



“Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

## HOPES AND FEARS FOR THE SYNOD WITH THE EXPERTS

- FR YESU KARUNANIDHI (INDIA) • PROF JOHN WARHURST (AUSTRALIA)
- PROF MICHAEL W. HIGGINS (CANADA) • GERRY O'HANLON SJ (IRELAND)
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- CHRISTOPHER LAMB (UK) • PROF MYRIAM WIJLENS (NETHERLANDS)
- PARDINGTON NHUNDU (ZIMBABWE) • PROF SERENA NOCETI (ITALY)

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## GARRY O'SULLIVAN CARDINAL MÜLLER AND CONFRONTING SYNOD DISINFORMATION



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# Church needs to be more accountable says top Synod adviser

“The [Synodal] train has begun to ride and we won't be able to stop it.”

“A synodal Church is a listening Church but it needs to go a step further: a synodal Church is an accountable Church and an accountable Church needs to be synodal” says Prof Myriam Wijlens, a professor of Canon Law and the only woman on the Coordinating Committee of the Synod on Synodality.

“Accountability is much more than responsibility. It is one thing to be responsible for something, and another to be held accountable for what you did or did not do. The latter would refer to negligence” said Prof Wijlens who served as a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (2018-2022).

“In the *Instrumentum laboris*...there are a number of questions to be discussed... for example, in a section on co-responsibility of bishops, there is a question: how can bishops be more accountable? And in a section on women, there is a question: how can women assist the Church in being more

accountable?” Prof Wijlens made her remarks in a wide-ranging interview with the Polish Catholic quarterly “*Wież*”.

She says it will take time to put the theory into practice. “Let's first of all complete the work of making accountability well seated in theory, in theology and canon law. Of course, it doesn't mean that it can be ignored in practice. A challenge is certainly

that not all places go with the same speed and that thus not all are at the same point in implementing being an accountable Church.

“I think that these structures of accountability should be developed in the context of where people live. Definitely we should strengthen diocesan pastoral councils, parish pastoral councils and search for ways how this participation may be better

developed. But, also with regard to the abuse cases, we need further development of more independent structures.

“The first step in any process of change is to create an awareness of the need for change...this change will not happen overnight, but things are developing already. A Synodal process is a journey in this direction. The train has begun to ride and we won't be able to stop it.”



A picture of adviser to the Vatican Synod of Bishops, Professor Myriam Wijlens.

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Key figures say Synod won't change doctrine



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THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE FOR THE UPCOMING SYNOD OF BISHOPS: THE PARTICIPANTS, THE SCHEDULES AND THE EVENTS

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THE SYNOD WHERE WOMEN WILL BE SPEAKING AND BE SPOKEN ABOUT



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# XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2023 full schedule

## Work calendar at the Paul VI Hall between 4-29 October

### October 4 Wednesday

**Time: 9:00** Solemn inauguration and concelebrated Holy Mass at St Peter's Square.

**Time: 11:00-12:30** Training of participants in and use of the new instrumentation.

**Time: 4:15pm-5:45pm** 1st General Congregation; Greetings from the President Delegate; Greeting from the Holy Father; Report from the Secretary General and Report of the General Rapporteur.

**Time: 6:15pm-7:30pm** *Instrumentum laboris* - theme: For a synodal Church. An integral experience. Presentation by the General Rapporteur.

### October 5 Thursday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (1st session). Conversation in the Spirit reflecting on the *Instrumentum laboris*.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** Minor Circles (2nd session). Conversation in the Spirit (continued).

### October 6 Friday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** 2nd General Congregation. Interventions by the small discussion groups and open interventions.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 3rd General Congregation. Interventions by the small groups and open interventions.

### October 7 Saturday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (III session). Finalisation of the reports of the small groups.

**Time: 12:30** Delivery of reports to the General Secretariat.

### October 8 Sunday

Rest.

### October 9 Monday

**Time: 8:45** Holy Mass (St Peter's Basilica - Altar of the Chair).

**Time: 10:00-12:30** 4th General Congregation - *Instrumentum laboris*. Theme: A communion that radiates. How can we be more fully a sign and instrument of union with God and of unity of the human race?

Presentation by the General Rapporteur. Voting for the election of Members of the Commission for the Synthesis Report and the Information Commission.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** Minor Circles (IV session). Conversation in the Spirit on Section B1 of the *Instrumentum laboris*.

### October 10 Tuesday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (V session). Conversation in the Spirit (continued).

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 5th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

### October 11 Wednesday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer

**Time: 9:00-12:30** 6th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 7th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

### October 12 Thursday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (VI session). Finalisation of the reports of the Minor groups.

**Time: 12:30** Delivery of the reports of the Minor groups to the General Secretariat. There will be a pilgrimage in the afternoon.

### October 13 Friday

**Time: 8:45** Holy Mass (St Peter's Basilica - Altar of the Chair).

**Time: 10:00-12:30** 8th General Congregation. *Instrumentum laboris*. Theme: Being co-responsible in the mission. How can we share gifts and tasks at the service of the Gospel? Presentation by the General Rapporteur.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** Minor Circles (VII session). Conversation in the Spirit on Section B2 of the *Instrumentum laboris*.

### October 14 Saturday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (VIII session). Conversa-

tion in the Spirit (continued). There will be a rest in the afternoon.

### October 15 Sunday

Rest.

### October 16 Monday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** 9th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 10th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

### October 17 Tuesday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** 11th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** Minor Circles (IX session). Finalisation of the reports of the Minor Circles.

**Time: 7:15pm** Delivery of the reports of the Minor Clubs to the General Secretariat.

### October 18 Wednesday

**Time: 8:45** Holy Mass (St Peter's Basilica - Altar of the Chair).

**Time: 10:00-12:30** 12th General Congregation. *Instrumentum laboris*. Theme: Participation, tasks of responsibility and authority. What processes, structures and institutions are part of a missionary synodal Church?

Presentation by the General Rapporteur

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** Minor Circles (10th session). Conversation in the Spirit on Section B3 of the *Instrumentum laboris*.

### October 19 Thursday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (XI session). Conversation in the Spirit (continued).

**Time: 4:00pm-7:00pm** 13th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

**Time: 7:15pm** Prayer for Migrants and Refugees (St Peter's Square).

### October 20 Friday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** 14th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 15th General Congregation. Interventions by the Minor groups and open interventions.

### October 21 Saturday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (XII session). Finalisation of the reports of the Minor



A crowd gathers in St Peter's Square at the Vatican for the midday recitation of the Angelus led by Pope Francis.

groups.

**Time: 12:30** Delivery of the reports of the Minor groups to the General Secretariat. There will be a rest in the afternoon.

### October 22 Sunday

Rest and meeting of the commission for the synthesis report.

### October 23 Monday

**Time: 8:45** Holy Mass (St Peter's Basilica - Altar of the Chair).

**Time: 10:00-12:30** 16th General Congregation. Presentation and delivery of the summary report outline - part A.

Personal reading and prayer.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 17th General Congregation. Open interventions on the outline of the Summary Report - part A.

### October 24 Tuesday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (XIII session). Discussion of the methods by the Minor Circles on the outline of the Summary Report - part A.

**Time: 12:30** Delivery of the methods of the Minor Circles to the General Secretariat.

There will be a rest in the afternoon and a meeting of the commission for the synthesis report.

### October 25 Wednesday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** 18th Gen-

eral Congregation. Presentation and delivery of the summary report outline - part B.

Personal reading and prayer.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 19th General Congregation. Open interventions on the outline of the Summary Report - part B

**Time: 7:30pm** Prayer of the Holy Rosary (Vatican Gardens).

### October 26 Thursday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** Minor Circles (XIV session). Discussion of the methods by the Minor Circles on the outline of the Summary Report - part B.

**Time: 12:30** Delivery of the methods of the Minor Circles to the General Secretariat.

There will be a rest in the afternoon.

### October 27 Friday

Rest and meeting of the commission for the synthesis report.

### October 28 Saturday

**Time: 8:45** Prayer.

**Time: 9:00-12:30** 20th General Congregation. Reading of the summary report in the chamber.

**Time: 4:00pm-7:15pm** 21st General Congregation. Approval of work and singing of the *Te Deum*.

### October 29 Sunday

**Time: 10:00** Solemn closing concelebrated Holy Mass at the Basilica of Saint Peter.

## Inside this issue

### • Our role in combatting Synod disinformation

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### • The Synod in Rome will be about women

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# Tackling the Cardinal Sin of disinformation about the Synod

## Garry O'Sullivan

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Unless you've been living under a rock – which has its appeal in an increasingly cacophonous and coarse world – you'll know that something very important is being lost to the world and to humanity that will utterly change how we interact and tell stories about ourselves and about each other. I'm not talking about shrinking blue glaciers, or threatened species of insect or animal, I'm actually talking about facts, hard facts.

I remember a young adult telling me that there were five million Chinese people living in Dublin, the capital of Ireland. When confronted with the fact that Ireland's total population is 5.2 million they doubled down and said they meant in the whole of Ireland. When that too was contested based on facts from the Irish census (and that fleeting of intelligences: common sense) their jaw dropping response was "Well, that's your opinion and I have mine, we can agree to disagree". Actually, no we can't. I can't respect or agree with your ignorance or stupidity. Jonathan Swift put it nicely: "You can't reason someone out of something they didn't reason themselves into in the first place".

### Opportunities

However, facts to the contrary probably won't cut it for deniers. They're too embedded and personally involved in their ignorance. In his book, *"On Disinformation – how to fight for truth and protect democracy"*, author Lee McIntyre says that what a denier believes isn't just what they think, it is who they are, so if you attack their beliefs you are in a sense attacking them.

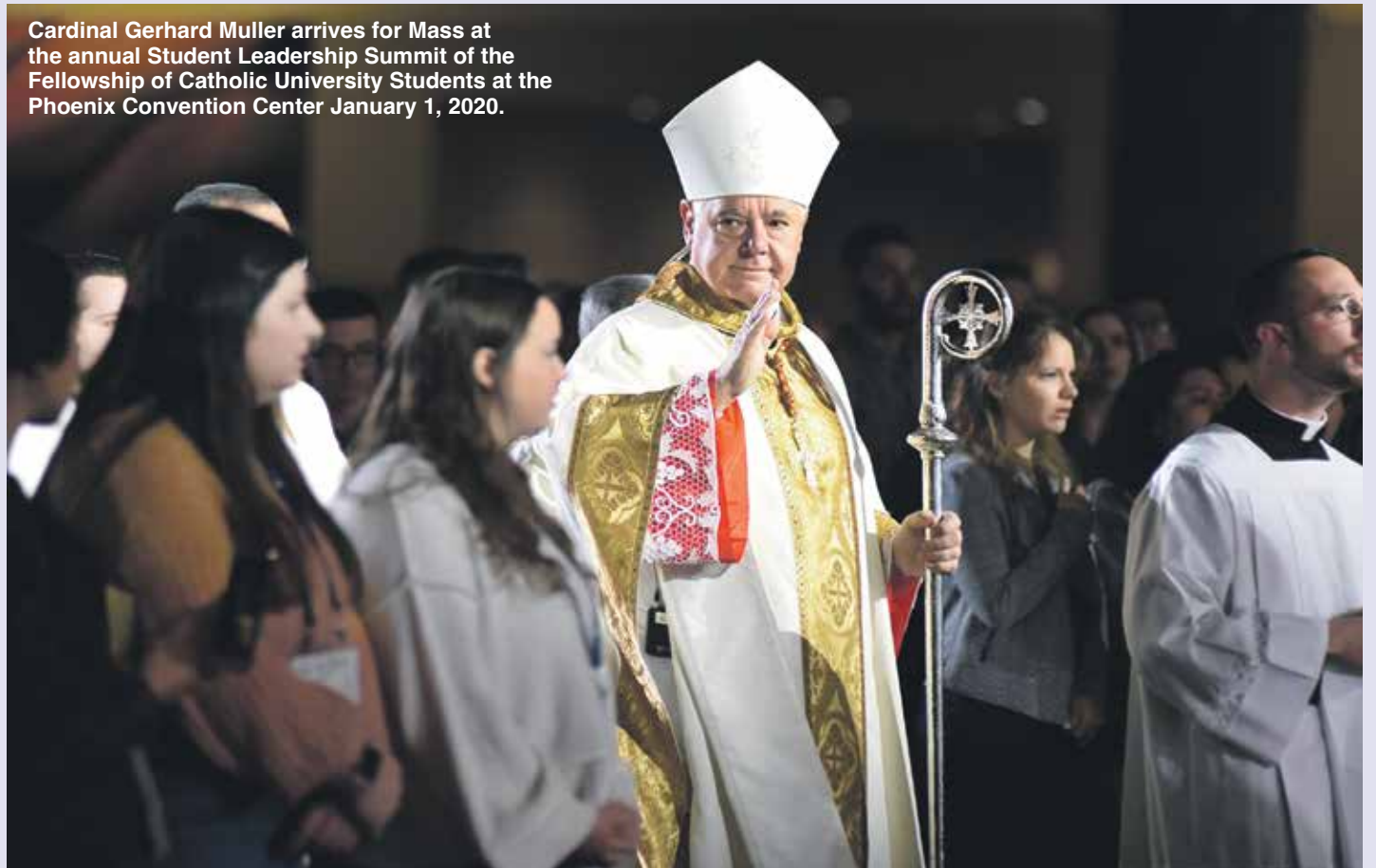
"The point of propaganda is not just to get you to believe false information, but to feel that those on the 'other side' are your enemy." And if the other person is given enemy status then you don't want to listen and prefer to hurl insults and abuse. He suggests that talking to deniers personally creates opportunities to not just share facts but to break barriers of distrust. It's easy to label someone evil on social media, harder to do when you are looking them in the eye.

So when Cardinal Gerhard Müller says that the Synod is a 'hostile takeover' by people who want to change doctrine, the Cardinal needs to be told that he is spreading disinformation. Where are your facts Cardinal? There is nothing in the working document of the Synod that calls for a change in doctrine and even those opposed to the Synod acknowledge that it has no power at all to change anything, let alone doctrine.

It is also clear that many of the bishops attending the Synod were not part of the earlier discussions and some may not have participated at all in any synodal events. How these uninformed bishops are supposed to be part of some grand conspiratorial take-over is only something the cardinal can possibly explain for us, and them.

What those like Cardinals Burke and Müller never seem to address are the actual problems facing the Church and how she should deal with them. They remind me of the notorious Protestant leader in Northern Ireland, Ian Paisley, whose constant refrain through bigoted

Cardinal Gerhard Müller arrives for Mass at the annual Student Leadership Summit of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students at the Phoenix Convention Center January 1, 2020.



spit and shout was 'No, No, No' until one day, after much bloodshed and hate, he sat down with his enemy and finally entered government with them.

The problems of the Church, and this was amply demonstrated in the synodal listening process throughout the world, is that the Church of Jesus Christ, led by its clerical 1% of members, oversaw and in far too many places continues to do so, the abuse and cover-up of the sexual exploitation of children.

**“There are few spaces where both the harm we've experienced and our love for the Church is believed and valued. The Sisters of the Little Way are building that space”**

### Crisis

But you won't hear Burke and Müller speak about this key issue for the Synod. What did they have to say about the revelations of child sexual abuse in Switzerland this September? Perhaps the former CDF head and German cardinal could answer why Switzerland didn't listen to other German speaking nations on their experience of the abuse crisis; how is it possible that the Swiss Church can't listen to its neighbour, 20 mins by train, that has the same culture and same language? If ever Cardinal Müller needed evidence for a Church cover-up,

here's lots of material to get started on.

However, a new religious community that is starting out in Portland, Oregon, The Sisters of the Little Way of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness is talking about it as reported by Paul Fahey of the *'Pope Francis Generation'* on Substack (<https://www.popefrancisgeneration.com>). This is what this new order of sisters say is their mission:

"Called and consecrated within Christ's Heart and in the heart of the Church, we joyfully live a mission of listening, healing outreach, spiritual reparation, and solidarity with people who are despairing, doubting, and hopeless, and people on the fringes or outside of the Church, especially those people who have been wounded, scandalised, or abused by members of the Church".

Paul Fahey writes: "There are not many Catholic spaces for people who have been abused, harmed, and betrayed by clerics and lay leaders in the Church. Often people respond with 'defend the Church at all costs' or 'burn the Church down'. There are few spaces where both the harm we've experienced and our love for the Church is believed and valued. The Sisters of the Little Way are building that space".

### Renewal

The Sisters also understand the need for reform and renewal for the simple reason the Church is bleeding members as they outline - see below. It's a huge crisis that Pope Francis is attempting to try address.

\*In the US the percentage of Catholics who

belonged to a parish declined to 58% from 76% between 1998 and 2020—twice the rate of decline among Protestants (Gallup).

\*37 percent of American Catholics in 2019 say news of reported sexual abuse by priests had them reexamining their religion, up from 22 percent in 2002 (Gallup).

\*A 2021 survey found that 31% of adult US Catholics said the abuse crisis has made them embarrassed to identify themselves as Catholic (CARA at Georgetown University).

The Sisters conclude: "These signs of darkness in the Church make clear the need for deep renewal and healing. This sorely needed, profound reform calls us to leave behind the *status quo*, take risks, reorganise our efforts, and embrace new ways of thinking rooted in the Gospel".

### Unity

The Synod will not change doctrine, it is not a hostile takeover. It is an attempt to figure out how the Church of the global north speaks to the global south, how do we think as a one world Church? How do we have diversity in unity in the Church? How can the Church be more accountable?

Lee McIntyre writes: "The truth does not die when liars take power; it dies when truth tellers stop defending it. So let's expose and name the truth killers...we have been born into an age in which science and reason - indeed truth and reality itself - once again need defending". We need to fight back.

# Cardinal Hollerich and Bishop Meier dampen reform expectations ahead of World Synod

**L**uxembourg Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich and Bishop Bertram Meier of Augsburg have warned against expecting too much progress on reform from the World Synod starting in Rome in October.

Speaking in the Catholic podcast “*Himmelklar*”, on Wednesday, Hollerich referred above all to expectations regarding the ordination of women and pastoral care for homosexuals.

These topics were central to the Synodal Path reform process of the Catholic Church in Germany but were less wanted in other countries, the cardinal said. As the so-called “Relator General”, he is largely responsible for the preparation and implementation of the Synod.

## Disappointed

“The Church will have to find answers to these questions,” he added. “But it won’t all happen in this Synod. One must not overload it with expectations; otherwise one will be disappointed.”

At the same time, Hollerich urged all participants to be open and willing to convert. “If I go in with the point of view: I already know everything – then I don’t listen, then I can’t make a discernment of spirits.”

Bishop Bertram Meier of Augsburg also warned against exaggerated hopes for reform. “I want to avoid disappointment by dampening hopes,” he told the *Augsburger Allgemeine newspaper*. “There will be no decisions on reform issues at this meeting of the World Synod as we have in Germany.”

After the Synod, Pope Francis would presumably draw up a list of priorities with his inner circle of colleagues for the following meeting in 2024. “In the end, he will decide on possible reforms,” said Meier.

## Failure

Nevertheless, the World Synod would not be a failure “even if not all our Synodal



Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, Relator General of the Synod, smiles after the presentation of the working document for the Synod of Bishops in the Vatican press office June 20, 2023.

Path resolutions are dealt with, let alone positively decided upon”, the bishop continued. “It would be advisable to slow down a bit – too much change gets us in Germany and at the level of the Universal Church in trouble.”

There were big differences in pace within the Universal Church, Meier noted. This applied, for example, to the question of blessing same-sex couples. Such ceremonies would be opposed in an African country, for example. “There, we as a Church must first fight to ensure that homosexuality is not punished with the harshest state penalties.” A German

reform resolution could not simply be transferred to the Universal Church.

## Ordination of women

Meier said he would also be taking issues to the Synod that reform-oriented groups had recently cited in letters to him, such as the ordination of women as priests and steps to combat clericalism. “I will also take these concerns with me and bring them into the Synod. But I will not act as a lobbyist for these issues,” the bishop stressed.

He said it was interesting that, unlike in the past, there would be no discus-

sion groups held in Germany at this Synod of Bishops. He himself would be part of a group that would speak Italian. “I see this as an urgent invitation from Rome that we Germans should get better involved worldwide and explain our ideas.” He said he did not perceive this as Roman criticism of German demands for reform, but as a “chance to put ourselves out there”.

The World Synod convened by Pope Francis for October 2023 and October 2024 will focus on new ways of involving the grassroots of the Church in important decisions in the Catholic Church. Non-ordained men and women will also have the right to vote. Ultimately, the Pope will decide on possible resolutions.

## Bishop Baetzing says Vatican should allow priestly ordination of homosexuals

The president of the German Bishops’ Conference, Bishop Georg Baetzing, has said he disagrees with the Vatican’s ban on the ordination of

homosexual men to the priesthood.

It led to homosexuality being regarded as taboo and hidden, Baetzing said. A spokesman for Baetzing’s diocese of Limburg confirmed to Germany’s *Catholic News Agency* (KNA) that the bishop had made those statements which were quoted by the *Deutschlandfunk* radio station.

The Vatican should depart from this rule, Baetzing said. Asked by the broadcaster whether it was right to exclude someone who came out as gay from the priesthood, but to tolerate secret homosexuality, Baetzing’s spokesman replied: “Generally, it is the case that a candidate’s secret relationships stand in the way of a serious willingness to clarify his professional and life decisions”.

But that applied regardless of whether someone was homosexual or heterosexual. This should not play any role at all in the question of suitability for the priesthood. The decisive factor was that a secret relationship did not fit in with the decision to be ordained as a priest.

The current Vatican guidelines published in December 2016 state that “practising homosexuals” and men who have “deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support a so-called homosexual culture” are excluded from the priesthood.

These guidelines confirmed a Vatican document from 2005, even though the Vatican had stressed after initial debates that homosexuals were not generally excluded from the priesthood and that a differentiated case-by-case examination was necessary.

During the Synodal Path reform consultations on the future of the Catholic Church in Germany, Baetzing had repeatedly spoken out in favour of reforms in Catholic sexual morality, including a general reassessment of homosexuality.

The *Deutschlandfunk* broadcast was about the story of a man who had to leave the seminary because of his homosexuality.

**i** Originally reported by KNA Germany.

**“I see this as an urgent invitation from Rome that we Germans should get better involved worldwide and explain our ideas”**

# Synod will not discuss changes to doctrine says prominent figure involved in process



Professor Anna Rowlands speaks at a news conference at the Vatican to present the document for the continental phase of the Synod of Bishops on synodality.

**P**rofessor Anna Rowlands, who has played a key role in the development of the Synodal Process, has said the Synod will be concerned with the 'who' of the Church rather than the 'what' of the Church.

Two years after Pope Francis gave all Catholics the opportunity to make their views known on the mission of the Church in the 21st Century, the first of two Synod meetings will take place in Rome from the 4 October on the theme '*For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*'.

The Synod of Bishops will, for the first time, include non-Bishop voting members, comprising of a number of laymen and laywomen.

## Retreat

The Catholic Church in England and Wales will be well represented. Archbishop John Wilson, the Archbishop of Southwark, and Bishop Marcus Stock, Bishop of Leeds, were elected by their brother bishops to attend. Joining them will be Bishop Nicholas Hudson, an Auxiliary Bishop for the Diocese of Westminster, chosen by Pope Francis, and Professor Anna Rowlands and Austen Iver-igh chosen as expert facilitators. Fr Timothy Radcliffe, the Dominican preacher, will lead a retreat for all Synod members prior to the official opening on Wednesday, 4 October.

Fr Jan Nowotnik, who will attend as a voting member and whose doctoral thesis focused, in part, on the preparation for a Synodal Church, will collaborate with theologian Professor Anna Rowlands in Rome and both will have a key role in proceedings.

Professor Rowlands stresses that the Synod will be concerned with the 'who' of the Church rather than the 'what' of the Church:

"It's not sorting out doctrinal issues, that's not what this will do. There's a fear of that in some quarters, that this is a Synod that's going to make big doctrinal changes – some fear that, some desperately hope for it. I think both groups will be quite disappointed

if they're looking for big doctrinal change because the Pope's focus is on the 'who' of the Church, on the question of the way in which our life itself is focused on mission to the world.

"The Church is the only institution that exists not fundamental for its own members, but for the sake of the conversion and the salvation of all. So [we need] a renewal in that focus on mission. But you don't get to that mission if you haven't done your housekeeping – thinking about the kind of community that we are, and that we would be drawing people into.

"It's that question of participation, the 'who' question again. Who belongs? How do they belong? Who participates? How do they participate? How is all of that being held by the inspiration of the Spirit who pours out on the Church the gifts, skills and talents? This is how the Church is different from any other institution."

## Divisive

Dr Rowlands reiterated that the Synod is about renewal:

"So [the focus is on being] renewed for mission to the world, renewed in the 'who' question and the 'how' question of participation, and renewed in communion – in a way of being together.

"What could be more important for the world to hear right now in the fractured, brittle, divisive times that we live in, the friend/enemy constant distinction? Who are you for? Who are you with? We are for Jesus Christ together as brothers and sisters."

Fr Jan Nowotnik agrees:

"I'm often saying to people that I think what the Synod is, in Pope Francis' mind, is about drawing all the members of the Church – and those beyond the Church – into a deeper relationship with God and a deeper relationship with each other.

"The Church exists to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, and to bring his healing mercy to the Church."

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# Building Bridges and Bridging Gaps

Indian hopes and expectations from the October 2023 Assembly of the Synod

**Fr Yesu Karunanidhi**



**‘P**ope Francis invites me to talk to him; he is there to listen to me; I am immensely excited!’ – this was the first response of a lay woman in a village when she was introduced to the Diocesan Phase of the Synod for a Synodal Church, in October 2021.

Excitement, antipathy, confidence, apprehension, involvement, indifference, responsibility, reluctance – thus has passed the synodal discussion-discernment in India at the Diocesan, National, and Continental Phases. The Church in India, with eyes filled with hope and hearts filled with expectations, awaits the XVI General Assembly of the Synod in October 2023.

The tagline of the Synod, *communion-participation-mission*, prior to October 2021, might have meant to a lay person as ‘communion means Eucharist, participation means Sunday Mass, and mission means mission Sunday collection’. But, now as we enter into the final phase of the Synod, we understand the depth of these words.

During the discussion-discernment exercise the Church in India realised that the tagline of the Synod *communion-participation-mission* is in an intense conflict. Differentiation on account of gender, caste, language, rite, creed, power, wealth, and vocation comes heavily on ‘communion’ in the Church and in the society.

## Deferment

Participation in ecclesial and pastoral structures is affected by deferment, a situation where the clergy and the lay faithful postpone saying, ‘we are not ready yet’. Mission is understood in a very narrow sense of being baptised and going to the church. This distorted notion of mission has made us ‘followers’ of Christian faith and not its partners.

Christianity has merely changed the way we worship but has failed to affect the way we live or conduct our lives in an ethical manner. We collectively hope that we will change our paths leaving aside our



A banner for the Synod of Bishops on synodality is seen in St Anthony Mission Station in Ambalapuzha, India, March 5, 2023.

**“Enough space must be given to spell out the challenges to synodality and the ways to overcome, instead of setting synodality as a farfetched ideal to reach”**

differentiation, deferment, and distortion.

The Church in India, first, expects that all the delegates ‘talk with *parhesis*’ at the Synod floor in Rome, instead of choosing to listen passively, for their entry to the Synod assembly is not a privilege ascribed to them, but a responsibility that is vested on them; that they do not hijack the floor on issues that concern a particular country or region or people.

Second, in India, Catholicism is often identified with the church buildings, structures, and institutions; and is associated with the people in authority: bishops, priests, men and women religious. The Church in India needs a ‘lay’ face to impact on today’s society. We wish that the Synod turns the table around to accommodate the lay faithful and creates space for the Church to permeate in the society through them.

Third, we want our local Church not as the kingdom of God, but as a household of God. We all will come to realise that we are a household each one having a role to play, with mutual respect, understanding, and acknowledgement. We will address the issues that concern our household today such as religious fundamentalism, unleashed corruption, hate politics; and will not remain as passive observers to the hard-hitting realities.

Fourth, when we go through 15

worksheets that accompany *Instrumentum Laboris* we are happy that ‘the poor’ stand on the top of the list for discussion. However, we feel disappointed to see the dignity of women dealt under ‘co-responsibility in mission’.

We would rather have it discussed under ‘communion’ or ‘participation’. For, the women are to be accommodated for their own sake, not for the sake of mission; accommodating them for mission implies ‘using’ women, and will it not subvert synodality?

Fifth, ecumenism has a separate worksheet. This section could have included our reflection on the independent churches that mushroom across the world. They, through their fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible and narrow understanding of salvation, disrupt not only the faith of the Catholics, but also national peace and harmony.

## Pathways

Sixth, relationship with other religions is an imperative today. But, we need to define pathways for it. For the dialogue among the Sacred Scriptures, the Church’s teaching on inspiration is a hurdle, and for integrating other religious elements, our orthodoxy in liturgy does not pave the way. Forums have to be created for inter-faith.

Seventh, at the end of the Synodal discussions, a Synod monitor

consisting of the majority of the lay faithful must be established at the parish and diocesan levels in the local Church.

Eight, enough space must be given to spell out the challenges to synodality and the ways to overcome, instead of setting synodality as a farfetched ideal to reach.

Ninth, what we expect at the end of the General Assembly is not a post-synodal apostolic exhortation, but a post-synodal active experience. This active experience will make us journey from emotional contagion to empathic concern for the vulnerable

in the Church and the society.

Tenth, we do not want the Synod to end as a romance. May it hurt us. From the sugar-coating we shall move to the bitter medicine. Failing will make this exercise a Francis syndrome in the Church. What we expect with hope is a Francis effect!

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As with many churches in Asia, parishioners at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Cathedral in Alappuzha, India, leave their shoes outside the church during Mass.

# My Hopes and Fears for the Synod



People participate in the Second Assembly of the Plenary Council of the Australian Catholic Church in Sydney July 2022. The meeting was disrupted after July 6 when more than 60 of the 277 members staged a protest over issues regarding women in the Church, including the defeat of a motion to formalise support for the ordination of women as deacons.

**“I fear the obvious unwillingness of a significant minority, at least, of bishops around the world to embrace synodality and Pope Francis’ vision”**

## Professor John Warhurst



**M**y hopes for the Synod lie with the leadership of Pope Francis. When the Pope launched World Youth Day in Lisbon recently, he emphasised once again his great theme of openness, repeating the Spanish term “*todos*”, meaning “everyone” and urging his audience to do so too. He said:

*“There is room for everyone in the Church, and whenever there is not, then, please, we must make room, including for those who make mistakes, who fall or struggle. The Lord does not point a finger, but opens wide his arms”.*

Just what this means in practice, though, is central to any discussion of the Synod. Opinions within a disunited and polarised Church vary enormously. The Pope him-

self referred in his address to the framework of Church laws within which openness must operate.

Christopher White, writing in the *National Catholic Reporter* on August 6 2023, interpreted the Pope’s meaning to be: “A message of welcome to historically marginalised groups in the Church, including women, the divorced and remarried, and LGBTQ Catholics”. I hope that is the case.

Questions remain though to be discussed at the Synod. How much diversity is the Church willing to accommodate? How much divergence from traditional status differentials, governance structures and established Church teaching is possible?

There are different types of diversity, and all are important. What I call ‘soft’ diversity, meaning ethnic diversity, co-existence of various Rites and even some decentralisation and regional diversity,

can be accommodated. It may even be welcomed enthusiastically by Synod members.

However, what I call ‘hard’ diversity, meaning evolution in Church teaching, inclusion of women, divorced and remarried, and LGBTQIA+ Catholics (Christopher White’s ‘marginalised groups’), is much more challenging and less likely in the immediate term. Yet it should be our aspiration as a Church.

### Hopes and Fears for the Synod

The Synod on Synodality is a true advance and an opportunity for the Church to move forward. There is a lot to like about the direction the Synod has taken. Many elements of it, including the Working Document, make me cautiously optimistic. I like the language of the document. I welcome its engaging approach and I appreciate its apparent openness to reform on contested issues.

I don’t have any major worries about the Document, therefore, though it is just a preliminary document for the first of two assemblies, and it is not yet strong enough on equal rights for women.

My worries are not really about the composition of the voting members either, which Pope Francis has made more diverse than ever before; though it is still hierarchical rather than representative of the whole Church.

The Australian participants, for instance, don’t include a truly alternative voice among them. That is a missed opportunity by our Church to be fully synodal. However, it is heart-warming to see more than 50 women voting members and other lay members as well as clerical members chosen by the Pope.

My worries lie rather broadly with what I know about the Church’s record and what I hear some powerful conservative figures saying about the Synod.

First, what we know of opinion within the universal Church must make any reasonable reformer concerned. I especially fear the malign influence of conservative Americans, both bishops and the broader conservative American Church community. They make no secret that they don’t like either Francis or the Synod and, well-funded and vocal, they will do all they can to impede any progress. Their influence is widespread.

Secondly, I fear the obvious unwillingness of a significant minority, at least, of bishops around the world to embrace synodality and Pope Francis’ vision. Official Australian responses to the late Cardinal Pell’s parting tirade late last year against both the Pope and the Synod was some local evidence of this. Not one Australian Church leader strongly supported Francis by distanc-

ing themselves from Pell’s denunciations, though a couple hedged their bets.

This reluctance may have come about for various reasons such as not speaking ill of the dead, but one reason clearly was that at least some bishops agreed with Pell. Evidence for this conclusion came later in the Oceania Bishops’ Pastoral Reflection following the preparation of the Oceania Response to the Continental phase document. Ominously it noted that: “Not every bishop found every part of the document wholly convincing or complete, and some had doubts and concerns about where this might be leading us”.

### Expectations

This typically vague language was a sort of ‘minority report’, which, along with warnings from many bishops about unrealistic expectations and how long the journey would be, served only to deflate the aspirations of their own communities.

Thirdly, the dilatory take up by Australian bishops of the outcomes of the local Plenary Council is another warning to the faithful not to expect too much. In their official document issued at Pentecost 2023 called “*Carrying Forward the Plenary Council*” no attempt was made by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to give an update on diocesan implementation.

This was a missed opportunity. The Australian Catholic community has been left without leadership.

But what we do know, based on the research efforts of the editorial committee of the “*Sense of the Faithful*” group in Melbourne is that the take up has been disappointing. Only less than one-third of Australian dioceses, and few archdioceses, have exhibited any real enthusiasm. *The Sense of the Faithful* committee conclude, after studying key actions in relation to three important issues, Indigenous recognition, diocesan pastoral councils and *Laudato Si* action plans, that there is a “large gap between higher level intention and action on the ground”.

It is not unreasonable to fear the same push back whatever the outcomes in 2024 of the Synod on Synodality? So much in the Church depends on the attitudes of diocesan bishops. This means that the future of the Church often looks like a patchwork quilt. In other words, it is sure to be patchy. That is why my hopes are mixed with anxiety.

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# My expectations for the coming Synod on Synodality? Simple really – It's destined to be both a *bousculade* and a *galimafrée*

**Michael W. Higgins**



My expectations for the coming Synod on Synodality are *both* a lot and a minimum. How are these in any way aligned? What sense does such a seeming contradiction make?

Let me make recourse to what experience I have with synods to help explain my own both limited and expanded hopes for the ecclesial gathering this October.

## Credentials

I have attended as an accredited journalist three Roman Synods, the most important of which was the Extraordinary Synod of 1985, convoked to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. It did indeed celebrate, but it also scrutinised and critiqued the post-conciliar legacy as well as highlighting the ascendancy of many key curial prelates and global hierarchs who would come to define the John Paul II papacy.

The '85 synod was not a reactionary event, although the appearance shortly before it began of the publication of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's *Rapporto Sulla Fede* (*The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*) provided the perfect backdrop for a tough ecclesiastical assessment of the Council and its perceived inadequacies. The cardinal and the Pope made sure that the '85 synod would not be a paean to the Council, its architects, liberal purveyors, revisionists, and leftover *periti*.

**“The event was still a wonderful example of the kind of generative activity that comes when Catholic minds collide in the interests of enlightenment”**

It was an exciting event but showcased the tight control exercised by the synod authorities—implementing the mind and mandates of the Pope at

every level and—although this is understandable to some degree given the nature of Roman governance and the strong personality of Karol Wojtyła—it created an environment so tightly scripted with pre-determined goals that as a gathering summoned to engage and discern it ended up being neither.

Of course, the '85 synod was not the first held in Rome since the re-institution of the synod in 1965 as a form of periodic, although always only advisory organ, for governance in the Church. But it was my first encounter with this instrument of collegiality and I wasn't impressed.

## Bishops

The interventions of the bishops were constrained both in time and in content, the heavily redacted summaries of the *circuli minores* (small language-based discussion groups) were infuriatingly cryptic and unhelpful, and the chaos often visited on the Vatican press office as it struggled to deal with an inquisitive and increasingly cynical corps of journalists and scholars, created an intense atmosphere where ecclesiastical spin became the order of the day.

But, and this is the sweet irony, the event was still a wonderful example of the kind of generative activity that comes when Catholic minds collide in the interests of enlightenment: lively discussions in the trattorias of Rome, candid off-the-record interviews with bishop-delegates and their theological advisors, corridor revelations far from the oversight of press briefing officials, grand liturgies open to all—voting bishops, consultants, auditors, journalists, and guests—and new friendships forged, both professional and spiritual.

Still, the deficiencies of the synod machine remained in evidence for the other synods I covered during the John Paul II papacy and, if anything, they proved more irritating because the Church appeared not to have learned anything from the process. Too little trust; an excess of control.

Pope Francis gestures to the crowd during a papal audience in the Vatican.



## “Francis is calling us to a pioneer Catholicism—an imaginative exploration of new territories of mind and spirit”

### Different Synod

And now we have Francis with his love of *parrhesia* (free speaking in the Spirit) guaranteeing a different experience of synod. I have not had the opportunity yet to attend a Bergoglio-inspired synod, although I have followed the synodal process and documents they produced in the previous synods he summoned.

But being onsite for the Synod on Synodality brings with it feelings of acute anticipation and fervent hopes all tempered by the resurrection of memories of previous synodal moments with their aggravating defaults.

Will this Synod be a *bousculade*, a mad scramble, or will it be a *galimafrée*, a ragout of diverse morsels? It will be both. And that is its saving genius.

### Making a mess

Francis is not averse to making a mess. In fact, he has encouraged Catholic youth to do precisely that and he has spoken frequently

of the image of the Church as a reverse pyramid, with the bishopric, including the Bishop of Rome, at the bottom. Now that is a radical re-structuring.

This Synod on Synodality was prefaced with a level of consultation beyond all previous consultations: surveys, questionnaires, diocesan reports, continental reports, academic conferences, elaborate data-gathering initiatives, massive media coverage, and, not surprisingly, resistance from some, a backlash from others, with arrestingly frank denunciations of Francis and his presumed efforts to reduce the Catholic Church to a liberal Protestant offshoot, a parliamentary assemblage, or a wildly equalitarian cult full to the brim with woke sentiments.

These are caricatures, calumnies really, and they will be exposed as such by the success of the synod itself: there will be no heretical proclamations, no sundering of the apostolic college, no schism-in-the-making, and no forsaking of the creative tra-

ditions of Catholic intellectual and spiritual life.

### A flowering

Rather, it will be a flowering of the Spirit and there will be healthy contestations of ideas, political lobbying (and, yes, the Vatican is not uninitiated to political stratagems, as history can amply attest), some platforming and positioning as various groups make compelling arguments for their positions regarding justice issues, women and ministry, presbyteral reformation, the moral gravity of planetary peril due to depredations of the environment by centuries of human misrule, and other matters as well. A possible Pandora's box?

The alternative to risking a free and open discussion of ecclesial issues facing the Catholic communion is withdrawal, retreat, entombment. For Francis, such an option runs counter to the will of his Lord. This Pope is fearless in heeding the Gospel injunction to speak to all nations; he knows that Catholic tribalism runs counter to the

expansionist vision of the evangelists and he knows that the boundary lands are where we often encounter Jesus.

Francis is calling us to a pioneer Catholicism—an imaginative exploration of new territories of mind and spirit.

Will the Synod sink under the weight of unrealistic expectations? Will it implode because of bureaucratic chaos and papal mismanagement? Or will it be the richest opportunity since the close of the Second Vatican Council to make sense of our Christian call in a darkening landscape? For me, it will be both a *bousculade* and a *galimafrée*.

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Visitors gather in St Peter's Square at the Vatican to pray the Angelus with Pope Francis, September 2023.

# Francis' Path: To Rome from the peripheries

**Gerry O'Hanlon SJ**



**M**aybe the first thing to say about the October Synod of Bishops is to note the human dimension. Over 300 delegates meeting together for over 3 weeks, most of them without prior knowledge of one another.

They will need time to come to terms with their surroundings and with each other, to find space in coffee bars to chat and gossip, spaces for prayer and quiet reflection, and to become familiar with the way of proceeding in the Paul VI 'Aula', so that they are not overwhelmed and depart somewhat bewildered by it all. It will help that there is a 3-day retreat period leading in to the formal opening of the Synod and that this is a two-leg event with, hopefully, as many as possible of this year's group returning next year to complete the job.

## Unique

This is a rather unique synodal event: there will be an unprecedented number

of the non-ordained present, among them lay and religious women. It will be interesting to see the effect of this: it is well known that it is one thing to speak about people when they are not present, another entirely to speak of them when they are with you in the same room.

It is of course also, in faith, an event with a divine dimension, and primarily so. The 'conversation in the Spirit' (spiritual conversation) methodology should already be familiar to most participants, and this and shared liturgical celebrations will be a great help to the communal discernment at the heart of the process.

I would expect that the great themes already enunciated in the Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) will be touched on: war and peace, climate change and biodiversity, an unjust economic system, cultural colonisation, immigration, secularism, the open wound of abuse – including sexual

abuse in the Church. All this is faithful to the understanding of Vatican II that the Church is there not primarily for itself but as a 'light for the world', and this missionary thrust is only possible if, in creative fidelity to the Word of God and the great tradition, it learns to read 'the signs of the times'.

**“Under the rubric of ‘evolution’ Francis noted how the Church had often changed its stance on particular issues over the centuries, instancing slavery, the possession of nuclear arms and the death penalty”**

There will be an eye out for the ecumenical and inter-faith dimensions. And since the credibility of the Church's missionary voice is dependent also on its own internal witness, there will be attention to the intra-ecclesial themes that have arisen globally throughout the consultation process leading up to this Synod – the need for a more welcoming, inclusive, less judgemental Church; the role of women; the contested nature of some Church teaching, notably on

sexuality and gender; the need for greater co-responsibility in governance, not least to address the abuse crisis.

Not all questions can be addressed with equal rigour. The Working Document notes (par 6): 'Part of the challenge of synodality is to discern the level at which it is most appropriate to address each question'.

It will become quickly apparent also that conflict, tension and disagreement are part of the process: the antidote to this is, as Pope Francis never tires articulating, not to avoid the conflict but to 'endure it', trusting in the Spirit that through candid speech (*parrhesia*) and patient and generous listening (*hypomene*) we can hope for consensus gradually to emerge, without attempting to resolve issues too quickly and at any cost, or giving way to destructive polarisation.

## Key issues

It may well be that this leg of the Synod will content itself with identifying key issues which will be passed on for further study and discussion over the coming year and returned to in October 2024 for a more conclusive discernment.

Among them may well be the issue of co-responsibility in governance (from parish level up, with implications for the role of the papacy itself), with the attendant changes

in structures, institutions and law that this will entail; the participation of women at decision making level in the Church, and, which would give a powerful signal, the naming of diaconate as an area for further study and decision; the determination to keep the abuse issue on the agenda, and even, in the words of the Irish National Synthesis, to understand it as 'a lens' through which all else needs to be viewed; the renewed welcoming of all into the Church, especially those (like the divorced and remarried, members of the LGBTQ+ community) who have felt alienated, and the determination to address them in new language.

## Change

Which brings me, finally, to an underlying issue that is unlikely to arise directly at this Synod but will surely bubble up time and again under the surface. I refer to the issue of change in Church teaching, which Pope Francis himself addressed recently in an address to Portuguese Jesuits.

Under the rubric of 'evolution' Francis noted how the Church had often changed its stance on particular issues over the centuries, instancing slavery, the possession of nuclear arms and the death penalty. In a recent issue of *Studies* (Summer, 2023) Newman scholar Dermot Roantree noted that '...

Newman became a Catholic because the Church did change, not because it didn't'.

We have lost this sense of what is traditionally known as the 'development of doctrine' within the Catholic Church, and have become so mired in an attitude towards tradition that confuses fidelity with immutability and not creativity that, as the late Gabriel Daly argued, the Catholic Church 'does change' through 'amnesia', claiming an unbroken chain of continuity which is historically unsustainable. It would be good to see some movement on this underlying fault-line.

Belloc's *Path to Rome* was written at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at a time of flourishing ultra-montanist. We now, ironically and astonishingly, have a Pope who wants to bring about a healthy 'de-centralisation' of the Church, who regards the 'peripheries' as just as important as the centre, who wants to 'invert the pyramid'. For all the risks and dangers, this is an exciting time for the Catholic Church.

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# The Synod and the way forward for the Church

## Mike Lewis



The opening of the October 2023 session of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the Vatican is a moment of truth for both the Church and for the legacy of Pope Francis. Here in the West, we have watched as the number of Catholics who practice the faith and agree with the Church on doctrinal and moral issues has steadily declined.

In many places, including Ireland, Catholic identity — people who self-identify as Catholic regardless of practice or belief — is in a freefall. There is no denying that the Catholic Church is suffering a severe loss of credibility today, resulting from the sexual abuse crisis and the Church's ineffective response to a rapidly changing culture.

### Controversial

The Church's credibility gap widens when Catholics draw heightened attention to our most difficult and controversial teachings. We can no longer describe the now-mainstream moral vision of the secularised West as "a dictatorship of

relativism", because in reality it is a new orthodoxy whose adherents are every bit as committed to the promotion of causes — such as women's equality, same-sex marriage, and contraceptive access — as Catholics have ever been to our principles.

**“There's only one way for us to carry out a conversation about these matters and that is to make the point of reference the doctrine of the Church”**

As a result, the mainstream position of Western society is that many Catholic teachings, including on the ordination of women, human sexuality, and family planning, are repressive at best (and evil at worst).

Catholic leaders today disagree on how to best address this division and heal the polarisation in the Church. For some prominent figures, many of whom are outspoken critics of Pope Francis, the answer begins with the emphatic and clear articu-

lation of Catholic doctrine.

This is the message of US Cardinal Raymond Burke, who has repeatedly insisted that doctrine must be at the forefront, such as when he said in an interview with an Australian Catholic newspaper, “there's only one way for us to carry out a conversation about these matters and that is to make the point of reference the doctrine of the Church”.

Such voices are not new in the Church. In his address to open the Second Vatican Council in 1962, Pope Saint John XXIII said, “the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another”.

Yet during the Council and in the years that followed, countless so-called “prophets of doom” argued that Vatican II — or at least its implementation — ushered heresies and doctrinal errors into the Church at the highest levels. They are still with us.

Pope Francis also rejects the approach of these prophets of doom. As he declared at World Youth Day in Lisbon, “The Church is for everyone”. Francis recognises that affirming doctrinal statements and apologetical arguments are an ineffective means of evangelisation in our rapidly secularising culture. As he wrote in *Amoris Laetitia*, “A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding ‘its

inherent values’, or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin” (AL 301).

### Credibility

A great challenge for the participants of the synodal assembly will be to discern new paths forward for evangelisation in light of this reality. It will not be easy. A long, well-funded, and cynical campaign to undermine the credibility of Pope Francis and the Synod has been underway for years. The honesty and intentions of the participants in the assembly are already being questioned.

Even though Pope Francis and the Synod's promoters and organisers have repeatedly insisted that the integrity of the core doctrines of the Church is not up for discussion, right-wing media outlets and celebrity Catholic “apologists” are daily pushing out rumors of “fixed” or predetermined outcomes.

This narrative is in total contradiction to Francis' vision of synodality, however. If the Synod is steered by an ideological agenda, left or right, then it will fail in its purpose. The fact of the matter is that nothing the Church has tried has been able to stem the steady exodus of Catholics from the Church. Projects including lay ecclesial movements, well-meaning but often hollow attempts to make the faith more “relevant”

for young people, and traditionalist efforts to emphasise Latin liturgy and moral doctrines have not balanced out the damage done by the abuse crisis, corruption, mismanagement, and a Church whose moral doctrines are increasingly at odds with those of our civilization. There is no project or program that will save the Church from itself. We need divine intervention.

Pope Francis has said that the Holy Spirit is the “protagonist” of the Synod, and that the purpose of the Synod is to listen for and to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in the Church. In order for the Synod to be successful, participants must ultimately set aside their own agendas and prayerfully ask where the Holy Spirit is leading us.

**“The other path is to follow the Successor of Peter, Pope Francis, and venture out with trust on this Synodal journey, to discover where the Holy Spirit is leading us”**

Cardinal Christophe Pierre, in an address to the US Bishops, stated that the Church needs “an eye-opening experience”. Our eyes will not be opened if our hearts and minds are closed.

If the Church is to find lasting renewal in the areas of communion, participation and mission, openness to the voices of others is essential. No one can be excluded from this dialogue, from the most devoted to those who struggle with the faith.

We are often presented with new ideas and new paths forward, but we will never see them if we remain closed to the “God of Surprises”. When we exclude or dismiss the perspectives of those whose decisions and experiences have led them in different directions than ours, we forfeit priceless opportunities to build community, create friendships, and share the gospel.

As we approach the Synod, Catholics can choose one of two paths. One path is to retreat into our assumptions, ideologies, and agendas. We can continue to insist that our way is the right way, and that the crisis in the Church could be fixed, if only everyone else would listen to us.

The other path is to follow the Successor of Peter, Pope Francis, and venture out with trust on this Synodal journey, to discover where the Holy Spirit is leading us.



Pope Francis participates in morning prayer during a session of the Synod of Bishops on young people in this file photo from 2018.

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# Synodality in the third millennium: ecclesial systems and synodal models

## Dr. Massimo Faggioli



**W**hen I am invited to talk about synodality, one can feel the excitement but also a certain anxiety for the unknown that the Catholic Church is stepping into. This anxiety must be taken seriously, not dismissed or belittled. The best way to respond is not to expound abstract theories or models distant in the long history or vast geography of the global Church.

The first thing to say is that there will be probably a plurality of synodal cultures in the global Church. This has to do with the fact that there are different ecclesial systems in the one Catholic Church.

Synodality is indeed a very ancient style of Church and, at the same time, a recent theme. It is part of the great Tradition of the Church, as stated in the report of the International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church* (2018) in the initial section (paragraph 3): “Synod” is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning recalls the deepest contents of Revelation”.

### Contemporary

At the same time, the theology of synodality, which now underlies Pope Francis’ push for a synodal reform of the Church, is a post-Vatican II development: the final documents of Vatican II never used the term “synodality,” even if the ecclesiology of Vatican II opens up to that perspective.

The modern theology of synodality originates chronologically in the contemporary, post-Vatican II theology of the Catholic Church and geographically develops in the theological tradition predominantly in liberal-democratic societies in the Western hemisphere. This is not just a coincidence.

### “To talk about the Italian synodal model and its relationship with the papacy we should look at an ecclesial system which has Rome and the Vatican at its center”

A key factor for the future of synodality is the relationship between Christianity and the different social and political – and not just ecclesial or theological – traditions in the world, in a global community such as the Catholic Church today.

It is a fact that we see partly different models of synodality developing in global Catholicism today, in Germany, Ireland, Australia, Italy etc. Behind these different models there are different ecclesial sys-

tems – different models of relations between Church, state, and society.

For example, to talk about the Italian synodal model and its relationship with the papacy we should look at an ecclesial system which has Rome and the Vatican at its centre. But we need to do this for every national/continental area, in order to accept, or at least identify the possibility of different synodal systems in the ongoing synodal experiences in the global Catholic Church today.

### “Synodality means opening an ecclesial processes for a Church less centered on the clergy and more open to the role of lay people and women”

Synodality is a crucial moment in the life of the community of the faithful because it allows the Church to be stripped of old-time protections and reverence for the clerical system, and invites us to focus on some specific dynamics.

One of the assumptions questioned by the conciliar and post-conciliar theology was the protection that political power offered to Catholicism for much of the medieval, modern and contemporary ages. But now we have a more global view of Catholicism: the history of the relations between political power and the Churches in Asia and Africa is very different.

Reflecting on synodality requires examining different factors within all churches, both those heirs of the European Constantinian system and those of the post-colonial world: what type of relationship exists between clergy and laity? What type of clergy and what type of lay people (from the social, economic, cultural point of view, of relationships between classes and ethnic groups)? What are the sources of theological and cultural production that animate that Church?

What type of social, educational and welfare services does the Church offer to the civil community in which it lives? What type of relationship with the rest of the population (majority/minority Church/state Church/state of persecution)? What type of ecumenical and interreligious relations? In which information system (Catholic and secular) does the Church operate?

Synodality means opening an ecclesial process for a Church less centered on the clergy and more open to the role of lay people and women. But the question of who, of the subjectivity of synodality is more complex than the simple call to free ourselves from clericalism: what are the social alliances at the centre of ecclesial synodality in the



A young woman writes her prayer on a Post-it Note at the Synod of Bishops’ booth in a park in Lisbon, Portugal, during World Youth Day August 1-6, 2023

21<sup>st</sup> century?

Which classes or class fragments are allied with the Church that now turns to synodality? Which sections of the Church or specific actors are at the centre of the synodal movement? Which organisations and networks? What are the dominant patterns in people’s minds and where do they come from? How are they shaped by class alliances? The property-owning class, the professional ruling class, the technical-bureaucratic class, the working class, the poor?

From the pontificate of Paul VI onwards, the synodal question remained a taboo. Francis’ pontificate instead allowed a resumption of that idea of a synodal Church. The question therefore reopens today. On the one hand, the alibis used to declare both synodality and a differ-

ent style of Church impossible and impracticable due to the Pope’s or the Vatican’s opposition have fallen away. With Francis this is evidently no longer true.

### Resources

On the other hand, in the “Synodal Process” different churches reacted in different ways to the invitation of the bishop of Rome. It is a question of understanding, as Francis said, that synodality belongs to the path of the Church in the third millennium. This means that now, starting from the Synod on Synodality in October 2023, different ecclesial systems will be called to offer important resources for building a synodal style appropriate to our time, but also to their particular local situations.

Synodality also means freeing

oneself from those pre-understandings that keep the local churches in a state of minority in relations with Rome and with other Catholic Churches; it means to strip away pretenses and pretexts (both clerical and lay) attached to the status quo.

Synodality does not mean wounding or even cutting off a particular type of relationship with Rome and the other local Churches, but rather represents the opportunity to rethink, in the context of synodality, the meaning of being a one Catholic Church.

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# ‘Taking Off Our Shoes’ for a Synodal Church



Pope Francis greets a little boy in Ulán Bator, Mongolia, during the last event of his four-day trip to Mongolia, September 2023.

## Dr Clarence Devadass



There was a sense of mystery that surrounded the Catholic Church when Pope Francis called for a two-year journey (2021-2023) to prepare for a Synod on Synodality. When he further extended it by another year (2021-2024), the sense of mystery was further heightened.

Nevertheless, the extensive consultation, one such as this never seen before, also brought with it a sense of expectation, of a change for the better. While change in the Church was going to be inevitable given the fast-changing world, there were also sceptics towards this process – will the Church become irrelevant?

Just like in the rest of the world, hopes and expectations also intensified here in Asia. People wanted to see a change in the Church, but many wanted to see an immediate change. Given the breadth and depth of Asia, change was always going to be a long process rather than an immediate one. Nevertheless, the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality revealed the aspirations, dreams, and even disappointments of the Asian peoples for the Church.

The synodal consultation process showed a deep sense of love for the Church across Asia. In that deep love

for the Church, there also resides varied emotions of joy, sadness, vulnerability, and woundedness. The vibrancy in many of the Asian churches is indeed a blessing despite the diversity of cultures and religions across Asia.

### Concerns

There is much to celebrate in the Asian churches because our churches are still full, expressing the quality of fellowship, caring for each other, and being agents of peace in a broken world. It must be said that the experience of walking together has brought about a greater awareness of the unique contexts and rich cultures across Asia.

The experience has also brought about a greater realisation of the vulnerabilities, wounds, and abuses that need healing for the churches in Asia. Vulnerabilities, wounds, and abuses include matters concerning finances and jurisdiction, abuse of power and authority, the crisis of sexual abuse of minors and the vulnerable, issues concerning women and youth leadership, the concerns of the indigenous peoples, and lack of pastoral care for the vulnerable groups.

In all this, the credibility of the Church is at stake. Not just pressing

issues within the Church, but the socio-political issues confronting Asia are also of concern to the Asian hearts namely, poverty, corruption, oppressive regimes, ecological threats, migration, freedom of religion, etc.

**“In the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality, a synodal ecclesial image emerged – ‘taking off our shoes’. It is a common practice among Asians to take off our shoes when we enter sacred places and people’s homes”**

Leadership styles often hinder the challenge of becoming more synodal, especially when decision-making is often left to bishops and priests. This has led to a passive complacency that is compounded by a culture of fear and sometimes even apathy – obstacles for a synodal Church. We realise that our mindset towards leadership must change where we learn to dialogue, consult, and discern communally for the greater good of the Church.

In the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality, a synodal ecclesial image emerged – ‘taking off our shoes’. It is a common practice among Asians to take off our shoes when

we enter sacred places and people’s homes.

It is a mark of respect and humility. Given the diversity of cultures and religions across Asia, respect and harmony are essential virtues to the Asian people. While the Church is a minority in many parts of Asia, conviviality must also be a mark of a synodal Church.

‘Taking off our shoes’ also indicates the equality that we all share as human beings, not divided by social or religious status. A synodal Church that embraces people from all walks of life, especially the poor and the marginalised. The voices of women, young people, children, and indigenous peoples must be heard. The lives of those from lower castes, divorced and remarried, the elderly, the infirm, persons who identify as LGBTQIA+, and many more must be touched through the life and ministry of the Church.

### Diverse

We ‘take off our shoes’ so that we can feel the pulse of the people and be closer to the ground realities of the people of Asia. The socio-political landscape across Asia is diverse and at the same time challenging. A synodal Church for Asia cannot be devoid of such realities if it is to be effective and relevant in touching the hearts and lives of its people.

The Church in Asia looks to this synodal journey as being the catalyst that will provide opportunities to explore new pathways and new visions in this “new Church”. Asia

has a rich tradition of hospitality towards inclusion, diversity in unity, peace through harmony, and vibrancy in the community – this is the Asian ethos that we can offer the universal Church.

**“Qualities that must accompany us on this journey are humility and hope for only then is it possible for the Church in Asia to embrace the culture of encountering Christ in one another”**

We recognise that the journey of becoming a synodal Church is a long and arduous one. It gains both support and resistance towards change. Nevertheless, there are things in the Asian Church that we must celebrate because the Church in Asia is very much alive, and we know that Asians are the heartbeat of the life of the Church in many places outside Asia.

We also realise that the way we do certain things must stop immediately because they do not promote the desire for a synodal Church. Most importantly, we need to initiate creative ways in the pastoral and spiritual mission of the Church in Asia.

The greatest hope in this whole process of journeying together as a synodal Church is that bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, and the laity will walk together as we listen to one another and discern what the Spirit is whispering to us.

Qualities that must accompany us on this journey are humility and hope, for only then is it possible for the Church in Asia to embrace the culture of encountering Christ in one another.

The synodal journey has given us the courage to hope and dream for a better Church that is relational, contextual, and missional, and that will best serve the peoples of Asia. It is encouraging to note that some churches across Asia have already implemented some fruits of listening and discernment from the earlier phase of this synodal process.

These are signs of more good things to come as we embrace the synodal path for a new way of being Church.

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# ‘The harvest is rich, but the labourers are few:’ Reflecting on England and Wales’ winding Synodal journey

## Christopher Lamb



**A**round 30,000 Catholics from England and Wales took part in the local stage of the global Synod process, the largest listening exercise in this local Church to take place over the last 40 years.

“To many of those taking part, the Synod was a revelation,” the national Synod report for England and Wales said. “They spoke of how, after decades of churchgoing, they had been asked to speak for the first time.”

Nevertheless, the seeds sown during the process will take time to bear fruit, with the Synod process still unfamiliar territory. The danger is that the Synod assembly in the Vatican this October will be viewed as something happening “over there” and have little relevance to their lived experiences in parishes. The harvest is rich, but the labourers are few.

### Discernment

“I suspect most Catholics in the pews in England and Wales won’t have much awareness of the upcoming Synod in Rome, and may not be sure how it relates to the diocesan processes back in 2022,” says Avril Baigent, the Synod Co-Lead for the Diocese of Northampton and Director of the *School for Synodality*, a recent established body which aims to help embed practices of listening and discernment in the Church in England and Wales.

“Those who have been following the global Synod sometimes wonder ‘if anything can change’, while there are others that worry that only some voices will be heard. It takes faith to believe that the Holy Spirit is present in what can seem a slow and contentious process.”

Responses to Pope Francis’ call for a synodal Church in England and Wales from Church leaders have been a varied mix of enthusiasm, caution, scepticism and resistance. The Archdiocese of Liverpool – home to Liverpool Football Club where fans chant the very synodal words of the song “*You’ll never walk alone*” – began a synodal process in 2018 thanks to the leadership of Dominican archbishop Malcolm McMahon.

In July 2023, the Diocese of Northampton held a synodal assembly, while the Salford diocese has begun a 2023-2035 synod process. Individual parishes, particularly those run by religious orders, have taken up the process and run with it. Wherever the Synod is experienced, people are energised and inspired.

As the Rome Synod assembly begins, Catholics in England and Wales hope that whatever is agreed at the centre can perme-

ate down to the grassroots. The need for reform and renewal is felt acutely by those on the frontline who believe the Church can no longer continue business as usual.

“One of the problems for England and Wales is the significant numbers of clergy remain indifferent to or fearful of synodal processes, unsure, perhaps, about what it means for their role”

A government inquiry laid bare devastating revelations of clerical sexual abuse and its poor handling by some of the hierarchy. Some dioceses are under severe financial pressure driven by a drop in Mass attendance in the aftermath of the Covid-19 lockdowns. Vocations to the ordained priesthood are down, and people in the pews want struc-

tures that may have worked well 50 or 100 years ago to be rethought.

While the Synod doesn’t offer readymade answers to these intractable problems, it is being seen as the way for the Church to start at least asking the right questions.

One of the problems for England and Wales is the significant numbers of clergy remaining indifferent to or fearful of synodal processes, unsure, perhaps, about what it means for their role. One of the most vocal resistance comes from a small group of ex-Anglicans, including some former Church of England clergy who are now Catholic priests. Inside the special structure set up for ex-Anglicans by Benedict XVI (the Personal Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham), a number have expressed concerns about anything resembling “synodical government” due to their experience of the Church of England’s synod and battles over the ordination of women.

Are they unnecessarily fuelling fear about the Synod? Unlike the Church of England Synod, the synod in the Catholic Church is a consultative, rather than deliberative, body with a strong emphasis on the spiritual process of listening and conversion. This is where the reform is likely to take.

### Community

“I have been amazed at the impact of synodal encounters, where true lis-

tening leads to encounters of the heart. So many Catholics have said to me ‘I’ve never been asked about my faith before’, Ms Baigent says. “I think that one of the legacies of the Synod will be in the grassroots skill of gracious listening and speaking which can transform our community lives at all levels, helping us discern the Holy Spirit at work among us.”

“The Synod process has opened up a new horizon, and people in the pews want Church leaders to ensure the Catholic community in England and Wales can become more synodal, participatory and focused on evangelisation”

Those who engaged in the Synod process spoke of their hope for “a loving, merciful, familial and missionary Church in which all are involved” and one “open to the guidance of the Spirit”. The Synod process has opened up a new horizon, and people in the pews want Church leaders to ensure the Catholic community in England and Wales can become more synodal,

participatory and focused on evangelisation.

There are repeated calls for women, described as a “silenced, unrecognised majority” and whose gifts often lie “unwrapped and ignored”, to be better included in leadership and decision-making. Talking of leadership, the Pope is expected to appoint a new Archbishop of Westminster in the not-too-distant future, given that Cardinal Vincent Nichols is almost three years past the episcopal retirement age of 75. Whoever takes over from the cardinal will be tasked with looking at how to embed synodal reforms at the local level.

In parishes across England and Wales, there is an appetite for what the Synod is offering. The success of the assemblies in Rome, both this October and in October 2024, will rest on how far they can encourage these communities to embrace the renewal process.

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Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, England, president of the Santa Marta Group, speaks to Pope Francis and others attending an international conference of the Santa Marta Group at the Vatican.



# Synodality also means accountability – The big interview with Professor Myriam Wijlens



A picture of adviser to the Vatican Synod of Bishops, Professor Myriam Wijlens.

Polish theologian **Zbigniew Nosowski** conducts an incisive tell-all Synod interview with Synod Coordinating Committee member Prof. Myriam Wijlens, touching on women in the Church, the scourge of sexual abuse, fostering accountability and changing mentalities

**Prof. Wijlens, you have a unique perspective being a professor of canon law and at the same time being the only woman on the Coordinating Committee of the Synod on Synodality Committee. “Accountability” is a new word in the Church’s language. Am I right that in the Vatican it appeared for the first time in February 2019 at the bishops’ summit convoked by Pope Francis?**

In the 2019 meeting the Pope asked the presidents of the national bishops’ conferences to reflect about accountability, because bishops had often not at all or insufficiently responded to allegations of sexual abuse. The Church became aware that there was the abuse of minors by clergy, but there was also a severe problem in that those in leadership had not acted in accordance with the responsibility flowing from their office as bishop.

Accountability is much more than responsibility. It is one thing to be responsible for something, and another to be held accountable for what you did or did not do. The latter would refer to negligence. In the 2019 meeting the word accountability was not only accepted, I believe the reality behind it was accepted as well.

Remarkably, the reports that arose in the context of the Synod on Synodality mention quite often the three words: transparency, accountability and responsibility. Hence, they are also mentioned in the *Instrumentum laboris*, the working document for the Meeting of the Synod this coming October. It shows that these notions are really crucial to the people of God.

**Since 2021 you’ve been a member of the Coordinating Committee of this Synod. How do you see your role as an expert at this event?**

I think it is really remarkable that with my background, I was appointed on the synodal coordinating committee. Throughout my academic work my research has focused on the question: how does the community implement the vision and doctrine of Vatican II and how do canonical norms play a role in that process? The doctrines of Vatican II such as on baptism, the common and ministerial priesthood, the hierarchy as ministry as well as the doctrine on *communio* form the context of reflecting about Church structures that implement accountability.

I have been researching these issues in recent years as a co-moderator of the Peter and Paul Seminar. This is an interdisciplinary research group of theologians

and canon lawyers who together investigate which reforms in canon law are necessary in light of Vatican II. We affirmed that a synodal Church is a listening Church, but we also discovered that it needs to go a step further: a synodal Church is an accountable Church and an accountable Church needs to be synodal.

During the project I was also able to offer my insights from my work in the domain of child sexual abuse. As a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors (2018-2022), I had the privilege of organising a seminar on the topic of transparency and accountability as well. So it was possible to bring a lot of insights and experience on these issues into the Synod on synodality.

**Would you say that the preparations of the Synod are fruitful?**

Oh yes, looking back at the synodal process until now, I think we have moved much.

In the preparatory document of the Synod of Bishops there was a paragraph saying that we need to think about synodality because of Covid. It was important to see that the document also mentioned deep theological reasons for focussing on being a synodal Church. After all, Covid does not occupy us today as it did in 2021. There are other important theological reasons why

we should meet and deliberate together, discern together what is necessary for the Church to be a credible and thus effective missionary church now and in the future.

In the *Instrumentum laboris* there are three major themes: *communio*, *missio*, *participatio*. For each of them there are a number of questions to be discussed. Questions laid down for discussions address issues from different angles. It is the case also with accountability. For example, in a section on co-responsibility of bishops, there is a question: how can bishops be more accountable? And in a section on women, there is a question: how can women assist the Church in being more accountable?

**But it’s only theory. Has it been successfully put into practice yet?**

It will take some time. Let’s first of all complete the work of making accountability well seated in theory, in theology and canon law.

Of course, it doesn’t mean that it can be ignored in practice. I think it works. A few weeks ago we saw Archbishop Charles Scicluna going to South America for a major investigation concerning abuse. Those who know the Church and those who are aware of his reputation know that if he is sent on such a mission, it means something is really going on. So it shows that the

Church is learning, of course little by little. A challenge is certainly that not all places go with the same speed and that thus not all are at the same point in implementing being an accountable Church.

**“I think it is extremely good that a person with canonical expertise has been part of the team from the beginning. Canon lawyers sometimes look a little different to issues than theologians do. So there is a complementarity between us and not an exclusiveness”**

I've been involved in the sexual abuse problems since 1987, so that's 35 years. First, the abuse was an issue in North America and Ireland. Then other countries who first said they did not have this problem had to acknowledge: it is a problem in our country as well. Sometimes I wonder why episcopal conferences do not seem to learn from each other. Why do they not speak with each other and learn from the mistakes of others. I think that bishops from Poland could maybe share their experiences with other neighbouring countries or

other parts of the world on how they had to learn from, what they first thought was impossible and, what they later thought were only incidental cases.

One would imagine that such a learning process be obvious and easy. But it appears not to be so. This “not-learning process”, I think, is part of the problem. There were few if any exchanges, like: This happened to you, what can we learn from you? What were your mistakes? Or: what went well? What helped you really? What brought peace? What were the surprises? What are the good solutions? What are the different phases that we have go through?

**How do you see your role in this October Synod and in the next phases later on?**

I still remain surprised that I was asked to be in this position. I was even more surprised when in the middle of the pandemic I got an email from Cardinal Mario Grech inviting me to be on this Coordinating Committee. It has been a tremendous privilege to serve the Church in this process.

I think it is extremely good that a person with canonical expertise has been part of the team from the beginning. Canon lawyers sometimes look a little different to issues than theologians do. So there is a complementarity between us and not an exclusiveness.

I see my task as listening to people and trying to discover

what that means theologically and canonically. It's not for me to make decisions. This process of listening has already brought many fruits, so I'm looking forward to the next phase where we shall meet. Listening requires also that we discern together what questions come to the fore.

It is a process very different from the past synods of bishops, in which basically a preparatory document was a draft of a possible final document. It was all secret, not to be discussed publicly. Pope Benedict XVI was the first to publish some of the documents. And Pope Francis widened this process.

**This coming October meeting is still called Synod of Bishops, but its full members will be not only be bishops, but also non-bishops, including women. So why again: Synod of Bishops?**

First of all, we are already in a Synod. I mean that the Synod was opened in 2021 by the Pope. And this meeting of bishops, the XVI General Ordinary Assembly, is a meeting within the larger Synod. It is a special moment within the Synod of the Church.

And that will continue, but I do not know how. We will see what will come out after this October meeting. Currently I have no idea what the Church will be doing between October 2023 and October 2024, when the second session is

scheduled.

What was achieved is that Rome invited the local Churches to speak and facilitated a process where all other local Churches could listen to each other. There was once a big theological discussion on the interaction between the local and the universal Church. In the current process we realised that the whole Church needs to listen to what all others are saying around the world. All need to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Churches (Rev. 3:22). The listening process of the past two years implies that there was a listening to the Holy Spirit in many different contexts at the same time. That is a unique moment in the history of the Church.

New in the current process is also the experience to listen at the continental levels. It gives expression to the awareness of a contextual aspect of living and expressing faith. In these new continental ecclesial assemblies not just bishops took part, but also other members of the People of God. Europe met in Prague. It was a very enriching experience.

**Is there a continental Church identity then?**

I have just recently published a book on the seven synodal continental meetings. In this book entitled *The People of God have Spoken* (which by the way will be printed in Poland, but published in Ireland) you will find the seven continen-

tal reports, but also seven articles describing what actually happened at those meetings. The readers shall see seven very different meetings.

**“South America, because of the distances, had three different sessions and then a final drafting session. Asia had reports from different episcopal conferences. And they also met in one location in Bangkok”**

For example, the European meeting was held in Prague, but it was a hybrid one. There were lay people, priests, deacons, religious men and women, bishops. Every episcopal conference was able to send four people, as well as ten people online. The meeting worked in five languages simultaneously. And people were all in one room – not one chat room or one zoom room, but in one location.

North America, by contrast, had only online meetings and they only met in one language at a time. So, they had 12 sessions, seven of them in English, three in Spanish, two in French. But it means that the Hispanics of the United States did not have an opportunity to meet with



Pope Francis celebrates a Mass to open the listening process that leads up to the assembly of the world Synod of Bishops in 2023, in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican



Professor Myriam Wijlens greeting Pope Francis.

the Irish Catholics who live in their country, so to speak. So, that's very different from Europe.

South America, because of the distances, had three different sessions and then a final drafting session. Asia had reports from different episcopal conferences. And they also met in one location in Bangkok.

**“In Prague we were not served at tables, but we all had to go to a buffet, which meant you would just join in the line as the last one”**

Now, Asia had something that Europe didn't have. Europe met in room that had a theatre style of seating. There was a podium and on the top of it there were basically men sitting. And the rest was sitting below and was listening.

In Asia they met from the beginning at round tables and in small groups. And they decided that each group would remain the same. But every day you had to look where your table was located, because they would change the location of the tables within the room. So, one day you would be sitting in the back of the room and another day in the middle and the third day in the front. Which meant that people continuously were moving and invited to get a different perspective.

After this experience the Synod office in Rome decided that the October meeting in Rome will take place not in the Synod Hall with an amphitheatre style of seating, but in the Audience Hall where there will be many round tables. Each table will host between 10 or 12 persons. That means there is nobody sitting at the head of the table. Hence, there is no need to decide who is more or less important. This will for sure impact the group dynamics and thus the listening and discerning process.

By the way in editing this book

I saw how many women actually participated in the continental meetings. Take Europe: there were 200 people in total: 42 bishops, but 49 women. So, there were more women in the room than bishops.

#### What does it change?

Imagine, we are in a room and suddenly 42 bishops walk in, in their full regalia. So immediately the atmosphere will change in that room. But in a similar way, if this is a room with men only or with bishops only, and suddenly 49 women walk in, I am sure it also changes the dynamics.

In Prague we were not served at tables, but we all had to go to a buffet, which meant you would just join in the line as the last one. And there would be somebody behind or in front of you whom you might not know. And then, because you had to wait, you got into a conversation. Often we decided to continue the conversation and eat together. So even these kind of aspects changed the dynamics at the meeting.

Journalists were in the same building and they too were standing with us in line for the food. Their presence gave expression to the desire to be transparent. That too had an impact on the meeting.

#### When did historically a notion of accountability show up for the first time in theological (or Church) discussions?

The article by Kaslyn is a result of an earlier shock in the United States after the situation in Boston in 2002, when the Cardinal had to resign, not because of sexual abuse, but because of the mishandling complaints of abuse. People were outraged by the scale of abuse cases. A newspaper in Boston revealed it all and it became clear that there was a systemic aspect to this.

The question then arose: how can we hold bishops accountable for this? All felt that something

had to happen. The US bishops took some steps to improve their actions. Also the Holy See stepped in and issued norms for the whole world. Nevertheless some of the things still didn't work and still do not function.

In my opinion the first important Church action of accountability was a 2001 decision that all the abuse cases against minors must be reported to Rome to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Vatican determined: you, bishops, have to report these cases to us, we will take the decision what to do next. The bishops had not any longer the power to decide by themselves. I guess Rome felt they had to, because they saw that bishops did not exercise the responsibility that comes with their office.

Of course, even today we still have bishops who say: I don't need to report this, but in general this is not true and in the long run, no one is served with such an attitude, because it affects whether faithful and society trust the decisions made by Church authorities. That in return impacts the credibility of the Church and thus its mission.

#### Since 2016, we've had *Come una madre amorevole* and since 2019, *Vos estis lux mundi*, that has for the first time introduced some procedures of accountability. How would you summarise this experience?

Both these documents address accountability of the leadership in our Church, thus bishops and e.g. major superiors of religious institutes. We finally see that these persons are being held accountable.

Yet, I'm not so sure if in real life major superiors of religious institutes are really held accountable. Since they have a term of office it is necessary to differentiate between the person who held the office at the time and holding the office accountable irrespective of who holds it. The issue with religious is rather sensitive, because for them

it is easier to move people from one province to another, or to another country. I think we would have to see how many accused priests from Europe ended up in South America, in Africa or in Asia, as so-called missionaries. We will have to face this reality, better sooner than later.

In recent years the understanding of the problem was broadened: the Church now also begins to attend to vulnerable adults. These are not so called reserved cases to the Holy See, but whenever I'm consulted by bishops I tell them: "If you doubt whether this is a reserved case or if you do not know what to do, send it to Rome and ask for advice".

We have to remember that accountability is not limited to sexual abuse. These procedures may be used also with regard to finances. Already in 2016, in *Come una madre amorevole*, there are possible consequences for a bishop for financial mismanagement. And even in these months there is a major case going on in the court of the Vatican City State which concerns financial issues. The person accused is a cardinal! So things are changing.

#### Accountability has come up, but accountability to whom? No explanations are given when decisions are made. The people of God still don't know why the decision was taken. Journalists are needed in order to find out, to check, to investigate, to explain. Is it going to be changed in your opinion?

I think that we are in a transitory process in which we are becoming more aware of the skills and expertise of lay people. I think the Synod might really help with it. And in synodal consultations people have responded quite enthusiastically to the awareness that there is a responsibility of everybody. Scripture provides us with the awareness that there are different

charisms in the community and that they need to be seen as complementary to each other.

Co-responsibility means that "the top" should be able to explain to the people how and why decisions are taken. There are things that require confidentiality, because we are dealing with people. But we have to distinguish between secrecy and confidentiality. We all know that some issues should be treated confidentially, and not everything should be on the street. But this confidentiality will be easier accepted, if a bishop in general is transparent about how he arrives at his decisions, and explains why they were taken. The Holy Spirit is active among all the baptised and confirmed, not only through bishops.

#### Accepting an idea that a bishop is accountable not only to God and the Pope, but also to the people of God, would require a theological justification. Is this theological work being done? Are the answers being searched, in your opinion?

I think that we can be extremely grateful to the Synod of 1985, convoked by John Paul II 20 years after the closing of Vatican II, in which the Church as a *communio* was very much put to the fore. Cardinal Walter Kasper was at the time the chief theologian of the Synod, not being a bishop yet. He was the main figure behind it all. *Communio* provides the theological foundation for understanding accountability.

#### In Poland *communio* is rather presented as a theological vision of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

He was then a prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, so I am sure he agreed with it. However it was Pope John Paul II who convoked the synod. The theologian Walter Kasper drafted the famous document of the 1985 synod. I guess they all stood together behind this vision.

If we are conscious of it, we understand that all what Pope Francis is doing is rooted in Vatican II, which finds a certain explication in this synod of 1985. Francis brings back the notion of people of God and idea that everybody is involved in the Church.

#### Kasper and Ratzinger discussed much later as cardinals about universal Church vs. local Church and which is primary.

That is interesting too, because their debate in a way has ended with the current *Instrumentum laboris*. Look at the pattern of synodality the Pope currently realises. He opens the Synod in Rome, but a week later it's already in the local Churches. Then it goes back. So the whole Synod works back and forth. And it really moves between the local and universal Church. There is a circularity and there is no priority in that. It is a way of giving expression to the Catholicity of the Church, by which each part has to give something to others for



the edification of the whole Church, in particular its mission.

*Communio* ecclesiology rooted in baptism of all is for me a main theological basis of a new understanding of who a bishop is. It combines both the vision of the Mystical Body of Christ, and of the People of God. Out of that a responsibility arises that has to be exercised in a mutual cooperation.

The model explains that a bishop is not ordained for himself, but within and for the community. And you can see this beautifully already now in the rite of consecrating a new diocesan bishop. At the beginning of the celebration of the Ordination one of the senior priests asks the main celebrant, to ordain for this specific diocese Father John or Matthew or whatever his name. So it is the diocese that asks that this man is ordained for ministry in it.

And then the main celebrant will say: Do you have a mandate? And the answer is: Yes, we have. And then the question is: Will you please read it out loudly? So then the person reads out the letter of appointment by the Pope. Now the whole community knows that this to be consecrated person stands in hierarchical communion with the Pope. And when a new bishop takes possession by just sitting down, the whole community applauds, giving its consensus to this. The community receives its bishop and leader.

I think it is a beautiful ceremony in which a beautiful theological vision finds already expression. A bishop exists within the *communio*, he is the one who represents and gives witness to the faith of this community in particular in the college of bishops.

An example testifies to this: before the dogma of Mary's assumption to heaven was officially proclaimed, Pope Pius XII did not ask the bishops from all over the world, what they think or believe personally, but he asked: what does your Church believe? And they responded, serving as witnesses to the faith of the Church entrusted to their care reporting what the faithful believe.

I'm of the opinion that Pope Francis is basically doing something similar. First he reminds us that in the dogmatic constitution on the Church of Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, chapter 2 is about the People of God. The council very consciously inserted this chapter before the chapter on the hierarchy, because the council wanted to affirm first what all have in common. Only subsequently did it attend to the differences. So this should be the lens: we begin with commonality, and then we can

see how a bishop's responsibility unfolds as a ministry within the community from which flow his unique tasks.

**Are there any concrete proposals of accountability structures prepared yet by the scholars for the sake of future Church reforms?**

We are still in a process. I think that these structures of accountability should be developed in the context of where people live. Definitely we should strengthen diocesan pastoral councils, parish pastoral councils and search for ways how this participation may be better developed.

But also with regard to the abuse cases, we need further development of independent structures. After the 2019 meeting of the Pope with presidents of episcopal conferences procedures were presented that an archbishop metropolitan is responsible for allegations against bishops of their ecclesiastical province. At the time there was no awareness that the number of bishops to be investigated would be so high that they would have to investigate each other. So we see that this provision does not work. It needs to be changed.

We need independent judges not only because the bishops might need to investigate each other and that would not help the issue of credibility. We also see that those who conduct these investigations need to have expertise in collecting evidence, weighing it etc. Judges in civil courts have special trainings for this. Our bishops do not always have such a training, but others in the community might have the expertise. The courts of Vatican City State see already an increase in professionalisation.

**In your research and publications you stress strongly that synodality implies accountability. I have to ask: isn't it just a wishful thinking of a reformer?**

No, I think we are really on the way. And it is abuse cases that show it best. An awareness of the people of God is growing. Before the Synod started nobody had expected that so many people would respond so positively to this invitation. People really desire a more synodal Church. I see a lot of enthusiasm. People are deeply touched that they are being asked what they believe and why faith matters for them. They want to continue this as it also deepens their faith.

**But some necessary changes do not appear. There have been**

**so many statements by this Pope and previous popes on how much people who were wounded in the community of faith should be put into the centre of Church and canonical procedures... But they are still marginalised.**

Well, it's easy for a Pope to change the law, sure. He can change it all tomorrow. But then there will be a problem with implementation of the law, because only few people see the point and reason for such a change.

In the current system there are many possibilities to treat victims in a fully humane way. Law does not prevent that. And we need more people who see this problem and want to move the things in a new direction. Earlier this year Archbishop Charles Scicluna and I published a book with papers of a conference about rights of victims in penal procedures. The book contains a number of proposals including what we can learn from provisions in different states around the world.

The first step in any process of change is to create an awareness of the need for change. After having worked for many years as a canon lawyer I can say: we first need a change of mentality. Because we may have rules and procedures for everything, but it will not stop people from not implementing them. An internal awareness is absolutely crucial. This change will not happen overnight, but things are developing already. A synodal process is a journey in this direction. The train has begun to ride and we won't be able to stop it.

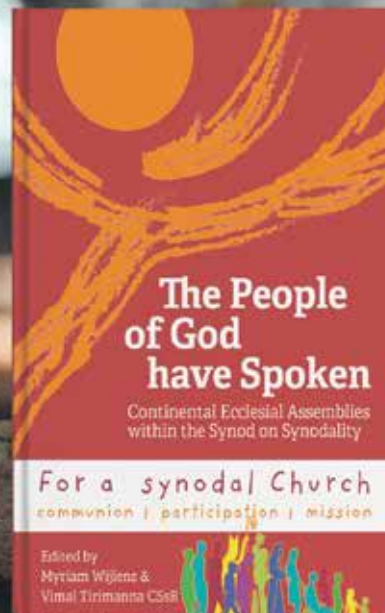
**i** Myriam Wijlens is a professor of canon law in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Erfurt and a Co-Moderator of the Peter and Paul Seminar. She is a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and a consultant to ARCIC. She is a member of the Coordinating Commission of the Synod on Synodality and an expert in the Synod in October 2023.

**i** Zbigniew Nosowski is a sociologist and theologian, editor-in-chief of a Catholic quarterly "Wież" in Warsaw, Poland. Former co-chairman of the Polish Council of Christians and Jews. Co-founder of the lay run "Wounded within the Church Initiative". Author of numerous articles on sexual abuse, initiator of "Catholic investigative journalism". Doctor h.c. of the University of Szczecin.



Professor Wijlens speaking at All Hallows College in June 2023

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# Secrecy or prayerfulness at the Synod?

## All the evidence points to the latter

### Fr Eamonn Conway



When speaking at a conference in Dublin last June, I emphasised that the entire synodal process, from consultation at parish level to universal meetings in Rome, is intended to be an act of prayer. It is not just that we should say prayers before, during and after the synodal gatherings. The gatherings themselves are intended to be acts of prayer.

In response, someone in the audience pointed out that prayer can sometimes be misused for the purposes of stifling debate and disagreement. Her fear was that if the General Assembly taking place now in Rome is primarily framed as a form of prayer, then it may be more challenging for people to speak with what Pope Francis has called *parrhesia*. By this, the Pope means to speak from the heart boldly and courageously, as indeed he has requested people to do.

#### Prayer as misuse of power

It is the case that the kind of prayers that are recited at Church meetings can *sometimes* over-emphasise the need for harmony and avoidance of discord and therefore seem manipulative, especially to those who feel the need to speak truth to power. This can be the case particularly if such prayers are led by the person in charge of the meeting.

There is a risk, therefore, that recent remarks by Pope Francis about the prayerful nature of the General Assembly currently underway in Rome will be considered in this light, that is, as an attempt to avoid controversy or the naming of uncomfortable truths, or worse, as an effort to somehow manipulate the synodal outcomes.

On the plane back from his pastoral visit to Mongolia, Pope Francis emphasised that the General Assembly is to be understood as a “religious moment” as distinct from an exercise in politics or parliamentarianism. Participants are to speak for

three minutes each, he said, and after every three presentations there will be three to four minutes of silent prayer. “Without this spirit of prayer,” Pope Francis said, “there is no synodality”.

Along similar lines, Cardinal Mario Grech, the Secretary-General of the Office of the Synod of Bishops, recently wrote to his fellow bishops that the Synod is above all “an event of prayer”, of which he mentions four particular kinds: listening, adoration, intercession and thanksgiving. And he asks local churches to accompany those gathered in Rome by their prayers.

#### Secrecy or safeguarding the privacy necessary for prayer?

We are becoming an increasingly divided and polarised Church. Both those on the extreme right and the extreme left have voiced their fears that their version of the truth will somehow be kept off the synodal agenda.

Those concerned that emphasis on synodality as prayer is a sinister attempt to keep the lid on things will have their suspicions confirmed by speculation that Pope Francis also wants to apply the “pontifical secret”, a particular Vatican code of confidentiality, to the entire proceedings of the General Assembly.

The evidence for this is scant and such a move would seem at odds with the overall thrust of his papacy, which until now has been characterised by transparency and accountability. In any case, as John Allen has rightly pointed out, any attempt to impose secrecy during the General Assembly will backfire because it will probably be observed only by the moderate voices, leaving the emerging narrative to be determined by the extremists on both sides who would continue to disseminate their take on matters behind the scenes.



Pope Francis, cardinals and bishops pray during a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

## “God’s self-revelation takes the form of an ongoing conversation between God and God’s people”

#### Spiritual Conversation

It is clear, though, that by setting aside the first three days of the General Assembly for a communal retreat, by celebrating daily mass together as well as a prayer vigil and pilgrimage, participants are being invited to approach their participation in the General Assembly as they would a month-long religious exercise.

Such religious exercises are best entered into by distancing oneself from one’s daily routine, by switching off as much as one can the background music and clamour of daily life, and by making a deliberate effort to cultivate interiority.

By inviting participants to be ascetical when it comes to engagement with, say, the media, and to be extra careful in what they communicate about what is, in effect, an ongoing conversation, Pope Francis is interested not in imposing secrecy, which is the stuff of conspiracy theories, but rather in creating the privacy and interior space that is indispensable to what he calls “spiritual conversation” or sometimes “conversation in the Spirit”.

Spiritual conversation

requires a high capacity for attentiveness and self-awareness. It requires the capacity to know and understand where in oneself certain ideas and concepts are coming from; whether, for instance, they are coming from a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ spirit. It also requires the capacity to be attentive not only to the words others are speaking but also to what motivates and concerns them.

In turn, this requires a capacity for ‘self-forgetting’ or ‘self-emptying’. Why is attentiveness to self and others necessary if what we are interested in is discovering God’s will and not our own? Because, as Patrick Kavanagh put it, “God is in the bits and pieces of Everyday”.

#### The lost art of listening

God’s self-revelation takes the form of an ongoing conversation between God and God’s people (*Dei Verbum*, n. 25). Spiritual conversation can be understood as the process by which the Church ‘eavesdrops’ on this conversation. This listening, in turn, enables pastors to discern the decisions they need to take to ensure that the Church remains faithful to its mission.

I was very struck by a lec-

ture I heard a few weeks ago given by the Abbess of an Italian Benedictine monastery near Assisi. Though an enclosed order, in accordance with their rule the nuns are required to work as well as pray, and so they make a living through growing and harvesting olives and grapes.

They also welcome guests, and in recent times, the Abbess’ former school classmates, now parents of teenage children, sometimes ask her to allow their teenage children who seem to have lost their way in the world to come to stay at the monastery for some time and work alongside the sisters in the fields.

These young people are sometimes in bad shape, often isolated, addicted to substances or to technology and social media, and so on. I asked her what the monastery has to offer them. “We listen”, she answered.

Listening is the most important gift that she and her sisters can offer to the world today, she said, and she spoke with the credibility and conviction that only someone genuinely a contemplative is able to communicate. The Abbess conveyed a sense that being listened to,

genuinely and profoundly, bestows respect and restores people to a sense of their inherent dignity.

The ‘core business’ of many of us taking part in the General Assembly, is the Church’s mission. Yet the reality is that despite this, we ourselves can easily neglect or even lose the art of how to engage in spiritual conversation.

Given the immense responsibility that comes with participating in the General Assembly, those participating, who are present in a representative capacity for the Church as a whole, owe it to others to dispose themselves as fully as they can to the level of attentiveness and ‘self-forgetting’ required to participate fully and generously.

Synod 2021-2024 is a Synod on synodality. It would therefore be incongruous if the General Assembly did not itself model and practise the very mode of being and operating (*modus vivendi et operandi*) with which Pope Francis is seeking to imbue the daily life of the Church. We are still only beginning to understand what this might mean in practice.

**i** Fr Eamonn Conway is a priest of the archdiocese of Tuam and holds the Inaugural Chair of Integral Human Development at the University of Notre Dame, Australia. He is participating in the General Assembly of the XVI Synod of Bishops as an expert appointed by Pope Francis.

# The Synod restarts a process that will take decades

## William J. Grimm



**C**onventional wisdom holds that it takes a century for an ecumenical council to flower and bear fruit. Altering customs and habits of thought, especially when they are linked to faith, takes a long time. Simply getting word out of a council's teaching and its implications can take decades.

Then there are people and institutions for which new directions, practices, or emphases appear as threats to ideas and practices that have taken years to master. Some people have a vested interest in preventing or holding back change.

### Habits of thought

Habits of thought that have been nurtured over a lifetime of individuals and institutions do not change easily. And so, it is not surprising that it can take a century for a council to have its full impact on the life of the Church.

The generation of slaves who left Egypt under Moses' leadership struggled halfheartedly or reluctantly or not at all and with little success to lose Egyptian religious habits and a slave mentality. Ultimately, they had to die out before the new people of God could enter the promised land in freedom. Likewise, the degree of change a council like Vatican II calls for takes generations to become second nature.

So, what of Vatican II? It is a half-century since that council. Are we halfway to a Vatican II Church? Probably not.

**“The forces of inertia, clericalism, and vested interests abetted by two papacies retarded and even reversed the tentative first steps toward a Vatican II Church”**

### Hopes

When that council ended, many hoped that an era of change was ahead for the Catholic Church. There would be more participation by the entire People of God in setting directions and practices for the Church; Scripture would become the guide for thought and action; there would be empowerment and perhaps even ordination for women; there would be new strides toward Christian unity; there would be more engagement with a world that had changed drastically in the twentieth century; there would be more interest in and acceptance of non-European thought and experience; there would be a move beyond a medieval monarchical model of Church leadership .... They did not happen.

The forces of inertia, clericalism, and vested interests abetted by two papacies retarded and even reversed the tentative first steps toward a Vatican II Church. Those who welcomed Vatican II and were ready to engage in the renewal it should have sparked are now elderly, and age and a half-century of frustration and disappointment have sapped their energy.

### Restarting process

Now, after more than half a century when the impetus of Vatican II was impeded, we have the first pope who would have studied the council in his student days and who is restarting the process that had barely begun before being stymied when he was a young man.

With the Synod of Bishops' first session intended to put the Catholic Church back on the ancient path of synodality, we should let history temper expectations, hopes, or fears. Even with a second session planned for some time next year, huge changes are unlikely.

This meeting of the Synod will simply be restarting a delayed process that is likely to take a century. It is turning



Pope John XXIII leads the opening session of the Second Vatican Council in St. Peter's Basilica October 11, 1962.

**“We must be prepared for the fact that this “marathon” is actually a relay and those of us alive today and hoping today will not see how it all ends”**

on the ignition for a journey that should have started in the 1960s and it is likely to take a few generations to reach whatever destination is ahead.

### Extravagant hopes

The extravagant hopes that some people have for this gathering must be tempered because they are otherwise

guaranteed to be disappointed. This is the start, not of a sprint, but of a marathon. There will be disappointments along the way right from the start, but not likely so great as the big disappointment of the past half-century. There will be incremental progress. There may even be some unexpected big spurts of progress.

We must be prepared for the fact that this “marathon” is actually a relay and those of us alive today and hoping today will not see how it all ends.

However, we can have faith that the Holy Spirit who guided the ecumenical council will be part of the restarted life of Vatican II. And we can and must enter into the pro-

cess, cooperating today for the sake of the future rejuvenated Church.

**i** William Grimm, a native of New York City, is a missionary and presbyter who since 1973 has served in Japan, Hong Kong and Cambodia. Article originally published by UCA News.

# Synod on Synodality: Youth Expectations in Africa

## Pardingtone Nhundu



**A**s I was preparing for my marriage this year, I sat down with one of my mentors who has been married for 25 years and he advised me to be aware of expectations in marriage. How you set your partner's expectations and fail to meet them, as well as your partner's unmet and unsaid expectations. To me, this is the pinnacle of the Synod.

Yes, undoubtedly people have been listened to, and the outcome is for everyone to consider, as we await the completion of the Synod of Bishops this October 2023 in Rome. Most importantly, as we wait in hope with all the issues tabled, others high level and others will be defined as non-issues, the success of the Synod is also on you and me for we all play a part in the activation and dismissal of expectations.

The Synod on Synodality is a potentially transformative event for the Catholic Church and, in particular, for young people. It is an opportunity for the Church to listen to young people and to offer solutions and platforms for transformation. The current Continental Working Documents capture the contributions and expectations of young people, but the Synod on Synodality must be genuinely synodal for this to be realised.

Here are my expectations for the youth I continue to

lead through the International Movement of Catholic Students – Africa:

### 1. Continuous Catechism:

Youth in Africa and other continents are concerned about a structured catechism lacuna between the sacrament of baptism or confirmation and the sacrament of ordination or marriage. Revising and contextualising YOUCAT is one approach, but it is insufficient if chaplains and lay animators who travel with youth are not completely engaged and prepared. The existence of a gap is apparent based on the findings of these three studies, a 2017 study conducted by the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), a 2018 research conducted by the Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), and a 2019 study conducted by the Pontifical Council for Culture. For me, Continuous Catechism will include, but not be limited to, the following expectations.

### 2. Vocational discernment:

Young people want practical assistance with discovering their mission. This sense of purpose enables them to make intelligent career or vocation decisions. It is important to observe that, when tied to a person's

faith, each career or vocation becomes the panacea of sainthood for ordinary work performed extraordinarily.

### 3. Contextual theology:

Young people want a Church that is more contextually authentic and pertinent. A Church that caters to the needs of youth. A Church that transcends the theory of theology, travels with adolescents on their level and allows them to identify with a faith- and spirit-growing Church.

### 4. Inculturation:

A local Church that understands its culture and teaches how each member of a specific society bridges the distance between culture, ancestral beliefs, and spiritual teachings. A local Church that is in touch with charisms and offers a platform for these charisms to manifest in the Church all in a bid to grow the Church spiritually.

### 5. Greater focus on social and environmental issues:

In a world where social issues have been a major factor in the detachment of adolescents from their faith and spirituality, a greater emphasis on social justice and environmental issues is necessary. The Church then has a much greater obliga-



Young people take part in the Ignatian Leadership Workshop facilitated by the African Synodality initiative.

tion to encourage adolescents' social justice efforts. Since 2013, the National Movement of Catholic Students in Zimbabwe has played a significant role in every national election with its Pray, Register, Vote campaign. Youths and program participants from the campaign have recently become members of parliament and councilors. In addition, more than sixty Catholics were elected to public office in the 2023 national election.

### 6. Youth Synodal Leadership:

Young people are tired of tokenistic leadership positions in the Church, and elders are tired of irresponsible young people. I hope that the Youth Synodal leadership program we have begun in Africa in collaboration with the African Syno-

dality Initiative will serve as a learning point for those travelling with young people on how to engage young people, chaplains, and laity animators to produce an empowered young synodal leader. Today's youths desire leadership roles, at least the responsible ones, and have so much to offer the Church. Remember that these positions facilitate young people's vocational discernment!

Finally, the Synod must be contextual. Archbishop of Harare Robert Ndlovu once stated, "The Synod is not simply a procedure". You have shared your contributions as a congregation, and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference has shared as a country at the level of Africa, but it is unlikely that every contribution will be reflected in the document.

This implies that we must be a synodal people. Communicate as a parish, listen to everyone, and make adjustments as necessary. For me this signifies the need for everyone to be synodal.

The expectations you and I have for the Synod regarding synodality may not be met, but we owe it to ourselves as individuals, local Christian communities, and parishes to be synodal. Let's make Synodality our way of life by at least making necessary acceptable transformations!

**Pardingtone Nhundu** is Zimbabwean and is Pan-African Coordinator for International Movement of Catholic Students and a published author. Contact him on LinkedIn at: [Pardingtone Nhundu](#) or on Twitter at: [@SirPardingtone](#)

Young people pictured attending a conference with a local bishop in Zimbabwe.



# The Synod in Rome where everyone will be talking about women

**Ruth Peacock**



**T**he Synod of Bishops in Rome is no decision-making body, but that isn't stopping Synod-watchers in Britain from believing that it will produce ground-breaking change on the role of women in the Church.

After an hour of highly informed debate during a *Religion Media Centre* briefing, the panel was asked to suggest the likely headline at the end of the Synod's three-week meeting.

The answers were: "Synod opens the door to women deacons?"; "Women can no longer be silenced"; "Women in the Church, the great debate".

Christopher Lamb, Rome correspondent of *The Tablet*, emphasised that the Synod was a consultative, not deliberative, body. What it agrees on is submitted to the Pope, who has the final vote.

But the point of this "Synod on synodality", which will give women the vote for the first time and which includes lay members, is that it creates a spirit of solidarity where all are listened to. "Synods are going to be the signature of this Pope and one that is likely to outlast him," he said.

The role of women is just one of many topics that emerged from Synod consultations with Catholics across the globe leading up to this moment and driving the agenda.

## Reformation

The gathering will also discuss clericalism, the abuse of power, migration and climate change. There will be a vote on a document summarising the discussion, and then it will all be discussed again at the same time next year with another vote.

The panel's host, Rosie Dawson, said the force for change indicated in the global consultation had led some people to suggest this Synod heralded another reformation, pointing the future direction of Christianity.

Certainly, Christopher Lamb said, there was clearly a need for reform and renewal in the Catholic Church, with recurring stories of sex abuse devastating Catholics. "The Church can't simply continue as business as usual. And I think that is what is behind

a lot of the synodal renewal. That is what is driving Francis."

For Anna Rowlands, professor of Catholic social thought and practice at Durham University, now working with the general secretariat of the Synod, its value is in the process of listening and what had come back from all corners of the world was a desire for a vibrant participatory Church.

## Identity

There was no detectable binary split between traditionalists in the global south and progressives in the north. At grassroots level, there were common concerns around liturgy and people feeling they had a place and belonged in the Church.

Martin Prendergast, chairman of the *Global Network of Rainbow Catholics Theology Committee*, was seeking change to the Church teaching on sexual orientation and gender identity, which many find unacceptable. He was disappointed there was no self-affirming LGBTQI+ person given a vote at the Synod and appalled that a Pentecostal church leader from Ghana known for opposition to decriminalising homosexuality, had been invited as an ecumenical participant.

Miriam Duignan, representing the lay alternative synod "*Spirit Unbounded*", hoped their meeting in Rome and Bristol would bring marginalised voices to the bishops at their meeting. She was encouraged to think that there was no foregone conclusion as to where the discussions would go.

"Everyone is talking about women's ministry, either the diaconate priesthood or all ministries. We know that it is a question that can no longer be ignored. The question of women's equal involvement is like toothpaste out of a tube and it's not going back in," she said.

But SR Professor Gill Goulding, a member of the international theological commission for the Rome Synod, said the synod process was not about lobbying for an agenda. The primary focus of the Pope was not a change in doctrine but to "raise up the fact that the people of God all have a voice".

The briefing was told that



Catholic Iraqi children participate in Palm Sunday procession in Irbil, Iraq.

the prospect of progressive change has caused some anxiety and fear among Catholics in the pew. James Somerville-Meikle, deputy director of the Catholic Union, said the Synod process had "undoubtedly deepened fears and heightened hopes" and the fact that the debate would go on for a year with a Synod planned for October 2024, "just allows another year of expectations and fears to drift".

The panel considered how fear, at its extreme, had given rise to deep and vocal anger from a well-organised and funded group of traditionalists who were active on social media, where the anti-Francis and anti-Synod agendas come together. This had the potential to poison the Church.

Catherine Pepinster, a journalist and author, described the Pope as a Marmite figure,

attracting huge loyal support among people who adored him while others have even described him as a force for evil.

**“There is a touch of déjà vu about this Synod. Professor Rowlands observed that the issues for discussion had come up many times before over decades”**

Christopher Lamb said Pope Francis did split opinion, but the vociferous critics were in a minority and he believed the majority of Catholics were supportive of the Pope, who is 86. His age made it inevitable that the bishops would discuss his likely suc-

cessor during their conversations.

Professor Rowlands said the disagreement was not the focus of the Synod, which would conduct its own process while "as much as possible, quietening what is very often a very unhelpful and skewed conversation". She said the faultlines of the Catholic Church would be present at the Synod with some opponents in the hall. But she believed attention to the strident voices on both sides of the debate overlooked the middle ground who "didn't take part as much as they might have done".

## Reluctance

There is a touch of *déjà vu* about this Synod. Professor Rowlands observed that the issues for discussion had come up many times before over decades, which implied that there were real issues

for the Church over the reception of previous synods, their materials, the teaching and the effectiveness of putting plans into action.

She felt the outcome was one "we don't yet know and cannot anticipate". Professor Goulding shared her reluctance to predict the likely result. This was because she regarded the Synod process as a spiritual phenomenon. The "protagonist of the central process is the Holy Spirit", she said, and listening and reflecting would lead people to declare what had been "made manifest to them in their heart".

**i** Ruth Peacock is the leader of the Religion Media Centre project and oversees its work. After studying theology and teaching RE, she trained as a journalist on a local paper, freelanced in print and radio and then joined the BBC. Originally reported by Religion Media Centre.

**“Everyone is talking about women's ministry, either the diaconate priesthood or all ministries. We know that it is a question that can no longer be ignored”**

# So, who's going to the Synod?

**T**he Vatican has published the names of those participating in the upcoming Synod on Synodality assembly in October, including laypeople who will be full voting delegates at a Catholic Church synod for the first time.

The delegates are made up of representatives selected by bishops' conferences and Eastern Catholic Churches, leaders in the Roman Curia, and 120 delegates personally selected by Pope Francis. In total, 363 people will be able to vote in the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, according to statistics released by the Holy See Press Office on July 7. Among them, 54 of the voting delegates are women.

In addition to the voting members, 75 other participants have been invited to the Synod assembly to act as facilitators, experts or spiritual assistants.

## Here is the full list of participants.

### President:

Pope Francis.

### General Secretary:

Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech.

### President's Delegates:

Ibrahim Isaac Sedrak, Patriarch of Alexandria, Egypt; Mexican Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes; Ecuadorian Archbishop Gerardo Cabrera Herrera OFM; Australian Archbishop Timothy John Costelloe SDB; American Bishop Daniel Ernest Flores; Mozambique Bishop Lúcio Andrice Muandula; Fr Giuseppe Bonfrate (Italy); Mexican Sr Maria De Los Dolores Palencia CSJ and Momoko Nishimura SEMD (Japan).

### General Relator:

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, SJ, Archbishop of Luxembourg.

Special Secretaries: Fr Giacomo Costa, SJ, Italy and Fr Riccardo Battocchio, Italy.

### Commission for Information:

President: Paolo Ruffini, Prefect of the Dicastery for Communication, Vatican City.

### Secretary:

Sheila Leocádia Pires, communications officer, Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference.

### From the Eastern Catholic Churches:

Ibrahim Isaac Sedrak, head of the Synod of the Coptic Catholic Church; Youssef Absi, head of the Synod of the Greek Melkite Catholic Church; Ignace Youssef Iii Younan, head of the Synod of the Syrian Catholic Church; Cardinal Béchara Boutros Raï, OMM, head of the Synod of the Maronite Church; Bishop Mounir Khairallah of Batrun of the Maronites; Cardinal Louis Raphaël I Sako, head of the Synod of the Chaldean Church; Raphaël Bedros XXI Minassian, ICPB, head of the Synod of the Armenian Catholic Church; Sviatoslav Shevchuk, head of the Synod of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church; Bishop Teodor Martynyuk, MSU, auxiliary bishop of Ternopil-Zboriv; Monsignor Bohdan Dzyurakh, CSSR, Titular Bishop of Vagada; Cardinal George Alencherry, head of the Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church; Metropolitan Archbishop Andrews Thazhath, president

The people who presented the working document for the Synod of Bishops pose for a photo in the Vatican press office.



of the Catholic bishops' conference of India; Archbishop Joseph Pamplany of India; Cardinal Baselios Cleemis Thottunkal, head of the Synod of the Syro-Malankara Church; Bishop Cristian Dumitru Crisan, Auxiliary Bishop of Fagaras Si Alba Iulia Dei Romanians; Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel, president of the Council of the Ethiopian Church; Metropolitan Archbishop William Charles Skurla, president of the Council of the Ruthenian Church; Bishop Milan Lach, SJ, auxiliary bishop of Bratislava, Slovakia; Metropolitan Archbishop Mengh-esteb Tesfamariam, president of the Council of the Eritrean Church and Metropolitan Archbishop Fülöp Kocsis of Hajdúdorog for the Byzantine Catholics, president of the Council of the Hungarian Church.

### Episcopal Conferences Africa

#### Northern Africa (CERNA):

Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero, SDB, Archbishop of Rabat, Morocco.

#### Angola and Sao Tome:

Bishop Joaquim Nhanganga Tyombe of of Uíje, Angola.

#### Benin:

Archbishop Coffi Roger Anoumou.

#### Botswana, South Africa, and Eswatini:

Archbishop Anton Dabula Mpako, Archbishop of Pretoria, Military Ordinary of South Africa.

#### Burkina Faso and Niger:

Archbishop Gabriel Sayaogo of Koupéla, Burkina Faso.

#### Burundi:

Archbishop Georges Bizimana.

#### Cameroon:

Archbishop Emmanuel Dassi Youfang and Bishop Philippe Alain Mbarga.

#### Chad:

Bishop Nicolas Nadji Bab.

#### Republic of Congo:

Bishop Ildevert Mathurin Mouanga.

#### Democratic Republic of Congo:

Archbishop Marcel Utembi Tapa and Bishop Pierre-Célestin Tshitoko Mamba.

#### Côte D'ivoire (Ivory Coast):

Archbishop Marcellin Kouadio Yao.

#### Ethiopia:

Archbishop Markos Ghebremedhin, CM.

#### Gabon:

Archbishop Jean-Patrick Iba-Ba.

#### Gambia and Sierra Leone:

Archbishop Edward Tamba Charles of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

#### Ghana:

Bishop Emmanuel Kofi Fianu, SVD and Archbishop Gabriel Charles Palmer-Buckle.

#### Guinea:

Archbishop Vincent Coulibaly.

#### Equatorial Guinea:

Bishop Juan Domingo-Beka Esono Ayang, CMF.

#### Kenya:

Archbishop Martin Kivuva Musonde and Archbishop Anthony Muheria.

#### Lesotho:

Bishop John Joale Tlhomola, SCP.

#### Liberia:

Bishop Anthony Fallah Borwah.

#### Madagascar:

Auxiliary Bishop Jean Pascal Andriantsoavina.

#### Malawi:

Archbishop George Desmond Tambala OCD.

#### Mali:

Bishop Hassa Florent Koné.

#### Mozambique:

Archbishop Inácio Saure IMC.

#### Namibia:

Archbishop Liborius Ndumbukuti Nashenda OMI.

#### Nigeria:

Bishop Donatus Aihmision Ogun OSA, Archbishop Ignatius Ayau Kaigama and Archbishop Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji.

#### Indian Ocean:

Bishop Alain Harel of Port Victoria.

#### Central African Republic:

Bishop Nestor-Désiré Nongo-Aziagbia SMA.

#### Rwanda:

Bishop Edouard Sinayobye.

#### Senegal, Mauritania, Cape Verde, and Guinea-Bissau:

Bishop Ildo Augusto Dos Santos Lopes Fortes of Mindelo, Cape Verde.

#### Sudan:

Archbishop Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla, South Sudan.

#### Tanzania:

Archbishop Jude Thaddaeus Ruwa'ichi OFM Cap and Bishop Flavian Kassala of Geita.

#### Togo:

Bishop Dominique Banlène Guigbile.

#### Uganda:

Bishop Sanctus Lino Wanok.





Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson J Pérez joins college students, other young adults and ministry leaders during a synodal listening session at La Salle University, Philadelphia

#### **Ukraine:**

Bishop Oleksandr Yazlovetskiy.

#### **Hungary:**

Bishop Gábor Mohos Mohos.

#### **Oceania**

##### **Australia:**

Archbishop Patrick Michael O'Regan of Adelaide and Bishop Shane Anthony Mackinlay of Sandhurst.

##### **New Zealand:**

Archbishop Paul Gerard Martin SM of Wellington.

##### **Pacific:**

Bishop Paul Patrick Donoghue SM of the Cook Islands.

##### **Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands:**

Bishop Dariusz Piotr Kałuża MSF.

##### **Bishops Without an Episcopal Conference:**

Archbishop Selim Jean Sfeir of Cyprus of the Maronites.

##### **Presidents of International Meetings of Episcopal Conferences**

##### **Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa And Madagascar:**

Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu OFM Cap.

##### **Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences:**

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo SDB.

##### **Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania:**

Bishop Antony Randazzo.

##### **Council of Bishops' Conferences of Europe:**

Bishop Gintaras Grušas.

##### **Latin American Bishops' Council:**

Bishop Jaime Spengler OFM.

##### **The Union of Superiors General and the International Union of Superiors General:**

Sr Nadia Coppa, ASC president of the International Union of Superiors General, Sr Elizabeth Mary Davis RSM, Br Mark Hilton SC Superior General of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, Sr Elysée Izerimana, Op SDN General Councillor of the Working Sisters of the Holy House of Nazareth, Abbot Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, O Cist., Abbot General of the Cistercian Order, Sr Patricia Murray IBVM, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General, Sr Maria Nirmalini AC, Superior General of the Sisters of the Apostolic Carmelite Order, Br Ernesto Sánchez Sánchez, Superior General of the Marist Brothers, Fr Arturo Sosa SJ, Superior General of the Society of Jesus and Fr Gebresilasie Tadesse Tesfaye, MCCJ, Superior General of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus.

##### **Heads of Dicasteries of the Roman Curia:**

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Archbishop Edgar Peña Parra, Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, Cardinal Luis Antonio G Tagle, Archbishop Salvatore Fisichella, Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández, Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti, Cardinal Arthur Roche, Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot MCCJ, Archbishop Robert Francis Prevost, OSA, Cardinal Lazarus You Heung-Sik, Cardinal João Braz De Aviz, Cardinal Kevin Joseph Farrell, Cardinal Marcello Semeraro, Cardinal Kurt Koch, Cardinal José Tolentino De Mendonça, Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ, Archbishop Filippo Iannone O. Carm., and Paolo Ruffini, Prefect of the Dicastery for Communication.

##### **Members Nominated by Pope Francis:**

Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes of Mexico, Bishop Juan Ignacio Arrieta Ochoa De Chinchetru, Cardinal Jeans-Marc Aveline of France, Archbishop Ignace Bessi Dogbo of the Ivory Coast, Fr Giuseppe Bonfrate, Italy, Bishop Dante Gustavo Braidia of Argentina, Archbishop Erio Castellucci of Italy, Bishop Stephen Chow Sau-Yan of Hong Kong, China, Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, SDB of Australia, Cardinal Blase Cupich of the USA, Cardinal Jozef De Kesel of Belgium, Bishop Lizardo Estrada Herrera OSA of Peru, Archbishop Paul Dennis Etienne of the USA, Cardinal Juan De La Caridad García Rodríguez of Cuba, Bishop Felix Genn of Germany, Cardinal Wilton Gregory of the USA, Cardinal Jeans-Claude Hollerich SJ of Luxembourg, Bishop Nicholas Gilbert Hudson of Great Britain, Archbishop Dražen Kutleša of Croatia, Cardinal Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer SJ, Cardinal Robert McElroy of the USA, Bishop Marco Mel-

lino, Bishop Gjergj Meta of Albania, Bishop Lucius Andrew Muandula, Bishop of Mozambique, Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Bishop Antonello Mura of Italy, Archbishop Robert Christopher Ndlovu of Zimbabwe, Bishop Manuel Nin OSB of Greece, Cardinal Seán Patrick O'Malley OFM Cap of the USA, Bishop Stefan Oster SDB of Germany, Cardinal Marc Ouellet PSS, Bishop Joseph-Csaba Pál of Romania, Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga SDB of Honduras, Archbishop Angel S. Rossi SJ of Argentina, Archbishop Grzegorz Rys of Poland, Archbishop Joseph Spiteri Apostolic Nuncio to Mexico, Bishop Radoslaw Zmitrowicz OMI of Ukraine, Enrique Alarcón García of Spain, Fr Riccardo Battocchio Rector of the Almo Collegio Capranica in Rome, Sr Simona Brambilla, Superior General of the Consolata Missionaries, Italy, Fr Luis Miguel Castillo Gualda, Rector of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Spain, Father Giacomo Costa SJ president of the San Fedele Cultural Foundation of Milan, Italy, Cristina Inogés Sanz, Theologian, Spain, Father James Martin, SJ, USA, Sr Maria De Los Dolores Palencia CSJ, Sister Samuela Maria Rigon SSM, Superior General of the Sisters of Our Lady of Sorrows, Italy, Fr Elias Royón, Vicar for Consecrated Life of the Archdiocese of Madrid, Spain, Fr Antonio Spadaro SJ, director of La Civiltà Cattolica, Italy, Sr Xiskya Lucia Valladares, Nicaragua, co-founder of Imisión, Alberta Giménez (CESAG), Comillas Pontifical University and Sr María De Fátima Vieira Diniz SSmoS, Superior General of the Servants of the Blessed Sacrament, Venezuela.

##### **From the Continental Assemblies (also selected by Pope Francis)**

##### **Africa:**

Fr Vitalis Chinedu Anaehobi, Fr Michel Jean-





Xavière Missionary Sister Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Synod, responds to a question during a news conference at the Vatican September 8, 2023.

Paul Guillaud, Sr Ester Maria Lucas FC, Sr Josée Ngalula RSA, Norha Kofognotera Nontera, Fr Agbonkhanmeghe Emmanuel Orobator SI, Sheila Leocádia Pires Sister Marie Solange Randrianirin, FSP, Sr Solange Sahon Sia, NDC and Fr Rafael Simbine Junior.

#### North America:

Sami Aoun, Cynthia Bailey Manns, Catherine Clifford, Richard Coll, Chantal Desmarais, Fr Ivan Montelongo Wyatt, Olivas Julia Oseka, Sr Leticia Salazar and Linda Staudt.

#### Latin America:

Erika Sally Aldunate Loza, Jesus Alberto Briceño Cherubini, Sr Rosmary Castañeda Montoya, José Manuel De Urquidi Gonzalez, María Cristina Dos Anjos Da Conceição, Sr Gloria Liliana Franco Echeverri ODN, Sônia Gomes De Oliveira, Fr Francisco Gerardo Hernández Rojas, Valeria Karina López and Néstor Esaú Velásquez Téllez.

#### Asia:

Vanessa Cheng Siu Wai, Rosalia Minus Cho Cho Tin, Fr Joel Casimiro Da Costa Pinto OFM, Fr Clarence Devadass, Father William La Rousse MM, Fr Momoko Nishimura SEMD, Estela Padilla, Anna Teresa Peter Amandus, Sr Lalitha Thomas SJT and Fr Vimal Tirimanna.

#### Eastern Churches and the Middle East:

Adel Abolouh, Father Khalil Alwan ML, Saad Antti, Sr Houda Fadoul, Sr Caroline Jarjis, Rita Kouroumilian, Caroline Rafaat Awd Narouz, Claire Said, Lina Taschmann and Matthew Thomas.

#### Europe:

Aleksander Banka, Geert De Cubber, Giusep-

pina De Simone, Sr Anne Ferrand, Helena Jeppesen-Spuhler, Sr Anna Mirijam Kaschner CPS, Fr Jan Nowotnik, Oksana Pimenova, Fr Luis Manuel Romero Sanchez and Maria Sabov.

#### Oceania:

Manuel Beazley, Trudy Dantis, Renée Köhler-Ryan, John Lochowiak, Fr Denis Nacorda, Kelly Paget, Sr Mary Angela Perez, RSM, Fr Sijeesh Pullenkunnel, Susan Sela and Grace Wrackia.

#### Under-Secretaries of the General Secretariat of the Synod:

Bishop Luis Marín De San Martín OSA and Sr Nathalie Becquart XMCJ.

#### Members of the Ordinary Council:

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo SDB of Myanmar, Bishop Jaime Calderón Calderón of Mexico, Cardinal Joseph Coutts of Pakistan, Archbishop Anthony Fisher, OP of Australia, Archbishop Andrew Nkea Fuanya of Cameroon, Cardinal Oswald Gracias, of India, Cardinal Gérald Cyprien Lacroix, ISPX of Canada, Archbishop Gabriel Mbilingi CSSp, of Angola, Cardinal Dieu-donné Nzapalainga CSSp, of the Central African Republic, Cardinal Juan José Omella Omella of Spain, Cardinal Sérgio Da Rocha of Brazil, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn OP of Austria, Cardinal Daniel Fernando Sturla Berhouet SDB of Uruguay, Cardinal Joseph William Tobin CSsR of the USA, Ignace Youssef Iii Younan, head of the Synod of the Syrian Catholic Church, Lebanon and Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi of Italy.

#### Special Guests:

Fr Alois, Prior of the Taizé Community, Luca Casarini, Mediterranea Saving Humans, Italy,

Monsignor Severino Dianich, theologian, Italy, Eva Fernández Mateo, Catholic Action, Margaret Karam, Work of Mary-Focolare Movement, Father Hervé Legrand OP theologian, France, Monsignor Armando Matteo, secretary of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Fr Thomas Schwartz, Germany.

#### Other Participants

##### Spiritual Assistants:

Father Timothy Peter Joseph Radcliffe OP, Great Britain and Mother Maria Ignazia Angelini OSB Monastery of Viboldone, Italy.

##### Referent for the Liturgy:

Fr Matteo Ferrari OSB Cam.

##### Experts and Facilitators:

Fr Dario Vitali, Italy, Coordinator of Theological Experts, Wissam Abdo, Lebanon, Fr Adelson Araújo Dos Santos SI, Brazil, Fr Paul Béré SJ Burkina Faso, Sr María Luisa Berzosa González FI Spain, Monsignor Philippe Bordeyne, France, Monsignor Alphonse Borrás, Belgium, Father Andrea Bozzolo, SDB, Italy, Fr Pedro Manuel Brassesco, Argentina, Fr Agenor Brighenti, Brazil, Ioy Bueno De La Fuente, Spain, Monsignor Valentino Bulgarelli, Italy, Fr Juan Jorge Bytton Arellano, SJ Peru, Sr Daniela Adriana Cannavina CMR, Colombia, Sr María Suyapa Cacho Álvarez, Honduras, Fr Carlo Casalone SJ, Italy, Sandra Chaoul, Lebanon, Sr Maria Cimperman, RSCJ, USA, Monsignor Piero Coda, Italy, Professor Eamon Conway, Ireland, Sandie Cornish, Australia, Fr Ian Cribb SJ, Australia, Professor Klára Antonia Csiszár, Romania, Fr Hyacinthe Destivelle OP, France, Sr Anne Béatrice Faye CIC, Ivory Coast, Paolo Foglizzo, Italy, Fr Carlos Maria Galli, Argentina, Iris Gonzales, Dominican Republic, Fr Gaby

Alfred Hachem, Lebanon, Sr Philomena Shizue Hirota, MMB, Japan, Austen Ivereigh, Great Britain, Claire Jonard, Belgium, Sr Jolanta Maria Kafka RMI, Poland, Christina Kheng, Singapore, Leonardo Lima Gorosito, Uruguay, Mauricio Lopez Oropeza, Ecuador, Sr Laurence Loubières, XMCJ, Canada, Professor Rafael Luciani, Venezuela, Fr Anthony Makunde, Tanzania, Fr Miguel Martin SJ, Brazil, Fr David Mc Callum SJ, USA, Father Vito Mignozzi, Italy, Sr Paola Nelemta Ngarndiguimal SPC, Chad, Susan Pascoe, Australia, Fr Asaeli Raass SVD, Fiji Islands, Sr Yvonne Reungoat FMA, France, Fr Gilles Routhier, Canada, Anna Rowlands, Great Britain, Fr Ormond Rush, Australia, Fr José San Jose Prisco, Spain, Monsignor Pierangelo Sequeri, Italy, Thomas Söding, Germany, Sr Nicoletta Vittoria Spezzati ASC, Italy, Fr Christoph Theobald, SI, France, Erica Tossani, Italy, Monsignor Juan Fernando Usma Gómez, Colombia, and Myriam Wijlens, Holland.

#### General Secretariat of the Synod:

Fr Justo Ariel Beramendi Orellana, Thierry Bonaventura, Communication Manager, Fr Pasquale Bua, Pietro Camilli, Alfonso Salvatore Cauteruccio, Andrea Cimino, Karina Fujisawa Simonetti, Tanyja George, M Id, Fr Ambrogio Ivan Samus, Noemi Sanches, Monsignor Tomasz Trafny, Federica Vivian, Paola Volterra Toppiano, Pedro Paulo Oliveira Weizenmann and Sr Marie-Kolbe Zamora OSF.

# The method is the message: The unique process of spiritual conversation used during the Synodal Process

## Christina Kheng



One of the notable observations from the Synod continental assemblies was the effectiveness of the Spiritual Conversation Method in fostering dialogue and discernment. Indeed since the launch of the Synod in October 2021, it seemed that the Spiritual Conversation, when carried out well, was frequently a profound turning point for participants in groups, fostering a deep listening leading from a synodal conversation from 'I' to 'we'.

It is thus fitting here to take a close look at the Spiritual Conversation Method, how it came about, why it was included in the Synod *Vademecum*, and how it might foster the Church's on-going growth in synodality.

### The origin of the spiritual conversation

The term 'spiritual conversation' is sometimes used in a general sense to refer to conversations about faith, religion, and spirituality. However, in the context of the Synod, it is more often used to refer to a particular method of group dialogue characterised by several rounds (usually three) of active listening, intentional speaking, pausing for silence in between, and discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit in the group.

Thus Spiritual Conversation as a particular exercise characterised by this method implies that the group puts itself in the presence of the Holy Spirit with heightened sensitivity and attentiveness. It is, therefore, sometimes also called a 'conversation in the Spirit'.

In the early Church, some elements of the dynamics of the Spiritual Conversation can be seen in the deliberations of the first disciples, such as in Luke's account of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-21). Faced with the question of whether Gentile converts would need to be circumcised or not, the apostles and elders met to discern together.

Luke highlights that in addition to discussing amongst themselves in reflecting on the faith tradition, the assembly also listened attentively to the first-hand experiences of Paul and Barnabas from the field, testifying to 'the signs and wonders God had done' (Acts 15:12).

In reporting the outcome they wrote: 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ....' (Acts 15:28). Thus it can be seen that their discernment involved listening deeply to a variety of perspectives and attuning to where the Holy Spirit was leading.

In more recent times, different kinds of group deliberations have been systematised by various schools of spirituality. For instance, in their 36<sup>th</sup> General Congregation in 2016, the Jesuits committed them-

selves to revitalising the Spiritual Conversation Method of communal discernment, tracing its roots to a key deliberation by their founder Ignatius of Loyola and his first companion.

**“Each person prepares by reading, reflecting, and praying with the material, in order to get in touch with his or her experiences”**

Similar approaches were also gaining traction in the wider Church, such as in the continental and national ecclesial assemblies and councils occurring just before the Synod 2021-2024. In similar vein, at the Synod on Young People in 2018, Pope Francis introduced the practice of a three-minute silent pause in between several speeches because 'discernment needs space and time ... to allow everyone to recognise within their hearts the nuances of what they have heard, and to allow everyone to reflect deeply and seize upon what is most striking'.

All these experiences indicated that the Spiritual Conversation Method would lend itself well to the process for the Synod 2021-2024. When the *Vademecum* was released in September 2021, it could be said that myriad creative problems and other training resources on the Spiritual Conversation produced spontaneously by people all over the world attested to its positive reception and broad-based traction.

### The steps of the Spiritual Conversation

In brief, the method comprises the following steps:

**1. Individual preparation:** Participants are provided with relevant information and some questions for discernment. Each person prepares by reading, reflecting, and praying with the material, in order to get in touch with his or her experiences, viewpoints and feelings, and to discern what the Holy Spirit might be revealing through these.

#### 2. Gathering:

In groups of ideally six to seven persons, participants gather at a conducive place and set aside at least an hour to carry out about three rounds of sharing.

#### 3. First round:

Every person is given equal time (usually three to five minutes) to share the fruits of his or her prayer and reflection. The others listen deeply without interrupting, paying



Fr James Keiter pictured with a group of lay Catholics taking part in a round-table discussion in Nebraska, USA

attention to not only what is said but also to the feelings and inner movements in the speaker as well as oneself and the group. Everyone gives the speaker full and undivided attention, setting aside preoccupations with what to say or how to respond. Listeners also refrain from giving advice, making comments, answering questions, or raising new enquiries.

#### 4. Silent pause:

A silent pause of about two to three minutes follows the first round so that group members can get in touch with what they heard in the first round, how it affected them, and what other significant movements they sensed. These might include deep joy, energy, enthusiasm, hope, gratitude, and inner peace, or anger, despondency, hopelessness, languor, or even tension and confusion.

#### 5. Second round:

Participants share what came up when they reflected on these points during the silence. As with the first round, everyone listens to each speaker attentively. This is not the time to share additional information that one would have liked to share in the first round but to reflect more deeply on the movements that were sparked by that round. After everyone has had a chance to speak, that group can engage in dialogue to explore particular convergences or tensions that seem to warrant closer attention. This is especially important when there is a decision to be made on the matter at hand.

#### 6. Silent pause:

Another time of silence follows, as above. Participants can try to sense what the Holy Spirit seems to be revealing to the group. This is usually resonant with what stirs them most deeply, what brings new insight or interior conversion,

what invokes authentic commitment, what themes seem to recur frequently, what beckons further attention however subtly, or even new questions that arise.

#### 7. Third round:

Each one shares what emerged from this silent reflection, and the group notes the key points and interior movements that have come up.

### Facilitating and reporting the spiritual conversation

Due to its structured methodology, it is often best to have an assigned facilitator for the Spiritual Conversation. His or her role is to remind everyone of the process for each step, ensure that every group member has an equal time to speak, especially in the first round, hold the spaces for silence, encourage everyone to follow up the dynamics of each round, and ensure that the group wraps up the conversation within the allotted time.

The facilitator can be someone from within the group, as long as he/she is familiar with the rules and dynamics of the Spiritual Conversation. As a group member, the facilitator also has an equal turn to share the fruits of his or her prayer and reflection on the question at hand.

Usually the group is required to report the main points arising from its Spiritual Conversation. This report is not a mere collation of what was said by everyone nor even a summary of the majority viewpoint. Instead, it is a report of what the group discerns to be the main insights and movements that the Holy Spirit was leading them to become aware of in the conversation.

This is usually quite evident by the third round if the group has followed the process faithfully. For

this reason, rather than leaving it to just one or two persons, the group needs to take a few minutes after the conversation to note together what emerged in the conversation and to agree on what to report.

This exercise is itself part of the communal discernment. Besides those points which gained greater resonance over the three rounds, there could also be some tensions, questions, or minority viewpoints that emerged and remained unresolved. These can also be highlighted if the group feels that they warrant further attention.

Additionally, it is also helpful to report not only the conclusions but also the affective experiences of the group. These might include noteworthy moments or consolation or desolation, turning points in the group's energy level, or shifts in the sense of communion. All these affective experiences are integral to discerning the Spirit's movements.

**“The methodical equality in participation also helps to counter power imbalances that might be present in a group”**

Sometimes the groups are required to present their reports at a plenary assembly. The nature of such presentations can be akin to a Spiritual Conversation. Representatives from each group are given an equal chance to speak, and everyone listens attentively and contemplatively, noting what is being said, what inner movements are aroused, and how the assembly seems to be responding.

It is helpful to observe a brief moment of silence after each group or at least after several groups. If time allows, some people can share



Visitors applaud and greet Pope Francis after praying the Angelus in St Peter's Square at the Vatican.

their observations or where they feel the Spirit is moving, and others can respond. Through this process, the assembly gradually begins to become aware of the resonant themes, the noteworthy points, significant tensions or questions emerging, and what the Holy Spirit might be revealing.

Sometimes there is a Working Group to synthesise the group reports and plenary reactions, and circulate this synthesis back to the groups for further reaction and fine-tuning. Once again this process of Spiritual Conversation can be repeated.

If there is a sustained good quality of listening and adequate opportunities for sharing, the whole assembly might eventually find itself in *singularis conspiratio*, which characterises the fruitful unity in diversity of the People of God, walking together in the Spirit.

### The Value of the Spiritual Conversation

The basic process described above can be adapted to various contexts and communities. When carried out well, the Spiritual Conversation can be a helpful tool to actualise the communal nature of divine revelation. It enables a community to discern the voice of God's spirit by contemplating the signs of the times, the concrete experiences of one another, and the developing faith tradition on the topic at hand.

Moreover, its methodical structure helps a community to surface and deal with conflicting viewpoints in a fruitful and non-violent way, avoiding impulsive reactions or comments, and polarising debates.

The methodical equality in participation also helps to counter power imbalances that might be present in a group. As mentioned, sometimes tensions and questions are not resolved by the third round. This can underscore the pilgrim nature of communities, beckoning greater humility, patience, trust, and mutual commitment to walk further along together.

Spiritual Conversation works well when participants enter it with radical openness to the Holy Spirit, surrendering their attachments to certain preferred outcomes if any, and embrac-

ing a willingness to listen to and learn from others.

Such interior freedom is itself a fruit of divine grace. Attentive listening is based upon a theological worldview which acknowledges God's Spirit present in all creation. In the Church, attentive listening has an added imperative from the principle of the *sensus fidei* of the baptised. For this reason, everyone's voice deserves an equal chance to be heard and to be assured of welcoming, engaged, and respectful reception.

In turn, those who speak must do so thoughtfully, honestly, and responsibly from a genuine basis of prayer and reflection. Spiritual Conversation highlights that discernment involves not just a rationalist stance but is something that engages the whole human person including the intellectual, social, affective, and spiritual dimensions.

Effectiveness in the Spiritual Conversation grows with practise over time. What is important is not so much an increase in the group's technical proficiency in the method but rather, its gradual growth in synodality through the underlying attitudes of communion, unconditional hospitality, inclusiveness, attentive listening and thoughtful sharing. All these are engendered by the methodology of Spiritual Conversation.

Not surprisingly, many people who have had a good experience in the Synod consultation said that they learned synodality by 'doing synodality'. Indeed, the method is the message!

**i** Christina Kheng, a laywoman from Singapore, was called by Pope Francis to work in the Commission on Methodology, one of the four groups that within the Secretariat of the Synod are accompanying the two-year journey that began 10 October 2021.

**i** Extract taken from Profs Myriam Wijlens and Vimal Tirrimana's new release, 'The People of God have Spoken'. Available to buy now at [columbabooks.com](http://columbabooks.com).

## The Confession Box

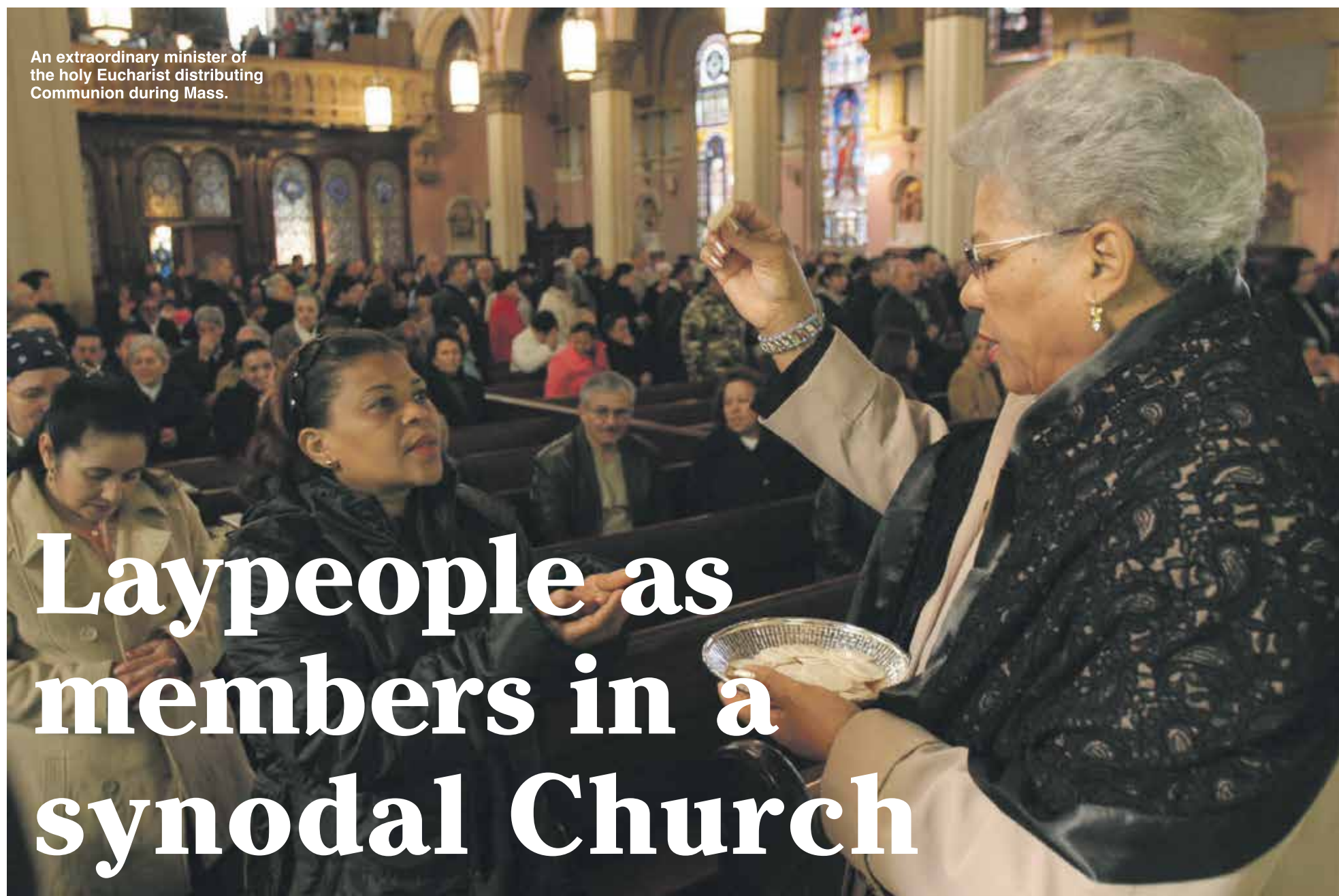
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An extraordinary minister of the holy Eucharist distributing Communion during Mass.



# Laypeople as members in a synodal Church

## Professor Serena Noceti



The document of the International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, offers the broadest and best articulated reflection on the implementation of synodality in the different contexts and levels of ecclesial life, but it mentions the theme of the laity in only a few passages.

These passages are nevertheless relevant for understanding the foundational assumptions and the hermeneutics of the conciliar documents, and they specify concretely the contribution required of the laity in a synodal Church. The horizon of reference is obviously the ecclesiology of Vatican II, especially its notions regarding the “people of God”, the *sensus fidei ecclesiae/fidelium*, and the laity’s work of evangelising and bearing prophetic witness in the world in service to the kingdom of God.

In discussing synodality, we are asked to take a stand for one of the two theological interpretations present in the vision of Vatican II, namely, the one that recognises the “co-essentiality of hierarchical and charismatic gifts” and places in the foreground the subjectivity of the word that is rooted in baptism and charisms.

This interpretation distances us from the more traditional one, which insists on the secular nature of the laity and their apostolate in the world. The laity are synodoi; that is, they are members co-constituting the collective Church, “the ecclesial We”, and their contribution is recognised as “indispensable” to the life of the Church.

They are not to be seen as simply obedient executors of instructions given by clergy nor as mere collaborators in pastoral work for which they are not truly responsible. Nor should they be considered passive recipients of doctrinal formation that only ordained ministers can offer; rather, they possess a vision of reality and a spiritual experience that must be recognised and welcomed so that the work of evangelisation and the life of the Church can be fulfilled.

In the synodal Church two dynamics are at work, understanding the faith together and deciding together; both require cooperation and unity of purpose. On both planes the laity are to be understood as active members with their own subjectivity of speech, with their own specific contribution to community discernment, and with autonomy around pastoral action.

Only in this way does it become possible to implement what is stipulated in *Ad Gentes*: The Church has not been really founded, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men and women unless there is a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy.

For the Gospel cannot be deeply grounded in the abilities, life, and work of any people without the active presence of lay people. Therefore, even at the very founding of a Church, great attention is to be paid to establishing a mature, Christian laity.

### Understanding the Faith together and deciding together

A synodal Church is generated and regenerated by the Word of the Gospel heard and understood ever more deeply thanks to the word of all the *christifideles* who constitute the Church. While the ordained ministers guarantee the apostolicity of the proclamation and of the Church, the laity invite everyone to grasp the coming of God in the history of humanity, thus preserving the extroversion and secularity of the whole Church, its being in the world and for the world (its pro-existence).

Their word of faith is shaped by laypeople’s professional skills, their family experiences, and their active involvement in politics, economics, and culture. During synodal meetings and in pastoral councils, laypeople read the signs of the

times and communicate the gospel proclamation using the language of their time so that its scope and meaning can be understood today.

Precisely because of their contribution to the hermeneutics of the gospel and the *Traditio Ecclesiae*, the laity ensure that the commitment to synodality is not reduced to an intra-ecclesial retreat but remains constitutively open to mission.

We understand the gospel with the help of the languages of our time, and we understand the extent and the shape of the ecclesial mission in the light of the promise of the kingdom we serve together, the kingdom of God coming in history. Thanks to their experience in the civil and political spheres—trade unions, citizens’ associations, voluntary work, and so on—laypeople can make specific contributions to shaping the synodal Church.

Precisely because they are accustomed to democratic and participatory procedures and to cooperative forms of social organisation, they can contribute to rethinking internal relations within the ecclesial body, especially regarding the exercise of authority, the distinction of powers, the greater involvement of women, and the dynamics of communication and information. Such rethinking in the Church will lead to increased transparency, accountability, and representativity and to more effective community action.

Sixty years after the Second Vatican Council, there is today no way that lay involvement can be disre-

garded or stealthily limited. Before making an authoritative pronouncement, the bishops (and the priests as well) should “listen to, nurture, and receive” what the laity have to contribute from their wisdom, competence, and experience of life, and they should do so without paternalism and in a spirit of real dialogue.

**“Synodality is not only a group of people walking together toward a common goal; it is a community trying to find a way together through collective discernment”**

### Duty

The relevance of the contribution of the laity to the life of the Church is affirmed in canon 212 of the Code of Canon Law, according to which the faithful have not only the right to make their needs known to the pastors, but also the right and the duty to express their opinions on what is good for the Church to the pastors and to the other faithful as well. This latter reference reveals the possibility of thinking about “public opinion” in the Church.

The contribution of the laity is indispensable in community discernment and in deliberative processes, precisely because it introduces “other” languages, categories, questions, and perspectives



Members of the Church in Germany hold banners and posters during a protest ahead of the fifth synodal assembly in Frankfurt March 9, 2023.

to the understanding of reality.

Moreover, it makes operational alternatives possible, and it allows for the evaluation of pastoral options and their possible repercussions. "Synodality is not only a group of people walking together toward a common goal; it is a community trying to find a way together through collective discernment."

Despite these important considerations, the contribution of the laity, who constitute the majority of the faithful, is still limited to offering "advice to the pastors" that is at best useful, but not necessary or binding.

The reduced space allowed for the laity to speak, the limited time given to listening to their concerns in the parishes, the concentration of all major decisions in the hands of ordained ministers alone, the little effort put into making participative bodies effective and efficient, the limited resources (in terms of people and financial commitment) invested in the formation of the laity, and the inability to accept the prophetic word of young people who are calling for substantial reforms in today's Church - all these are signs of a failure to achieve the synodality that is essential for true Church renewal.

The membership of the laity is always diverse; it is never reducible to a singular abstract "layperson" or to an undifferentiated category such as "laity". Recognising this membership as essential to a synodal church concretely means welcoming the voices that have remained "unheard" for centuries: young people, women, the poor, and the marginalised - even those "dissonant" voices that are sometimes critical but are necessary for considering the life of the Church from a different perspective and for overcoming the "same old, same old" that forever perpetuates itself.

The authoritative heft of the

laity is still limited; their power is evanescent, generic, and irrelevant; it is the result of limited, benevolent concessions from above, but it is not structurally integrated into the processes of ecclesial listening.

Listening to the Word of God through the words of our brothers and sisters in the faith, and listening to each other's opinions, even contrasting ones, so that together they can produce mature church decisions - these are the essential ways of building a synodal Church. It cannot be achieved unless the laity are recognised as true members.

### Toward an "all-ministerial Church"

Laypersons therefore help the synodal Church to mature by working in the diverse contexts and activities of pastoral life. Since Vatican II, all the local churches have, in different ways, witnessed the flourishing of various forms of lay ministry, and these have radically transformed the face of the Christian community.

This is one of the most significant changes in the life of the Church. Laymen and women are actively involved in many forms of significant and ongoing service to the Church; they have been given a specific mandate to respond to the pastoral and other needs of people and the region.

Some who receive special training receive a special mandate from the bishop to be the heads of diocesan pastoral offices; they become pastoral officers, engaged full-time in the life of the parishes and other diocesan organisations. Other laypeople serve as community coordinators in the absence of a priest, and they provide pastoral care as established by canon 512 §2 of the Code of Canon Law.

In 1972, Paul VI, with the *motu proprio Ministeria Quaedam*, estab-

lished what today we call "instituted ministries". Lectors and acolytes are ancient ministerial figures who today assume a specific task of service on the basis of their baptism and a "specific rite of institution"; they nourish a fruitful relationship between the celebration of the Eucharist and the pastoral life of the faithful.

**“All these ministries are an indispensable contribution to the structure and action of the Church, not only because clergy may be scarce, but also because laypeople are recognised as co-responsible members in the Church”**

### Weakness

Paul VI reserved these ministries to males only, by "venerable tradition", but Pope Francis has opened them up also to women and has promoted a further instituted ministry, that of the catechist. These measures are not simply ratifying *de facto* tasks and ministries; they are creating new ministerial figures. Their existence disrupts the "clergy/laity" duality that has served as a matrix for past thinking about ecclesial relations, and it allows for the consideration of a multiplicity of ministerial figures: ordained, instituted, and *de facto*.

The forms of ministry exercised by lay people in and for the Church are diverse: on the one hand, there are *de facto* ministries that are carried out for limited times and contexts; on the other, there are instituted ministries that entail enlivening other laypeople;

these are taken on permanently in a local Church after suitable training.

All these ministries are an indispensable contribution to the structure and action of the Church, not only because clergy may be scarce, but also because laypeople are recognised as co-responsible members in the Church.

From the 1990s onward, certain suspicions and warnings were voiced about using the term ministry for the laity, but Francis has restored legitimacy to this discourse and has given constituent value to lay contributions.

The Second Vatican Council offered only a partial vision regarding the ministry of "all" in the Church; it did not use the term ministry for laypeople but insisted rather on their apostolate in the world, whether as individuals or in associations. Even when the Council mentions lay pastoral service, it considers it something "extraordinary".

The weakness of the conciliar documents' reflection on the royal *munus* is especially evident when it comes to the laity, who are not expressly mentioned in chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* and who are referred to in chapter IV only as acting *ad extra*, in accord with their secular nature.

*Lumen Gentium* 36 makes no direct mention of the laity's contribution to ecclesial service, nor is there any mention of the laity's exercise of authority in the Church by virtue of their specific royal *munus*. *Lumen Gentium* 37 describes the relationship between hierarchy and laity, but always with a clear distinction between *ad intra* and *ad extra*, between the clergy's full membership in the Church and the laity's role as "collaborators".

The synodal form of Church entails not only the exercise of the *munus regendi ac pascendi* of the ordained ministers (the "one"), but also the synergetic contribution of "all" and

"some" (pastoral workers, in this case) in that common service that expresses and implements the royal *munus* of all baptised laypersons.

The Council, however, not only separated the membership of ordained ministers and that of the laity but also referred to the *munus* of each of them with different foundations and orientations. According to the *Relatio*, the term is not used in the second chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church "because it would be difficult to devise a treatment of the governing function that would be compatible with both categories at the same time".

Since 1983, however, the Code of Canon Law has provided for some forms of lay participation in the exercise of government, with specific tasks in the diocesan and Roman curias, in the area of administration (chancellor, bursar, notary, censor) and in judiciary functions (all roles are possible except those of the judicial vicar and the single judge).

Is it possible to extend the reflection on this matter? For example, is it possible to think about the participation of the laity in the process of appointing bishops and parish priests? Could the laity take on roles of coordination, administration, and legal representation of parishes? What should be the basis of lay authority, and how should it be conceived? Such questions naturally flow from the reconfiguration of lay ministry in a synodal perspective.

**i** Serena Noceti is an Italian lay theologian, a full professor at the Religious Sciences Institute in Florence, and a teacher at the theological faculty of central Italy. Extract taken with kind permission from her new release: *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding*. Available to buy at paulistpress.com

# The Vatican's 'Synod on Synodality' is about to begin - Here's what to know



Xavière Missionary Sr Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Synod, responds to a question during a news conference at the Vatican September 2023.

## THE LAST WORD WITH Claire Giangravé



Catholic clergy and laypeople will gather at the Vatican October 4-29 for a Synod, or summit of bishops and lay people, to discuss synodality, with an emphasis on communion, participation and mission.

While some might dismiss the highly anticipated event as a meeting on meetings, the term synodality under Pope Francis has expanded to reflect his vision for dialogue and decision-making in the Church.

"I am well aware that speaking of a 'Synod on Synodality' may seem something abstruse, self-

referential, excessively technical, and of little interest to the general public," Francis said to journalists at the Vatican on August 26.

The summit will bring 464 Catholic clergy and laypeople, including women, to the Vatican to discuss hot-button issues ranging from sexual abuse to LGBTQ inclusion and female ordination. "It is something truly important for the Church," the Pope said.

### What is the Synod on Synodality?

The Synod is the result of a two-year process that started in September 2021, when the

Vatican released a preparatory document and instructions on how to prepare for the summit. Catholic faithful around the world then met in their parishes to discuss the questions posed by the Synod. The syntheses of those conversations were then sent to their respective bishops' conferences.

Once bishops had the opportunity to discuss — and debate — the syntheses, they sent their conclusions to the Vatican, where a group of some 30 experts, theologians and pastoral workers met in the town of Frascati near Rome in September 2022 to draft a document that would guide the next phase.

This document, titled "*Enlarge the Space of your Tent*," was sent to the Continental Assemblies, or groups of bishops divided by continents. The Eastern churches and Catholic advocacy groups also had a chance to submit their reflections on the synodal topics.

The results of those continen-

tal discussions were sent once again to the Vatican, where officials at the Synod office drafted another document, the "*Instrumentum Laboris 2*," that will guide discussions at the upcoming Synod.

### When is the Synod?

On Saturday (September 30), right before the Synod takes place, there will be a consistory where 21 new cardinals will be made, followed by an ecumenical vigil in St Peter's Square. Afterward, participants at the Synod will travel to the town of Sacrofano for a spiritual retreat where they will get to meet and talk to one another until the eve of the synod on October 3.

Pope Francis will celebrate the inauguration Mass for the Synod on October 4. The Vatican announced in April that the Synod will be extended, meaning participants will convene again for a second time in the fall of 2024.

The month-long Synod will be sprinkled with other important gatherings and events, including Masses, pilgrimages, retreats and a prayer for migrants and refugees scheduled for October 19. Attendees will pray the rosary in the Vatican gardens on October 25.

### Where is the Synod?

Instead of taking place in the traditional Synod hall, the summit will unfold at the larger Pope Paul VI Hall, which can hold over 6,000 individuals. This is a reflection of the growing number of participants at the Synod.

Participants coming to Rome have found their own accommodations close to the Vatican and the multitude of restaurants surrounding the Vatican will likely become a hub for after-hours synodal discussions.

There will also be a number of other events held around the Vatican during the month of the synod. The Women's Ordination

Conference, the Italian Bishops' Conference and the Diocese of Rome, for example, are organising a series of gatherings and events that will accompany the Synod.

### Who will attend the Synod?

There will be 464 participants at the Synod and 365 will have the right to vote. For the first time, laypeople will be full voting members of the Synod, compared with earlier synods where only bishops had the right to vote. An unprecedented number of women, 54, will also be attending.

Representatives from Eastern churches and high-ranking members of the Roman Curia will also be present. Pope Francis personally selected 120 delegates. There will be spiritual assistants, 28 theologians and 34 facilitators, whose role will be to promote a synodal atmosphere at the event and encourage what the *"Instrumentum Laboris"* describes as "conversations in the spirit". While the spiritual assistants will go on the retreat with Synod participants, the facilitators and theologians will remain in Rome to prepare for the summit.

During the proceedings, theologians and facilitators will be encouraged to write down their reflections and observations on how the Synod is proceeding.

Two bishops from China will attend, having received permission from authorities in Beijing and the approval of Pope Francis. This is the second time Chinese bishops have been allowed to participate at a Synod; the first time was at the synod on young people in 2018. A There are also those who disagree with the Synod itself, such as U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, who has called the Synod, 'a Pandora's box'. There will also be several Germans in attendance who support the Synodal Way, a consultation of bishops and lay Catholics in Germany that took place between 2019 and 2023 and proposed progressive positions on sexuality and the inclusion of women.

### How will the Synod take place?

What is unique about this Synod is its attempt to make synodality effective in the way it's carried out. In the past, synods were mostly about listening to a panel of speakers presenting their views in often long-winded speeches. Francis himself has hinted at the fact that previous synods under Pope John



Participants attend the fourth synodal assembly of Germany's Synodal Path in Frankfurt September 9, 2022. How will the German bishops draw from their experiences at these meetings?

Paul II or Pope Benedict XVI had predetermined outcomes.

At this Synod, participants will be asked to speak briefly and their speeches will be followed by a moment of reflective silence and prayer. The event will be divided into five modules: Synodality, Communion, Participation, Mission and a final assembly to cast a vote.

After listening to the public pronouncements and testimonies at the general assembly, attendees will be divided into English, Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese language groups.

The working groups, also known as "*circoli minori*," will discuss the topics in detail. Before the start of the discussion the working groups will pray for the Holy Spirit to guide the discussions. Theologians and facilitators will only be allowed to participate at the plenary sessions and not in the working groups.

A summary of the discussions written by the smaller groups will be sent to the Secretariat of the Synod office led by Cardinal Mario Grech, which will collect all the information and send a digital copy to the theologians who attended the Synod.

The theologians will be charged with writing a final synthesis that will be submitted for the vote of

the plenary assembly. "It will be like the revelation of a mystery novel", said the Reverend Orm Rush, a professor at Australian Catholic University and a member of the theological commission on the Synod, speaking to *Religion News Service*.

The Vatican has made the decision to keep the conversations taking place at the Synod secret. The opening session will be livestreamed to the public, but the remaining plenary sessions and the discussions of the *circoli minori* will remain behind closed doors. Journalists reporting on the Synod will have to rely on occasional briefings by the Vatican's communication department.

"The Pope wants it to be like a closed room," Rush said, "not to keep the journalists out, but to enable us to get away from people and their megaphones blasting at each other in a spirit of hate".

### Why is the Synod important?

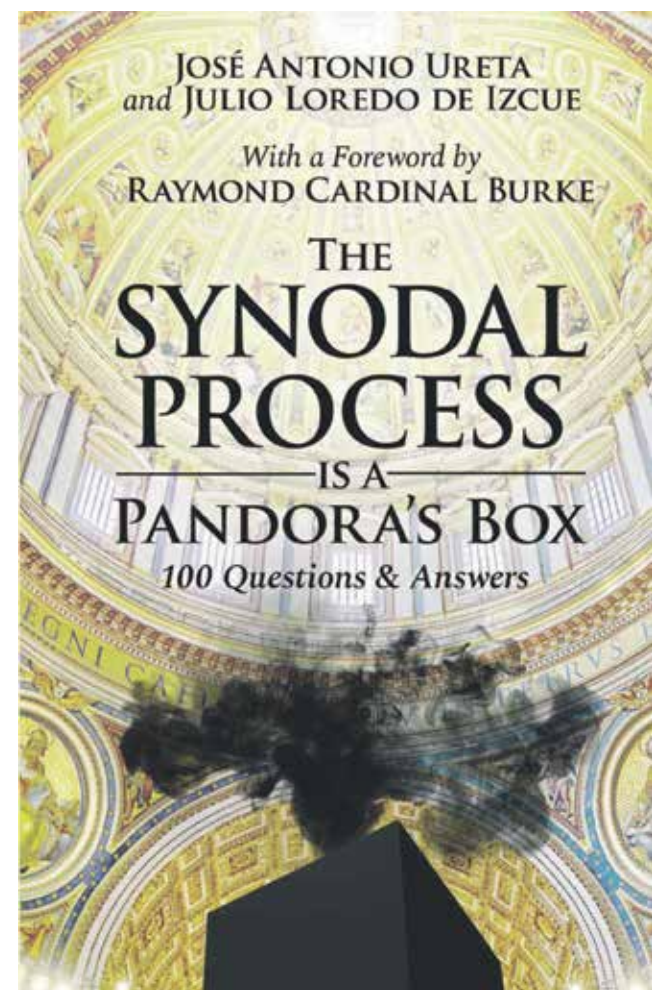
Synod organisers will say that it's impossible to predict what will emerge from the synodal discussions, which they insist will be guided by the Holy Spirit. But the process that has led to the event offers some insights into the expectations of participants and observers.

At the parish level, the

summaries of synodal discussions underlined the need to reflect on the role of women in the Church, the welcoming of gay and lesbian Catholics and the possibility of a married priesthood. These concerns were not only present in Western churches, but also for faithful in parishes all over the world who are grappling with how these issues relate to their beliefs.

Synod organisers have made it clear these concerns will be discussed at the Synod and there are several questions in the *"Instrumentum Laboris"* that address them. The event will also be an opportunity to think about how decisions are made within the hierarchy of the Church, underlining the need for bishops to work closely with parish councils, take responsibility for the oversight of their dioceses and enact accountability for sexual abuse cases.

While the Vatican has yet to confirm whether there will be an official document from the Synod, it is likely that the participants will vote on some sort of document emerging from their conversations. It is also likely that the document will be sent back to the local Church level to be discussed – and if necessary amended – once again before the 2024 summit.



The cover of *"The Synodal Process is a Pandora's Box"*, a book with a foreword by US Cardinal Raymond L. Burke. The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property released the book in late August 2023.

Changes in doctrine and morality are off the table, according to Vatican officials. But changing the way decisions are made and reshuffling the power structures within the historically

hierarchical institution could pave the way for such changes in the future.

**i** Claire Giangravé is an author at *Religion News Service*. Article first published by the *Religion News Service*.

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