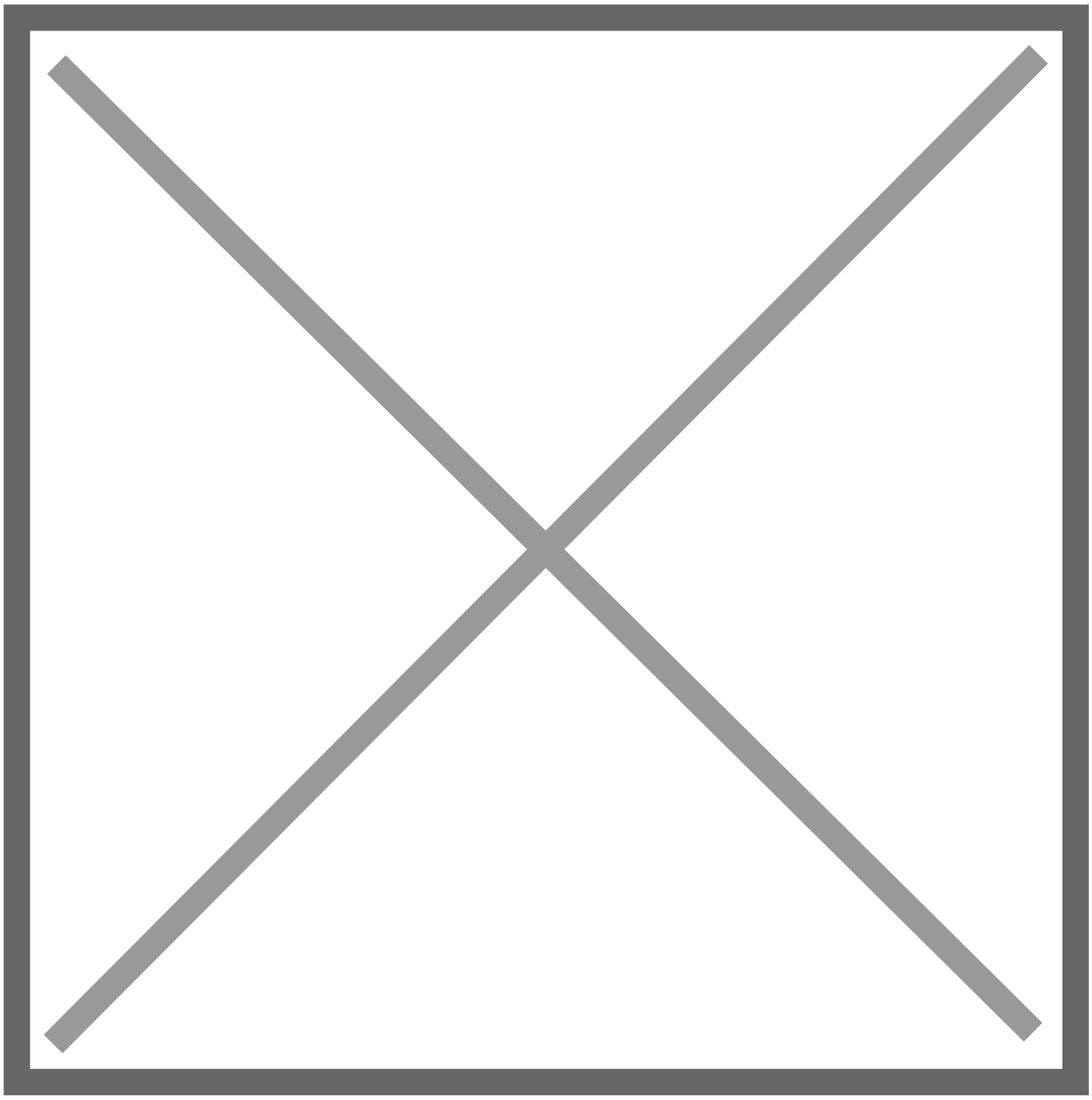
Vatican



Pope Francis gives the homily as he celebrates a Mass to open the process that will lead up to the assembly of the world Synod of Bishops in 2023, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 10, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Remo Casilli)



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ROME — Pope Francis on Oct. 10 officially launched the Vatican's high-stakes, two-year synod process in an opening Mass where he urged the global Catholic Church to master the "art of encounter."

"Everything changes once we are capable of genuine encounters with [Jesus] and with one another, without formalism or pretense, but simply as we are," said Francis in a homily in St. Peter's Basilica.

The Synod of Bishops, which emerged out of the Second Vatican Council, was designed in part to provide a mechanism for global church leaders to come to Rome to confront certain challenges in church life. Now its newly retooled model adds another component that begins with a listening stage with local churches at the diocesan level.

In inaugurating the new process, the pope said the Christian community must reflect the "style of God, who travels the paths of history and shares in the life of humanity."

This is a "time to look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say, to build rapport, to be sensitive to the questions of our sisters and brothers," Francis said.

While some world leaders have garnered mass appeal by promoting "the art of the deal," the pope implied that synodality is the very opposite of transactional relationships.

The "art of encounter," said Francis, is marked by listening and seeking to understand the other.

"Every encounter, as we know, calls for openness, courage and a willingness to let ourselves be challenged by the presence and the stories of others," the pope said.

> "Keep us from becoming a 'museum church,' beautiful but mute, with much past and little future." — Pope Francis
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After decades of continued financial and sexual scandals plaguing the church, Francis is betting that the synodal process — that of a participatory, listening church — will invite a fuller involvement of all its members and help purge its abuse of power.

Despite the church's vertical, hierarchical structure, Francis insisted Oct. 10 that the synod "listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of every church, people and nation."

"Let us ask: in the church, are we good at listening? How good is the hearing of our heart?" Francis asked. "Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered, rejected or judged?"

"Let us not soundproof our hearts," the pope implored.

One day earlier, on Oct. 9, Francis spoke to delegates from around the world in the Vatican's synod hall, telling them that this two year process — which will conclude in Rome in October 2023 — must include all of the church's members, especially those frequently marginalized.

"We must acknowledge the frustration and impatience felt by many pastoral workers, members of diocesan and parish consultative bodies and women, who frequently remain on the fringes," he said. "Enabling everyone to participate is an

essential ecclesial duty."

In a room filled with men who are sometimes referred to as "princes of the church," the pope said the synodal process should be not an occasional experience, but one of structural change, "where all can feel at home and participate."

Delegates also heard firsthand testimonials Oct. 9 from international participants, including Dominique Yon of South Africa, who said the synod must include "those on the periphery, like those who are persecuted or oppressed due to their age, religion, color or gender."

In a prerecorded video, Dominican Sr. Donna Ciangio, chancellor of the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, said the listening process must also include people who have left the Catholic faith.

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Jesuit Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, who is Archbishop of Luxembourg and will serve as the synod's relator general, said that listening "is a passage from a 'me' to a 'we.'"

As relator general, Hollerich will be tasked with drafting many of the synod's working documents.

"I must confess that I have no idea yet what kind of working instrument I will be writing," he said Oct. 9. "The pages are blank; it is up to you to fill them. The only thing I can say is that I will not do it alone. A work tool on synodality can only come from teamwork."

Over the next two years, many of the church's hot-button topics, such as priestly celibacy, the role of women and outreach to LGBTQ persons, are likely to emerge as wedge issues in the synodal process.

Francis told delegates not to be afraid to ask questions and to engage in honest, respectful dialogue, while also warning that the synod is not a parliamentary or political process.

"There is no need to create another church, but to create a different church," said Francis, drawing on the words of the influential Dominican theologian Fr. Yves

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"Keep us from becoming a 'museum church,' beautiful but mute, with much past and little future," he pleaded.

More than 3,000 tickets were distributed by the Vatican for the Oct. 10 opening Mass, with representatives on hand from every continent in one of the largest gatherings at the Vatican since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On Oct. 17, bishops from around the world have been requested to celebrate a Mass for the opening of the synod in their home dioceses.

"Let us have a good journey together!" Francis said as he concluded his Oct. 10 homily. "May we be pilgrims in love with the Gospel and open to the surprises of the Spirit."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 29-Nov 11, 2021** print issue under the headline: Pope launches synod on synodality.