News
Vatican



People receive Communion during Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., March 11, 2021. The Washington Archdiocese is among the U.S. Catholic dioceses that have been proactive in planning listening sessions and publicizing the synod on synodality. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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Kevin Beck said the only thing he has seen thus far from his diocese in Colorado Springs, Colorado, about the 2021-23 Synod of Bishops on synodality is an article in the diocesan newspaper that reported the bishop was reviewing the consultation process.

"That was in October, and we haven't heard anything since," said Beck, who is organizing his own online listening session for a group of lay Catholics in the diocese to offer their input and have their voices heard.

"We've drafted a set of questions that we're going to send out to people who said they want to participate so they can have time to think about what they want to say," said Beck, who told NCR that he wished his diocese was "more excited" about the synod.

"Maybe some bishops or priests are afraid of what might come out of it, or they just might not know how to organize something," he said. "I mean it's an awfully big operation when you think about what the synod is asking parishes to do."

The synod on synodality, as it is referred to in church circles, is an ambitious endeavor that some observers have described as the "biggest consultation exercise in human history."



Pope Francis 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)

Every diocese in the world is being called to consult its local communities and stakeholders over the next eight months. All the listening and dialogue in parish halls, diocesan offices, school gymnasiums, private homes, Zoom meetings, deanery gatherings, university classrooms and other settings all over the globe represent the first stage in an extensive two-year process that will culminate in an October 2023 gathering of bishops and synod delegates in Rome.

Pope Francis and other church leaders have framed synodality as a decisive step in the church's renewal that the Second Vatican Council proposed more than a half century ago. In an October 2015 Vatican address, Francis said synodality is the path that "God expects of the Church of the third millennium."

But the early weeks of the synod's diocesan phase in the United States so far reveal an uneven response to Francis' vision of a more decentralized, listening and discerning church that "journeys together."

Some dioceses, especially those in San Diego, Newark, New Jersey, Seattle, Washington, D.C., and others led by bishops who are seen as allies of Francis'

reforming agenda, have been proactive in planning listening sessions and publicizing the synod. The Washington Archdiocese, for example, has a detailed "landing page" on its website chock-full of synod resources, timelines, videos, surveys and other links.

Cardinal Wilton Gregory gives a homily during a Mass to open the 2021-23 synod on synodality in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 17. (YouTube/Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington)

"We have archdiocesan and parish staff dedicating many hours and their talents to ensuring that the diocesan synod is imbued with prayer, listening and dialogue," said Jeannine Marino, the secretary for pastoral ministry and social concerns for the Washington Archdiocese.

"We have received numerous responses already to the individual survey from the laity, men and women religious and the clergy, and we have had a number of parishes already begin their parish listening sessions," Marino told NCR.

Church officials in other parts of the country report that more detailed synod plans will soon be forthcoming. The archdioceses of Los Angeles, Denver and Cincinnati are among those who say that their consultative processes will begin in early 2022.

Other dioceses, meanwhile, have little mention of the synod on their websites and publications. Catholics in those dioceses say they have received little information about listening sessions or anything related to the synod.

"Particularly here in the U.S., we've been getting calls from lots of people in various dioceses where they hear nothing about the synod. Or if they do hear about it, it's only being advertised within church structures," said Francis DeBernardo, the executive director of New Ways Ministry, a national organization for LGBTQ Catholics that has been encouraging that community to participate in the synod.

"The Vatican has called for bishops to go out to the margins, to go out to the highways and byways and to hear the voices of everyone," DeBernardo told NCR. "So unless there's really a concerted effort on the part of the U.S. bishops to promote the synod, especially among groups that have been alienated by the church, it's not going to happen. Those voices are not going to be heard."

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Other than a notice for the opening Mass, there is nothing about the synod on the website for the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, which is led by Bishop Joseph Strickland, an archconservative who has criticized Francis' pastoral style. In a radio interview last year, Strickland said, "All this synodality is garbage as far as I'm concerned."

A listed contact person for the Tyler Diocese did not return multiple messages from NCR seeking comment.

"My sense is many [bishops and priests] are just slow-walking this papacy so that they don't have to do the kind of get-out-in-the-streets pastoral ministry that he calls them to," said Reyanna Rice, a longtime Catholic activist in western Montana.

Rice, who lives in the Helena Diocese, is also planning a series of online listening sessions that she intends to host after the holiday season. Rice told NCR that "not much" has been forthcoming from her diocese other than a link to the bishop's homily that officially began the local synodal journey in mid-October.

Bishop Austin Vetter gives a homily during the synod inaugural Mass in the Diocese of Helena, Montana, on Oct. 18. (YouTube/Diocese of Helena)

"We're seizing an opportunity here to share our voices," said Rice, a self-described "avid fan" of Francis.

As of mid-December, only about half of the 176 dioceses in the United States had appointed a "local synod coordinator," said Richard Coll, the executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development.

"We're hopeful that once the crush of the Christmas season passes, that we may see another slew of additional [synod coordinator] registrations at the diocesan level," said Coll, the bishops' conference's liaison with the diocesan synod coordinators.

Coll told NCR that he sees issues such as the need for more detailed guidance from Rome and the Vatican's late delivery of preparatory documents as bigger factors for the uneven diocesan responses than any ideological reasons.

"I know there are political divisions within the church, just as there are within society, but I don't see the synodal process as being an ideological process," Coll said.

He noted that the Vatican's synod office did not release its two main documents — the preparatory document and the *vademecum*, or handbook — until Sept. 7. Dioceses obtained those documents barely more than a month before the local phase kicked off on Oct. 15.



Richard Coll of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops participates in a smudge ceremony as Rita Means, tribal council representative with the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, holds a smoking bowl at the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina in Rome Oct. 18, 2019, during a side event to that year's Synod of Bishops for the Amazon. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"It's probably a shorter time frame than we in the U.S. would traditionally work with," Coll said.

The synod also presents serious logistical challenges for poorer, rural dioceses where the Catholic populations are small and parishes are spread out over large territories. Coll said the COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the picture for

many dioceses and parishes that are still dealing with public health protocols and the related losses in weekend collections, staff layoffs and curtailed ministries.

"While there's a desire among many dioceses to be responsive to the synod experience, coming out of the pandemic, it's more of a challenge given all the other issues that they're trying to address at the same time," Coll said.

However, several dioceses had already started planning weeks if not months before the Vatican documents were released. The Vatican announced in March 2020 that the next synod of bishops would focus on synodality.

"If you work in the church, you should be aware that this is happening. It's not like being in the military where if you don't receive the marching orders, you cannot move," said Massimo Faggioli, a moral theologian and church historian at Villanova University.

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"There is, I believe, a certain silence in the conversation in the Catholic Church in the United States that I'm not sure can be attributed to the delay in documents," said Faggioli, who told NCR that the apparent lukewarm reception to the synod in some dioceses aligns with "a crisis in the reception of the Second Vatican Council" in the U.S. Catholic Church.

"It is very hard to make some people interested in the idea that the church could work differently than it did in the 1940s and '50s," Faggioli said.

In recent years, a handful of dioceses in the United States have convened their own synods. Some — like the dioceses in San Diego and Bridgeport, Connecticut — are still conducting additional listening sessions for the synod on synodality. Others — like Springfield, Illinois, and Detroit — plan to incorporate feedback from their earlier gatherings into the 10-page reports that they are required to submit to the bishops' conference by August 2022.

Holly Fournier, a spokeswoman for the Detroit Archdiocese, which held its synod in 2016, told NCR that Archbishop Allen Vigneron has decided that the archdiocese's report next year will detail "the many fruits of our ongoing synodal process."

"We'll also look at what the future holds for the archdiocese as we continue to strengthen our synodal identity, particularly through our transition to Families of Parishes," Fournier said, referring to a new organizational structure for parishes.

While the consultation process is still in its early phase, synodality and its related principles of listening, dialogue and collective discernment are already taking root in some parishes and dioceses.



Synod members greet one another Nov. 18, 2016, during the opening session of the Detroit Archdiocese's synod. (CNS/The Michigan Catholic/Mike Stechschulte)

St. Francis Xavier College Church, a Jesuit parish on St. Louis University's campus, in recent weeks has been organizing house meetings to hear parishioners' thoughts as it transitions from a traditional priest-led model to a more synodal parish with a parish life coordinator.

"The foundation of synodality is relationship, and without that relationship you might as well just fill out a survey," said Katie Jansen, the current parish administrator and

future parish life coordinator for St. Francis Xavier.

From her observations in parishioners' house meetings, Jansen told NCR that it usually takes three conversations for most people until synodality is no longer an academic exercise.

"Because it's a shift in the way we relate to one another, at first we get questions like, 'This sounds good but how are you going to do it?' " Jansen said. "By the third conversation, they understand that it's not so much about what we do but how we are together. That's when you know it's starting to sink in."

Beck, of Colorado Springs, said he is holding out hope that his diocese will "eventually get the ball rolling" on the synodal process.

"It would be nice of them. But if they're not, there are plenty of people who interact and engage with each other in these online communities who have something to say," said Beck, who noted that the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops allows groups like his to directly submit their insights to the Vatican.

"The synod is giving everybody that opportunity," Beck said. "I'm pretty grateful for that."

Editor's note: *The map below contains links to U.S. archdioceses and dioceses with consultation plans for the 2021-23 Synod of Bishops on synodality. If your diocesan synod plan is not on this map, please email the link to synod@ncronline.org to be included.*

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 24, 2021-Jan 6, 2022** print issue under the headline: Synod phase for local listening gets an uneven start in US dioceses.