

**University of Notre Dame Synod Report
2022-2023 Synodal Process: Campus Synthesis
January 2023**

Introduction

Context 1: the Universal Synod

The Synod on Synodality, also known as the universal synod, is an expansion of the synodal approach that has been used by groups of bishops to discern and decide about specific issues facing the Church in the past. Synodality is an approach that requires journeying together through gathering, listening, and actively partaking in the Church’s mission of evangelization. As described by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB):

Pope Francis invites the entire Church to reflect on a theme that is decisive for its life and mission: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.” This journey, which follows in the wake of the Church’s “renewal” proposed by the Second Vatican Council, is both a gift and a task: by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission.¹

This synod is centered on three themes: communion, participation, and mission. The theme of communion is rooted in the Trinitarian love and grounded in the tradition of the Church. By living out the ideal of communion, we recognize that each person has a role to play in the process of discerning and living God’s call for his people. The theme of participation reminds us that the whole Church is called together to be active in this process. Each baptized person is qualified and called to participate by virtue of their baptism. The theme of mission emphasizes both the synod’s focus on listening to those who live on the peripheries of the Church and our society within the context of the synod, as well as our missionary call to evangelize in our everyday life.

The synodal process began in 2021 and will conclude in 2023. The process is divided into phases so that all of the faithful are able to participate and have their voices heard. The phase in which the University of Notre Dame’s synod took place, the diocesan phase, was intended as a period of structured listening to the faithful of each diocese. It will be followed by the episcopal phase, the continental phase, and the universal phase, each of which will be a synthesis of the phase that came before it. As these syntheses have begun to be produced at various levels of the Catholic Church, the University of Notre Dame offers this report as a synthesis of the conversations that

¹ <https://www.usccb.org/synod>

took place locally among our own community. In doing so, we hope to contribute the voices and experiences of young people in a university setting to the ongoing synodal process.

Notre Dame’s synodal process can be described, to some extent, as an extension of the diocesan phase, and the following report is contextualized as such. Many of the issues raised by students are broad-reaching, if not universal, and many more are a reflection of the state of young people in the present day. Other issues may be particular to Notre Dame, inviting a more local response and consideration. Regardless, many of the general themes that emerged through the University Synod are reflective of those captured in reports generated in other contexts that attend to the voices and experiences of young people.

Context 2: Disaffiliation

In addition to the Universal Synod, an important lens for this report is the wider phenomenon of disaffiliation in the Catholic Church, particularly among younger generations.

As of 2020, only 47% of adults considered themselves to be members of a faith community (Gallup). These numbers reflect an accelerating trend in religious disaffiliation, especially among younger adults. A 2020 Public Religion Research Institute study reports that 36% of adults ages 18-29 were religiously unaffiliated, which is a marked increase over the past two decades. It is important to note that while decreased religious affiliation is tied to decreased religious belief, belief and affiliation are not synonymous. In increasing numbers, people—especially young people—identify with an individually chosen set of beliefs rather than claiming membership in a religious community. Young people who identify as religious are increasingly likely to do so outside of the context of organized religion, preferring to choose the specifics of their beliefs based on personal experiences and relationships.

In addition, an increasing number of young people identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” which involves both a difference in belief and no affiliation with a formal religious organization. Both lack of belief and lack of affiliation are worth addressing, and the causes of these trends often overlap. In general, young people are less trustful of institutions and other people than older generations—according to Pew Research, in 2019 73% of 18-29 year olds said that “Most of the time, people just look out for themselves.” In addition, values that young people hold strongly are values young people often report as lacking in the institutions that they are refraining from participating in.

For example, one of these areas that receive particular attention among young people is around issues related to the LGBT community.² According to a 2021 Gallup poll, 20.8 percent of Gen Z (born 1997-2003) identify as LGBT. 48% of Gen Z see same-sex marriage as a good thing for society, with another 36% reporting same-sex marriage as neutral to society as a whole. In a recent report by the Springtide Institute, 72% of young people (ages 13-25) surveyed in 2021 reported that inclusivity, defined as creating spaces “where everyone is safe, welcome, and has equal access to resources,” is important to them. The combination of distrust of other people and this shift in which values are an essential part of young people’s involvement in organizations

² LGBT is used as an acronym here to accurately reflect the survey questions that young adults responded to. Throughout the rest of the report, the acronym “LGBTQ” is used.

means that young people are less likely to trust institutions, with 52% of young people ages 13-25 saying they have “little to no trust in organized religion.” This number is obviously greater than the number of young adults who are religiously unaffiliated, and the fact that the “distrust” number is higher implies that the trend in disaffiliation will only continue its trajectory.³

Relatedly, even young people who are members of their faith communities often report that they do not feel that those communities are places they can turn to in a time of crisis or struggle. Only 16% of young people see their faith as a place they can turn to in a time of uncertainty, a number that is distinctly lower than the number of young people who are affiliated with a faith community. Young people today feel increasingly isolated and even abandoned, with one in three young people reporting that they feel “completely alone much of the time.” A religious organization which attempts to serve young people by connecting them both with God and a larger faith community must first realize that they are unlikely to gain the trust of young people without confronting the fact that young people today are further from seeing any benefit from participating in organized religion than any group before them.

These are important contexts for interpreting the report that follows. They shed light on feelings of abandonment and isolation expressed by Notre Dame students, which have only been exacerbated by the physical and social realities of the pandemic. They also speak to concerns around the relationship between the LGBTQ community and the Catholic Church, which consistently emerged as a point of focus, concern, and differentiation for those who participated in the synodal process.

Therefore, this broader context of religious disaffiliation among younger generations is of particular significance for a university committed to forming the minds and hearts of students in light of the Catholic tradition, and which hopes for the ongoing, lifelong participation of its graduates in the life of the Catholic Church.

³ In the information cited above two groups, “young adults” and “young people” are used to describe demographics trends. The ages of these groups overlap but are not identical—young adults are ages 18-29, while young people are ages 13-25.

Process Overview

Inspired by the Holy Father's call for a synodal church and out of pastoral care/concern for the spiritual lives of students, the University of Notre Dame embarked on its own synodal process led by the Office of Campus Ministry. In the spring of 2022, a personalized email was sent to **2,159** students inviting them to participate in the University's synod. This invitation can be accessed through this [link](#).

In addition to a personalized letter, the synod was advertised in newsletters produced by the Division of Student Affairs and the Office of Campus Ministry. A general invitation was also extended from the Vice President for Student Affairs.

Of these, **492** of students indicated interest and registered to participate in these conversations, and approximately **280** ultimately participated in listening sessions.

The sessions were facilitated by forty faculty and staff from across the University. Facilitators participated in an orientation led by the Office of Campus Ministry, which addressed the purpose and goals of the University's synod; provided instructions on session logistics; and trained facilitators on how to facilitate sessions. Each facilitator offered three listening sessions of no more than twelve student participants each and not exceeding 75 minutes in duration. Each session followed the same format and same questions, with the facilitator keeping time and notes and facilitating the conversation.

Students were asked to respond to the following prompts:

- 1. How do you tend to your spiritual needs?**
- 2. Where do you find community?**
- 3. What do you want the Church to know about you?**
- 4. What do you want Notre Dame to know about you?**

Once each facilitator completed their three sessions, they were asked to submit summaries of the conversations that took place. These were then reviewed by a team of readers, who distilled these notes into the most prevalent themes heard from students. The term "prevalence" is taken to refer to any theme which emerged often and across multiple groups, *or* which may not have been common but was communicated with particular force or emphasis. The prevalent themes were then shared with synod facilitators, who convened in the spring of 2022 to review the themes and assist with their finalization.

Prevalent Themes

The following section summarizes the prevalent themes that have emerged from the University synod. For the sake of organization and clarity, they have been organized under three primary headings:

1. How participating students spoke about their **relation to themselves or to others in their “group”** (similar values, priorities, spiritual leanings, etc.)
2. How participating students spoke about their **relation to institutions** (whether the institutional Catholic Church or the University of Notre Dame)
3. How participating students spoke about their **relation to “others”** (especially those who they perceive to be on the margins of the Church or other majority groups)

The brief descriptions provided below attempt to offer a high-level synthesis of the most prevalent themes which students articulated in response to the four questions to which they were asked to respond. They are intended to present, objectively, what facilitators heard from student voices, and care has been taken to avoid as little editorial as possible.

How students relate to self

1. Reflection

When discussing their spiritual needs, students often noted the role and importance of **places or spaces** (such as the outdoors in general, the Grotto, the Basilica, and hall chapels); **rituals** (from listening to a meditation app to participating in adoration or Mass); and **materials** (such as Scripture, other spiritual reading, and even some theology classes). Students described what “reflection” meant to them, with examples ranging from taking a walk, to visiting the Grotto, to “having a conversation with God” or receiving spiritual direction.

2. Community

Students indicated a strong desire for community and personal connection. Many students seem to find this sense of community in one way or another at Notre Dame, including in residence halls, clubs or organizations, friend groups or social settings, and classes. Although it is common given the University’s strong emphasis on its residential model of formation and community, it is evident that not all students find their primary community in their residence halls. Additionally, students did not seem to make explicit connections between their faith lives or practices and their experience of community. Lastly, even though there is a strong “Notre Dame community” feeling that seems to be prevalent, students acknowledge that there is a sense of loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, and fear of vulnerability that exists among our student body that is not always obvious.

How students relate to institutions (ND and the Church)

3. Catholic identity/formation

Students expressed concern regarding their perception that one must choose between either justice and service on the one hand, or Catholic spirituality on the other. Students often described this sense of disparity between social teaching and spirituality as polarizing, and that there seemed to be (especially on campus) a lack of integration between initiatives or programs devoted explicitly to faith formation and spirituality, on the one hand, and those whose primary concern or focus is issues of social justice and direct service, on the other. Many students expressed a desire to witness the blending and integration of faith, Catholic identity, and justice throughout campus life, both in academic settings and through more opportunities for direct service.

4. Service and the integration of Catholic Social Teaching

While related to the above theme and mentioned above, students' concern for issues of social justice and Catholic social teaching emerged as a strong thread and warranting distinct comment. Many students expressed a desire to participate in direct service to the community, which seemed connected both to positive experiences they may have had in high school (and desired to continue), and an assumption that service is an inherent part of a faith-filled life. As students spoke of their interests in direct service opportunities, common threads seemed to be tied to themes such as: Catholic Social Teaching, their individual faith, Church teachings, their academic identities as students, and a need to create community and unity rather than separation and polarization.

5. Search for consistency between the Catholic Church and the University

Many students expressed concern and frustration with Catholic leaders, both within the University and in the Catholic Church more broadly. Students on different sides of a political spectrum spoke of their desire for leadership to avoid "safe" language, and to take more obvious stances on key issues. Students also described tensions between their own personal beliefs and University positions, policies, or practices, especially with regard to issues where the University has made clear its opinion and preference.

Relatedly, some students struggled to differentiate between the University and the Catholic Church writ large (i.e. students would often equate University leadership with the institutional Catholic Church), while others expressed a desire for the University to publicly object to certain aspects of Catholic teaching. One common thread that emerged was a strong desire for more transparency and accountability on the part of leadership, both at the University and in the Church more broadly.

How students relate to “others”

6. Marginalization

Students from varying backgrounds expressed a feeling that they are not being ministered to and/or feel like there is not a place for them in the Church or at Notre Dame. Because of a particular identity they may hold, they feel left out or not welcome. Some of the strongest voices on this theme included members of the LGBTQ community, women who feel their voices are not heard, and those who identify as religiously conservative as well as those who identify as disaffiliated from any formal Church. Please note that LGBTQ is offered as a separate category in this report due to the frequency with which this group was mentioned.

Another common thread was the experience of women in the Church and at Notre Dame, and the issue of marginalization tended to revolve around when, where, and how the campus community hears the voices of women expressed in settings as leaders of the faith. When it comes to the varying level of religious practices of students, those from more traditional backgrounds acknowledge that Notre Dame offers a variety of faith experiences, however, there is a desire for even more opportunities to engage in traditional expressions of faith, including perpetual adoration, processions on specific feast days, and campus speakers. On the other hand, those who are not catechized or do not come from a devotional practice background, or do not trust the Church since the clergy sex abuse scandal, spoke to feeling unsure of where they fit into Catholic life at Notre Dame and expressed feelings of being judged if they are not expressing their faith as devoutly as those who are more traditional.

7. The LGBTQ Community

At least in the context of the synodal process, the experience of the LGBTQ community at Notre Dame seems to be varied. A number of students expressed a sense of welcome and support for its members. However, when it comes to the Catholic identity and faith practices, LGBTQ members and allies struggle with Church teaching and many do not participate in the “regular” faith life of Notre Dame as a result. Members desire to remain in the Church but note some specific challenges in doing so, namely: the term “objectively disordered” as a reference to those within the community, the Church’s stance on marriage, and the perceived lack of public support from the University when articles are written or statements are made that call into question the validity of their role as valued community members.

8. Diversity

Diversity—in multiple senses of the word—emerged as a prevalent theme among students. For example, each year the incoming class of students at Notre Dame is increasingly diverse, and many students (especially those from diverse backgrounds) expressed a desire for more “ways” to express their faith that are more culturally responsive to the worlds that they grew up in.

Students from other (or no) faith backgrounds and those who identified with (or knew people from) marginalized groups expressed lower comfort levels with the evident Catholic character of the University, which they sometimes find difficult to access and engage. Catholic students evoked a range of sensitivities toward others who feel less welcome than themselves, along a spectrum from deep concern all the way to a lack of sensitivity or awareness. Time for solitude

as well as a desire for open and nonjudgmental communities with which to pray and to speak honestly about important topics also both came up repeatedly. Students also spoke of diversity and representation in University and ecclesial leadership, and a desire to continue to see increased representation among those in leadership positions.

9. Polarization

Finally, students expressed concern with their experiences of polarization, whether in the world, the nation, the Church, or on campus. Students expressed that increased polarization, including polarization around religious values, expression, and understanding, makes it difficult for them to have important but sensitive conversations on campus. This sense of polarization also limited students' feelings of freedom to explore their faith more deeply. Students "in the middle" feel that there is no space for them to discuss their ideas, navigate and question either Church teachings or cultural assumptions, and that they do not feel welcomed unless they express certainty in belief (and that this certainty and conviction aligned with a particular group). In addition, many facilitators noted that students in their groups were often polarized over topics that came up during the listening sessions, especially what it means to be "Catholic" and for Notre Dame to be a "Catholic University", LGBTQ conversations, the relationship between faith and justice, and other topics that are described elsewhere in this report.

Conclusion

The preceding paragraphs have sought to capture and articulate, in as authentic and objective a manner as possible, the most prevalent themes that Notre Dame students spoke to as they participated in the University Synod. They are not exhaustive, and nor do they intend to provide additional commentary or prescriptive action. It is our hope that this concise synthesis of what was heard through the University's Synod can offer a meaningful and distinct contribution to broader conversations around young people's relationship to faith, with particular reference to the Catholic Church. This synthesis will be communicated as appropriate to ecclesial leadership, University leadership, and others across the University that may benefit from its insights. In a particular way, staff in the University's Office of Campus Ministry will continue to grapple with the Synod's themes and how this important process—along with other initiatives and University efforts to hear from students' perspectives and experiences—might inform its work of forming and engaging Notre Dame students in their lives of faith.