News
Spirituality
Students at DeSales University in Center Valley, Pa., share in what they are reading in the Bib

Students at DeSales University in Center Valley, Pa., share in what they are reading in the Bible May 13, 2021, in Connelly Chapel on the Catholic college's campus. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)



Carol Zimmermann

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

March 1, 2022
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

WASHINGTON — Although next year's world Synod of Bishops on synodality may seem like it would be something far removed from U.S. Catholic college students, many are hoping that's not the case.

"Synodality is the chance to be creative in imagining the future of the church. Use this chance. ... Catholic colleges and universities can make a contribution," a theologian told a group of Catholic college leaders in February.

Massimo Faggioli, professor of historical theology at Villanova University, outside of Philadelphia, urged Catholic leaders during the annual gathering of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in Washington, to be invested in the synod not only because Catholic colleges are a big part of the church but also because there is currently a "crisis of trust in institutions" and Catholic colleges are not immune to it.

Vincentian Father Guillermo Campuzano, vice president for mission and ministry at DePaul University in Chicago, agreed, saying the challenge in this whole process will be to "capture the singular voice of the church," which will need significant input in order to be an accurate portrayal.

"I hope we agree on two or three simple things," he said, to some laughter, during a morning workshop Feb. 7, where he emphasized that above all, the synod should "fully embrace the meaning of diversity in the Catholic Church."

"This is not a time to write another document, but (is) a process of listening," he said, emphasizing that listening to what people in the church are saying should lead to changes, not to simply going back to the way things were.

Currently, parishes, colleges and dioceses are involved in listening sessions in preparation for the synod. Their comments will be part of reports sent to local bishops and then submitted to the Vatican.

Barbara McCrabb, assistant director for higher education with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Catholic Education, similarly encouraged Catholic college and university leaders to get on board with these pre-synod listening sessions if they hadn't already done so.

She described them as chances to listen to one another and "foster understanding for a more welcome and just community of faith."

Advertisement

McCrabb said colleges are advised to hold one or more listening sessions and then gather the highlights of that for a report. She said the whole process is counter-cultural because it requires trust from participants and the spiritual and emotional return will not be immediate.

Father Campuzano said the 2023 synod has the potential to be pretty dramatic. He said if the church listens to the voices of those who speak out in this process and to "what the spirit is saying," it could essentially cause an "ecclesial rupture."

Right now Craig Ford Jr., assistant professor of theology and religious studies at St. Norbert College in DePere, Wisconsin, is looking for something to happen on a smaller scale just through the conversations that are part of this process and the relationships that could come from it.

He told Catholic News Service Feb. 18 that part of the work involved now is to "find out what students and staff think about the future of the church," which he said provides an opportunity to focus on specific steps the church is doing to get where it wants to be.

He views the synodal process as something exciting and said part of the enthusiasm for it was likely to come across the in the pope's conversation with young people Feb. 24 organized by Loyola University Chicago. The webinar included 16 university students from the Americas on a videoconference with Pope Francis that focused on migration, poverty, the environment and collaboration.

Overall the Loyola initiative involved 130 students from 58 universities in 21 countries who met in work groups.

Michael Murphy, director of the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University, encouraged Catholic leaders at the ACCU gathering to watch the webinar. He said the idea of this online discussion with the pope and students came up in talks about preparing college students for the upcoming Synod of Bishops on synodality.

Some of his colleagues jokingly said they should see if Pope Francis would be available and then one of them presented the pope with the idea and he agreed to it.

It was "not a whim on his part," Murphy told CNS in January, noting that the gathering fits the pope's vision and priorities, especially since so many universities have been asking him: "What is our role and how can we support" the synodal process.

During the two-hour discussion, the pope listened a lot and took notes, following his own advice that the synod process is mainly about listening.

McCrabb emphasized this during the ACCU's Feb. 4-7 gathering of Catholic college leaders, stressing that even the stance in listening is key.

"You're invited to listen to one another and discern a way forward," she said.