

Two-year study shows young Catholics want a Church that is more welcoming, less divided

Youth and young adult Catholics often struggle with Church teachings, but not because those teachings are difficult, challenging or countercultural.

“This struggle with Church teachings is about struggling with the lack of consistency and the lack of action in implementing Church teachings,” Nick Stein, a Catholic young adult ministry leader, said Tuesday during an online presentation of the final report from the National Dialogue on Catholic Pastoral Ministry with Youth and Young Adults.

A consistent theme that arose in more than 450 dialogue sessions over two years that involved 10,000 participants was that while young people and adults ages 18-39 understand the Catholic Church’s moral teachings, what they struggle with is that many in the Church don’t live up to those teachings.

“The respondents wanted a Church that is authentic, welcoming, less judgemental and divisive,” said Christina Lamas, the executive director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, which helped lead the National Dialogue on Catholic Pastoral Ministry with Youth and Young Adults.

The dialogue was a four-year collaborative and synodal initiative that also included the Catholic Campus Ministry Association, the National Advisory Team on Young Adult Ministry, the National Catholic Network de Pastoral Juvenil Hispana (LaRED) and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Pope Francis’ call for pastoral dialogue in his 2013

encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), which he amplified in his 2019 apostolic exhortation on young people, *Christus Vivit*, inspired the synodal approach of the National Dialogue, which began at the USCCB Convocation of Catholic Leaders in 2017.

From 2018 to 2019, thousands of participants from across the country shared their thoughts, concerns, experiences and ideas regarding how the Catholic Church in the United States conducts religious education and faith formation, how those programs could be reimagined, and how the Church as a whole engages youth and young adults.

“We heard quite often in the conversations that young people feel judged by the Church. They feel unwelcome in the Church, both by their peers and older people,” said Lamas, adding that the respondents said they often felt judged by who they are and for their beliefs.

“Young people are asking to be accompanied, even in times of disagreement with what the Church teaches,” Lamas said.

The National Dialogue’s 138-page final report indicates that youths and young adults want the Church to address its “authenticity gap” and do more intentional listening, to invest in more resources regarding spiritual and formational accompaniment, to expand its outreach to young adults and to reexamine existing Confirmation preparation and faith formation programs.

“This is something we can’t put on the shelf and think it’s over, because it’s just beginning,” said Bishop Frank J. Caggiano of Bridgeport, Connecticut, who served as the episcopal committee liaison to the National Dialogue.

“When I read the report, I said, ‘This is a work of the Spirit.’ This process took on a life of its own,” Bishop Caggiano said during Tuesday’s hourlong webinar, which featured several Catholic youth and young adult ministry

leaders

“If this is going to work, we have to explore what it means to be co-responsible in this, that we all have a role to play, that we have to do this with humility and lift each other up,” Bishop Caggiano said. “We as leaders have to discuss and see what it means to be partners in ministry.”

The report found that young Catholics, even those who are actively practicing their faith and desire a relationship with God, wrestle with questions of how relevant the Church is to their lives.

“Most often, the struggles that we noted and challenges are with the Church, and with its leaders, not with their faith and not in a belief in God,” Lamas said.

By and large, respondents said they wanted to see a Church that is not only more accepting and authentic, but less polarized and divided between factions. Young people described having a strong sense of mission and a desire for spiritual accompaniment by older, more experienced Catholics.

“Young people want to make a difference in this world through service to those in need,” Lamas said. “In *Christus Vivit*, we hear quite often that young people want to change the world for better, to build friendships where everyone wants to work for the common good.”

Along with parents and youth ministry leaders whose input was also sought, Catholic young people are calling for more ministry programming opportunities, integrated and relevant approaches to faith and everyday life, guidance and accompaniment during life transitions and vocational discernment, and better collaborative and supportive approaches to leadership in the Church.

“Accompaniment is not just a buzzword; it’s something we must invest many resources in,” Stein said.

Though its final report has been published, Lamas said the National Dialogue will “never be over,” and added that synodality has to be the way forward.

“We still have much to learn, and listening never ends,” Lamas said. “Unity together is how we will reach our young people.”

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.