News
Vatican
Pope Francis leads a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from around the w

Pope Francis leads a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from around the world at the Vatican Oct. 9, 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



Dennis Sadowski

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 30, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Building on the guiding principles of his papacy, Pope Francis this year invited Catholics both in the mainstream of church life and on the margins to express their dreams, ideas and concerns in preparation for the Synod of Bishops in 2023.

The pope's invitation to discern a path forward for the church stems from his belief that the Holy Spirit inspires all members to be missionary disciples, sharing core Christian beliefs by going out to the world.

The pope formally opened the synodal process at the Vatican Oct. 9-10. It launched Oct. 16-17 in dioceses worldwide.

Under the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission," the pope has called the church to practice synodality, that is listening to — and hearing — one another in all facets of church life, coordinators of the effort at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops explained.

The October opening "is just the first step in a larger, longer-term process of really incorporating the fruits of Vatican II and becoming a synodal church," said Julia McStravog, a former USCCB employee who is a consultant to the bishops on the process.

"We're going to have consultation. It's also going to be a learning process about how to actually engage in a synodal way," McStravog said.

The launch began a two-year journey that will culminate in the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. The synod is expected to adopt a final document that will guide the continuing development of a synodal church going into the future.

The pope's call to synodality is rooted in his deep involvement as a cardinal in 2007 in drafting a document on church life for the Latin American bishops' council, known as CELAM, its acronym in Spanish, which met in Aparecida, Brazil. The document issued repeated calls for a "continental mission," a church that goes out in search of ways to proclaim the Gospel to all.

In the first phase that is underway, dioceses and parishes have begun convening discussions, or consultations, in which people from across the church have been invited to participate. The listening sessions will continue through June.

Each diocese is asked to submit a summary report to the USCCB or their appropriate episcopal conference office, which will then have until Aug. 15 to present a report to the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican.

The process presents opportunities to welcome the Holy Spirit to guide discussions said Richard Coll, executive director of the bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, who is coordinating the effort for the USCCB.

"The Synod of Bishops is saying don't focus on what the ultimate product is going to be. Focus on the process itself and how the Spirit will guide the church, represented

in part through subsidiarity in the work that you are doing at the diocesan level," Coll said.

The diocesan consultations also are an opportunity for creativity, McStravog added.

"This is a moment to be co-creators with the Spirit. ... It is a chance for reinvigorating an engaged community through creativity and the call to be open. There's a chance to reaffirm the good and reimagine some things that could be better," she explained.

Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, echoed the pope's invitation to creativity while addressing the bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore in November.

Advertisement

"No one is unimportant in this time of listening," he said, encouraging the bishops to remember that the first phase of the process must involve the participation of the whole church "listening together, praying together, discerning together" the voice of the Holy Spirit.

"Pope Francis has asked us to invite people, to listen to people, including those who do not show up in our pews," said Bishop Flores, who began a three-year term as chairman of the bishops' Committee on Doctrine at the close of the assembly.

He also described the synodal process as a "deliberate pathway and style of communion."

To facilitate the effort, the Synod of Bishops, under Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general, introduced documents to guide the work being done in dioceses. The USCCB followed up by developing a supplemental document as well.

The primary Vatican document is a "vademecum," or handbook, offering support for diocesan teams "to prepare and gather the people of God so that they can give voice to their experience in their local church."

The USCCB document further defines the Vatican materials. It includes a checklist of actions, proposed timeline for dioceses to follow, and a listing of background materials to help walk parishes and dioceses through the initial process and ensure

wide participation.

An addendum, developed by the U.S. bishops' Committee on Divine Worship, offers ideas for liturgical celebrations to mark the opening and closing of the synodal process in dioceses and suggestions for Scripture readings and musical themes.

As the first phase began, several U.S. prelates said the effort is an opportunity to better engage people in the life of the church.

In San Diego, Bishop Robert W. McElroy said he expects the diocese to become more synodal in its operation as the first phase unfolds, long before the final conclusions are reached by the Synod of Bishops and Pope Francis in October 2023.

"I hope this is an opportunity not only for us to assess the level of synodality, which is already present in the life of our local church, but to advance it dramatically," he said.

Meanwhile, Bishop Frank J. Caggiano of Bridgeport, Connecticut, convened a team of 260 delegates who have been charged with going out and prayerfully meeting with people. From parish town hall gatherings to one-on-one conversations, the delegates will be hearing from people about concerns, hurts and hopes, he said.

"In the end, we're not trying to solve a problem. What we're trying to do is discern the solution that is already there. The Holy Spirit already knows what the solution is," he said.

For several other dioceses, the process will build upon local synods that are addressing local priorities including young adults, family life and ministry to Latino members.

When the Vatican receives the synthesized reports of diocesan meetings from bishops' conferences around the world, the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops will draft by fall 2022 the "instrumentum laboris," or working document, to guide continental or regional ecclesial assemblies that will take place by March 2023.

Those assemblies will produce another set of documents that will help in the drafting of a second working document for the October 2023 Synod of Bishops.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.