



DIOCESE OF COLORADO SPRINGS

228 N. CASCADE AVE, COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80903

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Diocese of Colorado Springs

Synodal Process Report

June 2022

The Diocese of Colorado Springs began the Synodal process by establishing a steering committee of five persons. This committee met at regular intervals and recommended that listening sessions be scheduled at selected parishes throughout the Diocese. Six listening sessions took place, including one in Spanish. The Ordinary Bishop of the Diocese was present at each of these sessions. He began and ended the sessions with prayer and a word of support. The recommended format was used and proved to be fruitful. Most of the committee members were able to attend nearly all of the sessions. They also created a survey for the Diocese that was sent out to each parish in both an online and printed format. These resources were to be made available to the parishioners along with advertising the listening sessions' dates and locations.

The listening sessions were held at a parish in each deanery throughout the Diocese on a weeknight from 6:30 – 8:30 p.m., except for the Spanish-language session, which was held on a Sunday afternoon. The listening sessions were advertised online, in the diocesan newspaper, and at each parish. The composite number of persons who spoke for all listening sessions was 464. The Eastern Deanery had 64 speakers. The lowest was in the Western Deanery with 60. The North Metro Deanery had 100 speakers and the South Metro had 125. The Northern Deanery had 115 and the Hispanic Community Session at 38. Roughly two-thirds of those who spoke were women and the remaining third were men. We estimate that 1,000 people attended the sessions.

The sessions covered four main topical areas that included a series of questions. Each of these was given about 10 minutes each to cover as much as possible while allowing for flexibility in areas in greater need of attention. Response time from the attendees when the committee would listen totaled almost eight hours.



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There were over 3,000 responses to the online and paper surveys, made available in both English and Spanish. Similar to the listening sessions, roughly two thirds were women and one third men. More than 43% of the respondents were over the age of 65, overrepresenting the estimated 20% of Catholics in that age group. Only 7.3% of survey respondents were under the age of 34. This is a significant underrepresentation of that age group. Similarly, 86.6% of respondents were white and roughly 8% Hispanic. In the Diocese of Colorado Springs, Hispanics comprise 40% of the population. 90% of survey respondents attend Mass weekly.

The survey and listening sessions yielded very interesting results. There are some common issues that emerge when considering the data as a whole which will be addressed in greater depth in the conclusion of this report. Before engaging the major topics that characterized the responses, however, it should be noted that there was significant divergence in areas that are foundational to Catholic teaching. Especially in areas of sexual morality, issues of life, the nature and discipline of the sacraments, and ecclesiology. While variance in a number of peripheral areas is always to be expected, such a stark disagreement in such essential areas is noteworthy. This Synodal process is intended to be an instrument for dialogue achieving greater unity. It seems foremost to have exposed significant areas of disunity in principles essential to the Catholic faith. Rather than downplay them they should receive special attention and evaluation.

Another significant issue to address at the outset is that of credibility. The very nature of the Synodal process was questioned by respondents and those who chose not to participate due to suspicion of the process. Many were appreciative of the opportunity to be heard. For others there was a lingering doubt as to how the input would be used. Some expressed a concern that the input would be ignored or misrepresented. A number expressed a suspicion that the entire process is effectively a cover for a pre-determined conclusions touching on the life and teachings of the Church. While there was a broad representation of feedback on the various issues, most people engaged with good will, hoping that their input can help the Church that they love. Despite this, there remains a significant lack of trust in Church leadership in this area.

The contrasting responses to certain essential theological and/or moral issues suggests that, while the vast majority of respondents have a genuine love for the Church, there is disparity on what



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the Church is and what its purpose is. Frequent references to “Vatican II” and the unmet expectations of a post-Vatican II Church led some respondents to express disappointment. This could perhaps this could be due to a mistaken notion of the intentions of the Council or how it was represented to them by trusted authorities. Some responses suggest a negative experience of the “Pre-Vatican II” Church and to some, current trends feel like the Church must be regressing. There could be any number of alternative explanations. Many responses suggest that one’s view of the Second Vatican Council impacts how they would answer a particular question.

Terms like the “Church” and “discernment” can also be ambiguous and misunderstood or even misused. To some, the Church is the Universal Sacrament of Salvation, or the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ; to others the Church is the clergy and to others the Church is the lay faithful.

The responses also revealed ambiguity in a number of places about whether someone thinks the teaching or practice of the Church should change or if it just needs to be explained with greater clarity and Christian charity. Certain responses indicated that they feel the Church should change its fundamental moral or sacramental teaching. Others indicate that because there has been poor catechesis about a given topic, the teaching does not need to change but the pastoral approach must. This is where a more precise use of “discernment” would be helpful. It can be used as a word to justify strongly held opinions that may or may not be founded on the actual work of the Holy Spirit. This is reflected in strong disagreements with established teachings of the Church. Simply because someone discerns there should be a change does not provide a clear reason why it should be so.

When it comes to matters of foundational Church teaching, there seems to be a misunderstanding of the essential principles that are expressed in correlating secondary teachings. While some seek change of a particular teaching or practice of the Church, there seems to be less understanding on where that teaching comes from and the underlying principles that necessarily imply this particular teaching. The particular application of a moral or sacramental teaching is an expression of a deeper and more essential truth. By changing that particular expression, it would undermine that deeper more essential truth. Evident in the variety of responses about culturally



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sensitive topics, such as women's ordination, LGBT issues, abortion and contraception, sacramental discipline, etc., a more intelligent and effective catechesis is necessary to better equip Catholics to understand the reasons behind the teachings of the Church. It also demands a greater pastoral sensitivity and creativity in engaging those on the fringes of the Church and beyond.

In this way, the Holy Spirit seems to be moving not in such a way as to contradict his previous actions in the history of the Church, but rather to uncover new ways that these things may be effectively presented to the people of today. There is a concern that Pope Francis and other pastors are ready to contradict the established teaching of the Church under the guise of a new "movement" of the Holy Spirit. But because the Holy Spirit is the guarantor of the Church's unity, both contemporarily and historically, the Holy Spirit does not undo or contradict what has been passed on to us. While development of doctrine is a regular part of the life of the Church, there are discernible troubles in contemporary theology. The ambiguity and confusion resulting from recent magisterium statements has created room for this suspicion as well as allowed certain misperceptions of the life and teaching of the Church to continue. This has caused pain on both sides of a given issue and increased a sense of distrust and frustration.

One primary challenge is how to engage, listen, and walk together to deeper faithfulness to Christ and his Church. As we are called to an authentic unity in our doctrine, sacraments, moral lives, and Christian charity, there is a need to recover the breath of the Holy Spirit present in this direction. Rather than label movements away from unity as the promptings of the Holy Spirit, it is upon the leadership of the Church to work through these ambiguities, clarify the essential teachings of the Church, and to discover more effective ways to invite people into the path of discipleship.

Discernment itself is not merely strong conviction but should include the measure of how a particular subject is bearing fruit. A bad tree cannot bear good fruit and a good tree cannot bear bad fruit. What movements and initiatives are bearing fruit? What fruit are they bearing? Is there an honest appraisal of the elements of the life of the Church that are yielding fruit, even if they are not one's preferred way of doing things? Are certain ways of presenting the Gospel yielding



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new life or are they sterile? What parts of the global Church are growing, and which are shrinking? When various movements and ecclesiastical features seem to be bearing great fruit, they can be quickly dismissed if they do not fit one's preconceived notions or preferences.

Politics/Abortion/Catholic Social Teaching

Many listening session and survey participants indicated a need for a more civil conversation about Church issues and cultural issues. In the view of many, this conversation is what the Church should be. One listening session participant shared "We live in a divisive culture and time, people don't know how to talk and listen to each other, don't we bear some responsibility for this? We need to find a way to live together harmoniously". A survey participant shared this similar sentiment "Frequent diocesan events that provide catechesis and a platform for discussion on difficult topics would be helpful, including, but not limited to abortion, end of life care, medical ethics, LGBT issues, divorced and remarried, politicians, learning to live the faith in the current world, workplace ethics, making good faith based decisions, listening to the self-marginalized, and I'm sure many others ..."

There were significant responses on both political sides of how the Church should relate to politically affiliated issues. Some, unsurprisingly, said the Church was too Republican while others said the Church was too Democrat or "woke" and "politically correct." While some participants expressed support for the Church's focus on abortion, others rejected the Church's stance on abortion. Of those survey respondents no longer practicing their faith when asked why they left the Church, 44% (the largest percent) chose "I disagree with the Church's teaching on abortion and/or contraception". This needs further study and the two topics should have been separate for more accurate information. Some may agree with one issue and disagree with the other. A large number of respondents voiced a desire for a more "bold" and clear action on the part of the Church's leadership in speaking out against abortion as well as Catholic politicians who contradict the Church in this area. Others indicated that they felt the bishops already did this too much.

A third group shared a desire for a clearer "seamless garment" approach to social issues. This group expressed frustration that the range of important Catholic Social Teaching issues were deemphasized when compared to abortion as a preeminent issue. For example, these respondents



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felt issues like the option for the poor, “putting the needs of vulnerable, marginalized first,” gun control, opposing war, promoting anti-racism, condemning police violence against people of color, supporting immigrants, and care for God’s creation (earth) were all but ignored by clergy in the Diocese. According to one respondent, “There is a lack of teaching and taking a stand on Catholic Social teaching.” Another shared, “I would like to see the church be active in the fight against poverty, hunger, racism, homophobia, misogyny, the death penalty, gun violence and hatred!”

Many comments asked for clear and consistent leadership from the Church in cultural, economic, and political issues. Both survey and listening session participants expressed a desire for more civil dialogue on these issues.

“...I see the horrific lack of community so necessary for our young people. The pandemic, social media, and return to tribalism in our political realm has left us bereft of communal love and responsibility. The diocese needs to increase dialogue of all participants without anger, shame or malice.”

Others indicated that they wanted more clear leadership from the bishops of the Church in this area, expressing dismay that Catholics in the public square who continue to reject key elements of the Church’s teaching go uncorrected. They say this leads to scandal and confusion. They want greater accountability.

Transparency and accountability

A key theme for many in both the survey and listening sessions was a need for more transparency and accountability in the Church. Of those commenting on this theme, the vast majority referenced the clergy sexual child abuse scandal (and the Church leadership’s response to it) as a major ongoing challenge. While some see a great improvement in this area through transparency and action, the massively negative impact of the scandals on the life of the Church is undeniable. Of those survey respondents who had left the Church, 42% chose, “I left because of the clergy abuse scandal in the Church.” (This was the second most frequent answer, after “I disagree with the Church’s teaching on abortion and/or contraception.”) Of all non-practicing survey respondents answering the question “What perceptions about the Catholic faith present barriers to you journeying with the Church,” the largest proportion (71%) chose, “the Church hides or protects abusive clergy from criminal action.” As one survey participant stated, “The Church needs to get a handle on sex abuse by clergy in a transparent manner. This, possibly



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more than any other issue, undercuts the Church's moral authority.”

For many survey respondents it was viewed as a key barrier to participation/full participation in the Church for themselves or family members, including ongoing concerns as to the safety of their children.

One respondent shared, “Where do I begin? I LOVE the Catholic Faith, but still struggle to get through the sexual child abuse scandals and more importantly, the coverups. That continued even after we thought they wouldn't. [I'm] angry to find out just a few years ago the priest that baptized me was a part of it. This also ties in with not allowing priests to be married and women aren't smart enough/faithful enough/ good enough to be priests.”

A significant subset of those calling for more transparency/accountability also referenced financial transparency and accountability (not specifically related to clergy child abuse scandal.) One listening session participant shared “[I] don't trust the Roman Catholic Church, lack of accountability.” This was also noted in areas surrounding the financial abuse scandals under investigation in the Vatican, the use of Peter's Pence funds, etc.

COVID

There were a range of comments on the Church's response to the COVID pandemic. Some comments express frustration that the churches ever closed (moving Mass online), required masks, encouraging vaccination, instituting social distancing, stopping distribution of the blood of Christ. Others, including a large portion of the oldest two age groups, cited fear of COVID as a major barrier to attending weekly Mass. Of those who identify as practicing Catholics but attend Mass less than weekly, 34% cited fear of COVID as a barrier. Some comments also expressed frustration for what they saw as clergy in the Diocese spreading misinformation about COVID (e.g., message COVID not dangerous, masks not needed, vaccines ineffective, etc.) Several expressed concerns about how this will impact the nature of parish life in the future.

Women's Leadership Roles

Comments on women's leadership roles were divided. On one side, a number of respondents made it clear that they do not want to see women in leadership roles, including as priests, deacons, and, even for a few, not as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion nor altar servers. On the other hand, a larger number of respondents advocated for more leadership roles for women. Of these, around half of the comments specifically advocated for the ordination of



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women. The other half expressed an acceptance of the non-ordination of women, but felt strongly that women needed other leadership roles in the Church (e.g. as deacons and other lay leadership roles). One survey participant wanted to see “Women in actual, real positions of leadership at every level of church hierarchy.” Both responses indicate the need for a deepened understanding of sacramental theology, greater and sustained support for women, a deeper elaboration on human nature and the particular dignity of women, and what active liturgical involvement means.

LGBT inclusion/exclusion

Comments on LGBT inclusion/exclusion were also very divided. There is an implied equivocation of terms when it comes to “acceptance” and “inclusion.” In this area, some mean “acceptance” as approving a homosexual behavior. Others mean it as a way of welcoming and including people with same-sex attractions in the path of discipleship while encouraging chaste behaviors. The ambiguity in what is meant by “inclusion” and “exclusion” is problematic. There are also several distinct situations included within the “LGBTQIA+” acronym each requiring a different pastoral approach. This growing or open-ended acronym is increasingly difficult to adequately address with the required nuance. The overall situation of sexuality and identity needs a more thoughtful, intelligent, and pastorally savvy response from the pastors of the Church.

Some respondents expressed concern about cultural pressure for the Church to accept homosexual behaviors, “Thank you for listening. We need to do more than listen to the voices of dissent. We need to listen to the voices of all the faithful and not cater to a particular demographic that “feels” unwelcome. We are to welcome all in the same manner. ... There is so much confusion in the culture and the Catholic church is part of the confusion when she does not start all discussions with the Truth of Jesus and why it still matters.” Another respondent similarly shared “I’m very concerned with the push to include LGBTQ ideas/wants into our faith.” Other respondents shared the importance of apostolates like Courage or EnCourage (for family members) to help those striving to live chaste and well-integrated lives.

However, a large number of comments from the survey and listening sessions called for a more constructive approach to LGBT issues and persons. One listening session participant shared “to say LGBTQ is ‘intrinsically disordered’ is hurtful.” Another pointed to the inability of LGBT couples to marry in the Church, commenting, “Gay people need to be included, respected, and allowed to form families.” “There needs to be more inclusion, welcoming, and understanding of the LGBTQ community.” Another stated, “I would like to ask the Church to provide methods to welcome divorced and LGBT people back to the church yet still uphold the teachings of the Church.”



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Of all non-practicing survey respondents answering the question “What perceptions about the Catholic faith present barriers to you journeying with the Church?,” a large proportion (43%) chose, “the Church shuns members of the LGBT community.” Considering the number of responses to this effect, although this is not the teaching of the Church (CCC 2358), it seems to be a lived experience that must be addressed. The Church’s pastors are challenged to better address this issue in a way that is pastorally affective and always faithful to the teachings of Christ, especially relating to questions of sexuality and identity. For many of these surrounding issues, some secular sciences can offer helpful guidance.

Racial/Ethnic inclusion and solidarity

The survey was made available in Spanish and one listening session was conducted in Spanish. Unfortunately, as addressed above, the survey significantly underrepresents the Diocese’s Hispanic population. However, there is a clear theme around racial inclusion and solidarity. Within the Spanish listening session, strong emphasis was placed in two areas: (1) on the need to outreach to (Hispanic) youth and actively include them in ministries and youth retreats, and (2) for more Hispanic and/or Spanish speaking clergy, more Masses in Spanish (including daily Mass, bilingual Mass, and a children’s Mass) and more confession times in Spanish. Participants in the listening session also shared the need for outreach and inclusion of immigrants, including the undocumented. Others commented they would like to see increased representation of Hispanics as catechists and on pastoral councils and finance councils. One listening session participant shared, “I am a catechist, and the processes for certifying catechists are only offered in English.... Background checks are an obstacle for many who wish to become catechists. Many do not have documents that enable them to receive a background check.”

Marriage/Divorce/Annulment

A common theme among those experiencing barriers to full participation in Mass relates to the issue of divorce and annulment. Many respondents who referenced this issue expressed frustration that they (or their adult children) were excluded from Church (Eucharist and marriage within the Church). Comments included both the perceived unreasonable length of time and bureaucratic difficulty of the annulment process. One listening session participant shared “In our family we have so many divorces. Many family members have left the Church because of a divorce. Can the Church better help us?” A survey participant similarly shared their desire to receive the Eucharist, [translated from Spanish] “I am not married in the Church, but I am civilly married, and I would like to marry in the Church. We cannot get married because my husband



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was married in the Catholic Church 23 years ago, she was unfaithful to him and stopped loving him and they divorced. Because of the lack of this lady we have to pay and we cannot marry in the Church. The Church should analyze this type of situation more so that we can get closer to God through the Eucharist and not pay for the sins of others. If he had been the infidel, I agree that we are denied the Eucharist. Now he is 54 and I am 49. We want to receive God's blessing. But we cannot commune.”

Of those survey respondents who have left the Church, 12% choose “I could not reconcile my marriage with the Catholic Church.” Of all non-practicing survey respondents answering the question “What perceptions about the Catholic faith present barriers to you journeying with the Church,” 32% chose, “the Church does not welcome divorced members and excludes them from the Sacraments.” Of this group, 35% chose “the Church forces married couples to remain together where abuse is present” and 22% choose “the Church provides little support (spiritual, financial, legal) to a person seeking an annulment of his/her previous marriage(s). There remain many misperceptions about the actual teaching of the Church and how some clergy or leaders in the Church portray them. This requires greater clarification to avoid unnecessary hurt and alienation.

There was a call for better ministry to those in unhappy marriages. There was also a call for less bureaucratic hurdles for participation in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and marriage. One participant in the listening session shared [translated from Spanish] “Half my students could not receive Confirmation because they are not married in the Church, and they cannot marry in the Church because they are not confirmed.” In a listening session, one participant commented, “Have someone understand what a couple goes through trying to conceive, bear, and raise a child, especially with a miscarriage. Could there be a female liaison that could help? Technologically advanced world needs clarity with fertility issues later in life. [We] need help.”

Concern Church is in decline or dying, not welcoming

Many listening sessions and survey respondents expressed strong love and caring for both their parish and the Church. However, many also are concerned that the Church is losing membership. One listening session participant shared “This meeting [listening session] is refreshing, at least here in Colorado Springs I have felt the absence of the spirit of Vatican II, people are leaving [which] shows we are failing them, [I’m] heartbroken at stories of people leaving; why are we



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not welcoming?” Of those survey respondents who have left the Church, 36% chose “I did not feel welcomed in my parish or in the Catholic Church”

Most respondents who expressed concern that the Church is in decline attributed it to “losing its young people.” Many comments called for more concern and outreach to the Millennial generation (and Gen Z). One listening session participant commented: “look at [this] room, the problem is demographic, look at how old this group is, a dearth of young people.” Another parent surveyed observed “The strict rules and lack of joy during sacramental classes make the Catholic Church less appealing and experiential for our youth. We are raising three children in the faith, and they do not look forward to the classes required for the sacrament of Confirmation.” Another said, “We need to show our youth and young adults that this faith is not only rich in doctrine but is also a joy filled community that embraces all of our humanity.”

One area of caution is reserved for the topic of how to better engage the youth. Many in the survey and listening sessions rightly name this as a concern. However, as often happens, older demographics suggest what will attract the youth without any real data or experience on how to do this effectively. It is too easy to set an agenda for engaging the youth based on notions, stereotypes, or what worked in one’s own youth. These efforts tend to produce increasingly fewer fruits. How little attention is paid to what really engages the youth, especially when it defies older generations’ preconceived notions. A number of respondents commented on how young people are attracted to the Traditional Latin Mass. This is too quickly dismissed and not investigated as to why. There are many signs that what attracts the young are some things that older generations have moved past, such as a stable tradition, clear moral teaching, intelligent theology, apologetics, etc. When young people are immersed in today’s culture, the last thing they want is their church to look more like that same culture they want to escape. In this area, respondents frequently mentioned the need for help with mental health issues. These problems require honest appraisal and examination.

The perceived decline was attributed to a number of causes: (in order of frequency in survey) perception of “outdated” rules, LGBT exclusion, or exclusionary with communion, uninspiring Mass. Some respondents have taken issue with the Church’s sacramental discipline regarding Communion as a sacrament reserved to Catholics in a state of grace, seeing this as either inhospitable or weaponizing the Eucharist.



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Other comments focused on the quality of the Mass, some requesting more “joy and celebration,” messages of loving, caring and compassion and better preaching. A number of respondents spoke about how important they find the Traditional Latin Mass and that they feel that “Rome is not listening” and that they feel marginalized or even beat up for their preference for this liturgy. Comments also suggested less judgement, condemnation, depressing or boring homilies. Overall, the responses indicate that there is a great variance in what is otherwise meant to be a source of unity: the liturgy. This suggests that much greater conversation is needed in this area, as well as catechesis and investment made into the Mass.

Conclusion

This Synodal process in the Diocese of Colorado Springs revealed an extensive amount of information about the local Church. Most encouraging is the great enthusiasm and love many expressed for their Church, even if there were difficulties or disappointments. The simple fact that they participated indicates as much. The comments about the joy found in the sacraments, above all the Mass, and the prayer of the Church such as adoration and the rosary helped to show that many Catholics are engaged in their own faith and spiritual lives. Many respondents were converts or reverts, having taken advantage of the numerous excellent resources available to learn about their Catholic faith. A large number of respondents indicated that they are involved in their parish and find it welcoming and alive. Many also expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to engage in this process and be heard.

There were also many indicators of significant challenges that currently face the Church. Although there is a love for the Catholic faith among most of the respondents, there is disagreement on what that faith actually is and what it requires. While charity must preside in all things, there remain real disagreements about certain sacramental practices and moral norms within the Church. And apparently not just among the laity. It would be helpful to have greater clarification in three ways: 1) whether the respondent could articulate the actual teaching of the



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Church on a given issue, 2) whether they disagreed with the actual teaching and think it needs to be changed, or 3) whether they think the teaching should stay the same, but the elaboration/pastoral approach needs to improve. Clarity in areas such as this may help the conversation along towards greater unity. Currently, there seems to be a sense of disunity and even slight distrust among lay Catholics and towards the pastors of the Church.

It is undeniable that the cultural landscape around the Church is shifting ever more rapidly, and the Church is expected to make a thoughtful and bold response. Almost all responses indicated a great concern over the trend of Catholics leaving the Church and young people disaffiliating from religion. Rather than the Church trying to look more like the culture, there is something to be said for building an engaging and uplifting way of life that is accessible to all people and which is distinctly Christian in the fullest and richest expression. This will often challenge many preconceived notions, especially of older Catholics. While it is important to attend Sunday Mass, this no longer suffices to anchor someone in their Christian faith. A holistic Christian way of life, one that includes a meaningful community dimension, is essential. Catholics must live life together much more and guard against retreating into tribalistic camps. Prayer, fellowship, patience, understanding, forgiveness, and the works of mercy characterize such a needed way of life. Evangelization and discipleship formation are essential movements in building this community. Above all, it must be centered on and always seeking Jesus Christ.

A sense of trust must be rebuilt between the laity and clergy, especially the pastors of the Church. The pastors of the Church would do well to provide both doctrinal clarity and paths of pastoral charity as regards controversial themes of our day. The co-responsibility of the clergy and lay faithful for the health and life of the Church demand that we recover a needed level of clarity in essential teachings and first principles so that we can work toward common goals and offer a stronger witness to the Gospel in the world. This must always be done in a spirit of understanding and desire for greater faithfulness to Christ. Such a process of discernment is necessary yet so delicate because of how easily our preferences can influence the process. Hence the need for stable reference points that aid in this process, such as Scripture, Tradition, and the authentic Magisterium of the Church. It also requires a great amount of humility and self-denial so that the truth will always be the goal and not fashions, social pressures, preferences, or opinions. This Synodal process carries great promise, but it also can be misused. The success of future Synodal processes will depend largely on this one.



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The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. – John 17:22-23

Submitted by: Most Rev. James R. Golka

Bishop – Colorado Springs

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