concerned for the just welfare of all who provide us with sustenance; we seek to be guided by the words of Pope Francis in his Encyclical. We join with those everywhere who are working to pass on to the children of our world a life-giving environment, helping us to “Be co-creators with God of all Creation.”¹ We enhance our knowledge of what is happening to the Earth by using new communication tools, seeking to grow in our understanding of how to build the Reign of God. We seek to evaluate, from an ethical perspective, new technologies that will affect human development and our interactions with nature.

¹ Pope John Paul II.

Listening. We support what Pope Francis has done and continues to do to bring women into leadership roles in the Church so that all might listen to and benefit from the perspectives they bring. As a matter of social justice, we strongly support the ordination of women and their appointment to senior clerical positions. It is not a stretch of the imagination to think that had women been part of the hierarchy, the sexual abuses and cover-ups within the Church would not have happened or continue as long as they have. Women’s ordination would convey the message that the Church wants a more humane, pastoral priesthood. We also support both allowing priests to marry and accepting as candidates into the priesthood those who are already married. Married priests have much to offer the Church as those who can listen with particular compassion and empathy, given their own struggles and experiences with the same problems with which the majority of the Church’s flock are confronted.

Evolving. The transformed Church continually evolves over time. We believe a transformed church is open to cultural differences. Such a Church considers the beliefs and ways of worship worldwide, leading to new and richer forms of worship. It focuses on Christ’s teachings instead of rigid pronouncements and standards of worship. It establishes a permanent proposal process for listening and responding, not only to the concerns of its members, but also to people around the world.

We long to see our Church give community members a significant voice in choosing their leaders, such as their pastors, bishops, or cardinals. We long for a Church with a belief that outreach and acceptance of all people, no matter their status, is a value much greater than strict rules and authority. This Church would make a special effort to reach younger generations by stressing that communities in the network have the opportunity to communicate freely and create liturgies they find personal and rewarding.

This Church is one that accepts, values, and supports IECs. Richard Rohr writes,

We must rediscover what St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) called the “marrow of the Gospel.” [1] It’s time to rebuild *from the bottom up*. If the foundation is not solid and sure, everything we try to build on top of it is weak and ineffective. Perhaps it’s a blessing in disguise that so much is tumbling down around us. It’s time to begin again. In the year 1205, Jesus spoke to Francis through the San Damiano cross: “Francis, rebuild my Church, for you see it is falling into ruin.”²

Our Vision of What Church Is Meant to Do

A transformed Church is visibly and passionately *active* for justice and peace.

Matthew 7.16: By their deeds you will know them.

² Center for Action and Contemplation. Richard Rohr. “Struggling with Christianity: Rebuilding from the Bottom Up.” May 22, 2022. Available at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/redeeming-our-religion-2022-05-22/>.

We note the Pope’s vision for the transformed Church is to be active in the real world: The Church should act as “a field hospital”—a place where “shepherds [are] living with the smell of their sheep.”³

The activism of the transformed Church is **informed and inspired by the social gospel**. It is actively and joyfully inspired by Jesus’s lived example and teachings, as codified in Catholic social teaching. The Church is guided by the desire to devolve power to the most basic level, actively dismantling patriarchal hierarchy; the transformed Church operates with humility, in a consultative and collaborative manner, conscious of the harm and violence done by abuses of privilege and power.

The transformed church **advocates and agitates** for justice and peace. It identifies and attests to needs in the world. The Church stands in the gap—individually and as community—when it comes to witnessing injustice. It is active in aligning with other justice seekers, including people of diverse faiths or none, to bring about the Reign of God on earth.

The transformed Church visibly and specifically **engages** in nonviolent, prophetic, compassionate ways of moving toward justice and peace, and positively engages in conflict resolution. The Church manifests God’s love through its committed and sustained action for justice. It exemplifies the preferential option for the poor. The Church models many positive social stances: the power of dialogue and the way of love in addressing the current state of polarization and division in public life; economic justice and sustainable environmental principles in its own use of resources; racial justice through deep self-reflection, critical social analysis, solidarity, and inclusion; gender justice through its inclusive credo and practices; and peacemaking. We believe in a Church that practices forgiveness and reconciliation while acknowledging and addressing its own failings. This Church is a “go-to” place of engagement of young people for meaningful action toward justice and social transformation.

The transformed Church **acts** for justice and peace. It visibly places its activism for justice at the center of its community, as reflected in prayer, liturgy, pastoral care, teaching, giving, and dealings with others. This Church engages in respectful expectation and specific opportunities for every member to be personally engaged in the community’s work for justice according to their capacities. It forms a robust community, supporting individual activism through teaching, dialogue, learning, encouraging, sharing roles and resources according to personal capacities, and holding each other to account in loving and supportive ways. The Church actively accompanies the vulnerable, marginalized, stigmatized, and those in greatest need through sustained personal relationships.

The transformed church is a **poor** church. It is guided by economic justice and the preferential option for those who are poor. Its stewardship is grounded in environmental sustainability and social responsibility, setting an example for all. It retains for its own needs a minimum budget, actively liquidating and dispersing property and other assets for the benefit of the poor. The

³ *The Catholic Telegraph*. “Pope Francis: Priests Should Be Shepherds Living with the Smell of the Sheep’.” March 28, 2013. Available at <https://www.thecatholictelegraph.com/pope-francis-priests-should-be-shepherds-living-with-the-smell-of-the-sheep/13439>.

transformed church models the change it wishes to see by directing its own assets toward not-for-profit, humane, person-centered services, and housing for the poor.

The transformed church is inspired by examples of Church communities steeped in activism; one model is the [Sant'Egidio Community](#), a lay Catholic Association dedicated to social service, founded in 1968 by Andrea Riccardi. It is a network of small communities currently present in 73 countries, committed to social service through personal relationships and “friendship with the poor,” and prioritizing service to those who are homeless, refugees, and disabled, as well as peacemaking and reconciliation.

The role of clergy and leadership

We believe in a diverse and inclusive clergy, reflecting God’s people (men and women, LGBTQ, married or not). The shortage of priests can easily be resolved; there are many able and eager to serve who are held back by outdated, hierarchical rules. The Church could benefit from a close examination of its celibacy requirements, which force priests to be isolated from the people they serve and hinder their ability to help married people and families.

The transformed Church is **of** the people, not **above** the people. We acknowledge the stark difference between the institutional Church (the hierarchy) and the Church encompassing the flock—those who feel called to serve others.

The transformed Church **protects its members from sexual abuse and cover-ups**. Sexual abuse and all other forms of abuse affect everyone—women, men, and children, both within and outside of the Church. We know of too many people who no longer consider themselves Catholic because of it. The size and impact of the scandal in the Catholic Church, and attempts to cover it up, have been astounding. The Church also recognizes other forms of abuse, such as those experienced by Native Americans in residential Catholic schools or women religious abused by priests. A fully transparent Church encompasses full disclosure of abuses, and recognition, compensation, and support for survivors. Without major, immediate changes to the process for reporting abuse, the Church will continue to be disgraced.

This Church establishes and enforces a code of ethics to protect its members—a code clearly stating that people who work for the Church cannot prey on children, men, and women. During pastoral counseling, Church representatives recognize their limitations and do not practice in areas outside of their expertise. For example, Church individuals providing counseling seek guidance and refer parishioners to professional counselors for matters such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and for help with other issues outside of their expertise.

Such a Church has an established process in place to recognize and address suspicions of inappropriate behavior; report such behaviors to appropriate Church and civil authorities, as well as law enforcement; and protect victims. Church employees, including clergy, are designated as “mandated reporters” and thus are required to report suspicions of sexual abuse to the appropriate secular authorities. This process prevents these reports from being ignored or perpetrators simply being transferred. The widespread negative effect of the abuse scandal remains with us. Conversations among perpetrators and victims of the Church’s sexual abuse

scandal, although difficult, require great humility. Church leaders must continue to listen to and seek guidance from survivors of this abuse. The renewed Church does everything possible to reduce the likelihood that sexual abusers will be ordained, including better screening and vetting of seminarians, improved training, and education.

Our clergy have a **pastoral** vocation: priests trained as shepherds and teachers, servants instead of directive leaders. The transformed Church has leaders who are open and accepting, reaching beyond hierarchy and rules—humble servants who focus on listening rather than proclaiming. This Church has more pastors than bureaucrats, more ministers than gatekeepers. Clergy are open to learning from the congregation and providing support.

The ways the Church prepares and educates its clergy can be improved. The renewed Church trains seminarians to be ministers, not CEOs, and offers training in pastoral counseling. It gives them the ability to be effective counselors, consolers, and spiritual guides. The Church directs priests to work in parish settings and assesses them for their pastoral abilities. It stops providing staff to take care of them, helping them become true members of the flock without a sense of entitlement. The Church helps them recognize pastoral problems requiring outside professional help. The Church provides more cross-cultural training and socialization so priests can minister effectively to highly diverse communities—those rich in a mix of ethnicities, races, socio-political groupings, and genders.

The Eucharist becomes less a privilege of a priestly rite and instead constitutes an expression of all believers as the Body of Christ. Priests act as consultants to facilitate leadership of members of the community. We believe the ordination of people from the LGBTQ community and other marginalized communities should be assumed as necessary and right. Shared leadership allows all to be valued and heard. In the transformed Church, inclusion and outreach are valued over rules and authority, inspiring us to care more deeply about community and all of God’s creation.

We believe in **lay leadership** in all areas, including, but not limited to, management, formation, counseling, liturgy, and preaching. Ideal leaders appreciate Church members’ abilities and limitations, education, and opinions. The Church has an opportunity to rely on lay leadership for seminarian training, operations, and management, allowing priests more time and energy to address pastoral issues. One way for the institutional Church to stay viable, especially considering the declining number of priests, is to include, recognize, and encourage groups like ours—lay-led, justice-focused IECs. Many of us would not be practicing Catholics if we did not have this community, but we realize that not all Catholics seek this type of worship. Although it may be impractical to extend this concept to significantly larger communities, increased lay involvement, when encouraged, can flourish in communities of any size.

Conclusion: A Call for a Church Radically Renewed

Abuse scandals, declining vocations, vanishing congregations, and “culture war” dynamics have eroded the influence and credibility of the Roman Catholic Church in a contemporary world faced with existential challenges. The Synod on Synodality offers the Church an invaluable

opportunity for institutional and moral reform by listening to the views of the faithful and those who wish to be faithful from across the Roman Catholic world.

In the preceding paragraphs, the PAX Community has offered our hopes and vision for a radically reformed Church from the perspective of an American Intentional Eucharistic Community.

Ours is a vision of a communal, Eucharist-based, liturgically inspired, and socially engaged Church that is evolving, self-critical, lay-empowering, and above all, inclusive and all-embracing.

It is a vision of a dynamic community of worship engaged in questioning and peacemaking that stands with and advocates for the oppressed, marginalized, and impoverished across cultures and around the globe. It is a hope-filled vision firmly rooted in the Gospel, steeped in Christ's love and compassion, in active conversation with a world beset by war, inequality, pestilence, and environmental catastrophes, combined with technologies that could save us, overwhelm us, or both.

Our vision is of a Church where humility and compassion replace rigidity and punishment, and where doctrine serves ongoing reform. This vision includes priests representing the diversity of the people of God—including clergy who are women, married, and from many different backgrounds. They are pastoral and servant leaders.

Our envisioned Church values and empowers laity, stands with rather than above, welcomes different forms of worship and community, and recognizes diversity as a gift from God.

Our strong belief is that this is the Church of the future.