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Catholics Speak Out in Nationwide Listening Sessions

Barrington, IL: A key component of the inaugural convening of the *American Catholic Council*, to unfold in Detroit on Pentecost Weekend June 10-12, will be the release of a report on nearly 100 local and regional Listening Sessions across the country over the past 18 months.

These sessions have taken place in diverse settings, from parish halls and living rooms, to hotel conference rooms and retreat centers. Each has been an occasion where the faithful have had the opportunity to dialogue and listen to the promptings of the Spirit as they prayerfully considered fundamental questions about the future of the Catholic Church. Many gathered out of a sense of urgency and a shared sense of responsibility to build a better Church, and one grounded in the vision and promise of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The overwhelming issue echoed throughout Listening Sessions is the hierarchy's unwillingness to enter into dialogue with the laity about real issues which affect the lives and faith of real people in the church. From the perspective of the vast majority of participants in these listening sessions, the hierarchy is increasingly remote, disengaged and irrelevant to the faith lives of rank and file Catholics. This suggests a fundamental crisis of leadership in an increasingly dysfunctional institutional Church. Many see this failure to engage the diversity of the faithful as undermining the promise of a more inclusive Church that is central to the reforms called for by Vatican II. It is increasingly evident that the primary focus of the ACC when it convenes in Detroit will be to address issues of leadership, governance and structural reform.

These dialogues were informed by three fundamental tenets drawn from the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (Vatican II).

- As baptized Catholics, all the faithful share in the ministry of Jesus, the Christ;
- Because all of us are the Church, the common sense of faithful Catholics (***sensus fidelium***) is a legitimate agent of the Holy Spirit and serves to inform Church practice and teaching, in tandem with Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium;
- As adult Catholics, we are called to nurture an informed conscience that is the final arbiter of our actions;

Preliminary data also demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of participants in the listening sessions love the church and do not wish to leave the church like the 30 million who have left in recent years. There is great concern that the spirit of Vatican II has been repressed.

The 2011 Detroit Council celebrates the upcoming 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII and seeks to reinvigorate the Council's reforms, which have been increasingly downplayed in recent years. These include openness to all peoples and cultures, collegial and responsible decision-making, the primacy of a well-formed conscience, and sincere ecumenism.

The ACC Listening Session process also recalls two years of similar sessions leading up to an historic gathering convened in Detroit in 1976 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to implement Vatican II. Honoring the U.S Bicentennial year, that event 35 years ago recognized that many reforms called for by Vatican II mirrored foundational American principles of freedom of conscience, individual rights, and democratic practices, thus encouraging increased involvement of the laity in Church governance.

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