Vatican



Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, is pictured at the Vatican in a 2019 file photo. (CNS/IPA/Sipa USA via Reuters)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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The head of the Vatican's synod office says that when it comes to hot-button issues such as the reception of Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics and the blessing of same-sex couples, discussion cannot be limited to doctrinal concerns, but must also include pastoral considerations.

"These issues are not to be understood simply in terms of doctrine, but in terms of God's ongoing encounter with human beings," said Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops.

"What has the church to fear if these two groups within the faithful are given the opportunity to express their intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience?" he asked. "Might this be an opportunity for the church to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking through them also?"

Grech's remarks came during a virtual address on Sept. 22 to the annual summit of Leadership Roundtable, an organization that promotes a model of co-responsibility between ordained and lay people as a best practice for church governance.

In October 2021, Pope Francis launched a newly revamped global synod process, beginning with an unprecedented listening phase, which over the course of two years is meant to provide opportunities for Catholics and all people of goodwill to more fully participate in church life.

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"The whole people of God must be involved in the synod," Grech told the summit, which was held in Washington D.C.

The Vatican body named the "Synod of Bishops" has begun to shift its branding to "the Synod," meant to signal that both the office and the process is open to everyone.

"The Synod has been transformed into a listening process," he continued. "The Synod does not exist separately from the rest of the faithful."

As the cardinal offered his virtual address, a group of more than 24 theologians and pastoral leaders from six continents were meeting in Frascati, Italy, to take the more than 100 national synod reports and to synthesize them for the next stage of the global synod, which takes place at the continental level over the next year, before an October 2023 gathering in Rome.

Grech noted that he had twice read the report from the United States that was released on Sept. 19, which included the involvement of some 700,000 individuals. He remarked that the involvement was "unexpectedly high," even though it represents just over 1% of the country's 66.8 million Catholics.

The cardinal, who has spent much of the last year addressing synodal gatherings around the globe, said that listening is the "founding act of the synod" and a "true pastoral conversion of the church."

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>
> —Cardinal Mario Grech
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He said that he often reminds bishops that while they are responsible, that "there is no flock without a shepherd" and "there is no shepherd without a flock."

"Bishops have a duty to listen to their people," he continued, adding that all the baptized are "empowered by the sacraments of baptism and confirmation."

"Let us trust in our people," he said. "Let us trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with our people. And this Spirit is not merely a property of the ecclesial hierarchy."

While the cardinal acknowledged that there are some bishops and others who have "serious concerns" about where the synodal process will lead the church, he said that he hopes it will reveal that there is "legitimate" diversity in church life, but that should not lead to rupture among believers.

"The ties which draw the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them," he said. "Let them take unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is

doubtful and charity in everything."

Whether it be LGBTQ Catholics or those who favor the Latin Mass, Grech said that "everybody should be listened to" and "nobody is excluded."

"I hope the synodal process," he concluded, "will provide an experience that will inaugurate a much-needed spiritual, systematic and missionary renovation for the whole church."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 14-27, 2022** print issue under the headline: Cardinal Grech: 'Let us trust in our people'.