

Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA
Diocesan Synodal Synthesis – 28 June 2022



Introduction

The Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA (AMS) is unique in both mission and scope. The Archdiocese provides the full ranges of pastoral ministries and spiritual services to those in the United States Armed Forces. This includes more than 220 installations in 29 countries, patients in 153 Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, and federal employees serving outside the boundaries of the USA in 134 countries. Numerically, the AMS is responsible for more than 1.8 million men, women, and children. There is a pressing need for more priests to serve as active-duty chaplains to serve this growing population. The AMS is blessed, however, with dedicated lay people who offer their services as pastoral life coordinators, catechists, and lay leaders.

Data published by the United States Department of Defense in 2019 lead to several interesting observations. The largest demographic group in the military is young adults ages 18-25. These service members find themselves at a crucial stage of life during their military service; they are beginning their transition into adulthood, getting married, and starting families. About half of military personnel are married and around four in ten have children. Similar to their civilian counterparts, there is an equal amount of religious disaffiliation amongst this population. Roughly 20% of the military population claim no religious preference or affiliation. This percentage increases with younger members. Seventy percent of service members identify as Christian, however. Catholics comprise the largest denomination; one of every five active-duty service members self-identifies as Catholic. The statistic is particularly reliable, because members of the military are asked directly to indicate their faith group.

Undertaking the consultative phase for this global synod presented a number of unique challenges to the AMS, a non-territorial diocese responsible for Catholics around the world. Outreach on social media and direct communication to priest-chaplains were the primary means feedback was sought and small-group listening sessions were encouraged. Unfortunately, it was not feasible to travel directly to military installations to encourage participation, so fewer insights were received. As a result, the views expressed herein cannot be understood as representative of the Catholic military community as a whole. Nevertheless, these voices raise important considerations.

The questions provided to military chapel communities were designed around the theme of “journeying together,” which stems from the Greek origins of the word “synod.” This concept is especially important in the military community, where a strong sense of comradeship and esprit de corps guide the collective whole. United by a common mission, to defend the United States and support the country’s interests abroad, Catholics in the military find themselves hungering for a similar unity of purpose, for the life of faith is not one that can be lived outside of a community (cf. Mark 6:7). With this in mind, the responses received from chapel communities and from the Young Adult Ministry Symposium held in January 2022, an event that created a space for intentional reflection on the current state of Catholic faith life in the community, can be understood in light of the Synod’s three themes: communion, mission, and participation.

Communion

Among members of the Catholic military community, a deep longing for a sense of community and stability arose, and many hoped that the Church could provide that sense of community to them. Due to the nature of military life, in which changes in assignment and deployments are common and moves are frequent, the stability offered by the faith community becomes all the more important. The experience of isolation and loneliness (and the spiritual desolation that results) is not uncommon among members of the military, especially younger ones. For many of them, military service is the first time that they have left the comfort of their families and homes for any extended period of time. Friendships become almost impossible to sustain when service members are frequently receiving new assignments. Spouses are left alone, sometimes with their children, when a service member is called on deployment. As a consequence, many desire that their faith community become a place of intentional community-building. There is work in this area to be done.

Some participants expressed a feeling that the faith community was not as inviting as they might have wished, whether that stemmed from a lack of communication on the part of the chapel community or as a consequence of the shortage of available priests. One community shared that their priests were physically and mentally absent, unable to participate in community activities outside of celebrating the Mass. Some of this sentiment was provoked by tensions with the installation command, which they felt did not adequately understand the needs of military Catholics and was more concerned with the budget and efficiency. There is a hunger, in other

words, for the feeling of being wanted, of being able to contribute to something larger than oneself, through participation in the larger community, as an individual who has something to contribute. As young men and women who find themselves in unfamiliar environments, service members would appreciate if the Church would become a trusted community to which they could turn in times of need. The loneliness experienced by many service members, too, can begin to be addressed when the chapel community becomes a space to which they can turn knowing that it will support them. Indeed, some participants hoped that the Church would be able to do more in assisting with the mental health difficulties that members of the military community face.

Catholic service members recognize the importance of the sacraments in their lives of faith. They understand the importance of gathering as a community to worship together, but they also desire a faith community that meets them where they are in their particular situations: as young adults who experience a high degree of instability. For this reason, they desire Catholic communities that will anticipate their needs and will be available to respond. The Church, in other words, must be proactive in being a welcoming presence to a group that desires a place of support, not an institution that merely speaks at them. They desire a Church that places more emphasis on embrace than judgement.

Yet another common theme that emerged was the topic of polarization within the Church. Recognizing that the Holy Spirit desires a Church that has not been fully realized, there was a renewed call for the end to internal divisions. Seemingly perpetual division, political, religious, and social, among others, reflects that we do not share in the unity to which Jesus calls us (cf. John 17). As a spiritual institution guided by the Holy Spirit that claims to profess the truth, the Church ought to do a better job of witnessing to the harmony for which humanity has been made. A number of examples surfaced in these consultations. One community expressed the division that results between adherents of the post-Vatican II liturgy and the Traditional Latin Mass. Another community felt that polarization was especially acute during the COVID-19 pandemic. They felt that the Church was bending too quickly to secular authorities in regards to lockdowns and vaccination requirements. Others felt that the Church abandoned those whose consciences led them to refuse vaccination. This same community also reported that the Church has not spoken out enough to contemporary society regarding the Church's moral teachings, specifically regarding abortion and sexuality. Another chapel community, however, wished that the Church would transcend the political divisions that plague society, not appearing so reactionary. One Catholic

suggested that a renewed focus on devotion to Christ the King would ameliorate the divisions that have seeped into the Church and are evident among U.S. bishops. Yet another group mentioned that the Church, at times, appears to be a collection of smaller sub-groups and cliques. A view of the Church as political has the unfortunate consequence of stifling military chapel communities from becoming places where intentional relationships can be cultivated.

Journeying together requires the growth of personal relationships, and a number of Catholics expressed that this can be difficult within the military community. Difficulty was expressed, for example, regarding how authentic relationships among military Catholics could be developed outside of the context of Sunday Mass. In contrast to a civilian parish, military chapel communities are constantly shifting in membership. This unfortunately leads some Catholics to feel nothing short of ambivalence about participating in the chapel community. Indeed, one community that benefits from a “steady cadre of long-time experienced parishioners” mentioned that their presence was integral to supporting the transient military community. Other installations are not as fortunate. The inter-generational nature of a typical parish is lost, leaving no institutional memory. It becomes all the more important, then, for those who have established themselves in the faith community to reach out to those who have not. The military’s prohibition on “proselytizing,” however, can make this somewhat difficult.

Mission

The young adults who attended the 2022 Young Adult Ministry Symposium understood that there is no substitute for frequent prayer. Due to a general lack of interest in religion and the sometimes unusual and unpredictable schedules of service members, it is likely, they reasoned, that the discipline of prayer is not common to many service members. They wondered: do Catholics understand the importance of cultivating a personal relationship with Christ through prayer? Is the discipline required to cultivate a life of prayer possible to achieve in a hyper-connected world? The mindset of Catholics can frequently be reduced to understanding faith as a burdensome commitment. Going to Mass is something you “have to do” and a genuine desire is lacking. This feeling is especially prevalent among younger people. To counter this, pastors must encourage Catholics to understand that Christ nourishes us, gives us life and purpose, and calls us to himself. Resources with this aim in mind are desired. And all the more should the Church be

concerned with providing the faithful reverent and solemn liturgies with beautiful music and inspiring preaching.

Yet another theme that emerged was an expressed desire on the part of service members to use their gifts in service of the Church. Participants recognized the importance of their baptismal call to share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission of Jesus Christ. Although what this looks like in reality was less clear outside of serving the chapel community as a volunteer or engaging in local outreach to the poor and disadvantaged. There is a longing to serve the Church in new ways, but there is also a sense of inadequacy. Some expressed feeling that they didn't have the necessary preparation in order to serve the Church fully, hoping that a strong adult faith formation program might reinvigorate their spiritual lives. Among people who are regularly involved in the Church's life, it might be important to consider how prevalent this feeling of inadequacy is and what its causes are. They desire robust intellectual formation. Others admitted to the reality that volunteer ministers are lacking and that it often falls to the same individuals at each installation, leaving them feeling overworked and under-appreciated.

Some remarked that the weight of the call to evangelize is often not fully felt by the laity. There is a disconnect between what the Church is asking of the laity and the reality of the situation. How does a lay person in everyday life live out the call to evangelize? How does the Church reach those who are not involved with their local faith communities? Yet another group felt that the Catholic military community does not do enough to foster opportunities for the faithful to live out their baptismal call, permitting them to "exercise their true vocation of service within the Church." Since baptism and incorporation into the Body of Christ remain inseparable, no true discernment can occur without the help of the Church. One participant expressed the feeling that lay people feel like they have nothing to contribute to the ministry of the Church because the clergy are her "true" ministers. Without the sacrament of holy orders, how can the laity understand themselves as "consecrated" by God, a people set apart? In contrast, one chapel community expressed that priests were not intellectually prepared to lead their congregation. For others, the weight of the Church's sexual abuse scandal and the firm line it takes on moral issues place Catholics in difficult situations, perhaps leading to the not insignificant number of young people who find the Church irrelevant to their lives.

Many Catholics expressed that the best way to evangelize is to live a life guided by faith. What this means as a person of faith in the 21st century in a military environment, an environment

in which moral injury becomes all the more probable, was asked. Moral injury results most often in the military when a person is asked to execute an order that conflicts with his/her deeply held personal beliefs and convictions. This is not uncommon in the military, especially on deployment. As a result, service members can occasionally feel a dichotomy between what they are asked to do as members of the military and how they are expected to act as a result of its internal culture and what they feel comfortable with as it relates to how their consciences have been formed and what their faith tradition has to say. Still others are simply uncomfortable talking about their faith. The reasons for this discomfort are not clear, but it can be noted that Catholics are much more hesitant to tell others about their personal relationship with Christ like many Evangelicals do.

Journeying together occurs in the community when each person's gifts are fostered for the benefit of the entire People of God. All people, who have been given diverse gifts from the Spirit (cf. 1 Corinthians 12), must be given the opportunity to share their talents with the Church for the building up of the Kingdom of God. Some adults hinted at a desire for continuing faith formation into adulthood so that they might always grow in their knowledge of and love for God. One community affirmed their tradition of sponsoring a military cadet, thereby inviting him or her to be a part of their family life while studying at the military academy.

The Catholics who participated in this process do seem to recognize that it is primarily through prayer and devotion to the Eucharist that missionary endeavors are nourished. To that end, there is a desire for increased opportunities to be involved in these ways as a community. Many Catholic service members want to feel that they are contributing to the life of the Church, and this begins in devotion, particularly through adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Because it is the presence of Christ in the Eucharist that nourishes the life of faith, one group even called for the Church to embrace the custom of home tabernacles.

Participation

One community mentioned the importance of becoming a more discerning Church. In the Church today, the first instinct is often to make assumptions, draw conclusions, and judge prior to listening to what those who disagree with us might have to say. It is almost a foregone conclusion in today's polarized society to assume what the motivations of the other person are. But, as this group noted, the Holy Spirit asks us as a Church "not to be too quick to judge or assume." Listening and making a sincere attempt to understand before rendering judgement is the way the Church is

called to walk. Equally important to the efforts of becoming a discerning Church is a communal foundation in prayer. Journeying together must always begin through docility to the Holy Spirit, who bestows the gift of wisdom at the appropriate moments. “We must be content to be led by the daily gentle presence of God,” one community wrote, “allowing ourselves to be moved here and there. This requires much trust and abandonment.” This also requires the ability for the Church to make a sober assessment of where it finds itself. It is the responsibility of the community to come together as one body, reflecting Paul’s imagery of the Church as the Body of Christ. Diverse locations, people, and experiences allow God to be found in a number of ways. Every interaction, then, becomes an opportunity to find how God is working through the other in unique ways.

The Church must be on guard, however, with the tendency to equate planning programs with fostering relationships. The practice of faith is a process of entering into friendship with others. No person is a “project” and everyone has a part to contribute in the building up of the Kingdom of God. This is why something as small as a personal invitation to join the community at Mass is such an important step in doing the Lord’s work. Christ’s method of inviting people into fellowship involved calling people by name. The Church must be creative, then, in order to “call” those who have drifted away. Indeed, one community suggested that the Church has become too inward-looking, too concerned with maintaining structures and traditions, while neglecting her mandate to reach those outside of her visible boundaries. In a word, the Church’s primary focus should not be self-preservation, existence for its own sake.

While the military chapel community is where most active service members experience their faith, those who feel indifferent about the Church or marginalized by her must be reached in other ways, primarily by means of “accompaniment infused with love.” With the Holy Spirit as the primary mover, Catholics must learn how to “plant the seeds” that will develop into an awareness of a genuine longing for God in the depths of the heart. Since most people come to faith primarily through personal witness (as opposed to intellectual arguments), friendship becomes the primary form of evangelization. The Church, however, must consciously choose to engage in this manner of existing, since it must begin with self-conversion and self-examination in order for her witness to be considered authentic. At the same time, some expressed fear of publicly living out the faith in military settings due to perceived professional repercussions.

As might be expected in this situation, questions regarding the exclusion of married men to the priesthood arose. One community expressed the opinion that priests ought to have the

opportunity to be married, for “the reflection of a married couple at the head of the Church...will reflect better the diversity and beauty of vocations in the Church.” It would be nice for married couples and families to see their own vocations modeled by the priest, who they believe is at the heart of the faith community. It seems, then, that most of the faithful do not see how the vocation to marriage complements the vocation of the priest. The community did, however, highlight the gift of celibacy in reflecting on the importance of Paul and of Priscila and Aquila, each holding important leadership roles within the early Christian community. Allowing priests to be married, they believe, will lead to an increase in both vocations and might lead the Church to flourish in new ways. Another community that submitted a response called for the “re-instatement” of the female diaconate, allowing the Church to recognize the work that so many women do on her behalf. In whatever way, the Church must do a better job of honoring women’s voices, especially since most volunteers in the Church are women. The graces conferred by the sacrament of holy orders, they believe, should not be reserved to men alone. In a similar vein, the Church must also do a better job of encouraging women to pursue vocations as religious. One community also recognized that the official stance towards divorced and civilly remarried Catholics makes it difficult to include them fully in the life of the faith community.

Lastly, there was a desire expressed by some parents to play a more substantial role in military chapel communities. The whole family must become participants in the Church’s life of faith, they believe. Since living out one’s faith most often occurs within the context of the family, one community felt the need to emphasize that parents ought to be more involved in faith development of their children. Dropping off your child to religious education classes isn’t enough. The faith, rather, must be nourished through the authentic witness of the parents, who demonstrate through their actions how their faith has shaped who they have become. When parents become involved in the sacramental preparation of their children, both child and parent benefit.

Conclusion

After reviewing the responses received (from eleven installations in total) and the results of the 2022 YAM Symposium, it can be noted that there is an authentic desire on behalf of the faithful for a transformational experience of faith. They wish for a faith that challenges them while supporting them in what can be difficult circumstances. Faced with levels of loneliness and isolation not always seen in civilian life, the Church has the unique opportunity to become for

these service members an anchor within the military community. There is a desire for the Church, as an institution marked by holiness, to transcend the infighting that has come to characterize today's social scene, ministering with mercy to those who are in need of God's love. Young people, disillusioned with an ecclesial institution that many of them believe to be out of touch with the world, must be sought out by the Church with special attention. The Church must ask herself why young people feel disconnected with the message she preaches. In what ways has she failed to live up to the call that Christ has given to her? Similarly, she is called to minister to those in the armed services with special care, recognizing that they face difficulties unique to their circumstances: frequent moves, irregular schedules, moral injury, and post-traumatic stress and its consequences. The Church, then, is called to re-kindle in the baptized a renewed sense of their faith, reminding them of the radical newness that Christ inaugurated through His Incarnation. Too often, the practice of the faith becomes something ordinary, routine, and dull. It is Christ, however, that continually calls the members of His body to conversion, and it is the mission of the Church to create authentic communities founded on substantive relationships so that this mission might be achieved.