

A PEOPLES EXHORTATION

TO THE HOLY FATHER, POPE FRANCIS

TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD

FOLLOWING OUR EXPERIENCE OF COVID-19

Preamble:

We, the strategy team of Catholic Church Reform International are a network of over eighty global organizations from Argentina, Australia, Austria, the Basque Country, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, United Kingdom, and United States together with more than 8000 individuals actively engaged in Church reform. We invited people globally to consider through a survey whether the experience of Covid-19 had changed what is important to them and whether they intended to change anything about their life as they transitioned through the pandemic.

This broad initiative is in response to the Papal Exhortation on the Amazonian Synod, released in February 2020, just as the Corona virus pandemic began its global impact. In the Amazonian Synod, Pope Francis immersed himself into the people and the culture they live in to understand the obstacles and opportunities they face. Likewise, through this survey, we have attempted to do the same – really listening to the diversity of voices and seek the Spirit-guided perspectives of the People of God. In his encyclical, *Querida Amazonia* (Beloved Amazonia), Pope Francis shared his pastoral vision for the world including his social, cultural, ecological, and ecclesial dreams. He does not dictate the content of our dreams for us. Instead, he exhorts us to engage in the creative work of dreaming together with him. His vision stirred us to imagine our own hopes and dreams for the future of our world and our church in the world.

We recognize the church reform community is but one viewpoint of the whole. To offer an inclusive recognition of the broader communion, we engaged in listening to a wider set of voices, drawing primarily from Catholic links, but open to all who identify with Christ's call to love one another in all our diversity, across religious, cultural, and political lines. People were invited to dream about the social, cultural, ecological, and spiritual/religious realities in their world. The survey was conducted from July to September 2020 in five languages (English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese). We received eight hundred responses from thirty countries spanning six continents, including the United States (39%), Australia (33%), with 12% coming from the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland. While we believe we speak for a broader group, when we refer to the People of God, we are primarily reflecting the views of the participants in this survey.

This work is our prayerful epiphany respecting and acknowledging the people within their cultural diversity, including their needs, obstacles, and opportunities. We engaged in a holistic understanding of the power of relationships with one another, with the Divine, and with all creation. The summary result, which we dare to call *A Peoples Exhortation*, is a parallel effort to reflect an incarnate journey and to collect broad perspectives with many points of connectedness. For centuries, the Catholic Church has tried to make everyone sing one note, but we believe beautiful harmony can be made from all the different notes.

In Pope Francis's newest book, *Let us Dream: the Path to a Better Future*, he extends our view further. While the pandemic is a more immediate and compelling crisis, there are other crises beyond our own boundaries that are painful reminders of a suffering world in need of healing, e.g., 3.7 million people recently died of hunger in just four months. We have had time for introspection; for many, this has turned into prayer and contemplation. We have questioned what is important to us as reflected in the survey. Recognizing that the pandemic's disruptive effect has changed our behavior by necessity but change in us is also occurring. It is from this place that we are motivated to accept Francis's invitation to create a New Evangelization *together*.

The majority respondents affirmed the following:

Personal experience of life during Covid-19 and its restrictions:

At the start of the pandemic, Pope Francis characterized the worldwide trauma as: "God's call on people to judge what is most important to them and resolve to act accordingly from now on." A significant majority (72%) believe that the restrictions brought on by the pandemic deepened our sense of the importance of our interconnectedness. Many (42%) found that the lockdown helped us reconnect with ourselves through self-reflection, to connect with our purpose, and to reach out and touch those in need.

Technology became a liturgical medium connecting the celebration of Mass throughout the world often enabling a more creative, participatory experience locally and globally. On Sundays, we enjoyed gathering more personally, able to see each other, pray together, and engage in a dialogue homily. When we consecrated the bread and wine, each with a morsel of bread and cup in front of us, we became present to one another with Christ in our midst.

The pandemic's impact on our dreams for the kind of world we envision:

A significant majority (85%) of us have hope that as society reopens, we would co-create a new normal, that is, a new way of treating others as we would like to be treated. Many (59%) also affirmed that the experience inspired our dreams for a world where people will take active responsibility for injustices that must be confronted. Many of us expressed our dreams for a world where people are willing to stand against racism, sexism, and injustices of all kinds, including women's inequality, attacks on the LGBT community, shabby treatment of migrants and their children fleeing tyranny, and gross disparities in access to health care and the possibilities of human flourishing. Similarly, a third of us affirmed our belief that this global pandemic has brought the world together like nothing we have ever seen in our lifetime. Only some (15%) believed that it fuelled more division than union due to the violence and looting that occurred during some of the protest demonstrations.

We collectively hope for a world where relationships have taken priority and where individualism gives way to concerns for issues outside of ourselves: including care for the environment, solidarity with others especially the poor, and experiencing a new spirituality rooted in these principles. The pandemic confirms our belief that the world is deeply interconnected and each of our choices will determine the well-being of all.

The effect on churches and our faith during Covid-19:

Two-thirds of us discovered new ways of *celebrating our faith* while twenty-five percent felt that closed churches opened new ways for *living our faith* with one another. Faith became a lived experience rather than simply a traditional service. Only 14% said this made them feel *orphaned* without being in churches. A small percentage (8%) said they were indifferent to churches reopening, as their message has no relevance for them. Significantly, only a very few (3%) declared a belief in a personal and private God, so felt no need to attend any church.

Many felt a sense of "liberation" having broken the *habit* of traditional religious observances, describing Zoom liturgies as being more in keeping with early church gatherings in homes. We found these celebrations often to be more meaningful and ecumenical. Some indicated gatherings were more inclusive (locally, nationally, and internationally). New models of Reconciliation began emerging that do not require a priest as mediator.

The Church's Role and Relationship to the world:

The majority (83%) agree that churches need to be more welcoming, inclusive, and nurturing to the people they serve. Functioning as priests through our Baptism, we are to be in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and those unable to defend themselves. The pandemic has brought into focus Francis's likening the church to a "field hospital" where our role is compassionate outreach to those who are suffering, who have lost loved ones, and/or who have lost their businesses or their jobs.

Clericalism and patriarchy, the power tools of the institution, are no longer held in esteem by the people. Rather, we concur with Vatican II that the people are the church, and the governance of the institution is the antithesis of that imagery. We are the Body of Christ. We are Christ for one another in these times.

Our changed perspective of the church's role resulting from Covid-19:

Most (75%) agree that the hierarchical church needs to become more open, transparent, and responsive to the People of God. We see the shortage of priests as the Spirit's call for them to be from the community and directly chosen by the community it serves. The people should determine, as they did in Acts, whose gifts are most closely aligned with the needs of the community. These individuals chosen should have the option of marrying and/or being bi-vocational with a second career.

There is widespread agreement that the hierarchical, clerical structure of the church must be transformed into a *synodal church*. We share Pope Francis's understanding that the term represents a process of discernment, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, involving bishops, priests, religious, and lay Catholics, each according to the gifts and charisms of their vocation. We see key steps needed to help the church evolve into a synodal Church. Two-thirds of us want ecclesial conferences to be formed, that is, organizations made up of bishops *and laity* who make decisions together for our dioceses. We believe the faithful must have a deliberative voice in its decision-making since it is our economic support that makes the church a viable institution. Specifically, we must elect our own bishops. The voices of all theologians need to be heard and those who have been silenced must be reinstated perpetuating diverse thinking for synodality to become real. **Our participation in Sacramental life** is contingent on our well-formed conscience making us fully responsible and accountable for decisions based on conscience.

A shared culture of love, mercy, and compassion will replace the culture of rules that many have endured for centuries. Our vision of a synodal church is an inclusive assembly gathered to openly discuss theological issues with some emphasis on the formation and empowerment of lay leadership in Small Christian Communities. Online communities are a byproduct during the lockdown of many new groups formed organically through Zoom. We recognize that each community is unique, and, in matters of doctrine, the culture and mores must be respectful of our differences.

Transformation of the institution is contingent upon transformation in us. The pandemic has awakened us to our role and responsibilities to pastorally care for one another as Christ cared for us. We have come to terms with the fact that we must become adult Catholics accepting a new evangelical role. We can no longer be mute in the face of institutional injustice; we can no longer be obedient to doctrinal demands that are incompatible with our faith; we must no longer be impotent and passive in living our faith openly and intentionally for the world to see the light we share.

Our dreams on women in the church and in the world:

Discrimination in any institution is an abomination of our values. An overwhelming majority (91%) believe it is essential for the well-being of our world and the church that women be treated equally and offered the same opportunities in all areas of life. The just role for women in all ministry can no longer be an institutional decision if the call comes from a higher power. In this era of priest shortages, we see no reason why this issue cannot be a priority for the institution. So strong is this call for equality of women, we hold that this is the most critical issue facing the global church today.

We believe that all people are created to fulfill a mission and 84% believe those called to ordained ministry, if found to meet the needed qualifications, must be welcomed to act in that capacity regardless of gender or sexuality. Some 70% believe that, by virtue of our Baptism, each of us is called to function as priest, prophet, and leader in service to one another. Until women are truly equal, appreciated for their contributions and skill sets, and are freed to pursue their "call" in all cultures, the church and the world will remain impoverished.

Racial Discrimination:

The majority (93%) affirm that the color of one's skin is inconsequential. Racism has killed and injured more people than Covid-19 and has done so for millennia. More than three-quarters of us were inspired by the peaceful protest marches against racism occurring all around the world when George Floyd was killed in the United States. Greater acceptance of diversity strengthens our ability

to have a synodal church. 45% (mostly from the United States) expressed concerns about the violence and looting occurring during protest demonstrations.

We acknowledge the importance of cultural awareness recognizing that embracing diversity goes beyond ending racism. Those who experience tensions between races – caste systems in countries that foster such differences with privilege, power, and wealth – must come to realize that such discrimination is morally reprehensible and unjust. We commit to doing our part in working with such societies as opportunities arise.

The vast majority (94%) believe in the value of cultural diversity in communities, namely, that all are enriched when we are open to share with and receive from other cultures. We believe the world would benefit greatly if there were more frequent encounters and deeper engagement with other cultures. We need to somehow **SEE** what others are seeing through their eyes and not colored by our own biases and preconceptions. 87% want to see the rights of indigenous peoples respected in their way of life and in their rituals of liturgical celebrations. There is absolutely no place for racial, caste, or privilege discrimination in our Church.

Discrimination of the LGBT+ community:

An overwhelming majority (92%) call for equal recognition and treatment of all human beings regardless of sexual orientation. 71% of us believe that people should be allowed to marry the person they love. There appears to be greater ambivalence on the issue of whether LGBT+ couples should be allowed the sacrament of marriage, or some other form of recognition. Only 20% believe that LGBT+ couples should receive a blessing from the church in lieu of marriage. However, it appears that 12% still regard homosexuality as a state in need of transformative help to be acceptable to society. In general, we proclaim that all are equal in the eyes of God and we are opposed to the institutional church's centuries-old bias against the LGBT community as living in a "disordered state."

Our hopes and dreams on ecology:

We (92%) see this world as having been entrusted to us as a gift from a benevolent God and we support Pope Francis's vision as expressed in his encyclical *Laudato Si* (Caring for our Common Home): "A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach ... in order to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." We recognize climate change, believe global warming is real, and is the responsibility of all people and all nations to take proactive action immediately. With 82% having noted a positive change in attention to the environment during the lockdown, this leads us to dream of a world where we would all do our part to keep the land, air and water clean for ourselves and future generations. We oppose exploitation of the land or water – indeed all the earth – for profit, without consideration for its sustainability.

Our views on small faith communities after our Covid-19 experience:

There is a strong global movement toward the formation of Small Christian Communities. Most of us (83%) believe that both formal church gatherings and small communities provide opportunities to practice our faith. More than half (54%) feel Small Christian Communities that meet in homes, online, or in public spaces offer a more meaningful way to share our faith together. Many believe it is time for us to return to the simplicity of the early Christians. We believe church is primarily about community with about 30% seeing religious buildings diminishing in importance as places of worship. We want to see the theology of communal worship revisited making the Eucharistic meal truly as Christ intended it. Liturgy needs to be less of the people observing a re-enactment and more inclusive and participatory, reflective of the diversity of its membership with rituals that provide meaning and relevance to our daily lives.

Our belief and understanding of God:

Most (76%) believe that God is in us and we are in God. Two-thirds of us see God in every person we meet, especially in the poor, those who suffer, and in all those who need our help. 58% of us believe in and understand God as a unity of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 42% describe God as a force or spirit. Similarly, 39% express belief in only one God, whose nature remains a mystery.

The range of beliefs and understandings of God suggests that faith is personal rather than communal:

- God is a mystery and a reality.
- God is beyond intellectual "knowing" and all these statements can only be human metaphors.
- We experience God as Creator, incarnate in Christ Jesus, and Sanctifier in the Holy Spirit.
- God is a community of love – creator, redeemer, and sanctifier – loving and being loved.
- Relationship (love) is the essence of the Creator.
- Our knowledge of God is reflected in our relationship to other people and creation itself.

Describing our spirituality:

Most of us acknowledge some spirituality but the nature of that practice varies widely:

- 74% feel that God is with us and guides us.
- 73% say our spirituality is based on expressing our love for God through our treatment of the people with whom we are in contact.
- 63% describe praying conversationally with God.
- 46% say we respond to the influence that guides us through prayer.
- 22% describe spirituality as based mainly on how we treat other people.
- Only 5% say, when praying, we prefer to use prescribed prayers.
- A very few describe spirituality as based on our practice of the church sacraments and a mix of formal and informal prayer.

Most of us feel our spirituality is based on our call to be both active, social justice Christians as well as contemplative in prayer. Jesus Christ occupies a central place in the spirituality of many. We see prayer as conversation, silence, listening, entering with grace into the Mystery of God. We recognize that as we get to know God, we come to know our true selves and our call to serve.

Our description of the value of religion, understood as a belief system, in today's world:

For many, religion is a structural vehicle established to oversee the whole church, to nourish our faith, and to help us respond to the larger issues in society. 71% of us believe religion poses values by which to live our lives. Half (51%) say religion is a way of influencing how we think and behave. About one third say religion helps promote order in the world. However, we recognize that this is more a governance issue and not always a faith issue.

A variety of opinions exist for the role of religion in society. Many agree that religion also divides people and creates conflict while 15% believe that religion needs the support of an institution to be viable. And 13% indicate no need for a belief system: it is enough to know our God/Spirit in our hearts.

Some distinguish religion from spirituality indicating a preference to move away from religion and toward a universal spirituality. Inter-religious dialogue is important to prevent conflict and to promote understanding and an ability to work together to solve major problems in the world. A majority see the institution and faith as conjoined twins solidly fused together. We believe that faith is a tool for healing and a provision of hope in a troubled world. But it can also be used as an instrument of harm to discriminate, persecute, or manipulate. Our Catholic religion has been misused and therefore must proceed with grace and caution. As Christians who embrace the faith with a passion, we must be agents of change modelling Gospel values rather than punitive institutional practices that have outlived their value.

Sidebar Survey Perceptions:

Without profound changes, the church will be more of a "consumer business" than a community of followers of Jesus:

78% agree or strongly agree; 12% have no opinion; only 7% disagree or strongly disagree.

As the older generation dies, the church too will die unless it begins to meet the needs of the people, especially the younger generation:

84% agree or strongly agree; 6% have no opinion; The rest disagree or strongly disagree.

Expressions of those of us who have needs from the church that are not currently being met:

Of all who took our survey, 67% responded with personal needs and comments varied widely:

- Assure that all are welcome at the Lord's table.
- Deal with institutional discrimination more compassionately and equitably, particularly with divorced Catholics, LGBT+ Catholics, and women.
- Expand the Church's position on respect for human life beyond birth control and abortion. Include the right to a decent life for infants already born; access to health care for the poor, the disabled, and the elderly; humane treatment of immigrants and their children; oppose discrimination of minorities, women, and the LGBT+ community; oppose unjust wars and the death penalty.
- Create democratic functioning, financial accountability, and increased role of the laity as provided for in Vatican II documents and Canon Law.
- Invite lay involvement globally into a respectful institutional culture where our contributions are acknowledged and appreciated.
- Welcome non-traditional roles for women priests, married priests, bi-vocational priests, and gay priests.
- Encourage primacy of conscience.
- Be a church that, like Jesus, identifies with the poor and powerless instead of a clerical church that feeds on power and wealth.
- Encourage people to choose out of love and not fear.
- Update training of priests in seminaries.
- Treat women with equality and welcome women having a voice.
- Change church governance structure to include ecclesial councils made up of clergy and laity.
- Transform the church into a listening, inclusive, participatory community.
- Call for openness, transparency, and responsiveness from bishops and priests.
- Provide training opportunities for lay parishioners, such as guiding the laity to make personal decisions based on a well-formed conscience and to practice discernment in our everyday lives.
- Call upon lay people to take responsibility for our Church.
- Demand zero tolerance of clergy sexual abuse.

Conclusion:

Working toward becoming synodal will be a primary focus of our work and understanding the needs of a global community means that that dialogue must occur. Through this process, we will move toward setting up a plan of action and share our plan with Pope Francis and Bishops globally.

The overwhelming voice of the People of God is that the universal Church needs to get back to Jesus' mission, moving away from being a church of laws toward becoming a global community of love. Relationships are the foundation of the faith we share and, to be in right relationships, we as the People of God need to be inclusive of the whole of God's creation.

We are the Church and we, especially women and young people, must be major participants in the church of the future. It is our hope that the institutional Church will reform its governance structures to become synodal structures that are inclusive, transparent, welcoming diversity, and accountable to its people. But for this to happen, we as the People of God must be willing to do our part to bring needed change within us. And this can happen in different ways in communities everywhere. Especially during this Covid-19 pandemic, people have reached out to each other irrespective of religion, race, or economic class.

We are listening and responding to the call of the Spirit, the *sensus fidei*, leading us on to a new world order. This Exhortation coming forth from the People of God must be welcomed and accepted as part of the dialogue leading up to the October 2022 Synod in Rome. Since Synod literally means "walking together," there must be lay people who walk this journey together/side by side with bishops and priests. For there to be a true synodal process, the *Lineamenta* (the working document to prepare the agenda) must be liberally distributed throughout the whole Church – to lay leaders not merely to conferences of bishops and the Pontifical University; to the Union of Superior Generals of women and not just to the Union Superior Generals of men; to International lay groups and not just to clergy. The 2022 Synod must demonstrate advances in the faith that will concretely influence institutional decisions.

As global communities of faith, we need to create deeper local relationships to understand and be more accountable to our neighbors in need. We would consider it a blessing to be an activating agent in uniting our institutional and communal differences in a liturgical celebration.

We the People of God are assuming our rightful place in our Church. As adults, we now take the responsibility for being silent when we suffered from the injustice in our own Church, the lack of compassion when we were ostracized because we disagreed but never opening a dialogue to understand our differences.

This document represents a consensus of those who participated in our survey. We are heartened by what we see as an increasing willingness of people at the grass roots to transform themselves and their small communities. We deem it an appropriate expression of a synodal church and essential for transformative change that must begin now. In genuine synodal style, we find ourselves open to dialogue with the goal of really seeing what others are seeing through their eyes with the result, if not consensus, finding a harmony with the differences. We want to see our institutional church encouraging diocesan and parochial transformations, recognizing that the local community knows its own needs best. As a result of the changes that have occurred within us during this pandemic, change in our understanding and practice of our faith is already underway. We are determined to continue this effort to return our church to a welcoming, inclusive community based on love of God and love of one another as taught us by Jesus Christ. We as the People of God must have recognition of the work of the Spirit among us. Our hope is that our beloved church will respond with courage, to be true to the mission of Jesus, and to be a catalyst that makes the reign of God's love, peace, and justice a reality in our world.