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## Synod and the Arts Inspire Hope and Imagination

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## Synod and the Arts Inspire Hope and Imagination

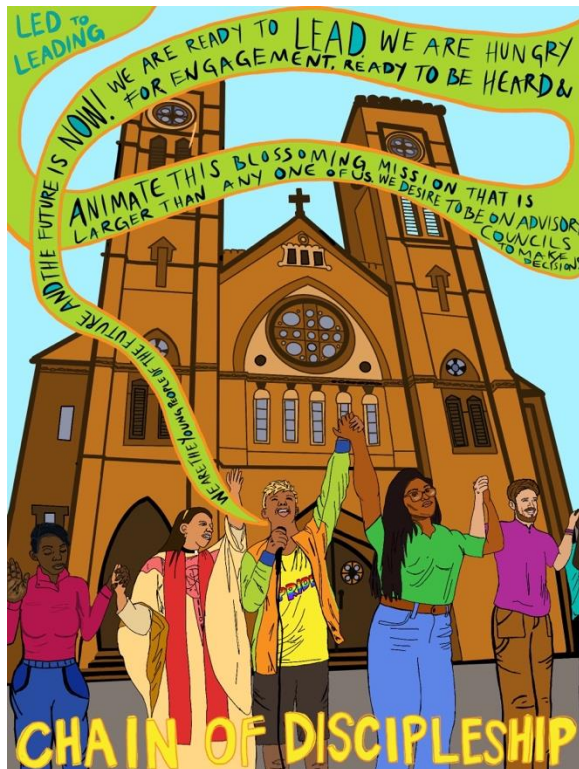
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### Abstract

The process of journeying together, spiritual listening, discerning communally, and incorporating community art has kindled hope and imagination for Philadelphia-area university students during the ongoing, three-year global Synod on “Communion, Participation and Mission,” which Pope Francis convened in October 2021. The SCHEAP leadership team desires to share what we have learned through our hope-filled and creative synodal process so that others may cultivate the protagonism of college students in imagining the future of the Church through synodal practices of spiritual listening, relationship building, and creative communal discernment.



*“Journeying from Being Led to Leading” by Becky McIntyre*

### Introduction

The process of journeying together, spiritual listening, discerning communally, and incorporating community and participatory art<sup>2</sup> has kindled hope and imagination for Philadelphia-area university students during the ongoing, three-year global synod on “Communion, Participation and Mission,” which Pope Francis convened in October 2021.<sup>3</sup> This “Synod on Synodality,” as it is commonly called, is unique in that all people, including Catholics and those of diverse and no faith traditions, have been invited to journey together in synodal listening, relationship building, and discernment. Broad involvement across every continent in the diocesan phase of the Synod (October 2021 to October 2022) indicates a hunger for synodal encounters of listening and dialogue. The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops met in Rome in October 2023 and will meet again in October 2024. These meetings mark the first time in the history of the Roman Catholic Church that non-bishops have voting status in a global synod. Notably, Jesuit university student

Julia Oseka, a rising senior from Saint Joseph's University (SJU), is among them. Oseka's selection was the result of a communal, collaborative, synodal process of relationship building among Catholic universities and Newman Centers with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia called SCHEAP (Synodality in Catholic Higher Education in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia).<sup>4</sup> Not only was our process unique in its collaborative scope, we also integrated communal, participatory arts into our spiritual listening and discernment. Integration of the arts has not only increased engagement with our own students in Philadelphia, but has also allowed for engagement both nationally and internationally, as visual elements can spark dialogue more quickly than written reports. The members of SCHEAP, students, staff, faculty, and archdiocesan collaborators are humbled and joyful that Oseka is a voting delegate to represent the voices of young people from North America at the General Assembly in Rome. The SCHEAP leadership team desires to share what we have learned through our hope-filled and creative synodal process so that others may cultivate the protagonism of college students in imagining the future of the Church through synodal practices of spiritual listening, relationship building, and creative communal discernment.

### **The Unique Gifts of Ignatian Spiritual Listening**

It is important to note from the outset that students with previous exposure to Ignatian spirituality, particularly those at Saint Joseph's University, recognized the three rounds of spiritual conversation recommended for synodal sessions as similar to those used in the Christian Life Communities (CLC). CLCs draw upon the spirituality of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and gather together for prayer and spiritual conversations for the purpose of becoming "missioned, discerning communities."<sup>5</sup> Spiritual listening sessions are not for dialogue or a debate about topics pertaining to life in the Church. They are for prayer, reflection, authentic sharing, deep listening, and then reflecting back what has been heard. Rounds of sharing allow for each person to share from their own life experiences after prayer and reflection, if desired. Each person has time to speak without being interrupted, and each person speaks from

their own experience without commenting on what another person has said. Participants are encouraged to listen for times where they feel moved by what someone else has said. In the second round they can share these moments, leaving time for each person to share. The third round allows time for spiritual discernment about where the Holy Spirit might be leading the group. Such a format allows students to both listen and be heard. In our synodal listening sessions, topics pertaining to life in the Church have been personal, shared from lived experience. Such spiritual listening practices have grounded our Philadelphia higher education synodal journey.

### **Relationship Building: A Synodal Journey**

The synodal journey in Philadelphia Catholic higher education began organically. On the soccer field, two administrators from different universities watched their children play and asked each other, "Have you heard about the Synod? Do you think we could do something on our campuses?" Texts flew among administrators from different universities who had collaborated previously in introducing students to faith-based community organizing as a methodology of social justice. "Can we participate in synodal discernment on our campuses together?" We felt the stirrings of the Spirit. We brainstormed over Zoom in the midst of COVID. Even though we worked on campuses of diverse religious charisms, participants in the conversations who became members of the initial core leadership team had all been Jesuit educated. We drew from resources of an Ignatian way of proceeding including spiritual listening, communal discernment, and relationship building.

The initiative began with prayer and formation. The Synod prayer, personal check-ins and reflections framed our Zoom time together.<sup>6</sup> We quickly issued broad invitations and gathered and trained nearly 30 animators in the synodal listening process from among administrators, faculty, and some students from Catholic campuses and Newman Centers in the Philadelphia Archdiocese. Animators were university representatives trained in synodal listening processes, who convened synodal listening opportunities on their respective campuses. We were grateful for Discerning Deacons,<sup>7</sup> an initiative whose mission is to engage

Catholics in the active discernment of the Catholic Church about women and the diaconate, for their wisdom and support in these training sessions. Our goal was to engage students in the synodal process so that their voices would be included in the listening phase and so they could see themselves as protagonists in the Catholic Church. Between February and April 2022, we collectively held 48 student listening sessions on our campuses. Students reflected on and responded to

prompts such as, “What have been the joys and obstacles in your journeying together with the Church?” We prioritized inviting students of diverse faith traditions and identities. Animators submitted the fruits of these listening sessions, which we used to distill the learnings of discrete sessions into a synthesis report for the whole group.



*Over 100 students and faculty gathered for a cross-campus listening session in April of 2022. Photo credit: Becky McIntyre*

The culminating listening session was a cross-campus synodal gathering of over 100 students and animators from Catholic colleges and Newman Centers with Philadelphia’s Archbishop Nelson Pérez. The time together was framed by a meal and fellowship, participatory art, music, prayer, listening, and discussion. Students gave brief reflections on their joys and obstacles with

the Church. One of the students, Julia Osęka, mentioned being inspired by Sister Nathalie Becquart’s invitation that “Synodality begins with a coffee.”<sup>8</sup> In response to her testimony, Archbishop Pérez publicly invited Osęka and other interested students to coffee, and Osęka took him up on the invitation a few weeks later.





*Participants in our synod listening session at La Salle University in Philadelphia wrote messages about their hopes and obstacles with the Church and attached them to the windows of a conference room to create a collective art installation*

*Photo credits: Sarah Webb | CatholicPhilly.com (above); Becky McIntyre (below)*

Perhaps most notable in this cross-campus listening session was the intentional role that artistic expression could play in both eliciting student engagement and expanding interpretations of what they shared. Drawing upon Philadelphia's vibrant communal art context, which has earned it the reputation as the "mural capital of the world,"<sup>9</sup> the team commissioned SJU alumna and community engaged artist Becky McIntyre as a visual notetaker for the event. McIntyre brought to the synodal process methods she employed at Walls for Justice, a community mural organization, to yield touchstones of collectively discerned values and visions. In some ways, the team anticipated Pope Francis' call to artists gathered in the Sistine Chapel just last year, to help the world

to "see things both in depth and from afar while peering into the horizon and discerning deeper realities."<sup>10</sup> McIntyre created an interactive art installation that was incorporated into the opening prayer service. Students wrote their laments and dreams for the Church on translucent multi-colored footprints and then adhered them to a Synod logo outline on a bank of large windows in the meeting space. This improvised stained-glass window, "A Window into the Future Church," served as the backdrop for the remainder of the session. McIntyre also served as a visual notetaker throughout the gathering. She captured in image and lettering much of what she heard as an observer in small groups, as well as from the patterns in the campus reports.



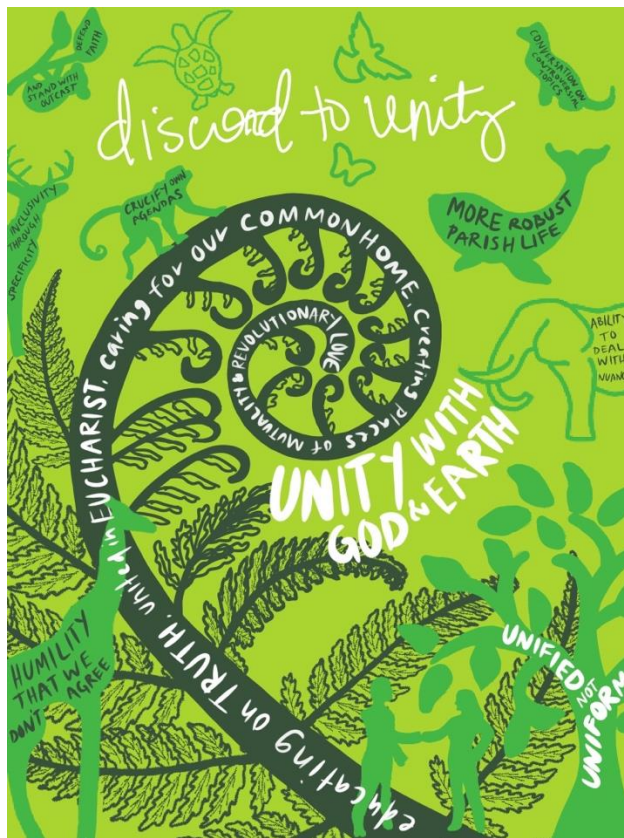
*"A Window in the Future of the Church: Journeying Together in Celebration and Accountability," communal installation by Becky McIntyre. Photo credit: Becky McIntyre*

The team worked during May 2022 to identify six patterns in student responses across campuses: journeying from exclusion to inclusion; journeying from fragmentation to wholeness; journeying from discord to unity; journeying from performance to integrity; journeying from broken trust to accountability; journeying from being led to leading. Original artwork by McIntyre

accompanied the report and visually amplified each of the six themes. In May, the drafting team submitted a synthesis report to the Archdiocese, the Synod Office of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU). The Philadelphia Archdiocese submitted the report in its entirety as an appendix to their



diocesan report sent to the Synod Office of USCCB. In August 2022, Philadelphia area campus animators met with Archbishop Pérez to prayerfully discern with the report in a synodal fashion. We prayed, we engaged in a conversation in the Spirit about what our respective journeys with our students on the synodal path was revealing to us, and we listened for the Spirit's promptings for moving forward together. Pérez encouraged us to continue on our synodal journey and to further develop and refine our collaborative synodal efforts. He asked if this type of collaboration had happened across Philadelphia area universities in the past. When we answered no, he insisted that "this"—the group of people gathered with him and collaborating—was in and of itself one of the fruits of synodality. He commissioned us to continue to discern what "this," to which we are communally called, might be, and committed to supporting us as that discernment unfolds. Inspired, we began calling ourselves SCHEAP (Synodality in Catholic Higher Education in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia) and committed to keep walking together synodally.



*"Journeying from Discord to Unity" by Becky McIntyre*

In September 2022, the USCCB highlighted the SCHEAP report on their website under "Region XVI" reports, and the Vatican Synod Office tweeted out the artwork from the report noting, "In #Frascati22 our experts are working on synthesis produced during the local consultation phase. Pages and pages full of stories, insights, but also in some cases real works of art."<sup>11</sup> In October, the release of the working document for the Continental Stage, "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,"<sup>12</sup> inspired further opportunities for student formation in synodality on campuses. Calls went out from the seven Continental groupings for delegates to Continental Assemblies. Archbishop Pérez invited SCHEAP animators to select a student to be among the three delegates from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia to the North American Continental Assembly. We facilitated a process to solicit nominations and prayerfully discerned that SJU student Julia Osęka would be SCHEAP's delegate. In the meantime, in December we gathered all of the students identified through that nomination process to a discernment with the report, particularly its images, and began to design a larger discernment session for their peers.

The following month, January 2023, nearly 100 college students, campus animators, representatives from the USCCB and Archbishop Pérez met again to reflect with SCHEAP's synthesis report, with a focus on the artwork, in order to discern what next steps the Holy Spirit might be prompting us to take together. At this gathering, we pitched a physical tent to symbolize the enlarging of our hope and imagination for our journey together as Church and placed under it sacred objects reflecting our different founders and charisms. We invoked McIntyre's initial art installation by inviting participants to write on multi-colored footprints the steps they were willing to take in order to keep walking together. In a closing prayer, we commissioned and blessed the Philadelphia archdiocesan participants in the North American Continental Stage of the Synod, including SJU student Julia Osęka. Osęka participated in the last of those virtual assemblies and was later invited to give feedback on the Continental Stage report document. Our work with students was affirmed with the release of the North American Final Document in mid-April, where a paragraph on young people affirms, "We

are often perceived as the future, but we are also the ‘now’ of the Church.”<sup>13</sup> That refrain has become the focal point of subsequent initiatives, including a student-led retreat on synodality.

In late April 2023, the Vatican announced that for the first time in the Church’s history, 70 non-bishops would be among the voting delegates to the 16th Ordinary Assembly of Bishops in Rome in October 2023 and 2024.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as evidence of the efficacy of students’ participation in the synodal process, Pope Francis asked that young people be among that historic number. Given her participation at the Continental Assembly, SCHEAP campus animators again discerned putting Osęka’s name forward to Archbishop Pérez for his consideration, and he agreed. Campus animators and students from across the Archdiocese supported the discernment of Osęka to represent the voices of young people in Rome.

With great joy, we saw the list of delegates selected by Pope Francis to attend the General Assemblies in Rome in 2023 and 2024. Among the delegates is SJU student Julia Osęka. We had a spontaneous Zoom call for our SCHEAP community to reflect with gratitude on the good news. Members of SCHEAP wept over Zoom at the enormity of the news. The fruits and benefits of our grassroots relationship building were tangible. A college student, a woman, would be voting in a Synod of Bishops for the first time in history. This moment shared communally was brimming with possibility, hope, and imagination. What does it mean to make a “preferential option for young people?” at the highest levels of ecclesial discernment, a time when the majority of young people still claim to be spiritual and/or religious but do not express much trust in religious institutions?<sup>15</sup> Our experience suggests that in addition to building opportunities through relationships, the arts play a significant role.

### **Creative Communal Discernment: Participatory Art and Synodality**

The SCHEAP team made a deliberate choice to invite a community engaged artist into our synodal process in light of the impact this kind of participatory artistic activity and expression has had on Philadelphians for more than 30 years.<sup>16</sup>

As a muralist, McIntyre brought with her the skills for turning individual expressions of hopes or laments about journeying with the Church, the central prompt for the listening phase of the Synod, into visual touchstones. These touchstones deepened those ideas through visual presentation and broadened their reach by opening up the possibility for ongoing interpretation.

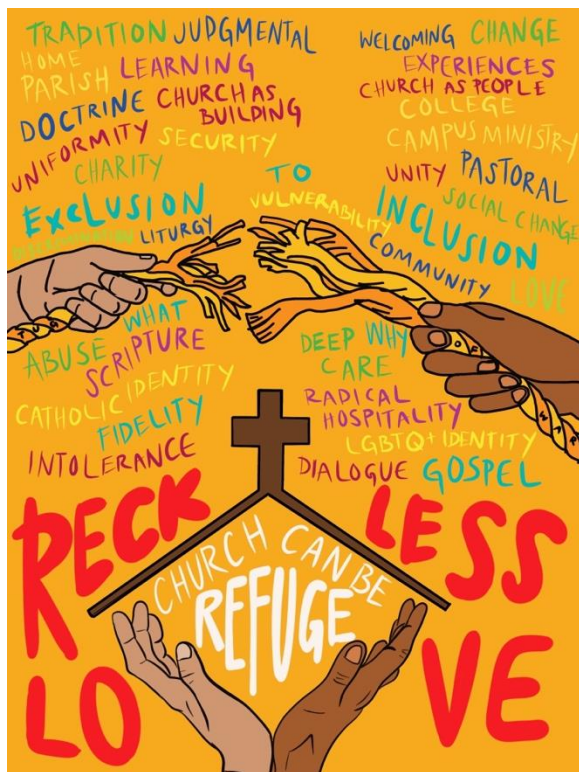


*The team has continued to re-engage students and community members using the art, both to spark conversations in the spirit as well as for resources for prayer. The pieces were used here at an event at St. Joseph’s University in Spring 2023 where participants were invited to pray with the art at “prayer stations” using visio divina. Photo credit: Becky McIntyre*

We believe that incorporating communal, participatory arts into our synodal endeavors was a large part of why we were successful in creating synodal relationships characterized by listening, dialogue and communal discernment among 14 institutions of higher education in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Our art-infused process also contributed to Osęka’s formation in the methods of synodality. This formation prepared her to contribute impactfully to the North American Assembly and ultimately opened the door for her selection as a voting delegate to the General Assembly of Bishops in Rome. She carried



SCHEAP's art-infused synthesis with her into the Aula in Paul VI Hall for every session. Synthesizing the fruits of listening and discerning via participatory art has ensured that what has been shared in a particular place and time—in this case, promptings of the Holy Spirit among college students in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in the spring of 2022—continues to illuminate a way forward not only for us, but also the global Church. In short, participatory art continues to form all who engage in the synodal process in the distinctive movements of the Synod on Synodality: communion, participation, and mission.



"Journeying from Exclusion to Inclusion" by Becky McIntyre

### Created for Communion

Participatory art and synodality share a fundamental goal: to enhance relationality with self and others, and in the case of synodality, with God, in order to discover something unexpected together. Both seek to instill in participants a sense of belonging through recognition of one's own story and empathy for others through receiving their stories. McIntyre shares that art has always made more sense to her in the context of

community and dialogue. Through murals, she has seen art capture listening and discernment and make people feel heard, seen, and connected. McIntyre's vision echoes a central goal of the synodal process articulated in the Preparatory Document: to initiate "living a participative and inclusive ecclesial process that offers everyone—especially those who for various reasons find themselves on the margins—the opportunity to express themselves and to be heard in order to contribute to the edification of the People of God."<sup>17</sup>

Young people long for the kind of belonging offered through this notion of communion.<sup>18</sup> In light of our experience with young adults in SCHEAP, we can affirm Katherine Douglas's conclusion drawn from her own study of artistic expression and young adult faith formation: the arts provide a critical pathway toward relationship.<sup>19</sup> In a study of the impact of the arts on the faith formation of young adults, Douglas discovered that young adults are "interested not merely in abstract forms of knowledge of God but in embodied, physical forms of connection that highlight the immanent, communal and incarnate dimension of the Christian life."<sup>20</sup> In addition to desiring "expressive and experiential activities," she notes that when young adults engage their faith through the arts, "the goal is not mastery or replication but rather wondering, in the midst of practical reason, through imaginative and playful encounter, with the potential result of transformation."<sup>21</sup> Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu echoes this conclusion in *Bridge To Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty*, in which she illuminates the work that art does in transforming us into "wonder-filled beings" capable of "facing the difficult questions and answer these in a ways that give us life."<sup>22</sup>

Engaging images, especially in the context of small conversation groups with others, turned passive listening into an active stance of encountering others with the "ears of the heart." This is possible because participatory arts ground us in more vulnerable postures of storytelling and the hard work of articulating experiential wisdom, rather than more buffered stances that appeal to ideology and doctrine, which can obfuscate the concrete realities of persons and divide us. Images arising from stories can interrupt what Pope

Francis calls “rigid thinking” with a sense of wonder and curiosity that can open us up to new horizons of meaning.<sup>23</sup> Mohammad Ashrif, a Muslim scholar of aesthetics and practitioner in an interfaith Rumi Circle, akin to synodal conversations in the Spirit, also values integrating beauty into these kinds of dialogical encounters this way: “My suggestion is that ‘beautiful aesthetics’ have a role to play in rousing our self-enquiry, suspending our judgements, overcoming our fears, and thereby enabling us to truly see the ‘other’ and in seeing and experiencing the ‘other’ effect a change and growth in ourselves, allowing the possibility of a transformation of some sort.”<sup>24</sup>

Artwork created through participatory processes, like those McIntyre shared with SCHEAP, expands our capacity for communion rooted in

empathy and honors multiple perspectives. People saw themselves in art and felt belonging tangibly in ways that words cannot fully express. As such, these images build bridges across people, cultures, and differences. Through this, our solidarity increases. In her study of communal artistic expression stemming from the storytelling traditions of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Nichole Flores proposes an aesthetic dimension to solidarity that we in SCHEAP have experienced: “aesthetic experience can promote communal encounters that affirm dignity both within and across broader society” through its ability to cultivate imagination and affection, relationships of mutuality, equality and participation, and by operating “on interpersonal and social levels to promote justice.”<sup>25</sup>



*“Journeying from Broken Trust to Accountability” by Becky McIntyre*

## Amplifying Participation

Just as participatory art and synodality expand our capacity for relationality, they also increase our capacity to be agents in developing shared visions and in working together with others to bring them to fruition. Again, this form of creative expression supports another primary goal for the synodal process articulated in the Preparatory Document: “to accredit the Christian community as a credible subject and reliable partner in paths of social dialogue, healing, reconciliation, inclusion and participation, the reconstruction of democracy, the promotion of fraternity and social friendship.”<sup>26</sup> At the very least, integrating the arts into our listening and discernment processes made it possible for more students to participate in the formal Synod, whether by having elements of their story captured in a way that words alone could not or by opening up the process to those who had not yet had a chance to participate through inviting their interpretation of various images that had been created. We were better able to reach marginalized populations within this already marginalized age group, such as women or LGBTQ+ students or even students who identify with more traditional liturgical rituals, through McIntyre’s symbols, color palette, and lettering. She literally and figuratively created a spaciousness that echoes the prophet Isaiah and the title of the working document for the Continental Stage, “Enlarge the space of your tent (Is 54:2).”<sup>27</sup> Students not only were able to see their shared journeys, hopes, and obstacles with the Church synthesized and represented in the six pieces of art that accompanied the summary report, but they also were able to participate in creating an interactive art piece together, a collective moment of visible shared power.

Equally as important as expanding the numbers of participants, participatory art also amplified the quality of students’ participation in the process. On the level of individuals, artistic expression, particularly when created out of processes of storytelling and listening, allowed students to express themselves on their own terms. This is particularly critical for building up the moral agency of those from marginalized populations who too often have their voices usurped by others who are too ready to speak on their behalf. For example, queer Catholic students have expressed

surprise and joy to see themselves represented front and center through the pride T-shirt in the “Journeying from Being Led to Leading” image. Female students delighted at the possibility of an image of a woman wearing liturgical vestments. The SCHEAP team found that art allows people to be seen on their own terms, from multiple perspectives, in addition to being heard. Given that young people have been identified as a population on the margins of the Church, students’ abilities to articulate their laments and dreams for the Church in ways that continue to visually reverberate around the Church demonstrates efficacy. Students participating in an installation demonstrated the way the arts can engage whole communities and deepened the praxis of listening. The images amplified their experiences of the protagonism extended to them through the synodal process.

On the collective level, because their images are often inspired by story, participatory arts allow us to move into and through conflict in ways that open up possibilities for sustained engagement, as opposed to familiar responses that shut people down through aggressive division or enervating withdrawal. Several of the images themselves contain what Francis calls “contrapositions” or binary opposites arising out of students’ experiences with the Church that generate tension.<sup>28</sup> For example, in the piece “Journeying from Exclusion to Inclusion” there are a variety of experiences and values listed that often are in conflict and competition with each other shared by students, such as the tug-of-war between the need to stay true to doctrine and the need to offer pastoral care. This image calls for the complete breaking of the tug-of-war game so that neither side “wins” over the other, but rather that we instead take refuge in a Church that can hold complexity and reckless love for all sides of the spectrum. As such, the images provide a lasting way to “hold space” for those tensions, one of Francis’ recommendations for transforming potentially divisive conflict into insights and energy for transformation. This movement toward discovering what Pope Francis calls “over-flow” also amplifies the participation of all involved—the surplus of meaning that often arises from interpretations of these pieces points us toward those unexplored horizons, which in turn spark us to continue to participate in the process, to



continue to walk together.<sup>29</sup> Synodal arts, therefore, join other forms of participatory art in serving communal discernment and public witness by inviting people into processes of discovering common understanding in the midst of conflict and polarization. The deeply relational and reflective process of participatory art, and not simply the final product, echoes a similar emphasis in synodality: how we arrive at shared insight or consensus, particularly across difference or within diverse contexts, is just as critical as that insight or consensus itself. The process is what transforms us, not necessarily the conclusions upon which we land.



*"Journeying from Performance to Integrity" by Becky McIntyre*

## Imagining Mission

Francis has been clear that synods are not merely for the sake of conversation but for helping us to discern how we might best serve the mission of the Church in a new epoch. The Preparatory Document articulates that goal for the process this way: "to explore participatory ways of exercising responsibility in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the effort to build a more beautiful and habitable world."<sup>30</sup> Delegates to the first General

Assembly, including Julia Osęka, concur in light of the focus proposed for the global Church in order to prepare for the final General Assembly in October of 2024: how can we all become co-responsible for the mission of the Church? SCHEAP has learned that integrating the arts into the synodal process helps us to better imagine that mission by giving young adults a taste of what it is like to create a Church, and even a world, they want to be a part of together. A significant part of that creative act, and perhaps even co-responsibility itself, involves discernment in an Ignatian key: the ability to imagine another's situation or experience, to imagine the Spirit at work in someone else's life, to imagine beyond the status quo, and to imagine bringing one's gifts to a Church ready to receive them. The SCHEAP images sparked the Catholic sacramental imagination, a realization that all of creation is a reflection of and way of participating in Divine love, which aided participants in recognizing God at work in all creation, including the encounters that gave rise to these images. The sacramental imagination also heightens our individual and collective sense of being made in the image and likeness of God and as such that we too are capable of creating good things. O'Connell calls this collective intuition of our innate goodness and capacity for channeling that shared sense into commitments to the common good the "Catholic sacramental imaginary." By this she means "the collective process of determining how we ought to live that is oriented toward radically liberating possibilities of what might be."<sup>31</sup> Again, this echoes Douglas's findings on the relationship between the arts and faith formation for young adults: "The young adults in this study value and seek out relationships where they feel known. They value the way the arts foster connections between themselves and God, as well as others (important to express self so as to be known); and they believe that the Holy Spirit is active in their lives, especially when they do activities that employ their creativity."<sup>32</sup>

Through the participatory arts, SCHEAP students stepped into their protagonism, and through Julia Osęka joined others at the North American Continental Assembly in claiming their identity as "the now of the Church." The lasting visual representation of their contribution to the listening phase of the Synod helped us to see and

experience, if even only briefly, a mission that attends to those on the peripheries, in this case young adults, for which we all may indeed be co-responsible. SCHEAP's experience confirms Pope John Paul II's sense of why we need the arts to serve mission: "Society needs artists...who ensure the growth of the person and the development of the community...they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favor of the common good."<sup>33</sup>



*"Journey from Fragmentation to Wholeness" by Becky McIntyre*

## Conclusion: Headlines of Hope

A preferential option for young people in the Catholic Church is being realized in Pope Francis' call to become a more synodal Church sparked by the global Synod on Communion, Participation and Mission. The success of that conversion process, itself a generational project akin to the *aggiornamento* to which Pope John XXIII called the Catholic Church more than 60 years ago, in many ways hinges upon the protagonism of young people who have proclaimed themselves to be "the now of the Church."<sup>34</sup> College and university

students play a crucial role in this conversion process and we have good reason to hope.

First, the Church is taking young people seriously. The documents of the Synodal processes (synthesis reports at campus, diocesan, national, continental, and global levels) reflect young people's laments and dreams. They reflect what breaks their hearts and what sets their hearts aflame about the Church. Perhaps the most powerful moments of our work together as animators in SCHEAP came when we could highlight for students the places where their participation in the synod process made a difference in terms of the priorities of the Church as we move forward. In some instances, they could trace the throughline of their engagement—even in direct quotes—throughout documents that gave rise to our current synodal priorities around communion, participation, and mission. This is affirming and empowering.

Second, young people are protagonists. The process of spiritual listening resonated with college students. They felt heard. They have participated at every level of the global Synod, including in their universities and parishes, with their voices reaching their dioceses, the USCCB and even the Continental Stage of the Synod. For the first time in the history of the Church, and as a direct result of their participation, young people, lay people, and women are voting in the global Synod. They will be in the room where it happens and will be contributing to discernment on the three priorities of the Synod. This awakens students to their relational power—the kind of power experienced through telling stories, listening to the stories of others, and journeying together, albeit from different places and with different styles, toward a common vision of change.

Third, the tent of belonging is enlarging. In light of their positive experiences, young people want more synodality. Moreover, they want to be sure to include those on the margins despite being on the periphery of the Church themselves. Students yearn for belonging. SCHEAP implicitly heard our students offering a recipe for creating communities of belonging in the midst of our polarized society and fractured Church: "Admit and take responsibility for mistakes and what

harms dialogue... listen to each other, respond with compassion rather than judgment, place love of others before conviction around dogma, and learn and grow together.”<sup>35</sup> Our students, whose wisdom joins that of other young people around the globe who participated in the synodal process, give us the courage to go to the peripheries and listen to those who feel excluded because of intersecting identities of age, gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ status, etc.

Fourth, art awakens the Spirit’s prompting. Incorporating the arts deepened SCHEAP’s engagement in each movement of the synod, as well as its basic methodology and skills. The arts help us tap to articulate what the Spirit may be prompting within us as individuals, to engage with the Spirit’s promptings in others, and to unleash our collective synodal imagination.

Extending invitations to students to journey together synodally is critical for the viability of the Catholic tradition. That young people will be at the table of discernment in Rome for the second General Assembly of Bishops is unprecedented and crucial for the future of the Catholic Church and for the Catholic identity of our Jesuit higher education institutions. The synodal practices of spiritual listening, relationship building, and creative communal discernment allow for fuller communion, participation, and mission in the

Church. Using new tools of engagement, such as the arts, is crucial as we discern the future mission of the Church with new generations at the forefront. In addition, Ignatian spirituality has contributed crucial communal discernment and spiritual listening tools for the synodal process.

University students are part of Conversations in the Spirit at circular tables in the John VI Hall and voting on critical matters pertaining to the renewal of the Church. In light of that unprecedented fact, what new life, hope, and imagination awaits? How can engaging in spiritual listening with college students expand our imaginations for what is possible? How can college students continue to be involved locally and where can we build relationships? What possibilities exist for collaborations between Catholic universities and with their dioceses? Where might the contributions of college students be seen in parish and diocesan decision-making structures? Where might the contributions of college students be seen in how our Jesuit universities express Catholic identity as a synodal Church? How can the arts empower, facilitate, and lift up the voices of young people as they imagine and discern together? How will synodal hope and imagination continue to inspire us as we journey together? HJE

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more on Becky McIntyre and her art, see <https://www.sanaartista.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> We will use the terms *community art* and *participatory art* in this paper. Community art is characterized by interactions of an artist with a community in order to incorporate the experiences and context of the participants. A type of community art is participatory art, characterized by direct engagement of an artist with participants so that they become active participants in the creative process (See “Community Art” and “Participatory Art,” Tate, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms>).

<sup>3</sup> Synod 2021-2024, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.synod.va/en.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Synodality in Catholic Higher Education in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://synodalityinphillyhighered.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Life Community – USA, “Our Mission and Vision,” accessed February 1, 2024, <https://clc-usa.com/our-mission-vision>

<sup>6</sup> See “Prayer for the Synod: *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus*,” Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission. *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality,” 9 July 2021, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html#:~:text=Official%20Handbook%20for%20Listening%20and,in%20tandem%20with%20one%20another>.

<sup>7</sup> Discerning Deacons, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://discerningdeacons.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> Colleen Dulle, “Deep Dive: The ‘Synod on Synodality’ — What’s Done and What Comes Next?” *America*, October 14, 2022, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/10/14/synodality-walking-together-pope-francis-243970>.

<sup>9</sup> Mural Arts Philadelphia, accessed February 1, 2024, <https://www.muralarts.org/about/>.

<sup>10</sup> Justin McClellan, “Artists, Like Poets, Must Share the Truth for a Better World, Pope Says,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 23 June 2023,



<https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/artists-prophets-must-share-truth-better-world-pope-says>.

<sup>11</sup> Synod.va (@Synod\_va), Twitter, Sept 24, 2022, [https://twitter.com/Synod\\_va/status/157356910905234636?lang=en](https://twitter.com/Synod_va/status/157356910905234636?lang=en).

<sup>12</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Enlarge the Space of your Tent" (Is 54:2): Working Document for the Continental Stage," October 2022, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "North American Final Document for the Continental Stage of the 2021-24 Synod," 9.

<sup>14</sup> Salvatore Cernuzio, "Synod: Laymen and Laywomen Eligible to Vote at General Assembly," *Vatican News*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2023-04/synod-synodality-general-assemblies-laypeople-eligible-vote.html>

<sup>15</sup> Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion & Young People*, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> See Mural Arts Philadelphia, <https://www.muralarts.org>, and Makenna Walko, "Mural Arts Philadelphia: Public Art as a Conduit for Urban Transformation, Political Mobilization, and Community Building," *Harvard Political Review*, September 6, 2023, <https://harvardpolitics.com/mural-arts-philadelphia/>. For more on an approach to the arts and faith, see Maureen H. O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Preparatory Document for the Synod on Communion, Participation, and Mission," 7 September 2021, 3, [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en\\_prepa\\_book.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-21x21/en_prepa_book.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> See Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion & Young People*, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Katherine M. Douglas, *Creative in the Imagine of God: An Aesthetic Practical Theology of Young Adult Faith* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Douglas, *Creative in the Imagine of God*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas, *Creative in the Imagine of God*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 36–37.

<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Different Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 69.

<sup>24</sup> Fatimah Mohammed-Ashrif, "Visions of Beauty: Exploring Aesthetics as a Starting Point for Meaningful Inter-Religious Encounter, True-Seeing, Truth-Seeking, and Personal Transformation," *CrossCurrents* 68, no. 3 (September 2018): 359.

<sup>25</sup> Nichole M. Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 141.

<sup>26</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Preparatory Document," 4.

<sup>27</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Working Document."

<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, 80.

<sup>30</sup> General Secretariat of the Synod, "Preparatory Document," 4.

<sup>31</sup> O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk*, 197.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas, *Creative in the Imagine of God*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (Vatican City: Italy: Libreria Edrice Vaticana, 1999), 4, 12, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii LET\\_23041999\\_artists.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_23041999_artists.html).

<sup>34</sup> CCCB and USCCB, "North American Final Document," 9.

<sup>35</sup> "Synodality in Philadelphia Catholic Higher Education Summary Report," May 16, 2022, 16.