Opinion
Guest Voices
Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Pérez joins college students, other young adults and ministry

Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Pérez joins college students, other young adults and ministry leaders during a synodal listening session at La Salle University April 4. (CNS photo/CatholicPhilly.com/Sarah Webb)



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With an abundance of Catholic colleges and universities in Philadelphia, a planning team of educators worked together to envision a way for all of Philadelphia's Catholic colleges and universities to encounter synodality, which means journeying together, specifically tailored for young people.

Inspired by Pope Francis' call for greater listening, presence and curiosity among the global church, nearly 400 students from more than 40 campuses across the Philadelphia metropolitan region joined a multipart listening process that culminated in an all-campus listening session at La Salle University. Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Perez participated in the listening session and delivered some thoughts at the end.

A major highlight of the event was the small discussion groups self-selected by students focused on six themes identified from the reports of cross-campus listening sessions: journeying from exclusion to inclusion, from fragmentation to wholeness,

from discord to unity, from performance to integrity, from broken trust to account, from being led to leading.

Student reflections on Pentecost, a large group examen and the opportunity in an open plenary listening session for students to share their insights with each other and Perez round out the highlights of Philadelphia Catholic higher education's robust response to Francis' invitation to participate in the global synod process.

In this gathering, I witnessed a way forward for the church's pastoral outreach to young people. For these students, Francis' call for synodality for being church together, provides endurance and hope.

Following the pope's call

In October 2021, Francis said this in his homiletic reflection, "Opening of the Synodal Path":

> Nothing leaves Jesus indifferent; everything is of concern to him. Encountering faces, meeting eyes, sharing [everyone's] history. That is the closeness that Jesus embodies. He knows that someone's life can be changed by a single encounter. The Gospel is full of such encounters with Christ, encounters that uplift and bring healing. Jesus did not hurry along or keep looking at his watch to get the meeting over. He was always at the service of the person he was with, listening to what he or she had to say.

A student's message about participating in listening sessions in preparation for the 2023 worl

A student's message about participating in listening sessions in preparation for the 2023 world Synod of Bishops on synodality is seen April 4 at La Salle University in Philadelphia. (CNS photo/CatholicPhilly.com/Sarah Webb)

In short, Francis believes we are called to be a listening church. In his address to open the global 2021-23 synod process, he stated: "[We need] to listen to our brothers and sisters speak of their hopes and of the crises of faith present in different parts of the world, of the need for a renewed pastoral life and of the signals we are receiving from those on the ground."

These sisters and brothers about whom Francis speaks include the young Catholics whose voices and stories were brought together in Springtide Research Institute's State of Religion & Young People 2021: Catholic Edition. The findings in this report suggest to me a need for a renewal of the pastoral life of the church, especially among young people. About half of young Catholics ages 13-25 agree that "religious communities try to fix my problem, instead of just being there for me" (49%). About the same percentage agree, "I don't feel like I can be my full self in a religious organization" (51%). Only 26% of participants say they "use faith as a guide when I am confused about things."

With the theme "For a synodal church: communion, participation, and mission," the church's process of synodality is positioned to capture the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of young people as they navigate uncertainty, transcend traditional religious boundaries and encounter a sense of wholeness. Recognizing the unique role colleges and universities play in the dialogical and listening processes that make synodality possible, Francis encouraged Catholic higher education institutions to create spaces to listen to the joys and hopes, grief and anxieties of young people in our care.

Why young people need synodality

Springtide's Catholic Edition (a sample can be found here) paints a compelling portrait of the continuing trend of young Catholics disassociating not only with institutional Catholicism and Christianity, but all religion. It gives us a glimpse of young Catholics who find themselves in a holy frustration, wrestling with disjointed elements of reality afflicting the church, nation and world.

Drawing a picture of the insights young people offers to Catholic educators and other leaders requires both reflection and synthesis, in which one must consider two things: why young people don't join or stay in faith communities, as well as fresh possibilities for practitioners of faith to enliven their minds and hearts with curiosity and imagination.

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A synodal path allows curiosity to become a vehicle for young people to encounter the sacred resident in texts, in traditions, in themselves, in others, in creation. In short, synodality offers a pathway for young people to unbundle existential

questions including the meaning of life, vocation, suffering and salvation.

The Catholic Edition underscores the significance of embracing and satisfying the curiosity, wholeness, connection and adaptability that young people crave and synodality promotes, which can be met with the turn to pastoral care that Francis' papacy punctuates.

Katherine Angulo V., who prepares pastoral leaders for long-term ministry at the University of Notre Dame, writes in the forward of the Catholic Edition:

"Young people desire to be listened to … Like Jesus' listening on the road [to Emmaus], our listening as teachers and ministers must take place on the roads young people are traveling. We must go out to them. We must ask questions first, and then we must be prepared to answer the questions young people will inevitably ask us: Why do you stay? Why do you still believe?"

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She adds, "When I receive these questions, I have the chance to convey my joy, my gratitude, my sense of service, my sense of fulfillment. I can share the history of God's action in my life — not just salvation history, but family history, the stories of my community, and the ways God is alive." Synodality for all

Francis hoped for a participative and inclusive synodal process that "offers everyone — especially those who for various reasons find themselves on the margins — the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard in order to contribute to the edification of the People of God."

For young people, the experience of encountering a listening, curious and compassionate church becomes the yeast for fostering communion, participation and mission — the three markers that characterize the synod process underway in the church.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.