



Synod on Synodality Synthesis Report

The Diocese of Nashville



Introduction: The Synodal Experience

The Diocese of Nashville, with the Most Reverend J. Mark Spalding, DD, JCL as bishop, covers the geographical area of 38 counties in Middle Tennessee. Within its territory are 60 churches and 16 diocesan schools, serving roughly 83,000 registered Catholics. The diocese began planning and conducting its diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality in October 2021.

Process: Organization and Milestones

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Diocese of Nashville journeyed on a path toward greater synodality that resulted in the following milestones.

Preparatory Period (October 17, 2021 – January 10, 2022)

- Mrs. Erin Stracener, Director of the Tribunal, and Dr. Brad Peper, Director of the Office of Faith Formation were appointed as the Diocesan Contact Persons to lead the diocesan phase.
- A bilingual webpage on the diocesan website was developed to explain the upcoming Synod on Synodality and to offer resources for the People of God to learn more about the synod and how to participate in it.
- Given the limited timeframe and geographical size of the diocese, it was decided that the best means for eliciting the diverse voices of the People of God was to utilize not only the parishes and their existing ministries but also other organizations in the diocese: Catholic schools, Theology on Tap, Catholic Charities, assisted living facilities, prison ministries, etc.
- Parish pastors were asked to submit the names of parish facilitators to organize and lead listening sessions with the assistance of parish staff and/or volunteers.
- Bilingual discussion questions in English and Spanish were created, addressing the ten thematic nuclei, and were organized under the three interrelated pillars of a Synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission (see Addendum I). These questions were modified depending on the needs of a specific listening session, though the core themes remained the same. Additionally, a bilingual online survey was created for those unable to attend local listening sessions.
- Awareness of the synod and upcoming local listening sessions was raised through the following means: the diocesan website, multiple articles in the *Tennessee Register* (the official newspaper of the diocese), talks and homilies from Bishop Spalding, parish bulletins, priest announcements, and social media.





Consultation Period (January 11, 2022 – April 29, 2022)

- During this phase, in-person and online meetings were held regularly by the Diocesan Contact Persons and facilitators to share best practices and to assist one another as we journeyed together in the synodal process.
- Approximately 275 listening sessions throughout the diocese were hosted by the facilitators and Diocesan Contact Persons with 75% of the parishes and 95% of the schools participating in the process. Listening sessions ranged from 2 to 70 participants depending on the location and size of the community hosting the session. Each session began with the *Adsumus, Sancte Spiritus* prayer to invite the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the synodal process.
- There were 560 anonymous, online survey responses submitted.
- Facilitators communicated their findings to the Diocesan Contact Persons at the conclusion of the consultation phase.
- A final listening session, introduced by Bishop Spalding, was conducted with the facilitators to gather feedback regarding the process and to provide an opportunity to respond directly to the themes as well.

Synthesis Period (April 30, 2022 – June 30, 2022)

- Reports from listening session were analyzed to discern if there were significant differences among responses based on parish size.
- Quantitative analysis from the surveys was performed, and the results were depicted graphically (see Addendum II).
- The synthesis document was then presented to Bishop Spalding for acceptance.

Experience: The Journey and its Setbacks

Most surprising about the synodal journey was the overall positive feedback from facilitators and participants. Despite some of the initial opposition exhibited on social media and other national platforms following the Holy Father's universal invitation, the response in Middle Tennessee was one of praise and gratitude for the opportunity to dialogue with the Church. The following are a few of the comments highlighting this appreciation and the desire to continue a form of local consultation after the Synod's conclusion:

I learned much through this process. I was especially moved by the depth and profoundness of our youth and their candor. Personally, I would like to something like this encouraged maybe every few years as an internal parish and diocese process to keep our parishes fresh and forward focused.





All who participated expressed gratitude that this forum was available to express their feelings. Many also commented that they would welcome more meetings throughout the year and not just during the Synod.

The dichotomy between the “poles” of the Catholic world is doing great damage to her mission...an opportunity this synod gives is for both of us – all of us—to listen and receive correction where we fall short, then encourage each other in the good!

Understandably, some participants did raise critical concerns about the degree to which their voices would be heard and how their ideas would be implemented by the hierarchy of the Church. Others expressed that, following the principle of subsidiarity, many of the ideas could and should be enacted at the parish and diocesan levels prior to or regardless of the Synod’s outcome.

There were procedural and communication setbacks experienced during the diocesan phase. First, there was an issue regarding the timing of the phase. The necessary demands of the Lenten and Easter seasons made it difficult for parish facilitators to devote their full energy to this endeavor. Likewise, this time of year also made it more difficult for the Jewish and Islamic communities to participate given their religious celebrations. Second, there were issues with communicating to the entire People of God. Despite a concerted effort to reach the different cultural communities in the diocese, more diverse participation was needed to reflect the diocesan population more adequately. Since the various cultural groups form a quiet, yet growing, strength in the diocese, finding a way to hear their voice will be a valuable necessity for the future of the Church in Middle Tennessee. Additionally, there was not an effective means found for reaching out to non-practicing Catholics. Regrettably, this is a growing population among Catholics and hearing their voices is also necessary for a richer synodal experience. Finally, it was also difficult to gather input from non-Catholic Christians and non-Christians, which demonstrates the need to create stronger networks within the diocese or rebuild the ones that existed prior to the pandemic.

Observations and Takeaways

General Observations

Most responses suggest a positive perception of the parishes in the diocese as living out the communion, participation, and mission of the Church (see Addendum II). Moreover, many participants discussed and highlighted the programs, organizations, and outreach opportunities that are continuing to work well and bring a positive impact to the life of the parish communities: Knights of Columbus, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Cursillo, Room in the Inn, youth groups, clothing and food drives, etc.

There were some demographic variations among responses in both the listening sessions and surveys that are worth noting. With the listening sessions, there were distinctions between the smaller, more rural parishes and the larger, more urban ones. These distinctions were generally





limited to overall liturgical preference and social issues, which are noted in the key takeaways. Smaller, more rural parishes also tended to feel more excluded in the diocese, perceiving the diocesan offices as more administratively focused; some of the participants would like to see more programmatic assistance and communication coming from the diocesan offices. In the survey responses, comments tended to be more polarized than what was reported in the listening sessions, reflecting the broader ideological and political divides in the current American culture. Surprisingly, little distinction in responses was found when accounting for demographic differences (age, sex, number of children, marital status, ethnicity, and education level). One trend noticed, however, was that there was a significant increase in n/a or unknown responses concerning questions about the mission of the Church when compared to responses concerning communion and participation. This may indicate more attention is needed toward mission diocesan wide.

Despite these nuanced distinctions, responses in both the listening sessions and surveys revealed a common sensibility in the diocese. As indicated by the following key takeaways, there is a great desire to continue building parish life through the sacraments, fellowship, family, and education to help extend the mission of the Church in reaching out to others in the surrounding community. These takeaways are a synthesis of the more specific suggestions and ideas coming from the People of God, which will help inform the universal Church as well as potentially form a blueprint as we journey together in this diocese.

Specific Findings: Key Takeaways

Communion

Worship

- The sacramental life of the Church was highly regarded throughout the diocese. Nevertheless, many participants, regardless of parish size and location, expressed the need for greater availability for worship and devotion, especially for Reconciliation and Adoration. This was notably prevalent among the smaller parishes, particularly those with multi-parish priests, and among working-aged adults.
- There was a wide range of preferred liturgical styles among participants with the vast majority being the *Novus Ordo*. Although smaller, rural parishes tended to advocate more traditional styles of worship (e.g., *ad orientem*, altar rails, etc.), and various participants expressed gratitude for retaining the Traditional Latin Mass, many participants in both the listening sessions and surveys recognized the need for varied styles. Participants suggested that a range of validly celebrated masses be offered, from traditional to contemporary, both throughout the diocese and within a single parish community. This sensibility was echoed strongly by the youth and young adults.
- Many identified music and singing in Mass as an important part of their celebration and worship. Participants from parishes with more robust music programs positively cited them, while participants without them suggested the need for improvement.





- Many participants expressed a strong desire to receive Holy Communion under both species.
- There is a great desire and appreciation for homilies that are strong in content and delivery. Regarding content, many would like to hear homilies that are more catechetical in nature, expounding on Catholic beliefs and practices, as well as those that treat current controversial issues in a pastoral manner. Additionally, many participants acknowledged that they struggled listening to homilies if the priest's native language differed from their own.

Fellowship

- Although favorably viewed, participants still expressed a strong need for parishes to be more welcoming, especially toward new members. Many suggested forming welcoming committees, having socials after Mass, and recognizing new members more publicly or finding other ways to integrate them into the community more quickly and relationally. Suggestions included hosting special dinners, creating mentoring programs, etc.
- Considering the negative effects the pandemic had on the communal environment of the parish, participants strongly emphasized a greater focus on creating or reviving social gatherings at the parish level, such as picnics, festivals, fish-frys, etc.

Integration

- Reflective of the rise of various immigrant populations in Middle Tennessee, participants expressed a clear concern and need for better integrating the English speaking and non-English speaking communities within the parish. Although greater emphasis was accorded to integration with the Hispanic community since they form the largest population of non-English speaking Catholics in the diocese, concerns regarding other groups (e.g., Sudanese, Coptic, etc.) were also raised. Parishes with more rapid cultural and linguistic changes express more difficulty with the transition. However, most participants desire to find ways to celebrate together but also acknowledge a need for how to accomplish this while still respecting a given community's cultural heritage. Some suggestions included cultural festivals, multi-language processions on Pentecost, multi-language sacramental aids, service projects, dinners, etc.

Participation

Communication

- Many participants report that while recruiting volunteers has always been difficult, it has become increasingly harder post-pandemic. The majority believe that shifting to a stronger interpersonal model of recruitment may be a more effective means for engaging more volunteers in the various ministries, events, and services offered in the parish. Methods offered included personal invitations, surveys to find particular gifts and talents (especially among new members), family-based opportunities, etc.





- While some participants felt their parish effectively communicates the various ministries and events offered in the community, other participants expressed a lack of knowledge regarding the various ways they could participate, what help was needed, or the commitment involved. Suggestions for clearer promotion included ministry fairs, weekly bulletin inserts, centralized event calendars, etc.
- Some suggested a more standard form of communication is needed throughout the diocese to communicate the various events occurring at the diocesan and parish levels.

Involvement

- Finding new and more effective ways to involve families in events, ministries, and services was consistently voiced. Many parents, especially those with younger children, found it difficult to participate in the life of the Church due to the hecticness of life and lack of childcare. Many suggested offering childcare during events, providing a list of babysitters in the parish, or creating family-focused events (e.g., movie night, family education, festivals, etc.) to help facilitate involvement.
- In parishes with a school, some participants expressed difficulty becoming involved with parish events if their children do not attend the school. Feeling separated, both communicatively and interpersonally from the other parents, they wish to find better ways to integrate.
- Many participants reported a significant decrease in participation from the youth following the pandemic. Creating ways to re-engage the youth both in programs and Mass was cited as a priority. Involving the youth more directly in decision-making processes, mentored leadership positions within ministries, and liturgical celebrations were suggested in addition to youth-oriented events and catechesis. The youth reported that they feel empowered when asked for their input, especially from priests, which increases their desire to want to participate in the life of the Church.
- Participants expressed a need for greater lay involvement in administrative decision-making and responsibility at the parish, seeing this as a potential means for clergy to be more available for sacramental opportunities in the parish.

Outreach

- Participants consistently expressed a greater need for liturgical inclusion as well as for programs and resources directed toward individuals who are at the periphery of the parish community. Most frequently cited are those with physical, emotional, or learning disabilities. The need for resources and programs extends to the family members of those with disabilities.
- Many cited programs and resources for those experiencing addiction, separation and divorce, or loss and grief as a major need throughout the diocese.





- Many stated the request for parish-based ministries to help the elderly with their spiritual needs. For those who need physical assistance, finding means of transportation and assistance as well as more handicap accessibility at the parish was frequently mentioned along with bringing communion and ministering to those who cannot attend Mass.
- Parishes of varying sizes revealed a strong desire to minister to those in prison. Although the diocese has a prison ministry, finding new methods for recruiting volunteers and promoting the ministry may be necessary given this concern. Listening sessions with prisoners further demonstrated the need for more outreach from “free-Catholics.” Prisoners expressed gratitude for what was already being done but would like to have more opportunities for reconciliation and communion, more correspondence with “free-Catholics,” and more Catholic publications and readings (e.g., newspapers, bulletins, access to EWTN, etc.).

Mission

Education

- A large portion of participants cited education as a means of fostering the faith among Catholics. Many would like more programs to be offered at the parish level for all ages, especially for high schoolers and adults. Others expressed the need for speakers and teachers who have expertise in doctrine and discipline. A consistent sentiment from listening sessions was the desire for more family-based or parent-based catechesis, which would enable parents to be better equipped as the first teachers of the faith.
- Some of the participants wished they could provide their children with a Catholic education; however, they find that they are unable to afford it.
- More robust education on both the contents of Scripture and Tradition was raised throughout most of the listening sessions. A common corollary concern among participants, especially young adults, was the need to teach the Catholic faith more boldly and avoid conforming Christ’s message to a modern or secular sensibility. The youth echoed the need for greater catechetical teaching but would also like more guidance in practically applying the teachings of the Church as well as learning more creative means to express their faith (e.g., art, music, physical activity, etc.). Additionally, they felt more education and discernment opportunities for vocations toward the priesthood and religious life were needed at the high school level.

Cooperation

- Ecumenical/Interreligious: Participants revealed a strong desire to reach out to those with differing faith traditions and religions; however, many expressed not feeling equipped to do so. Some suggestions for such outreach included creating local ministerial alliances, hosting ecumenical services (e.g., Taizé) or events, inviting speakers from other traditions, and visiting non-Catholic places of worship.





- Civic Presence: Many felt a need to have a greater presence in the public sphere, especially in areas that are predominantly Protestant, whether through Eucharistic Processions or participation in community projects and events.

Concerns

- The Pro-Life movement was cited consistently as one of the central issues the Church needs to continue promoting. Some participants suggested more attention is needed toward preventing the conditions that make abortion seem like an option. Others noted that all matters of life, from conception to natural death, need more emphasis.
- In both the listening sessions and surveys, people voiced the need for greater attention and discussion at the local level regarding the environment.
- Participant responses throughout the diocese demonstrated a clear struggle regarding the issues surrounding the LGBTQIA+ community. There were diverse responses exhibited that generally fell into one of three positions. Some participants stated that the Church and pastors need to speak more openly against behaviors that conflict with divine and natural law. Others expressed that, while the need to maintain the teaching of the Church is fundamentally necessary, parishes should be more welcoming to those whose lifestyles may conflict with it. Lastly, some participants felt the Church needs to change its position and not only welcome those who identify as LGBTQIA+ but also fully accept their lifestyle. More consistently expressed is the need for the Church to respond fully to the issues regarding gender, sexual attraction, and the appropriate response toward those who identify as LGBTQIA+.
- Many voiced the belief that more roles and greater decision-making opportunities for women are needed in the Church. The issue of women's ordination was also raised in some listening sessions. Although the issue has been definitively clarified regarding the priesthood, it is one that may require further elucidation and explanation concerning the diaconate. Nevertheless, the doctrine and discipline surrounding women's ordination continues to be perceived as an obstacle to the faith for some individuals.
- A need for the Church to provide greater transparency and restorative action regarding the sex abuse crisis was raised in both the surveys and listening sessions conducted in larger parishes.



Conclusion: Overview and Suggested Next Steps

One of the main objectives set for the diocesan phase of synodal consultations was “to listen to what God has been saying through the people of the diocese, to discern His will for the local Church and the pathways He is inviting the Church to follow in the diocese towards deeper communion, fuller participation, and more fruitful mission” (*Vademecum*, Appendix C). The act of listening, as testified by many participants, brought forth a greater appreciation for the Church and a deeper sense of renewal toward lived synodality. Although diverse in theological and liturgical expression, a shared voice echoed in many of the listening sessions, which reveals a common pathway for the diocese to follow. Participants in the Diocese of Nashville, through their expressed praise and concerns regarding the communion, participation, and mission of the Church, conveyed a strong eucharistic sensibility to be lived out in worship and in community life. As illustrated by some of the work produced from listening sessions with children (see Addendum III), there is a sense of enculturated reverence towards the Blessed Sacrament and a desire to live out this reverence in solidarity with the entire People of God.

Since an invitation to listening presupposes an act of responding, the suggested next step for continuing the Church’s synodal journey is for diocesan and parish leaders to review in depth the key takeaways and discern what priorities are appropriate and accomplishable for a given community. Some of the concerns raised, such as those regarding official statements relating to the LGBTQIA+ community, require a magisterial response. The vast majority, however, can be addressed at the local level to strengthen the vitality of the Diocese of Nashville. Another suggested next step is to continue the act of active listening following the Synod on Synodality. Such listening could take place on the parish or diocesan levels and proceed in a different manner from the current journey. What is most important is that the Church continues this journey together in lived synodality, listening to the Holy Spirit and reflecting the will of God.



Addendum I

Listening Session Questions

Communion

1. In our parish, do we have active participation in the sacramental life of the Church? What would help strengthen this participation?
2. Do Mass and the other liturgical celebrations and practices in our parish promote and engender a communal Church that lives out its Christian faith? How could our parish enhance our current practices to achieve this end?
3. Does our parish foster a Spirit-filled sense of belonging with and among the laity, new members, and visitors? How might we make the parish more welcoming and cohesive?
4. Does our parish provide calming respite from the anxieties and busyness of the world? How might we create better opportunities and space for reprieve?

Participation

1. How well does our parish foster lay participation in the life of the Church (i.e. volunteers, extraordinary ministers, etc.)? How might we increase such participation more fully?
2. How well do we equip parents with the knowledge and tools to pass on the faith effectively? What would be beneficial to help strengthen the family as the domestic church?
3. How vibrant are our youth programs? Are we adequately giving voice to the youth and young adults in our community? Are we effectively engaging them in the life and teachings of the Church?
4. How are we reaching those who might be at the periphery of the community (i.e. marginalized, disabled, disadvantaged, and neglected)? How are we providing a space that is inclusive to those of different cultures, races, socio-economic status? In what ways can we connect with them more effectively?

Mission

1. Within the parish, what initiatives or outreach programs exist to foster the faith among Catholics (both those who are actively and passively practicing their faith)? How are we evangelizing those with no religious affiliation? What other programs might be helpful in this endeavor?
2. Does our parish engage in dialogue with non-Catholic Christians and/or those of other faith traditions in order to promote the common good? How can the parish improve interfaith and interreligious communication?
3. What particular issues pertaining to the Church and society should we direct our attention and efforts toward? Are we actively engaged in social justice issues or is this an area that needs improvement in our parish?



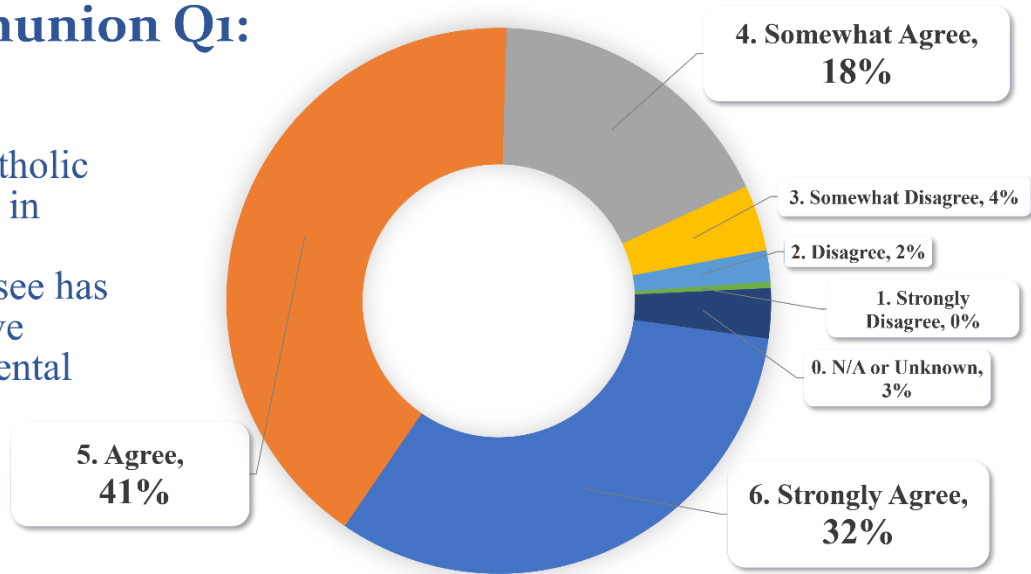


Addendum II

Statistical Summary of Survey Responses

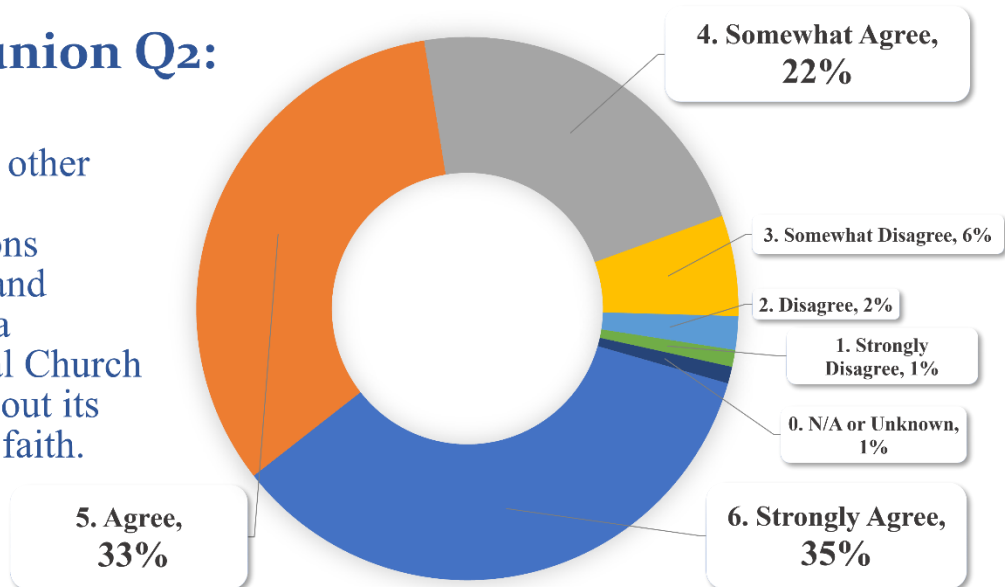
Communion Q1:

The Catholic Church in Middle Tennessee has an active sacramental life.



Communion Q2:

Mass and other liturgical celebrations promote and cultivate a communal Church that lives out its Christian faith.



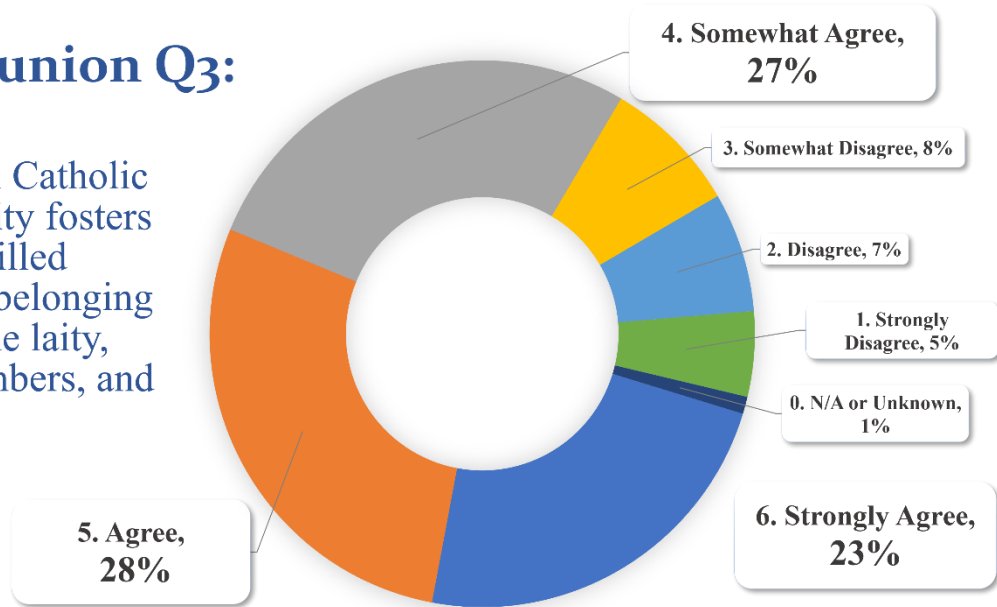


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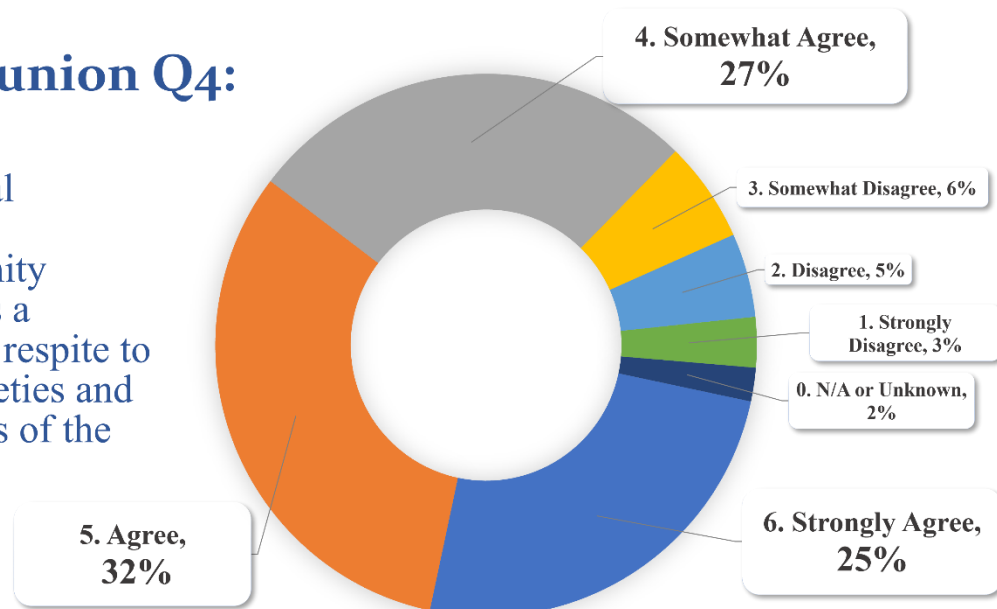
Communion Q3:

The local Catholic community fosters a Spirit-filled sense of belonging among the laity, new members, and visitors.



Communion Q4:

The local Catholic community provides a calming respite to the anxieties and busyness of the world.



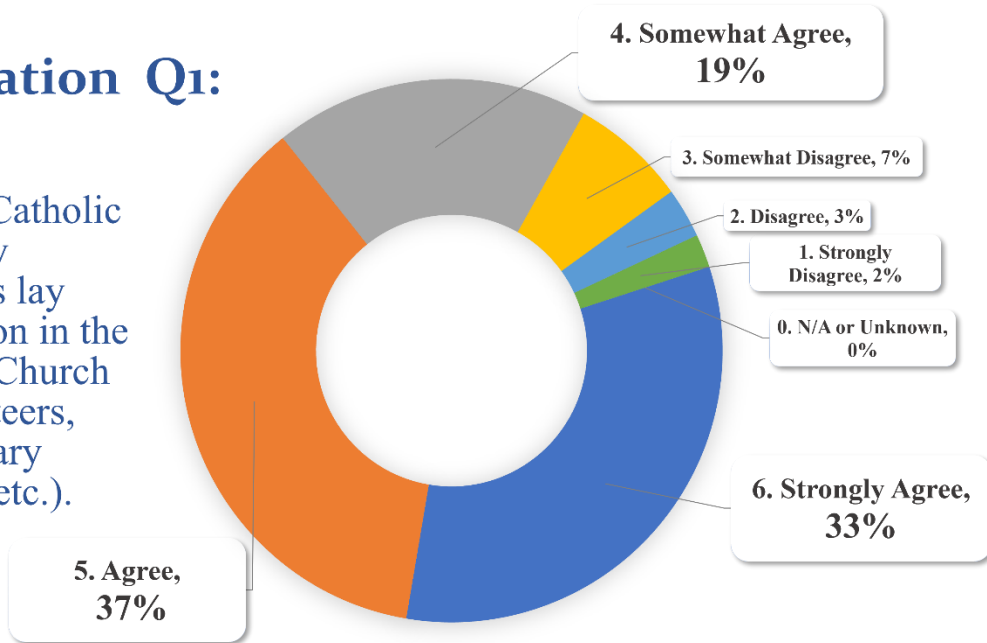


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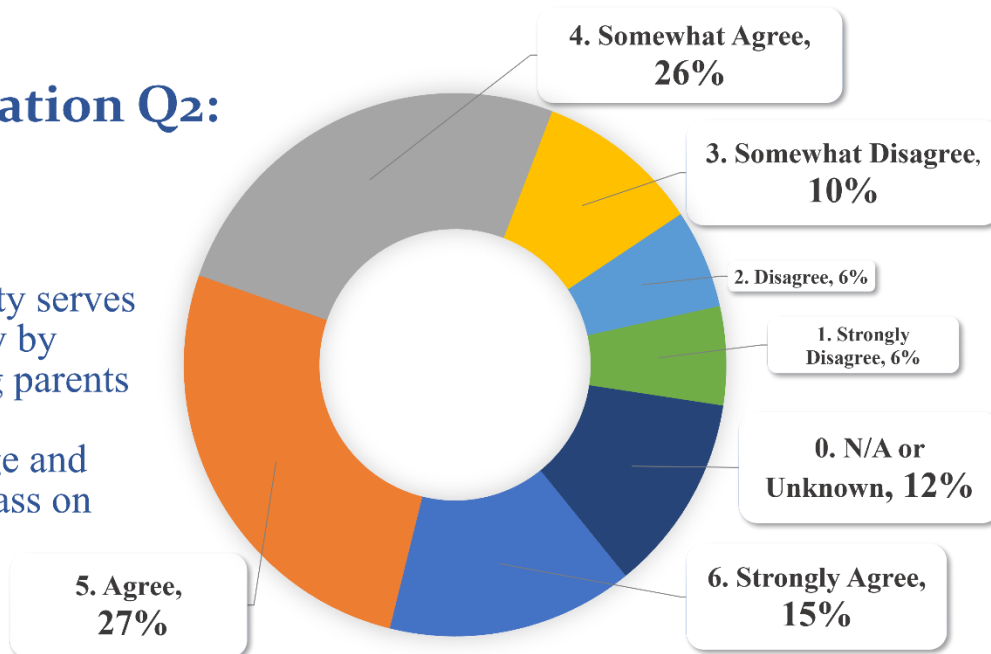
Participation Q1:

The local Catholic community encourages lay participation in the life of the Church (i.e. volunteers, extraordinary ministers, etc.).



Participation Q2:

The local Catholic community serves the family by equipping parents with the knowledge and tools to pass on the faith.



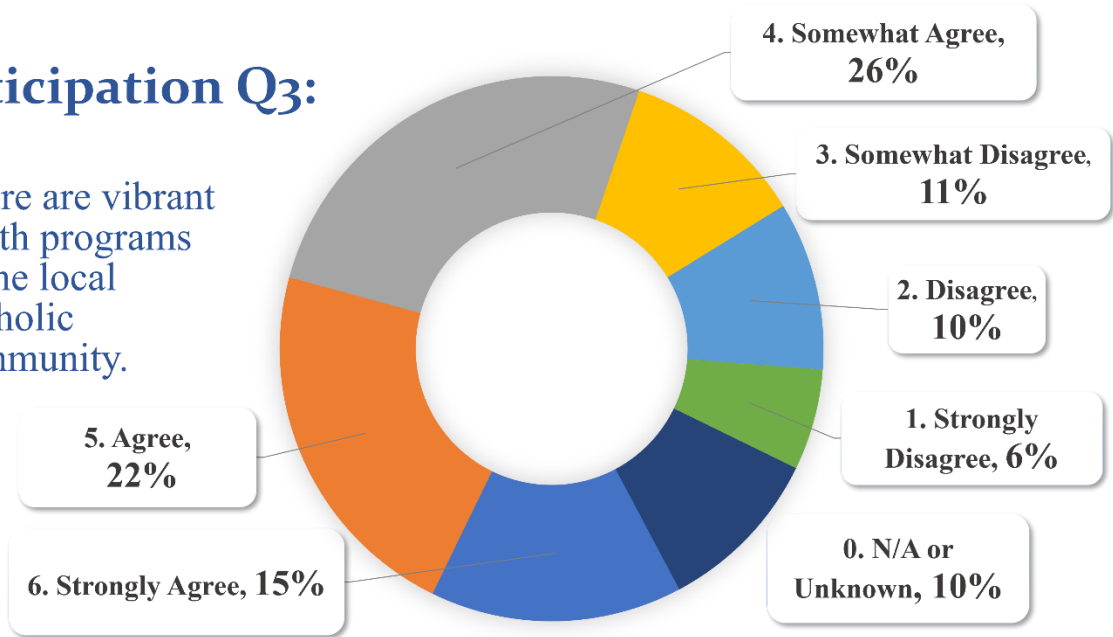


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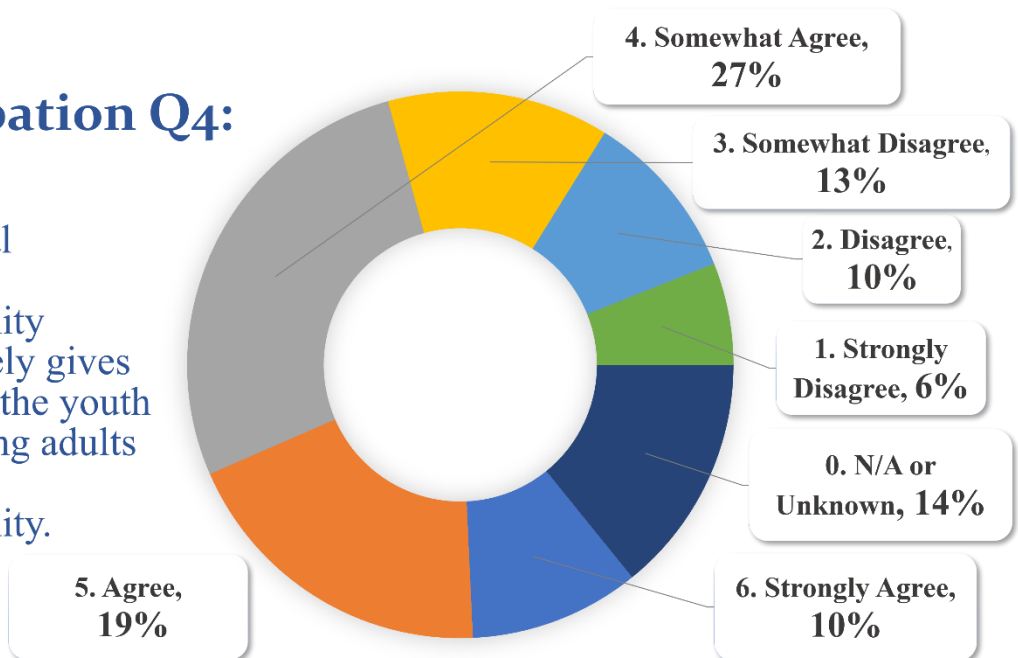
Participation Q3:

There are vibrant youth programs in the local Catholic community.



Participation Q4:

The local Catholic community adequately gives voice to the youth and young adults in our community.



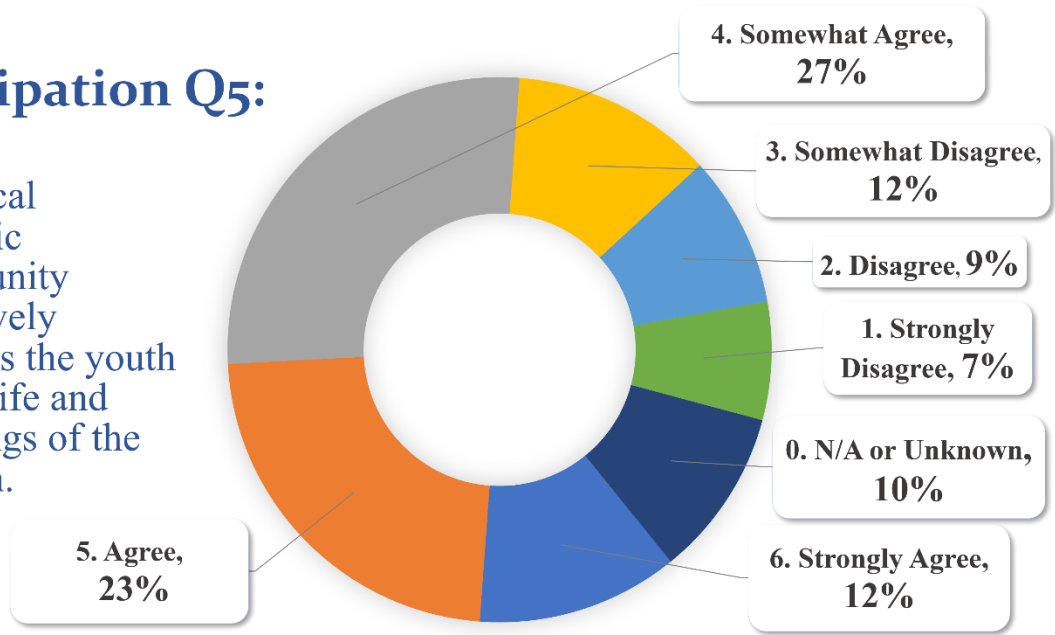


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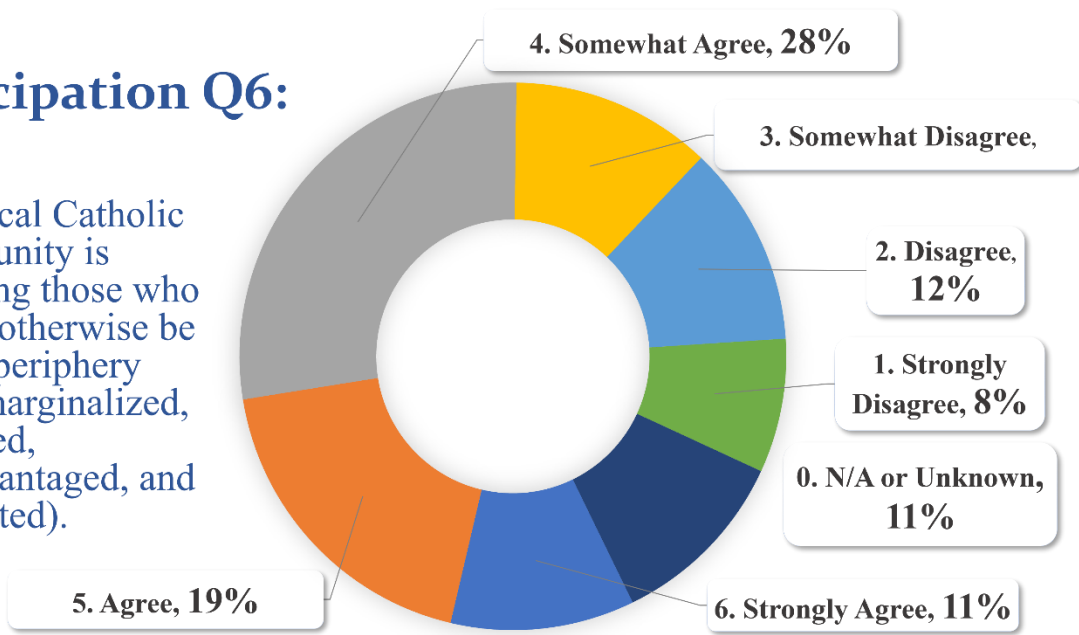
Participation Q5:

The local Catholic community effectively engages the youth in the life and teachings of the Church.



Participation Q6:

The local Catholic community is reaching those who might otherwise be at the periphery (i.e., marginalized, disabled, disadvantaged, and neglected).



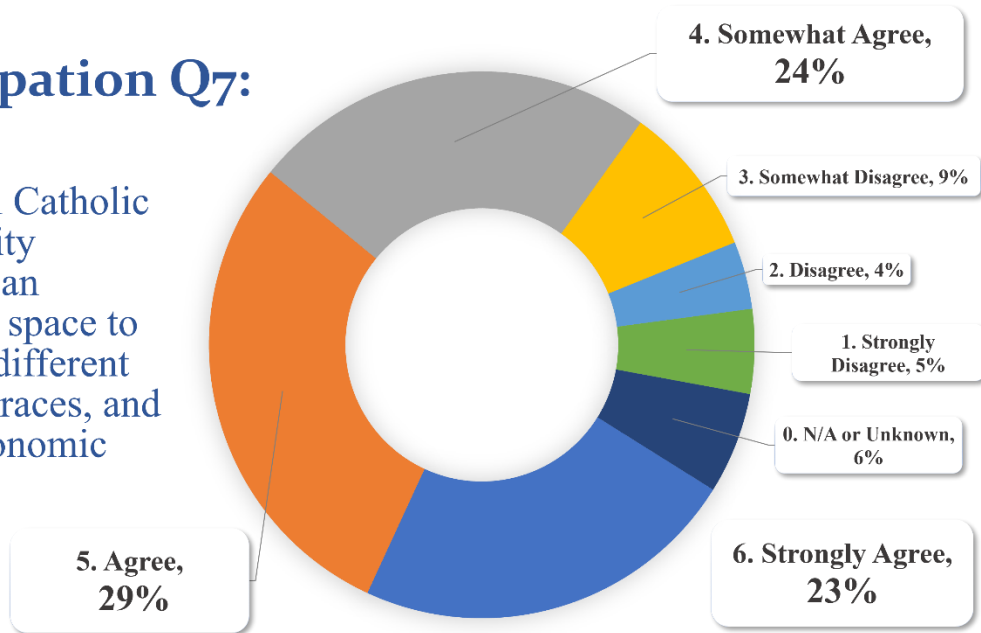


Addendum II

Statistical Summary of Survey Responses

Participation Q7:

The local Catholic community provides an inclusive space to those of different cultures, races, and socio-economic statuses.



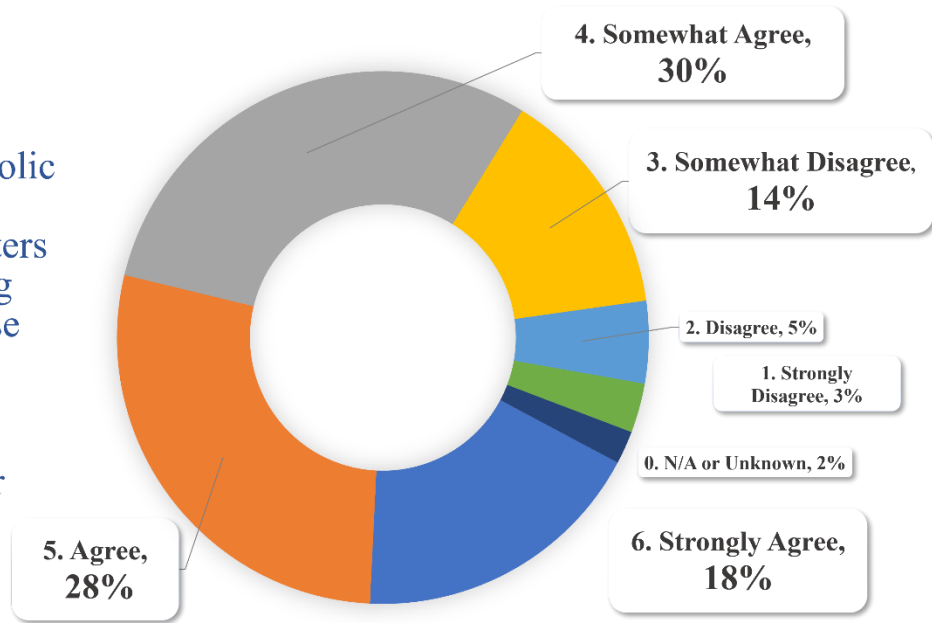


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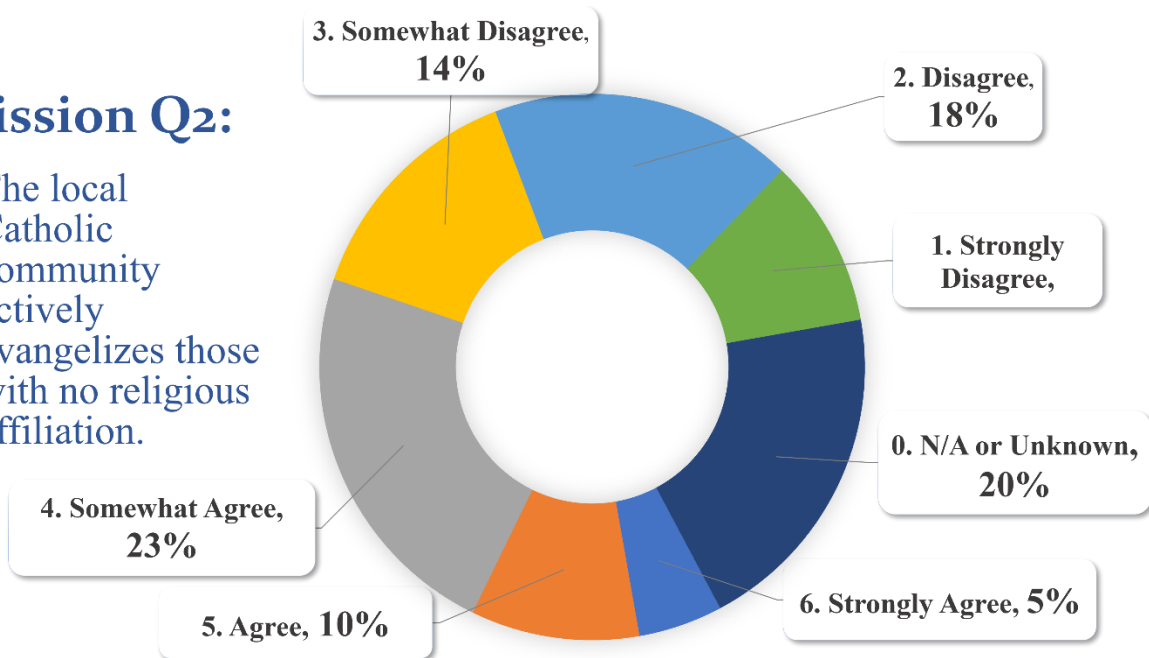
Mission Q1:

The local Catholic community effectively fosters the faith among Catholics (those who are either actively or passively practicing their faith).



Mission Q2:

The local Catholic community actively evangelizes those with no religious affiliation.



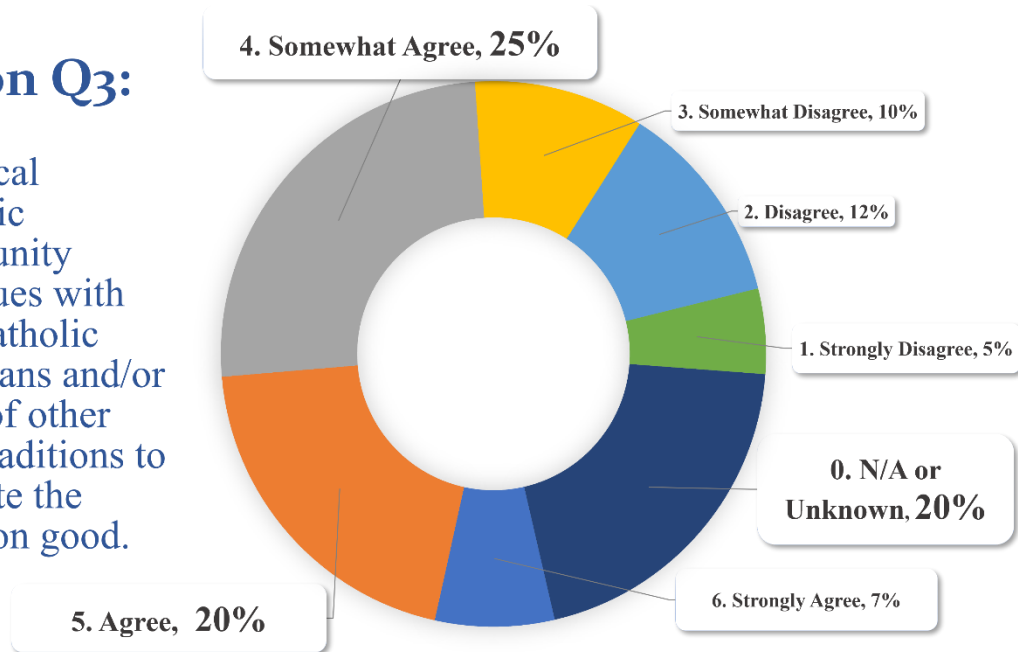


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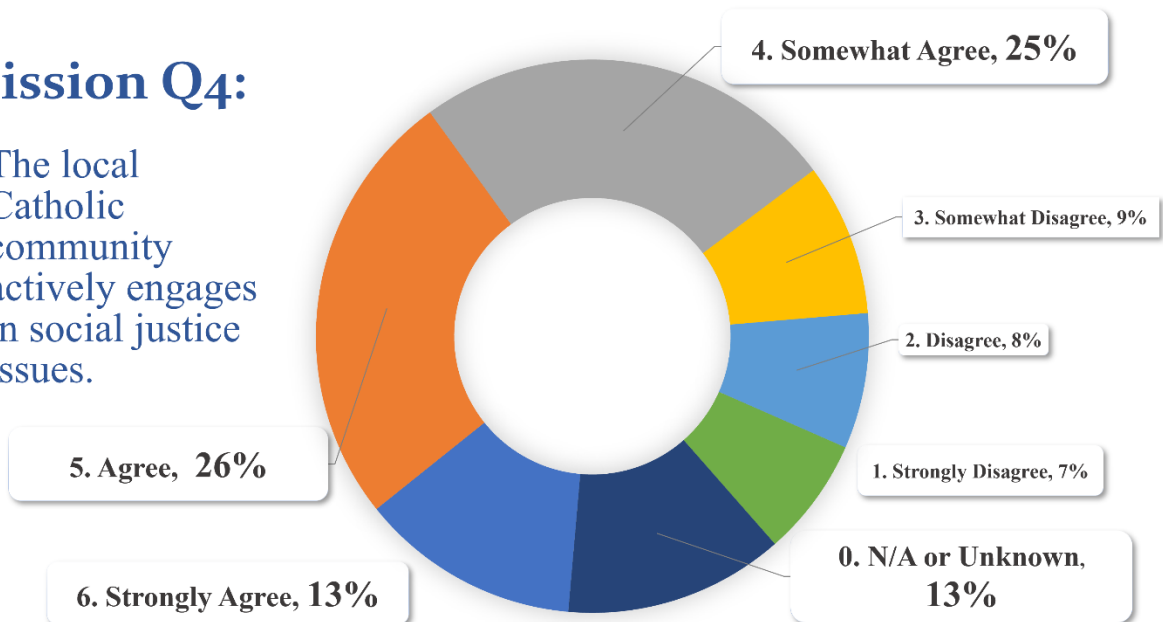
Mission Q3:

The local Catholic community dialogues with non-Catholic Christians and/or those of other faith traditions to promote the common good.



Mission Q4:

The local Catholic community actively engages in social justice issues.





Addendum III

Creative Synodal Expressions



What I love about church is
to sing and my new thing will be is
going out to get the body of
Christ. And seeing the priest.



Addendum III

Creative Synodal Expressions



What I love about Church is
the people.

Milo St. Matthew





Addendum III

Creative Synodal Expressions

