News
Vatican



Pope Francis gives his blessing Sept. 16 at the end of a meeting in the Vatican synod hall with members of lay movements. The hall will be the site of the 2023 Vatican gathering, the final phase of the new process of the Synod of Bishops (CNS/Vatican Media)



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With about three weeks to go before Catholic prelates around the world are due to open a first-of-its-kind grassroots consultation period as part of an expanded vision for the Vatican's Synod of Bishops, church officials across the U.S. are still figuring out exactly what that process will look like.

A range of dioceses contacted by NCR in recent weeks said they were still working out the details for the consultation period and would be in a better position to comment on the synod in coming weeks, after Pope Francis formally opens the two-year synod process with a ceremony in Rome on Oct. 9.

Officials who agreed to interviews described plans that relied on parish listening sessions, online surveys, Zoom meetings and other avenues to get feedback from laity.



Bishop Christopher Coyne of Burlington, Vermont (Courtesy of the Diocese of Burlington, Vermont)

"It's a great opportunity for me to learn and for bishops all over the world to develop better habits of consultation with our people," Bishop Christopher Coyne of Burlington, Vermont, told NCR.

"Whatever comes out of this really good effort is one that, more than anything else, hopefully will invite us to begin to see each other more in the sense of a collegial church, a church in which all the members have access to the Holy Spirit and have

something to say within the work of the church as we strive within the tradition of the church to live in this culture," Coyne said.

Synods of Bishops have been held in the Catholic Church since 1967. In the past, they have normally involved hundreds of bishops coming to Rome for a few weeks to discuss a prescribed set of topics.

Francis announced in May that he would be expanding the scope of the next synod, originally set for 2022. He postponed the Vatican meeting of bishops, now set for October 2023, to allow first for periods of consultation in every local diocese and at the continental level.

Although Francis has previously asked for local consultation to occur before other synods during his pontificate, no earlier process has been so wide-ranging.

The entire 2021-23 process will still focus on the theme of synodality, the kind of "walking together" that Francis has characterized as a central theme for how the Catholic Church should move forward in the third millennium. The formal title for the newly enlarged synod process is "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission."



St. Joseph Sr. Katie Eiffe, director of synodal planning for the Diocese of Syracuse, New York (Courtesy of Sr. Katie Eiffe)

"It’s a wonderful opportunity to live out what Vatican II called us to 60 years ago as a church," said St. Joseph Sr. Katie Eiffe, the director of synodal planning for the Diocese of Syracuse, New York. Eiffe told NCR that the synod on synodality is not meant to be "a one-time meeting."

"This is Francis' dream for the church, this church that engages the entire people of God, that is a listening church and a learning church. It’s a wonderful image of

church," she said.

Per the instructions that the Vatican sent out last May, each U.S. bishop is supposed to open his local consultation process on Oct. 17. He is to collect input from local parishes, lay movements, religious institutions, schools, universities, ecumenical communities and other groups.

The bishop then has to synthesize that data into a 10-page report by April 2022 for submission to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which, like bishops' conferences across the world, is to pass on a summary of the country's work to the Vatican. Those summaries will be used to help create a working document that will be the start of discussions during continental synod meetings that will run from September 2022-March 2023.

A handbook about the synod process that the Vatican released on Sept. 7 said the goal of the local phase of the process is "not to overwhelm dioceses and parishes, but rather to integrate the Synodal Process into the life of the local Church in creative ways."

"This diocesan phase is an opportunity for parishes and dioceses to encounter, experience, and live out the synodal journey together, thus discovering or developing synodal tools and pathways that are best suited for their local context," said the handbook.



Massimo Faggioli, theology and religious studies professor at Villanova University (Courtesy of Massimo Faggioli)

However, it appears that many U.S. dioceses are not yet quite prepared to open their local consultation process.

Several major diocesan websites across the country do not mention the synod on their home pages, or on pages dedicated to press releases and bishops' blogs and columns in their diocesan newspapers. Eight of 15 dioceses contacted by NCR in recent weeks either did not return emails or said they could not comment because

they were still in the early planning stages. Two others did not follow through on initial messages regarding interview requests.

"I expected some more show or effort to say, 'Yes, we're doing something,' but I don't even see that. That is the most surprising thing," said Massimo Faggioli, a theologian at Villanova University who has written about synodality.

Faggioli told NCR that in many locations, it appears that only Catholics who follow church affairs would know about the synod. He said that trend is consistent with a general tension that exists between synodality, a development that he said comes out of Vatican II and that assumes a certain unity of people, and the Catholic Church in the United States, which is fragmented ideologically, with some bishops openly resistant to Francis, and highly clerical.

"It's very difficult to explain synodality to a church that has stopped talking about Vatican II," Faggioli said. "That is a serious problem, intellectually."

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>
> —Massimo Faggioli
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Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a religious studies professor at Manhattan College who teaches courses on Vatican II and contemporary Catholicism, told NCR that there are several factors to explain the tensions between Francis' vision of a synodal church and the church in the United States. Among them, she said, is a particular brand of clericalism where priests used to the style of ministry of the late Pope John Paul II effectively "are the ones running the church" in the country.

"Priests are not accustomed to collaborating with laypeople in this country, in part because the way we have tried to garner vocations has been to emphasize how set apart they are, and that’s a legacy of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, who continued that," Imperatori-Lee said.



Theologian Natalia Imperatori-Lee on the curial reform: "To separate out governance or administration from orders means that orders is primarily a sacramental ministry and that governance then belongs to the whole people of God, which is as it should be." (Provided photo)

"There is no blueprint either on the clerical side or on the lay side of how to do something as collaborative as a synod," she added. "If we don’t see each other as equals in the faith, then there's very little chance that [the clergy] are going to take anything that laypeople say seriously. That fundamental trust, seeing each other as equals in the faith, does not exist in the clerical climate in this country."

However, some dioceses have been working through the synod process for a few weeks now. In Chicago, Cardinal Blase Cupich intends to use the archdiocesan structures he already uses for consultation, such as the presbyteral council, the lay-led pastoral council and the women's committee.

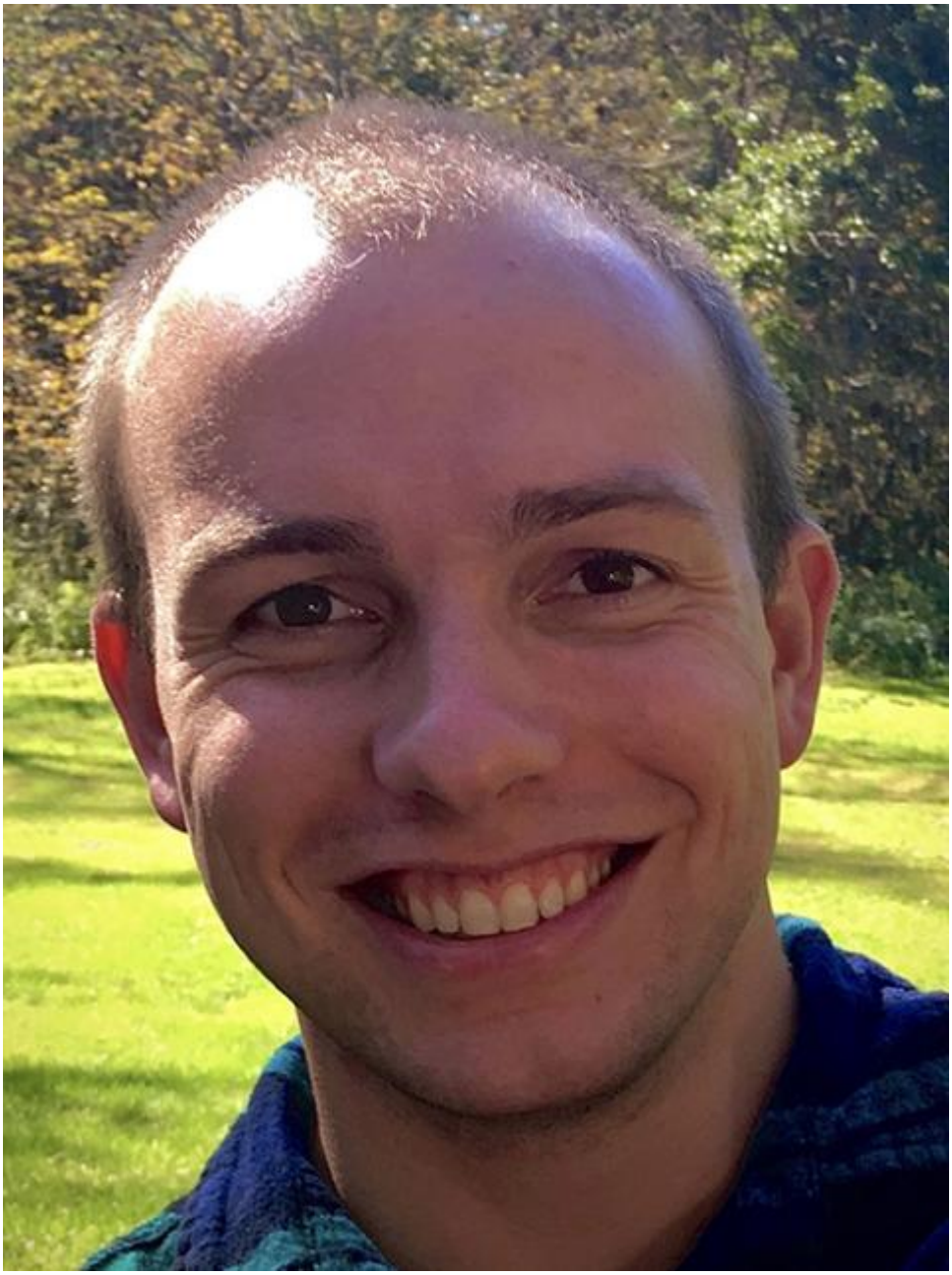
"The cardinal will also include the ways we normally consult with religious communities that serve the archdiocese. He's trying to be as comprehensive as possible with the already-existing consultative groups," said Msgr. Patrick Pollard, who is managing the synod process for the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Pollard told NCR that the Chicago synodal process will begin with Mass at Holy Name Cathedral. The listening and consulting will rely heavily on parishes, with members of the archdiocesan pastoral council and women's committee seeking feedback and reflections from people in their own parishes.

"He's listening to people in the pews," Pollard said. "You'll have those who are more conservative in their style and then you'll have those who are very progressive. He's trying to listen to find the truth of what each group is saying, and how he moves forward given that information. I think the Holy Father is trying to do that worldwide."

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Eiffe, the synodal planner in the Syracuse Diocese, said Bishop Douglas Lucia will appoint a steering committee for the process and that listening sessions will be held throughout the diocese.



Patrick Schmadeke, director of evangelization for the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa (Courtesy of Patrick Schmadeke)

"The goal of the Holy Father is that this time the consultation with the people of God should be very wide, so that is our hope too," she said. "The invitation will certainly go out to many people; certainly to people in the parishes, but also as the Holy Father has put it, to the people on the margins, to other Christian communities, even other faith communities. We're trying to follow that model, if you will."

Patrick Schmadeke, the director of evangelization for the Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, told NCR that the diocese is looking to leverage technology, such as Zoom for online listening sessions, and to advertise in secular media like daily newspapers and radio stations.

"We want to spread the news far and wide that the Catholic Church is listening and we want to hear your voice," Schmadeke said. "That's the goal. How that exactly looks like is still being worked out."

Schmadeke added that the diocese is hoping to equip parishes to put them in "a good position" to live out the synodal process in their given context, whether they are in the suburbs, the inner city or a rural setting.

"We're hoping to provide some suggestions for parish-level discernment," Schmadeke said.

"What kinds of demographics and populations might they want to reach out to? What kinds of locations might they want to do listening sessions in? If an event is hosted in a parish hall, that will probably attract people who belong to the parish and are active, but that's not getting outside the four walls of the parish. We want to be as creative as possible in considering things like geographically what spaces are we using."

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In addition to parish-level listening events, Schmadeke said the diocese is looking to organize three town hall-type settings as well as small-group sessions. "We want to focus on people's experiences, make sure people are heard and listened to, and feel known," he said.

Meanwhile, for the Archdiocese of Seattle, the local phase of the synod will give the opportunity to build on the efforts it has undertaken since Fall 2019 to become a more synodal local church, said Tim Hunt, the archdiocesan executive director of

planning and mission effectiveness.



Tim Hunt, executive director of planning and mission effectiveness for the Archdiocese of Seattle (Courtesy of Archdiocese of Seattle)

Hunt, who is managing the synod process for the archdiocese, told NCR that Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne established the archdiocesan Office of Planning and Mission Effectiveness and appointed a new pastoral council that over the last two years has helped the archbishop to begin a pastoral planning process that has emphasized accompaniment, building understanding, dual conversion and listening.

"We feel we've gained some real experience of this journeying together, but we really have only begun those steps, so I think Seattle is in a good position to kick back into this listening session phase again," said Hunt, adding that the archdiocese this time around wants parishes to take the lead on listening sessions.

"I think what we're encouraging is both what we already know what to do, but we also want to make sure that people know that they have creative liberties to do this process of listening creatively, however they feel like it would be best to get the feedback and involvement and participation of everyone," Hunt said.

Regarding the importance of bishops listening to and consulting the laity, Coyne in Burlington pointed the finger at himself and other bishops, referencing the controversy over the U.S. bishops' plan to draft a document on "eucharistic coherence" that may address pro-choice politicians like President Joe Biden.

"We're the only ones in the room who are talking about this, about the document and about the implications of the document," Coyne said. "To me, if we're going to talk about the understanding of ourselves as communion, and all the aspects of what that means, then there needs to be consultation with everybody who's part of the church, and that includes the laity."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 15-28, 2021** print issue under the headline: US dioceses don't seem prepared for worldwide synod process.