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In the James Norbury book *Big Panda and Tiny Dragon*, Big Panda asks: "Which is more important, the journey or the destination?" Tiny Dragon replies: "The company." This vignette captures the substance and spirit of Pope Francis' call for a universal synodal process between now and 2023. The synod on synodality, the pope has said, is about "journeying together."

The preparatory document issued by the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops from the Vatican describes the purpose of the process and the fundamental question:

> A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together": How is this "journeying together" happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together"?

On Feb. 14, I was blessed with the opportunity to participate in a small piece of this journey with 17 members of the National Catholic Reporter Board of Directors. The two hours we spent "journeying together" in response to the pope's invitation were moments of grace and a gift of rich dialogue.

We shared where we find joy in our experience of church and where we encounter difficulties, obstacles and wounds in our faith journey as part of the Catholic Church.

Most of all, we shared our hopes for the future. These hopes are grounded in a profound belief in the good news of the Gospel and the universal call to holiness that Jesus proclaimed and that was emphasized at Vatican II.

> One of the most poignant moments in the discussion was when participants talked about their adult children and their alienation from the Catholic Church.
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The hopes of the participants are also grounded in the theological reality that, by our baptism, we are all "agents" of the Gospel and need not wait for cues or direction from the ordained to preach and live the Gospel in and to our homes, communities

and world.

Beneath the anger and frustration with the church, participants expressed a desire for the church to be what it could be — a community where all are welcome without regard to race, language or way of life.

Participants also called for an admission of the church's sin of homophobia and an acceptance of women at all levels of church leadership. That women cannot be ordained ministers of the Gospel was described as "a scandal."

Also scandalous is the polarization in the church. "Participants see a wealthy and very conservative cabal's presence on and manipulation of print, television and social media as a great disservice to Church unity and this misuse of media must be dealt with," according to our summary of the meeting.

Experiencing a world of poverty and violence, participants want the church to preach and live the Gospel of nonviolence. Participants called upon Francis to continue to teach the immorality of the possession or use of nuclear weapons. In fact, participants would like Francis to issue an encyclical on the Gospel of nonviolence that was preached and lived by Jesus and to which we are called today.

One of the most poignant moments in the discussion was when participants talked about their adult children and their alienation from the Catholic Church. The feeling was more about how the church has left their children than about their children "leaving" the church.

While some participants shared a very positive experience with their local parish, others instead find their primary faith community in self-organized small groups of people who are disenchanted with their local parishes and bishops.

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One of the things that impressed me most was a combination of hope and low expectations for institutional change expressed by the participants. As one person put it: "The hope has to begin with us, not with the institutional church." Whether or not the institutional church makes the called-for changes, participants are deeply committed to continue a journey of faith that is Gospel-oriented.

A summary of this listening session has been sent directly to the Vatican's Synod office and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Readers can also access the summary at bit.ly/NCRboardsynod.

The listening session included 17 participants who live in various archdioceses and dioceses across the United States. They include the archdioceses of San Francisco; Los Angeles; Kansas City, Kansas; Chicago; St. Paul-Minneapolis; Washington, D.C.; and Boston, and the dioceses of Cleveland; Monterey, California; San Jose, California; Kansas City-St. Joseph, Missouri; and Joliet, Illinois.

As a result of this experience, I would be glad to help other groups whose dioceses don't have a viable synodal process conduct their own listening sessions. Individuals or groups interested in resources to do this can contact me at j40purcell@gmail.com .

The Vatican's synod website is also a wonderful resource for groups wanting to organize listening sessions: www.synod.va.

Our group concluded that "it's up to us" and that "Christ and his way of life need to be central." One participant summarized that the church should "focus on four concepts central to Jesus and the Gospel: compassion, nonviolence, forgiveness/mercy and service."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **April 1-14, 2022** print issue under the headline: Board 'journeys together' in listening session.