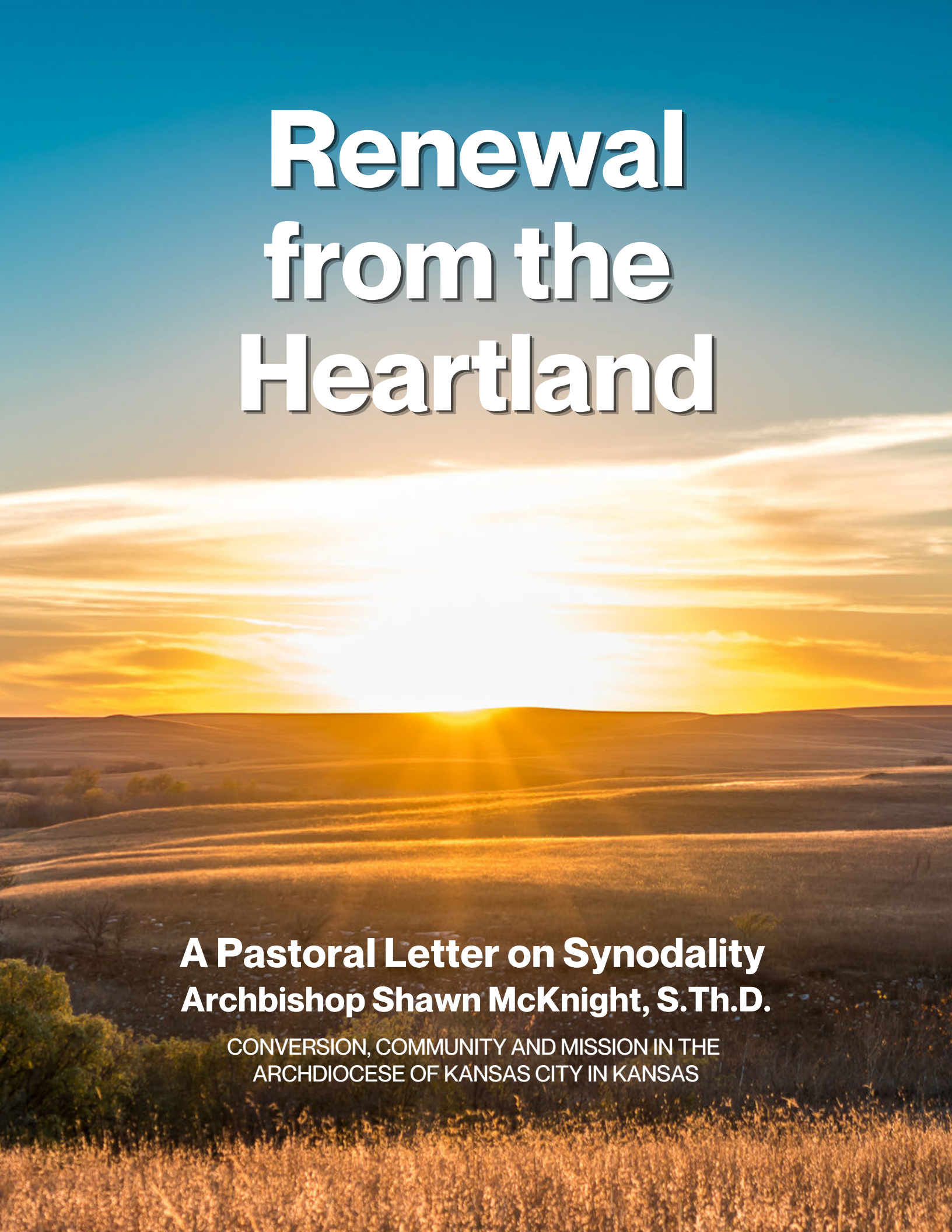


Renewal from the Heartland

A Pastoral Letter on Synodality

Archbishop Shawn McKnight, S.Th.D.

CONVERSION, COMMUNITY AND MISSION IN THE ARCHDIOCESE OF KANSAS CITY IN KANSAS

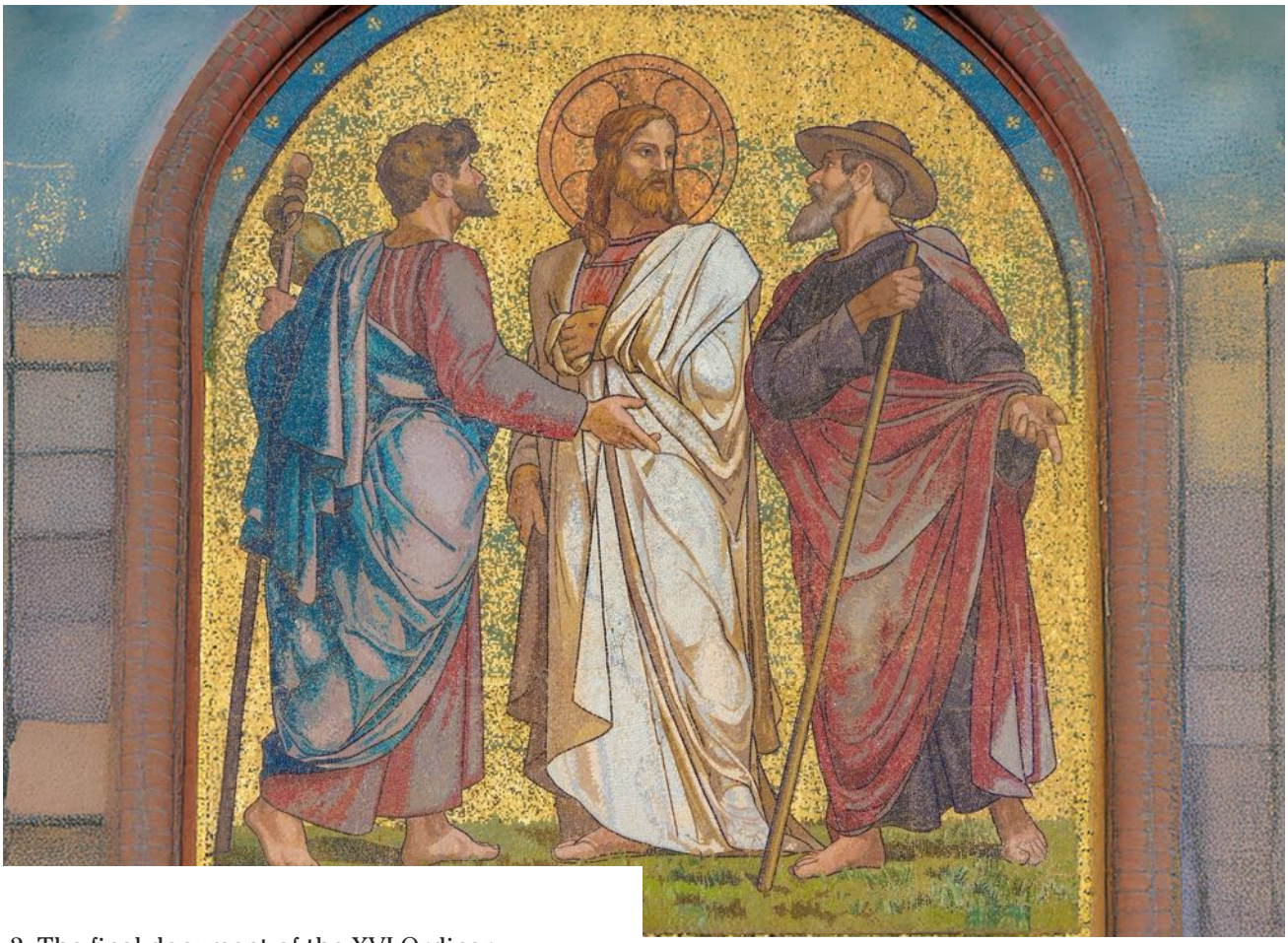
Synodality and Renewal in the Heartland

"[W]hat we have seen and heard, we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).



1. As we gather today at our annual convocation of clergy, religious, and lay leadership of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas, my heart is full of gratitude for all those who participated in the Renewal from the Heartland synodal listening process this past year. Participation in the "Beatitudes from the Heartland" Lenten small group series prepared us to actively discern the voice of the Holy Spirit in the synodal listening sessions held in April. There were 32 sessions in 17 parishes, two prisons, four high schools, and seven community centers in which approximately 1,000 people participated in English, Spanish, and American Sign Language. About 100 trained facilitators assisted the archdiocesan synodal team in compiling the responses from these listening sessions, and the results informed an online survey in June to help us further discern priorities for the next phase of synodal discernment as we continue to walk together, listen together, and discern together in pastoral planning. What we have seen, heard, and shared under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we now proclaim as we begin the second year of Renewal from the Heartland, our archdiocesan response to the Holy Father's call for us to become a more synodal church.

Renewing the Church by Returning to the Source



2. The final document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which concluded on Oct. 26, 2024, states in its very first paragraph, “every new step in the life of the Church is a return to the source.” Now that we are in the implementation phase of the Synod on Synodality, we should have a clear understanding of how our archdiocesan efforts are in alignment with the universal church. The implementation of the Synod on Synodality does not require a new pastoral program or movement in the Church. The essential mission of the Church – the salvation of souls – is not changed. Instead, we are called to renew the ordinary life of the Church from within: a Renewal from the Heartland.

This ecclesial renewal is happening in a synodal way. The “why” of what we are doing is a call to conversion, an encounter with the living Christ. The “how” is the method of being Church, known as “synodality.”

Becoming a more synodal Church does not oblige us to create more documents or to develop a pastoral program that is artificially imposed on our parishes; rather, it fosters a renewal of parish life that springs from our encounter with the Risen One and our sense of discipleship. It requires us to reflect on how we are living as missionary disciples in and among our parishes as we witness our new life in Christ.



3. Renewal from the Heartland is about conversion in three significant ways that are described in the Final Document from the Synod on Synodality: a conversion of relationships; a conversion of ecclesial processes; and a conversion of bonds, which allows for accompaniment across multiple groups and communities.

Conversion of Relationships

Every vocation and every ministry exist in relationship with others. Bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons and lay faithful are called to move beyond individualism and to build authentic communion through mutual listening, trust and shared responsibility.

Conversion of Ecclesial Processes

Instead of asking "Who exercises authority," we must consider how authority should be exercised collaboratively, in service of the mission entrusted to the entire Church. Synodality calls us to renew decision-making processes through participation, discernment, and co-responsibility.

Conversion of Bonds

Finally, synodality strengthens the bonds that unite us with other parishes, dioceses, episcopal conferences, Christian communities, other religions, and society. The Church becomes increasingly capable of walking together with all humanity.

We are called to live synodality faithfully in our own time and place. While we have so much in common with our sisters and brothers today, we are also obliged to remain in communion with the first Christians.

THE JOURNEY OF CONVERSION

4. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we are called to renewal. We pause to listen, not to look nostalgically at the past, but to recognize where the Risen Lord has walked with his people and where their hearts have burned within them because of that encounter.

The story in Luke's Gospel about the two disciples headed in the wrong direction – away from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus after the Crucifixion – shows us how the Good News of Jesus' Resurrection has the power to change where we are headed.

We know the name of only one disciple, Cleopas; the other disciple could be a man or woman, young or old. As such, the other nameless disciple could be a placeholder for any one of us.

The two disciples were conversing, grappling with how to wrap their minds around the death of the Lord and what this would mean for them. They were downcast; perhaps their hearts were filled with fear, and they were unable to recognize the Lord when he suddenly joined them on their journey. They relayed their belief in Jesus as a prophet of God, mighty in word and in deed, but also their disappointment that, it seemed to them, he hadn't turned out to be the savior they were hoping for.

But Jesus changed their minds. He began by teaching them from the Old Testament scriptures, showing how it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer to enter his glory. Then Jesus inspired their hearts.

As they approached the village, they beseeched the Lord to stay with them, for it was already evening. Jesus accepted their invitation. And while they were at table, he repeated his actions from the Last Supper: he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him as he vanished from their sight.

They said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way

and opened the scriptures to us?" They turned themselves around and went back to Jerusalem, testifying to all what they experienced, how the Lord was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

5. This fascinating story of the disciples, recognizing Jesus in the breaking of bread and reflecting on how the Sacred Scripture stirred their hearts to believe in his Resurrection from the dead, inspires us to consider the many ways we might be disheartened, troubled, and confused without the light of the Gospel, the hope of the Resurrection, and the Real Presence of Jesus until the end of time. It reminds us of how much we need an intimate relationship with the Lord, and that our best place to encounter him is in the "Breaking of the Bread" in the community of disciples known as the Church.

This is a vivid biblical image of synodality, a story about walking together, about accompanying one another to become more deeply in love with our Savior and his people. It's a story captured in Luke's Gospel, and it is a story unfolding right now, here among us.

LISTENING WITH THE HEART

6. For those of us who participated in the Listening with the Heart synodal listening sessions in April, our hearts truly were burning within us. Those sessions were moments of prayer, to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking both in our own hearts and through those who gathered with us. Some of us came with sorrow and fear in our hearts, and all of us are grappling with what Jesus' death and Resurrection mean in our lives today, with so much turmoil and division, death, and destruction around us.

There were at least three sessions held in each deanery, and others were held in communities who might have otherwise been shut out, specifically our deaf sisters and brothers and those incarcerated in our prisons.

In addition, 7,252 responded to our invitation to participate in an online survey which was designed from the comments made at the listening sessions. We conducted this survey using the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), an internationally known research center that uses modern scientific methods to serve the church, to help focus our future pastoral planning.

The themes that have emerged from these two efforts to listen with the heart of Christ have informed my discernment, as the chief pastor of the archdiocese, to hold up a common vision for the people living in all 21 counties.

7. This vision will be pondered in each deanery according to the local realities there – the resources available, the cultures of the communities, the pastoral challenges, and the capacity among those who gather as leaders in the deanery. Each deanery (and because of the size of the Johnson County Deanery, there will be two discernment groups in it) will discern a common pastoral plan for the parishes in the deanery.

Each parish will then discern how to implement their deanery pastoral plan according to the particularities of the local parish's mission, people, and resources. Thus, the local parish realities will inform and be informed by its neighboring parishes and other local communities. We must avoid any parochialism that would negate our goal of building a stronger communion among the parishes and in the local church of the archdiocese, thereby strengthening the participation of the people in the life and mission of the Chuch.

The steps of our pastoral planning are taking place in this manner:

1. **LISTEN** – First, we listened. We identified signs of renewal and recognized God's presence among us in the synodal listening sessions and online survey.

2. **VISION** – In collaboration with the universal and local church leadership, I am articulating in this pastoral letter a vision from our common experiences and tensions, thereby reading the signs of the times in the context of God's living Word.

3. **ORIENT** – We will discern emerging paths forward and form common orientations, using the structure of the deaneries. This will require additional listening as we discern those unique pastoral needs in each deanery while focusing on the same archdiocesan-wide vision.

4. **PARISH LIFE** – As missionary disciples, together we will implement the aspects of the deanery plan that align with the reality of the parish, prioritizing the common deanery plan so that we are accompanying other parishes in actualizing the archdiocesan vision.

GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE HEARTLAND

8. What signs of renewal and God's presence can we identify from the Listening with the Heart synodal listening sessions and survey?

Across all eight deaneries, parishioners expressed a deep love for the Catholic Church, a profound reliance on the sacraments, and immense gratitude for parish communities, Catholic education, and family faith traditions. God is, indeed, present here in the heartland. This is the Good News of the presence of Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit worth celebrating!



Across urban, suburban, and rural communities, participants identified a strong desire for the Church members to move from passive participation to active discipleship. The collective voice of the archdiocese calls for a flourishing Church that is deeply rooted in Eucharistic spirituality, faithful to Catholic doctrine, and openly outward-facing — listening deeply, forming adults and youth intentionally, welcoming the wounded and searching, and serving those on the margins with real, concrete mercy. These are signs of and opportunities for renewal.

9. **By listening with our hearts, we hear people seeking to:**

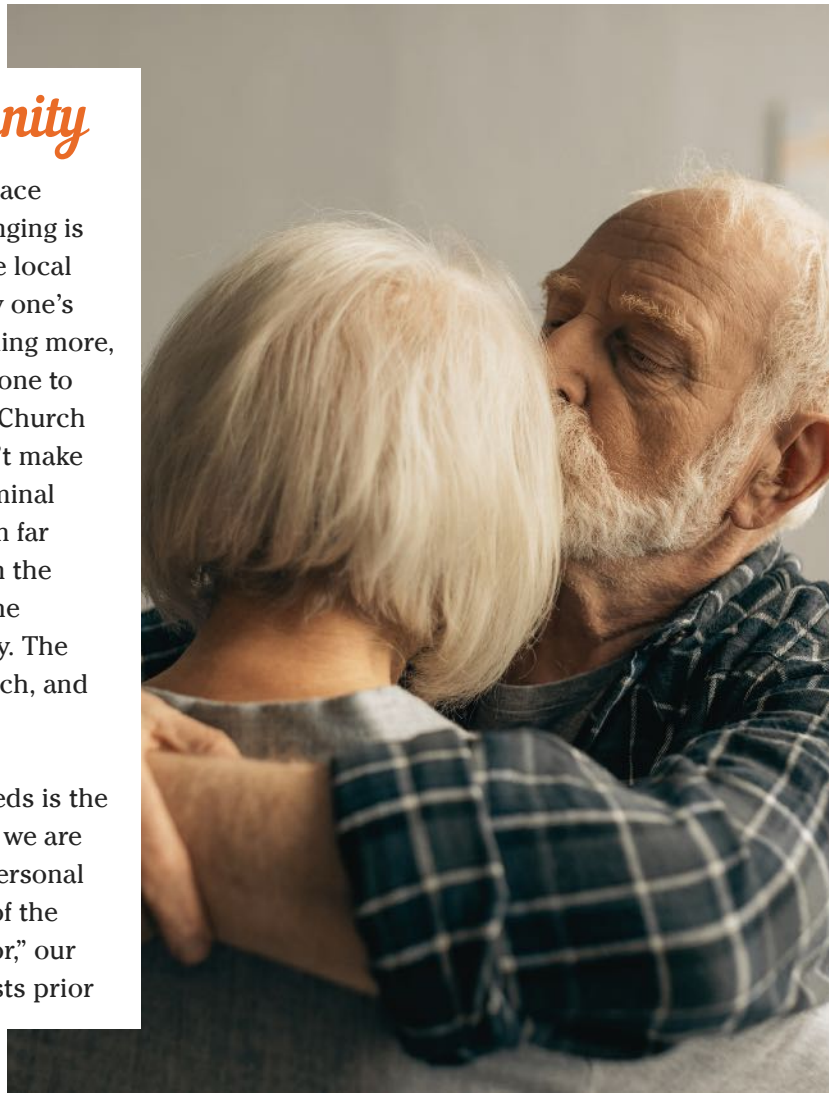
- *Belong in a community*
- *Deepen their relationship with God*
- *Be sent on mission*

Like the disciples on the road from Emmaus, our hearts should be on fire with the desire to testify to what is happening and what can happen in our villages, towns, and cities.

Belonging in a Community

10. People long to be known; they want a place where everyone knows their name. This longing is not primarily about being recognized at the local coffee shop or store, or for the priest to say one's name as they are leaving Mass. It is something more, something deeper. It is the longing of someone to know, even before a crisis arrives, that the Church will be there for them. The farmer who can't make ends meet. The mother who receives a terminal diagnosis. The veteran returning home from far away. The student who fears sitting alone in the cafeteria, or the whispers in the hallway. The immigrant struggling to support their family. The prisoner in despair, apart from family, church, and community.

What each of them, and each one of us, needs is the feeling of belonging to the Church and that we are known by the Church. While moments of personal crisis can be an opportunity for members of the Church "to proclaim glad tidings to the poor," our faith is stronger when that relationship exists prior to our moment of crisis.



11. Allow me to offer an example of how this desire for belonging was expressed by one participant in a listening session: "My wife had Alzheimer's. I was her sole caregiver. She got to the point where I could no longer get her to church. I put her name on the prayer list. For six months, we had no contact from anyone in our parish until 10 days before she died."

This is only one story that was shared. In hearing these stories, as Catholics, we can pause and ask ourselves: is this not like the story of the Good Samaritan? How many people read that prayer list and just went on with their lives? How many people prayed for that couple, then turned to other matters? And how many people thought about how they could intentionally step out of their daily routines and let this spouse know he is seen and heard – really seen and heard – so that he knows he and his wife are loved and belong in their family of faith?

12. Across every deanery, we heard very clearly that belonging is often the doorway into active discipleship. People described the Church at her best as a family, a sanctuary, and a steady source of support when life becomes difficult — during illness, grief, relocation, or crisis.

People did not say they want the Church to become a "resource center" or a "one-stop" place for them to get their needs met. They aren't seeking transactional opportunities; they want to belong.

People shared that what helps them move from simply attending Mass to truly feeling connected are often simple, personal invitations and connections: Come join our small faith-sharing group, the men's or women's groups. Be with us on a retreat. Join me in this service opportunity. Repeatedly, people named these moments as the turning points where they stopped feeling anonymous and began to feel known.



13. At the same time, participants also reminded us that entering parish life can be hard. One parent told us how they enrolled their daughter, who attended public school, in a CYO track program as an intentional way to meet other Catholic families at their parish. She was the only public-school student on the team. After several meets, their daughter shared that the other parents from their parish did not cheer for her when she raced. Her sense of exclusion shaped her parents' perspective on families who send their children to Catholic schools.

Long-standing friendships, family networks, large parishes, small, tight-knit parishes, busy schedules: These can create barriers that insiders may not even notice. Just like the parents who are focused on their own children, we don't consider how our behaviors may tell someone they aren't really a member of our team or our community.

For newcomers, converts, returning Catholics, single adults, childless couples, divorced persons, and non-Catholic spouses, and even the husband housebound with a wife with dementia, those barriers can feel overwhelming.

14. That is why hospitality cannot be only a greeting at the door. It must become ongoing accompaniment — personal follow-up, relationship-building, and the patient work of helping each person know they belong.

Christian hospitality recognizes our belief that each human person is created in the image and likeness of God. God is a Trinity of divine persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And as God is a community of persons within himself, we who have been made in the image and likeness of God were created for relationship. We are seeking to belong because God created us that way. It is our path to salvation.

15. As Pope Leo XIV wrote in his first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* (Magnificent Humanity):

"At the heart of the Christian understanding of the human person lies the great biblical affirmation that men and women are created in the image and likeness of the Triune God. Created for relationship, every human person is planned and willed by God to enter into communion with him, with others and with creation" (n. 50).

Pope Leo explains, "Human dignity does not depend on a person's abilities, wealth or position in life, nor on the right or wrong choices made; instead, it is a gift that precedes and transcends each person, endowed by God as an expression of his unfailing love. For this reason, the human person always remains the 'way for the Church' and the heart of every authentic path of integral human development" (n. 50).

Belonging calls us into a deeper relationship with one another, and through these social bonds, into a deeper relationship with God.

Deepening our Relationship with God

16. As Catholics, we know the sacraments are "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1131).

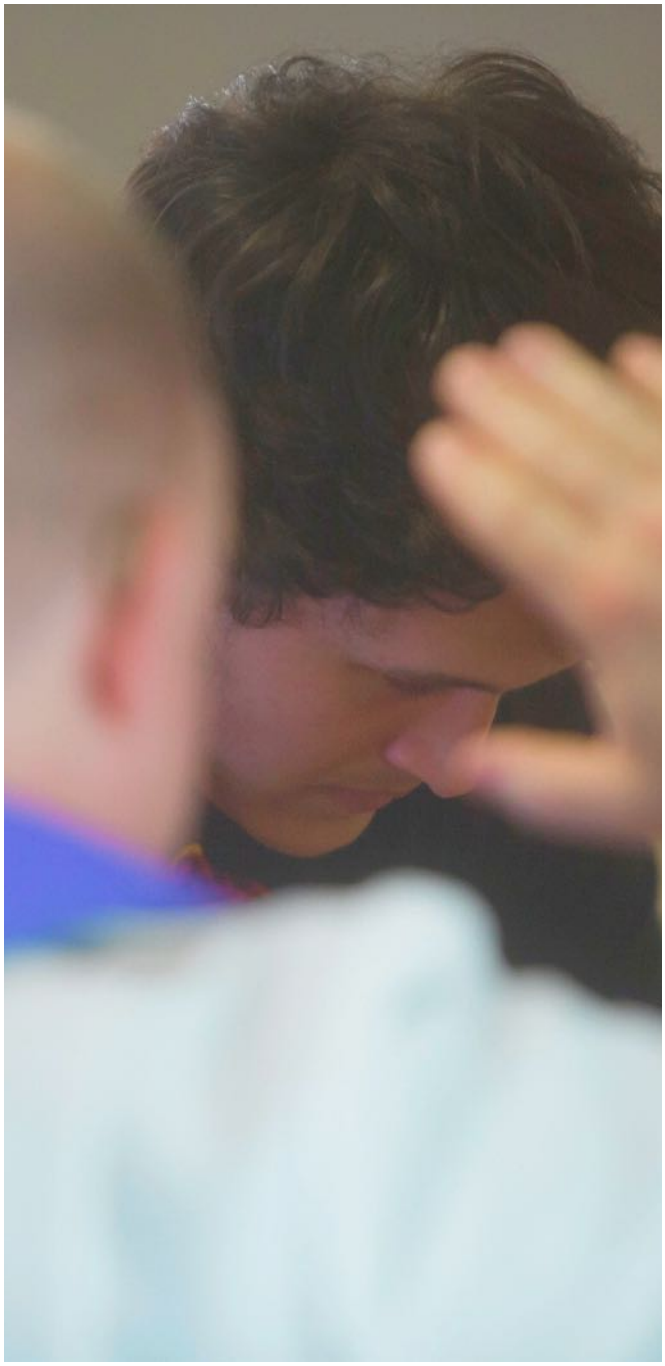
Many who answered our survey and participated in the listening sessions seem to have this definition etched into their DNA. It's not just head knowledge but an involuntary reflex of our souls. Time and again, people described most notably the Eucharist, but also the other sacraments, as indispensable sources of healing, identity, spiritual strength, and renewal.

17. Here I want to make a special appeal to my brother priests and deacons:

The Church is an assembly of sinners struggling to become saints. In our hearts, we know we need the sacraments to bring us more fully into the communion of the holy ones. As ordained ministers and sacred collaborators, our duty is to assist the assembly, God's people, to preserve our communion in the Christian way of believing, living, and praying. The First Letter of St. Peter challenges us who are in ordained ministry to be the kind of leaders Christ desires for his flock:

> "So I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed. Tend the flock of God in your midst, overseeing not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you but be examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." (1 Peter 5: 1-4).

18. Furthermore, Pope Leo has challenged us who are priests to give ourselves as the love of the heart of Jesus:



"Dear priests, renew each day your 'Here I am' before Christ's pierced Heart. Give yourselves entirely to him, so that you may love his people with the same love with which he loves them. And joyfully remember how the saintly Curé of Ars loved to say that 'the priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus'" (Message to Priests on the Occasion of the Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests, 12 June 2026).



Our people are asking the same thing of us. They desire reverence in worship, whether as a community gathered around the altar, in quiet adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, or in the important cultural devotions of the people — these are all expressions of our Catholic identity.

19. And yet there is some unease in our local church, in that some consider their personal preferences for legitimate liturgical expressions as the only way to be truly reverent according to the mind of the Church. We need more walking together, listening together, and discerning together the legitimate diversity of liturgical expressions afforded to the Universal Church, while firmly committing ourselves to our unity in faith and practice as expressed in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Across the spectrum, many articulated the pain that divisiveness creates, especially around the liturgy. They see these "us vs. them" feelings as corrosive to co-responsibility and mission. They call for more welcoming and receptive attitudes by all.

Several weeks ago, Pope Leo addressed these concerns in a letter to the prefect of the Dicastery for Divine Worship. It's quite succinct and, while it was directed at those attending a conference on liturgical formation being held in Oregon, it has great relevance to us.

Pope Leo's letter reminds us to be faithful to the approved texts and instructions for the celebration of the sacred mysteries, including the rites promulgated by his predecessors, Pope St. Paul VI and Pope St. John Paul II. He sets that reminder within the context of what he calls "the first practical opportunities for liturgical formation," the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. He writes:

> [I]t is essential that [the liturgies] also be profoundly formative, promoting an ever deeper understanding of the *ars celebrandi*, expressed not only by the celebrant of the liturgy, but also by the entire assembly. In this way, through proper education and reverent worship, Catholics will be formed both for the liturgy and by the liturgy (cf. *Desiderio Desideravi,* n. 34 and 54).

20. As we encounter strong opinions and preferences from all sides, let us start by considering them not as opposites. Instead, can we consider these diverse experiences as a shared desire for the proper celebration of the liturgy, just expressed differently? That perspective could perhaps be helpful as we consider how to use pastoral planning to address change, conflict, and disagreements in our parishes and other ecclesial communities. How can we build bridges and bring unity, amidst diversity, among our communities? We priests and deacons, listening to our people in this manner with the "ear of the heart," can help us hear another deep desire, which aligns with what our Church teaches.

Resonating with Pope Leo's comments on the liturgy, participants in the listening sessions and survey also want us to preach and teach in those liturgical moments, fostering both interior reverence and outward missionary enthusiasm, or missionary zeal.

FAITH FORMATION FOSTERS RELATIONSHIPS

21. One of the clearest themes we heard across the archdiocese is the desire to move from a faith that is simply inherited or practiced by routine into a personal, lived relationship with Jesus Christ. Many people expressed deep gratitude for the formation they received as children, but they also named a real gap in ongoing adult formation. Some cradle Catholics said they practiced the faith for years out of habit or a sense of duty before they truly came to understand why the Church teaches what she teaches.

Converts and those who have gone through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) or the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) often describe how integrated adult formation changed their lives. And that has led many lifelong Catholics to ask for the same kind of formation for themselves: formation in Sacred Scripture, the Eucharist, Theology of the Body, apologetics, Church history, Catholic social teaching, and prayer.

Just as importantly, people told us that formation is most effective when it is relational and accessible. It cannot be limited only to formal lectures or preaching from the pulpit. It needs to happen in conversation, in small groups, and in settings where people can ask honest questions and grow together.

They also tell us it will mean offering formation at times that working adults, young parents, and busy families can actually attend. This second point goes back to how we understand making people feel welcomed and invited. Are we asking ourselves frequently enough, who is not here, and why not?

Even those who are physically present and trying to focus on their interior life realize that private prayer is not enough. Here's what one participant in a listening session said about prayer without works: "I can treat my faith like it's an individual thing. I go to Mass, and I pray,



and I read the Scriptures, and I try to grow closer to Christ, and I just kind of have the temptation to keep to myself and keep my head down. Then I wonder why I feel so disconnected and lonely, and I feel like I don't have anyone to lean on."

We cannot find our way to heaven alone. Nor can we find it just by sitting in a pew and listening to a good homily. We need the Word of God to take flesh in our own lives.

22. Our service, outreach, advocacy, and other means of being missionary disciples must remain rooted in prayer and explicitly connected to our life in Christ. Helping our people make that connection is done through strong witness, good homilies, and holistic faith formation that goes beyond memorizing prayers and reciting facts.

Participants in Listening with the Heart consistently reminded us that faith cannot remain only an interior conviction. We must go out to hear other teachers of the Gospel whose voices may not be found inside a church building. Faith must take flesh in concrete works of mercy, active charity, and compassionate pastoral care. Across the archdiocese, people pointed to food pantries, prison ministry, pregnancy resource centers, support for those experiencing homelessness, care for the elderly and homebound, foster care, immigrant assistance, ministries to the deaf, and parish relief efforts as places where the Gospel becomes visible.

23. In Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic exhortation, *Dilexi Te (I have Loved You),* the Holy Father explains that "the poorest are not only objects of our compassion, but teachers of the Gospel. It is not a question of 'bringing' God to them, but of encountering him among them" (n. 79). Going further, Pope Leo asserts that "while it is true that the rich care for the poor, the opposite is no less true. This is a remarkable fact confirmed by the entire Christian tradition. Lives can actually be turned around by the realization that the poor have much to teach us about the Gospel and its demands" (n. 109).





The Holy Father highlights that "no Christian can regard the poor simply as a societal problem; they are part of our 'family.' They are 'one of us.' Nor can our relationship to the poor be reduced to merely another ecclesial activity or function" (n. 104). Furthermore, he recalls the teaching of Pope St. John Paul II to reflect on "the active role that the poor ought to play in the renewal of the Church and society, thus leaving behind a certain 'paternalism' that limited itself to satisfying only the immediate needs of the poor" (n. 87).

24. This requires us to go into some places that may be uncomfortably unfamiliar. In deaneries where we had more Spanish-speaking participants, we heard the call to build bridges across language and cultural communities.

In every deanery, participants asked for a public Catholic witness that holds together protection of the unborn, support for vulnerable families, economic justice, care for creation, and the rejection of racism — not as competing concerns, but as one consistent expression of the dignity of every human person.

25. Let us be mindful that we use the word "poor" not only to describe someone who has little material resources. Scripture also raises up the "poor in spirit." Sometimes the poor look very much like us, family and neighbors who have much to teach us about the Gospel and its demands.

Many participants in Listening with the Heart shared painful experiences of judgment, loneliness, racial or language barriers, alienation after divorce or annulment processes, clerical scandals, or being told they weren't needed anymore as a volunteer.

Their witness calls the Church to take up a posture of mercy — to love first, to honor each person's dignity, to listen patiently, and to rebuild trust where wounds have been carried for a long time. This is especially the case for those who carry the trauma of abuse by those who held a sacred trust within the Church community.

This is what I mean when I speak of our parishes becoming centers of charity and sanctuaries of mercy. A center of charity is a community where the love of Christ is made visible through concrete corporal works of mercy. A sanctuary of mercy is a place where no one carries suffering alone, because the Body of Christ has already drawn near, by the action of the Holy Spirit.

This kind of parish will never be built by the pastor working harder. It will be built when every ministry, every council, every budget begins with asking the same question: How will this help someone know that Christ knows them and loves them? It requires all of us to listen to the same Spirit, becoming the One Body of Christ for the world.

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26. We must understand that the full breadth of Catholic social teaching connects the Sunday Eucharist to the Monday workplace, to Friday evening socializing, and beyond. My hope for our archdiocese is that every parish becomes known for its integral Catholic community life. Not because we have the most programs or the finest facilities. Those things matter, but they are not what people remember when life becomes difficult. What they remember is whether the Church was there for them. Whether someone noticed. Whether someone listened. Whether, in the hour they most needed mercy, they discovered they had already been known.

SPIRITUAL LISTENING

27. In our listening sessions, people were asked, "What is the Holy Spirit calling us to be?" That's a very broad question, and some of our facilitators questioned its usefulness when they were being trained.

It was a question posed by Pope Francis when he called for the Synod on Synodality. What we heard in April in our archdiocese was astonishing, like the reactions of people at Pentecost: "We hear them speaking in our own tongue!"

Participants named spiritual listening as a fundamental discipline being requested by the Holy Spirit. They didn't see this as something reserved for religious, for the ordained, or for Church professionals. Being attentive to the Holy Spirit is something required of all of us to address the pastoral needs before us.

For many, the listening session was the first experience of this kind of spiritual, or synodal, listening. Without being



prompted, people expressed gratitude for the opportunity to pray, to hear others offer spiritual reflections, and to voice their own understanding of God's desire for his people. They appreciated the opportunity to slow down, to surrender control by not having to convince others of their position, and to spend quiet time discerning God's promptings.

They want more of this kind of spiritual listening, and becoming a more synodal Church will ensure this becomes a natural part of who we are and how we do things as Catholics. It is being integrated into our pastoral planning process.

28. Intentional spiritual listening is necessary for us to become a Church more faithful to our mission, to what Christ founded us to be. If we can embrace this kind of discernment in our pastoral planning, it will fundamentally change our culture to be more synodal and, I believe, give us the courage to help heal the polarization, fear, prejudices, and other barriers that are preventing us from answering Christ's call to his disciples for all to be one in him.

The synodal process is about conversion. The synodal transformation of the Church will happen through conversion of relationships among individuals in how we listen to each other; the conversion of how we make decisions in the Church; and the conversion of bonds between communities, churches, and other groups of people.

I turn now to that second conversion of ecclesial processes and offer my vision for how this enables each of us to claim our baptismal right to be sent on mission, to be a disciple of Christ.

The synodal process is about conversion.

Being Sent on Mission

29. "To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity," Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth). We must be attentive to the common good "juridically, civilly, politically and culturally" in the life of society. "The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors," he writes, "the more effectively we love them" (n. 7).

The Church's principle of the common good builds upon our belief that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and, therefore, each of us has an innate dignity. However, the common good is not just the best for the greatest number of people.



30. Pope Leo explains in *Magnifica Humanitas*: "In this sense, we can say that the whole is 'greater than the sum of its parts' and that, for this very reason, 'the mere sum of individual interests is not capable of generating a better world for the whole human family.' Indeed, it is an illusion to think that simply pursuing one's own progress without caring for others is sufficient for contributing to the good of all. This view ignores the inherent and specific value of the common good, which is the result of an 'interdependence' that creates a network of social good that expands and has an impact on people. The common good is a 'plus,' the result of interaction and mutual influence that connects various actions, initiatives, efforts and decisions. If we were to add up the individual goods, we could not explain the existence of this 'plus' that transcends them and, at the same time, enriches them (n. 61)."

31. No one is saved alone, and no community is a sanctuary for salvation unless we allow ourselves to be oriented by that community toward the common good.

Co-responsibility is a relatively new term for many of us, but it is rooted in the fundamental values we share as Catholics. It is a way that we fulfill the Christian definition of being a community: a group of people who agree to grow together in relationship with God.

CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND ECCLESIAL PROCESSES

32. This is precisely where pastoral councils and finance councils become not simply useful, but necessary to the Church's mission.

Too often we have misunderstood these councils as governing bodies or as mere advisory committees that exist to affirm decisions already made. Neither reflects the vision the Church offers us.

Nor is a parish council simply a way of extending the pastor's reach, additional ears and eyes gathered so one man can hear more from his parish than he otherwise could. That limited view sells the council short. A council that exists only to gather intelligence for the pastor's use has become an instrument of observation rather than a place of encounter.

Parish councils exist because the Holy Spirit has not distributed his gifts to the ordained alone. Through Baptism, every member of the faithful carries experiences, insights, and charisms that belong to the whole Church, not merely to the individual who holds them.

This is not a recent innovation. The Second Vatican Council described the laity not as passive recipients of pastoral care, but as co-responsible participants in the mission of Christ. When *Lumen Gentium* speaks of pastors being helped by the experience of the laity to make "clearer and more suitable decisions both in spiritual and in temporal affairs," so that "the whole church, strengthened by all its members, is able more effectively to carry out its mission for the life of the world," the church fathers are not offering a concession to modern culture (n. 37). They are describing the normal life of a Church that believes the Holy Spirit has truly been poured out upon all the baptized.

33. Some may wonder why I keep mentioning finance councils alongside pastoral councils in the same breath. Isn't one concerned with people, and the other with budgets? The Church has never understood stewardship that way.

Every parish budget is a moral document. It tells the story of what a parish loves and prioritizes. When a finance council decides to invest in youth ministry or chooses to sustain a food pantry rather than postpone it for another year, those are not merely financial decisions. They are pastoral decisions expressed in dollars.

A finance council that knows only the numbers can make one kind of decision. A finance council that knows the mission and the people behind the numbers will make a different kind of decision, and a better one in line with its mission. Stewardship of resources and knowledge of the flock were never meant to be separated.

34. To those of you who are not ordained: you are not in your parish as volunteers filling a gap in your pastor's schedule. And you are not there to replace the unique and sacred role that your pastor has, a role that I highlighted earlier.

You have another important responsibility to fulfill. Remember Pope Francis' famous call for pastors to have the smell of their sheep? You already smell like the sheep in ways your pastor



cannot. You know which family quietly stopped coming to Mass, and why. Your pastor needs that knowledge, not as data to be filed, but as a gift the Spirit has already placed in you through your own Baptism. He cannot smell like the sheep without you!

Synodality is, at its heart, nothing more than the Church learning to lead the way Jesus shepherded. Synodality is simply the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, organized: the shepherd lays down his life, the shepherd learns, the shepherd comes to know, and only then does the shepherd speak. The sheep recognize the voice that has learned them, and the sheep follow.



35. And here a distinction must be made carefully, because it is easy to get subtly wrong. Christian listening is not primarily a technique the shepherd uses to gather better information so that he might govern more effectively. If that is all it is, the sheep have been studied, not heard. They come because being heard — genuinely, patiently, without an agenda already fixed in advance — is itself an act of love and a recognition of their dignity as members of the Body of Christ. A sheep that has only ever been observed has not yet been known.

We can run a pastoral planning process that looks, from the outside, exactly like synodality — comment cards collected, opinions tabulated, a report produced — and still have failed at the thing itself if the process was conducted in the way a company might survey and market to its customers, rather than letting what is heard genuinely change the shepherds who hear it. The Church does not possess a *sensus fidei* so that it can be measured and filed away. She possesses it so that pastors might be enlightened by the ones they lead.

A council convened to be studied has missed the point of its own existence. A council convened to be heard has become exactly what Christ would intend it to be.

Any pastoral plan that is solely the work of the pastor is sure to die as soon as the pastor leaves the parish. The sense of the faithful is what can keep a parish thriving, year in and year out, if the faithful have ears to hear and eyes to see what God is doing in their midst.

36. Listening with the Heart told us that the sense of the faithful is already awakened and aware of the need for authentic co-responsibility in our archdiocese. First indications of an appreciation for true co-responsibility among clergy and laity emerged through the listening sessions and survey responses. People told us that sharing responsibilities is essential for sustainable parish growth and mission.

People voiced deep gratitude for dedicated priests, deacons, and religious, while expressing strong concern over clergy burnout due to heavy administrative, financial, facility, and pastoral demands. Participants called for empowering lay members to handle operational, administrative, and outreach roles so clergy can focus on sacramental and pastoral care.

In rural regions like the Nemaha-Marshall and Leavenworth deaneries, as well as urban centers facing financial strain, participants emphasized the need for inter-parish collaboration, resource sharing, joint programming, and creative planning to maintain rural parish life and Catholic school viability.

CONCLUSION

37. Brothers and sisters, as we continue the Renewal from the Heartland pastoral planning process, I am not asking you to become another committee. I am asking you to become another way the Church knows Christ's sheep.

The measure of a parish is not whether people know the Church's name. It is whether, in the hour they most needed mercy, they discovered the Church already knew their name.

That is the Church I believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to become. It is the Church envisioned by the Second Vatican Council. It is the Church Pope Francis and Pope Leo have challenged us to build. It is the Church our world longs to encounter.

And if we become that kind of Church, something beautiful begins to happen. People no longer encounter only a parish. They encounter the Good Shepherd himself. Through the listening of his people, they hear his voice. Through the compassion of his people, they experience his mercy. Through the communion of his people, they discover they are not alone.

38. I come back to where I began: Our hearts are already burning within us. We have begun to hear God speaking to us through one another. Our eyes and ears are being opened by the breaking and the sharing of the Bread, the Body of Christ. We are running back to Jerusalem to tell our sisters and brothers: We have seen the Lord! He is alive and among us!

May our archdiocesan patroness, the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, intercede for our continuing renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Given at the Chancery on 12 September 2026 before the People of God gathered for the Renewal from the Heartland Convocation, I am



Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Shawn M. McKnight

Most Reverend Shawn McKnight, S.Th.D.
Archbishop of Kansas City in Kansas

A Prayer for Renewal from the Heartland

O Most Sacred Heart of Jesus,

You know the hungers we cannot name,
and desire friendship with us.

Today we entrust to your Sacred Heart
a Renewal from the Heartland for the people of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas.

Teach us to listen with our hearts:
to hear your voice in silence,
to recognize your presence in one another,
and to discern the will of the Holy Spirit.

Bring about the conversion you desire in us.

Convert our relationships:
Where there is division, bring communion;
Where there is isolation, a sense of belonging;
Where there are wounds, bring healing and mercy.

Convert our processes for decision-making:
Free us from the temptation to begin with our own answers, and to discern together where your Spirit leads us.
Form in us a true sense of co-responsibility,
where mutual respect among the clergy, religious, and lay faithful strengthens our ability to be one Body in Christ.

Convert and strengthen the bonds between us:
Deepen our communion across parishes and deaneries,
and make us one Church walking together in mission.
Give us eyes to see those who are not yet with us,
ears to hear those whose voices we have not yet heard,
and hearts that desire to know them as you know them.

May all we discern and all that we do
transform our parishes into centers of charity and sanctuaries of mercy,
and make us missionary disciples,
with hearts aflame with your love.

O Sacred Heart of Jesus, make our hearts like unto thine.
O Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.
Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us.

Amen.

THE ARCHDIOCESE OF KANSAS CITY IN KANSAS

Appendix

KEY DOCUMENTS AND RESOURCES

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