



Synod Listening Session Report

Organizational Background

The Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies (ICJS) is a center of interreligious dialogue, theological exchange, and collaborative inquiry between Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities; it is an independent, educational nonprofit, without affiliation to any academic or religious institutions. ICJS envisions an interreligious society where dialogue replaces division, friendship overcomes fear, and education eradicates ignorance. The mission of the ICJS is: “To dismantle religious bias and bigotry, ICJS builds learning communities where religious difference becomes a powerful force for good.” ICJS offers events and study courses to the general public; creates fellowship cohorts for high school teachers, congregational leaders, and community/nonprofit leaders; and works to advance the academic field of interreligious and interfaith studies through scholarship and service to the field. See more at www.icjs.org.

Approach to the Synod: Interreligious & Interfaith Dialogue for the General Public

Since Vatican II, interreligious dialogue has occurred at both the professional level (e.g. clergy, theologians, scholars, and other religious professionals) as well as with members of the public (e.g. lay people). ICJS creates interreligious dialogue opportunities for both religious professionals and the public. ICJS is well-positioned to offer a Synod Listening Session prioritizing interreligious dialogue participants from the public and sought out this audience in particular. The Synod Listening Sessions ICJS described below were designed for a broad audience; the majority of participants were not clergy or religious professionals. Participants were from Jewish, Muslim, Protestant Christian, and various religious and non-religious backgrounds, as well as Catholic laity engaged in interreligious dialogue and encounter. Given the nature of our organization and focus on the laypeople, we addressed issues in *Vademecum* 6: Dialogue in Church and Society. We invited past participants in ICJS courses, programs, and fellowships, as well as the broader public to participate. We created two opportunities for participation: 1) a synchronous Zoom discussion in small break out rooms with a designated facilitator and notetaker and 2) an asynchronous online survey. Individuals were invited to participate in one or both options; the four questions were consistent across options:

- Yourself – How has your experience with interreligious dialogue helped you to understand yourself?
- The World – How can interreligious dialogue address global concerns and challenges?
- The Divine/Sacred – How have interreligious encounters affected your experience of spiritual life?
- Interacting with Others – If you’ve experienced interreligious dialogue at ICJS, how has the ICJS approach influenced your interactions with others beyond the scope of the events and courses?

The survey also included these four questions, and participants who were not able to attend the live session were directed to a video with the opening informational overview.

In total, 38 participants attended the synchronous Zoom session, and 10 filled out the asynchronous online survey. The session participants were largely female, and about half currently identified as Catholic or had identified as Catholic at some point in their lives. Of the remaining synchronous participants, about half were Protestant Christian and the other half Jewish, with one person identifying as Muslim. About one-third of the attendees came from interreligious families, or self-identified with more than one religious tradition (i.e. multiple religious belonging). For the asynchronous survey, nearly all participants self-identified as Christian, with one Catholic. A few themes emerged, most notably the importance of “journeying together” with others outside of your faith community. Almost all participants valued learning from conversations with individuals who were religiously different, and many highlighted that they understood and appreciated their own religious tradition more after having interreligious conversations.

ICJS Synod Listening Sessions: Results

We have highlighted major themes below, with specific examples for each theme. Bulleted points are direct quotes or paraphrased ideas, depending on the source material (quotes come from written responses to the asynchronous online survey and paraphrased responses come from the designated notetakers in the Synchronous Zoom session).

Theme #1: Interreligious dialogue allows people to understand their own religious life, as well as their own religious traditions, more deeply.

This was the most prevalent theme in the ICJS Synod Listening Sessions. Participants believed that learning about the religious lives of others helped them to understand their religious selves, and conversations about different religions helped to highlight the vast similarities, as well as tease out differences that shaped people’s identities. Many participants highlighted the importance of having one-on-one conversations with people of different faiths.

- Through learning about other religions, I started learning more about my own religion. I realized there were similar practices and values in my religion.
- I discovered and deepened my Catholic faith through my study of Judaism in my interreligious marriage.
- Interreligious dialogue is the best way to fulfill my religious call to love my neighbor.
- Whenever I learn about other religions, I find many similarities between our faiths, a deeper appreciation for how God works among all people, and a greater understanding of my own beliefs and practices.
- My spirituality is allowed to become more profound as I am open to possibilities and experiences in the extravagance of God.
- Interreligious spaces help people who have stepped away from institutional religion but who want to explore their identities and humanity.
- I formerly worked at a Jewish day school, and it was this experience that made me go into priesthood. It brought me more into my own faith tradition. Interreligious dialogue

can help you go deeper in your own faith identity. I am taking a class on Islam, and just learning the descriptors on God that I don't have in the Christian faith is really enriching.

- We always find the Divine in the Other. Being in touch with God does not happen by attending mosque, synagogue, or church, but through encounter with each other. Each of us are part of God's creation.

Theme #2: Interreligious encounters show participants where common ground exists; this is a crucial step for creating opportunities for collaboration around areas of mutual concern.

People felt that many faiths, particularly the Abrahamic faiths, were similar in their interpretations of the Divine. Having open conversations about religion allowed people to find common ground and move forward for common goals.

- Bringing the beliefs and attitudes of many religious groups can promote understanding of our similar journeys.
- Many of my religious beliefs come from other religions, and we have more in common than we think and know.
- The shared beliefs of the Abrahamic traditions outweigh the differences...it is essential to share our beliefs with each other for the sake of understanding...this promotes understanding without fear of converting or being converted.
- Fellowship and respect are formed when people from different religious backgrounds work together on social justice initiatives.

Theme #3: Interreligious families impact and shape how people understand religion today.

Many participants came from interreligious families and expressed the richness of interreligious encounters within their own interreligious families. People felt great power coming from interreligious families; they celebrated the openness to deep religious experiences that came from places of difference. Families were generally supportive, but not in all cases. Some people experienced rejection and judgement for their interreligious marriages, particularly those married a few decades ago.

- I [a Catholic] love being exposed to the sacredness of Sabbath in the Orthodox tradition. I feel Christians can learn from this because we aren't as serious about Sundays. I have learned things about myself having this casual living experience with people who are serious about personal religious practices that are based upon Leviticus, the Bible.
- I was blessed with different cultures and religious backgrounds that allowed me to have a more enriching life.
- My parents had an interfaith marriage Lutheran-Catholic. I didn't experience any friction. It was always a positive relationship. I went to Catholic university, and the study of antisemitism formed who I became as a person. That changed how I understood myself in the interreligious world.
- My interfaith marriage broadened both sides of the family. I caused the synagogue to evaluate how they deal with families who did not share the same faith. I felt like a bridge.

Theme #4: Several participants identified as “struggling Catholics” and/or Christians unhappy with mainstream Christianity.

Some Catholic participants expressed apprehension at adhering strictly to Catholic doctrine, and other Christians and Catholics had areas of disagreement over Church teachings, particularly regarding issues of sexism, exclusivism, and oppression.

- As a Catholic, I didn’t understand the Catholic insistence on its exclusivist claim. Women need to be more involved if we want the church to continue in the world.
- Walking along the path is fine as long as everyone has an equal place on the path, but they don’t – women don’t have an equal place.
- I do not identify with what the term Christian has come to mean, so I classify myself as a Believer. The God of my understanding is not who is being represented by the title of “Christian,” so I chose to not associate with the name.
- Interreligious dialogue has freed me from pre-Vatican II (this is what you had to believe, and we are the one true church). My mother was a Presbyterian, so I knew that was not true. I would confess that I question the infallibility of the pope and church. I feel free of the dogma.
- I was confirmed in the 7th grade but I grew into an adult Catholic in the 80s. I was marching along like a good little soldier. We didn’t know a lot about the Hebrew Scriptures. I learned about the Shoah and Judaism. I experience religious envy. I will remain a Catholic, but if I have a question I will ask a rabbi and I believe their perspective over a Catholic’s perspective. I get annoyed at mass if I feel like they are reading the Old Testament, and refer to the Jewish people as “the Jews” (like there is a negative slant when they reference the Jewish people).
- Christian tradition in this country leans heavily on colonization, and it has taken many years to reach a place where I can forgive the Christian tradition and find peace with God.

Theme #5: It is important for the Catholic Church to listen and respond to the Synod process reflections meaningfully, at both the global and the local level.

There is a general positive feeling about the Synod process and the current direction of the Catholic church. There is also fear that concerns brought up in the Synodal process will not be addressed.

- The opportunity for these listening sessions is encouraging. The Pope cares about what we think. The grassroots is being listened to.
- The Church must respond to what comes from the grassroots. If they aren’t listened to, the Church is in real trouble.
- There is hope that some feedback comes back from Rome to the people who participated in this process. “It’s only as good as what comes back.”

Theme #6: Building and maintaining interreligious spaces is essential for peace and justice in the world.

Interreligious dialogue gives people the chance to engage with others and find common ground. Many participants believed the only way forward into peace is to create robust spaces for interreligious dialogue and encounter.

- It's clear that leaders in all nations are more interested in their own narrow goals than in seeking world peace. So the rest of us have to pursue this process until it becomes a tsunami, a force for peace and coexistence. Good will and dialogue is the road.
- We have to be open that your truth is not THE truth. We have to enter into dialogue, not monologue. We have to be open to see the similarities, the values, the shared values. To recognize a different way of envisioning God or a Spiritual being, doesn't make you an enemy. It's not an assault to your vision or perspective. We are becoming a much more global world. We are all connected...we are very connected and dependent upon each other. It is easy to "other" people when we are feeling insecure. And that is a very dangerous thing to do.
- Over the past 60 years, interreligious dialogue has created a successful model for positive and constructive interaction. We could use it in other areas outside of religion, and it would be a great global contribution.

In summation, the ICJS Synod listening sessions demonstrate the importance of interreligious encounter and dialogue. Interreligious dialogue: 1) deepens connection with the Divine 2) challenges religious bigotry and dehumanization by creating opportunities for participants to recognize the humanity of their neighbors 3) allows participants to find common concerns and shared hopes, which are necessary foundations to pursuing good works, creating flourishing communities, and building a more peaceful and just world.