



## What Do Parents Want to Hear from the Church?

A Survey Analysis Conducted by the  
[Strong Catholic Families National Initiative](#)

### What Do Parents Want?

The recent Synod on the Family (2014) and the upcoming World Meeting of Families (September 2015) indicate that the Catholic Church has placed the faith of families as a priority. The [Strong Catholic Families National Initiative](#) shares this priority and has developed a short survey that mirrors the listening process used by the Synod. Strong Catholic Families is a collaborative partnership comprised of the following national church organizations: the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM), the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), the National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (NACFLM), and the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA).

The simple four-question online survey was directed toward parents, grandparents and church leaders. Twelve statements gleaned from various sources (i.e. church teaching, phrases heard at parent gatherings or sacramental preparation sessions, research on congregational engagement) were listed on the survey in the order shown below:

- You are always welcome at our church.
- Parents are the most influential agents of catechesis for their children.
- Marriage is a vocation and serves as the foundation of the family and society.
- What role do you want faith to play in the lives of your children?
- What are your hurts? Hopes? Joys?
- At Baptism you promised to raise your children in the Catholic faith.
- Tell us about your faith journey.
- You are not alone.
- How can the church help you/your family live out your faith in the world?
- Avoid that which separates the unitive and the procreative purposes of marriage.
- We are sorry for having hurt you.
- Your family is a domestic church; sacred and holy.

### The Survey

The survey was designed to take less than five minutes to complete. While it was not designed as a formal research tool, survey results could provide church leaders with information that might help them respond pastorally to parents and families. The survey was open to all (via SurveyMonkey) from February 23 through March 15, 2015 and was promoted through social media and national Catholic Church organizations.

Respondents first indicated whether they were a parent/grandparent or church leader. They were then referred to a list and asked *“From your perspective, what are the three most important messages that you wish to hear from the Catholic Church and/or church leaders right now?”* The third question asked



respondents to “rank the list of 12 statements with one being the most important and twelve being the least important from your perspective.” The final question was an open-ended comment box for respondents to leave messages about parents/families they wanted to share with church leaders.

## Results Summary

From February 3 – March 15, 2015, more than 5,100 people visited the survey site with 3,500 individuals completing the survey and just over 2,300 leaving specific comments. Eighty percent of the respondents were parents/grandparents (hereafter referred to as “parents”) and twenty percent were church leaders.

For purposes of this summary, the results are categorized in three groups based on the percentage of times a response was selected. Tier One represents those selected by more than 50% of respondents; Tier Two indicates those selected by between 20% and 50% of people; and Tier Three includes those selected by less than 20% of survey participants.

Rank	All	Top 3 Messages You Want to Hear from the Church/Church Leaders
1	63%	You are always welcome at our church.
2	54%	How can the church help you/your family live out your faith in the world?
3	29%	Parents are the most influential agents of catechesis for their children.
4	27%	Your family is a domestic church; sacred and holy.
5	26%	Marriage is a vocation and serves as the foundation of the family and society.
6T	23%	You are not alone.
6T	23%	What role do you want faith to play in the lives of your children?
8	16%	Tell us about your faith journey.
9	15%	What are your hurts? Hopes? Joys?
10	11%	We are sorry for having hurt you.
11	8%	Avoid that which separates the unitive and the procreative purposes of marriage.
12	4%	At Baptism you promised to raise your children in the Catholic faith.

View survey results at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-9VWY3YF7/>

### Tier One

The two messages in Tier One could engender some thoughtful reflection among church leaders as to how they might best reach out to and connect with families. Not coincidentally, these two messages correspond to research on congregational engagement conducted by the Gallup organization (see *Growing an Engaged Church* by Albert Winseman) which states that “belonging leads to believing,” The top rated message in the Strong Catholic Families National Initiative survey indicates that people want to hear that they are welcomed by the Church.

The second most prioritized message is the question “How can the church help you/your family live out your faith in the world?” This indicates a need for the church and its leaders to meet families where they are and ask how the church can help them live out their faith in the world.



Judging from the survey's more than 2,300 comments, respondents seem to have much to say about how critical it is to feel welcomed and urge the church to ask how it can support families, especially parents. Below are some of the comments found in the open-ended question section of the survey that support this sentiment.

- *Families don't feel very welcome. Express joy each week at seeing everyone at Mass.*
- *Tell (us) it's OK if (children) cry – it's the sound of life, of growth... How beautiful it is that the family knows how to calm those cries.*
- *Don't hide from the fact that there are divorced Catholics. Support and include them in the Church, they do exist.*
- *It is difficult feeling abandoned by the church after my husband died. I feel like the church is just for families and my priest failed to reach out to me after the death.*
- *As a single parent I feel I am looked down upon in the church.*
- *Families come in all forms, and we should honor ALL OF THEM.*
- *Get to know me, my spouse and my family first. Then help us on our faith journey...*
- *The family is a sacred and holy domestic church, regardless of whether it looks like a "traditional" family.*
- *We need support (not judgment) ...starting with where people are, rather than overlaying a set of principles or programs and expecting everyone to "fit in".*
- *We need to meet people where they are - in their broken homes, living with partners without being married, divorced, using birth control, living in single sex relationships etc. and we need to journey with them to Christ. It would not be a watering down of our faith to do that.*

### **Tiers Two and Three**

Tiers Two and Three compose some of the most quoted messages used by church leaders when gathering with parents, and are usually overheard during required sacramental preparation meetings. These statements may very likely represent the church's usual starting point with parents and, while the messages are critical ones, the survey results might cause people to wonder if there are more foundational messages that need to be offered first.

It appears that parents/grandparents are seeking validation for who they are as a family first, and then attended to and accompanied to a deeper experience of faith and church. This accompaniment model is one to which Pope Francis has often alluded during his papacy and one way that church leaders might journey with families.

*"The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this art of accompaniment, which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3, 5)." (Evangelii Gaudium, 169).*

This model replicates the journey Jesus walked with the despondent disciples along the road to Emmaus. Before the risen Jesus teaches them, he asks the question, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" (Luke 24:17) He validates and acknowledges the disciples' confusion and fear, allowing them the opportunity to explain why they were turning their backs on Jerusalem and possibly their faith.



Many of the survey comments indicate that once church leaders ask about and listen to the things its members are needing, those members seem willing and eager to support and pass on church teachings and practices. Survey comments reveal that respondents are wanting and needing more accompaniment and assistance from the church and its leaders, especially in fulfilling their roles as parents.

- *Please support parents, reinforce our efforts, teach the truth, and don't shy away from challenging topics.*
- *Most parents are trying their hardest and need support, not condemnation.*
- *Help us with quality programs, not check-off lists of things to do to receive a sacrament.*
- *My family is busy, but will make time for something that is worthwhile, well done and will meet our spiritual needs.*
- *We need the parish to help us form small communities of faith and prayer.*
- *Recognize and respect the roles and rights given to all of us in Baptism - work with us as partners in the journey of faith.*
- *Parents need to be an active participant in their children's faith journey. Give parents the tools to do this.*
- *We don't like to be treated like children or spoken "down" to...*
- *We cannot just say parents are the most influential. We must encourage, equip and support parents. Sometimes faith formation programs and structures do the exact opposite.*

### **Engaging Parents and Families**

In reviewing the survey comments, it seems clear that respondents feel very strongly about having an active role in the transmission of faith within their families as well as in the world. There appears to be a critical mass of untapped potential awaiting the leaders who wish to engage parents and families as individual domestic churches, fully capable of nurturing and growing faith within their homes. Parents need to be inspired, invited and equipped to do this, not just required and expected to do so. Consider these comments made by parents/grandparents completing the survey:

- *Families want to participate; we just don't always know how.*
- *Talk about REAL LIFE issues and how we can bring our faith to our culture.*
- *Stop lecturing us. Engage us!*
- *We need to be inspired to live the Gospel with our lives, rather than hear again and again topics related to "maintaining the institution" of the Church.*
- *We have to see our faith life as integrated into our whole life and not just another activity or meeting to fit into our schedule on a Sunday morning.*
- *There is no single plan or method or process that will work for everyone. Adjust the plan to the needs of the individual family.*
- *Meet us where we are at and help us ENCOUNTER Christ.*



### Parents vs. Leaders: It's all about the Vocation

When the survey results were analyzed, comparing parent/grandparent and church leader responses, a few interesting variations arose. While most were small differences, there was one notable difference concerning the statement: *“Marriage is a vocation and serves as the foundation of the family and society,”* While parents/grandparents rated this as #4, church leaders ranked it as low at #9, marking the most significant variation between groups.

Parent Rankings	Leader Rankings	<i>Question 1: Top 3 Messages You Want to Hear from the Church/Church Leaders</i>
1	1	You are always welcome at our church.
2	2	How can the Church help you/your family live out your faith in the world?
3	4	Parents are the most influential agents of catechesis for their children.
5	3	Your family is a domestic church; sacred and holy.
4	9	Marriage is a vocation and serves as the foundation of the family and society.
7	5	You are not alone.
6	8	What role do you want faith to play in the lives of your children?
8	7	Tell us about your faith journey.
9	6	What are your hurts? Hopes? Joys?
10	10	We are sorry for having hurt you.
11	11	Avoid that which separates the unitive and the procreative purposes of marriage.
12	12	At Baptism you promised to raise your children in the Catholic faith.
Parent Rankings	Leader Rankings	<i>Question 2: Rank Order All Messages from 1 as Most Important to 12 as Least</i>
1	1	You are always welcome at our church.
2	2	Parents are the most influential agents of catechesis for their children.
3	3	How can the Church help you/your family live out your faith in the world?
4	4	What role do you want faith to play in the lives of your children?
5	9	Marriage is a vocation and serves as the foundation of the family and society.
6	7	You are not alone.
7	8	Your family is a domestic church; sacred and holy.
8	5	What are your hurts? Hopes? Joys?
9	6	Tell us about your faith journey.
10	11	At Baptism you promised to raise your children in the Catholic faith.
11	10	We are sorry for having hurt you.
12	12	Avoid that which separates the unitive and the procreative purposes of marriage.

It would be interesting to hear thoughts from both groups as to why the discrepancy exists. Could it be that leaders are downplaying marriage as a vocation because leaders think it appears too “preachy” or are trying to be sensitive to single parents or other non-traditional families? Is it because leaders want the term “vocation” to be reserved for religious vocations? Are leaders assuming parents already know their marriage is a vocation and they do not wish to overstate it? Whatever the reason(s), it is obvious from the comments section to church leaders that parents feel strongly about the sacredness of marriage and its place in the church:



- *Respect the Sacrament of Matrimony as a Sacramental way of life.*
- *If we focus on elevating the domestic church and marriage as vocations we will see an increase in vocations ...*
- *The faith community should help married couples, parents, and children live out their vocation as Christian families.*

The other variations found in comparing leader and parent responses were in the messages “*What are your hurts? Hopes? Joys?*” and “*Tell us about your faith journey.*” Church leaders ranked these two somewhat higher (#5 and #6) than did parents (#8 and #9). Again, without further input, it is not possible to know for certain why this gap exists. Could it be that church leaders are incorrectly assuming that parents want a more relational and conversational message? Are parents fearful of opening up and sharing deeply with church leaders or others, especially if they are already feeling judged, guilty or disconnected in some way? This would certainly be in line with the #1 message of first and foremost wanting and needing to feel welcomed and accepted.

### **Where to Go from Here?**

There appear to be five needs respondents yearn for from the church/church leaders to help them bring home the faith to their families:

1. To feel a clear sense of belonging by being welcomed, accepted and supported for who they are as a family.
2. To be accompanied in their faith journey starting with where the family is at.
3. To be called sacred and holy, affirming each family’s unique identity as a domestic church.
4. To be supported and empowered as a primary, vital influence in the faith transmission process.
5. To engage families through their gifts and support what each uniquely can do to live out their faith in the world.

Surveys, like research, are done to inform, not form us. As mentioned earlier, this was not a formal research study and should only be viewed as a helpful tool, one that each reader must decide how best to use. Surely, any constructive dialogue resulting between church leaders and parents/grandparents would be a most welcome and helpful response. Ultimately, any next steps in moving the church to a new, and perhaps better place in its partnership with parents, is a worthy one.

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*Strong Catholic Families is a collaborative partnership comprised of these four national organizations committed to helping parishes and schools partner more closely with parents to bring home the faith:*

- National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM)*
- National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL)*
- National Association of Catholic Family Life Ministers (NACFLM)*
- National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA)*



**For more information on strategies for partnering with parents,  
Visit us at [www.strongcatholicfamilies.org](http://www.strongcatholicfamilies.org) and “Like Us!” on Facebook**

