

Report of DignityUSA to Synod Study Group 9

The People of God of DignityUSA, comprised of LGBTQIA+ Catholics, our families, and friends in the United States of America are pleased to offer this report to Study Group 9. Because some in the Church have identified our particular concerns and needs as belonging to the body of “controversial doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues”¹ facing the Church today, we write to you to share our reflections one year into the implementation phase of the Synod on Synodality.

In our 2022 synodal report, we proclaimed our dream of a “welcoming, listening Church.” We urged the Synod, “Trust in the people. Listen to the Holy Spirit.”² In the intervening years, this dream has been realized in fledgling and partial ways. We look back on positive interactions with Synod delegates in the United States and in Rome in 2023 and 2024. We recall with great affection the encounter between our executive director and the Holy Father, Pope Francis, of happy memory, in 2023. We value our communications with the General Secretariat in Rome. And we experienced with great joy the Jubilee Pilgrimage of LGBTQ Catholics and the Jubilee of Synodal Teams and Participatory Bodies, both in 2025. The voices of LGBTQIA+ Catholics are rising to the highest levels of our Church and are being heard among members of the faithful everywhere in the world. Church leaders, beginning with the Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, have advanced a vision of a welcoming, listening Church that resembles the dream our members articulated in 2022.

In the same report, we called for a “repentant, reconciled Church.” The reluctant penitent stands on the threshold of repentance and reconciliation moved by God’s mercy but wrestling with fears and doubts. The reluctant penitent asks whether her guilt can truly be overcome. He weighs the cost of reconciliation—what he must sacrifice to begin down the path. The reluctant penitent wavers, asking whether the conscience has been truly offended. The Church stands on the threshold of this same pathway today and is faced with the questions of the reluctant penitent. Can the Church’s pastoral and doctrinal failings be overcome? What is the cost of entering onto a new pathway? Should an examination of conscience be abandoned altogether in favor of comfortable patterns and doctrinal certainty?

Happily and prophetically, the Final Document of the Synod on Synodality sought to propel the Church down the path of repentance and reconciliation:

The need within the Church for healing, reconciliation and the rebuilding of trust has resounded at every stage of the synodal process, particularly in light of so many scandals related to different types of abuse...The Church is called to put at the centre of its life and action the fact that in Christ, through Baptism, we are entrusted to each other. Recognition of this profound reality becomes a sacred duty that enables us to recognise mistakes and rebuild trust. There is a missionary obligation upon the People of God to walk this path in our world and we need to invoke the gift to do so from above. Walking this path is also an act of justice. The desire to do so is the fruit of synodal renewal.³

The LGBTQIA+ People of God, along with our families and friends, wish to elaborate here on some necessary changes to the Church's pastoral practice and doctrinal expression. We will offer our brief reflections on both areas of concern as well as five recommendations.

Whole Persons in Christ

As members of DignityUSA, we write from our experience as LGBTQIA+ Catholics, family members, and friends living in the United States of America. We write from our deep experience of ministry, accompaniment, and ecclesial community over fifty-six years. While this letter seeks to outline considerations particular to the work of Study Group 9, we wish to first speak to our whole identities and our relationship to the Catholic Church.

We recognize ourselves firstly as baptized members of Christ's faithful people, co-heirs with the whole Church, and sharers in the Gospel.⁴ In our 2022 synodal report, we wrote, "The message of the Gospel is a magnificent one. This message is advanced by a People who strive to reflect the person of Christ in all we do."⁵ As full and equal participants in the Church's life and mission, we strive to advance the Gospel and to serve our Church and world in justice and holiness. "We find common purpose with our Church when it seeks to confront war, poverty, starvation, and the injustices found in the world, and we are proud of the good work that our Church accomplishes in the world."⁶ Members and communities of DignityUSA dedicate ourselves to this common mission.

Included among the community of LGBTQIA+ Catholics are migrants and refugees, those living with HIV, persons with disabilities, the young and the elderly, the poor, and those who minister with and among them. Together, LGBTQIA+ Catholics, our families, and friends are fellow pilgrims with the whole Church, striving for justice and witnessing to the Resurrection of Christ.

Love, Mercy, and Compassion: A Complicated Pastoral Reality

At the midpoint of their journey, members of the Synod on Synodality reflected in 2023:

In different ways, people who feel marginalized or excluded from the Church because of their marriage status, identity or sexuality also ask to be heard and accompanied. There was a deep sense of love, mercy and compassion felt in the Assembly for those who are or feel hurt or neglected by the Church, who want a place to call "home" where they can feel safe, be heard and respected, without fear of being judged.⁷

We received these words with hope, and we recognize the sincere sentiments of Synod delegates reflected within them. At the same time, we experience in our reality a painful absence of love, mercy, and compassion from too many who minister in the Church's name. In the United States, this absence is manifested in countless ways. LGBTQIA+ Catholics remain excluded from ministry of all kinds in parishes and in Catholic schools. The bishops of the United States continue to actively oppose civil rights measures protecting gender and sexual minorities. In some cases, LGBTQIA+ Catholics are denied the sacraments of the Church and even Christian

funerals. For nearly forty years, groups of LGBTQIA+ Catholics have faced strict prohibitions from gathering in Catholic spaces. Many of these pastoral practices can be directly attributed to our bishops' continued reception of the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1986.

Since 2021, the members and leaders of DignityUSA have invested significant time, care, and resources in the synodal journey, accepting the call to journey together with the whole Church. We have been encouraged by our interactions with the General Secretariat, which has acknowledged receipt of our contributions and extended the invitation to participate in the Jubilee of Synodal Teams and Participatory Bodies in 2025. However, the story of our engagement at the national level in the United States is a less encouraging one.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has thus far been unresponsive to our efforts to engage in the synodal process in our country. Our formal request to be included in the synodal assembly for national Catholic organizations and groups in the U.S. (known as "Region XVI") was met without response. Our submissions of synodal reports to the U.S. synod team and to officers of the USCCB were met with similar non-responses. In our synodal reports of 2022 and 2024, the members of DignityUSA noted that our "sustained attempts at dialogue with bishops over many decades...have been almost entirely ignored or rebuffed."⁸ We reiterate also what we wrote in 2024:

For a truly synodal path to emerge in the United States substantial intervention from Rome will be required. The history of our own nation has made clear that marginalized persons and groups must, at times, enjoy promotion and protection from the highest levels if they are to be heard and respected. We appeal to the Synod Bishops, to the Roman Curia, and to the Holy Father to provide such pathways for marginalized groups of Catholics within the United States.⁹

Polarization in Vital Matters: Doctrinal Expressions that Polarize

The Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, has urged us to recall that ideological differences can lead to harmful polarizations in the life of the Church.¹⁰ As Catholics living in the United States of America in the year 2025, we feel intimately and personally the tragic consequences of polarization in the Church, in civil society, and in our own families. We may recognize at various times the tendency toward polarization even within our own hearts. Synod delegates powerfully reflected in their 2023 report:

The Church too is affected by polarization and distrust in vital matters such as liturgical life and moral, social and theological reflection. We need to recognize the causes of each through dialogue and undertake courageous processes of revitalizing communion and processes of reconciliation to overcome them.¹¹

An honest reflection on polarization within the Church cannot fail to consider the ways in which doctrine is presently expressed and has been expressed in recent decades. The Holy See, in particular, must undertake a serious reflection on the present and past language chosen to

discuss the moral, spiritual, and sexual lives of LGBTQIA+ Catholics and the ways in which this language, far from diffusing polarization, has served to reinforce polarized attitudes within the Church. DignityUSA described these problems in our 2022 synodal report:

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), and the document *Male and Female He Created Them* (2019)...employ the words “intrinsically evil,” “intrinsically disordered,” and “acts of grave depravity” to describe our intimate relationships. They use the words “objectively disordered” to describe our sexual orientation. Those whose gender identity does not conform strictly to their biological sex are accused of merely following “emotional impulses” and promoting a “confused concept of freedom.”¹²

Transgender persons have been tragically misrepresented as promoting “the ideology of gender,” which ends in “the annihilation of man as the image of God.”¹³

Throughout our synodal listening process, we received a high number of contributions regarding the 1986 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. Although we are removed from the issuance of this letter by nearly forty years, many of our members remain painfully affected by its conclusions, language, and the ways in which it has shaped the life of the Church in the United States. Reflecting on the searing content of the document coupled with its timing at the height of the AIDS epidemic, one member called it “cruel and un-Christlike.” Although not explicitly cited, the letter’s conclusions are closely mirrored in the language later employed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. We note also that the ideological position advanced by *Male and Female He Created Them* (2019) ironically does not appear to be developed in response to any dialogue with transgender and non-binary persons and has not served to advance any sort of authentic dialogue in the Church since it was issued. Since 2014, several participants at multiple assemblies of the Synod of Bishops have reflected on the insufficient and offensive nature of the language employed in pronouncements of the Holy See on LGBTQIA+ persons.

We also noted in our 2022 synodal report:

We find in the official teaching documents of the Holy See information that is outdated and even inaccurate. The documents disregard the many advances made by the sciences, social sciences, psychology, philosophy, scriptural scholarship, and theology in the past years and decades.¹⁴

To our great encouragement, the Synod on Synodality similarly observed:

Sometimes the anthropological categories we have developed are not able to grasp the complexity of the elements emerging from experience or knowledge in the sciences and require greater precision and further study. It is important to take the time required for this reflection and to invest our best energies into it, without giving into simplistic judgements that hurt individuals and the Body of the Church.¹⁵

The Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, has expressed the understanding that changes in the attitudes of our people precede changes in doctrine. Although this pattern can be observed at various times in the Church's history, we also observe that the doctrine of the faith, rightly understood, serves also to influence the attitudes of the faithful who seek to be formed by the Church's teaching. Therefore, the formulations and styles in which the Church's official doctrine are expressed carry heavy a weight of responsibility for the attitudes of the Catholic people. When moral doctrines are expressed in a polarizing and absolute fashion, they cultivate harmful pastoral practices and judgmental attitudes among the faithful. Such has been the experience of LGBTQIA+ Catholics.

Recommendations for Study Group 9

In light of the reflections we have offered, we wish to make five recommendations that we hope might be reflected in the final report of Study Group 9:

- We request that a worldwide consultation of LGBTQIA+ Catholics be undertaken in the years 2026 and 2027 to be coordinated by the General Secretariat of the Synod. Such a consultation would include many Catholics around the world who have not, to this point, been permitted to participate fully in the synodal process. We recognize that LGBTQIA+ people are present in every country of the world regardless of the level of acceptance they have achieved in their particular culture. We also recognize that, for some, this sort of participation will carry risks and will have to be managed with great care and sensitivity. We offer the General Secretariat our assistance and that of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics in organizing and facilitating such an effort.
- We request that openly LGBTQIA+ Catholics and their family members be represented at the 2028 ecclesial assembly in Rome and in gatherings at local, national, and continental levels that precede this assembly.
- We advise that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith explicitly abrogate the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986).
- We advise that, after a real and substantial dialogue with transgender and non-binary Catholics, the Dicastery for Culture and Education undertake a revision process to *Male and Female He Created Them* (2019), even if the revised text leaves questions, tensions, and ambiguities.
- We advise that the terms “intrinsically disordered,” “objectively disordered,” and “acts of grave depravity” be removed from paragraphs 2357 and 2358 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. We note that the text of paragraph 2358 was previously revised in 1997 and can be revised again. We recognize again that a new text will leave questions, tensions, and ambiguities.

As fellow pilgrims on the synodal journey, DignityUSA always stands ready to serve the universal Church. We offer our own ministerial experience and knowledge as a resource in any effort the Holy See undertakes in a spirit of goodwill.

Conclusion

LGBTQIA+ Catholics, our families, and friends long for a Church in which we can welcome and be welcomed. We long for a Church in which we can listen and be heard. Cooperating with the Holy Spirit, we strive, even now, to make this Church present within our communities.

We dream also of a Church whose pastoral practice values the diversity of all of its members. And we continue to appeal to the Holy See that condemning and polarizing language be jettisoned from its official teaching documents. Let us walk together on the road of synodality, the pathway of repentance and reconciliation. And let us listen attentively to one another other along the way, trusting in the Spirit of God which propels us down the path together. May the good work God has accomplished in all of us be brought to completion in Christ.

¹ Pope Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document* (2024), no. 8.

² DignityUSA, *Toward a Christlike Church: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2022).

³ Pope Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document* (2024), no. 46.

⁴ See Ephesians 3:6

⁵ DignityUSA, *Toward a Christlike Church: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2022).

⁶ DignityUSA, *Toward a Christlike Church: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2022).

⁷ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission* (2023), no. 16h.

⁸ DignityUSA, *Toward a Christlike Church: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2022); DignityUSA, *The Call of Christ Does Not Wait: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2024).

⁹ DignityUSA, *The Call of Christ Does Not Wait: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2024).

¹⁰ Pope Leo XIV, "Homily by His Holiness Leo XIV: Jubilee of the Synodal Teams and Participatory Bodies," 26 Oct. 2025.

¹¹ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission* (2023), no. 5h.

¹² DignityUSA, *Toward a Christlike Church: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2022).

¹³ Pope Francis, "Meeting with the Polish Bishops: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis," 27 July 2016.

¹⁴ DignityUSA, *Toward a Christlike Church: Synodal Report of the People of God of DignityUSA* (2022).

¹⁵ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission* (2023), no. 15g.