Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Francis leads a meeting with the presidents and coordinators of the regional assemblies of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Nov. 28. Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, attended the meeting. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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December 5, 2022
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The universal church is now shifting to the "continental phase" of the synodal process to which the Holy Father has called us, as ecclesial gatherings on every continent will reflect on the working document "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," drafted in Frascati, Italy, and released on Oct. 27. The reactions to the report indicate that the leaders of the synodal process need to start thinking about how to manage expectations.

The synodal process invites people to speak freely. In fact, no synodal process can really work without candor. Pope Francis recognized this back in 2014 when he opened the first synod of his pontificate, which focused on the family. He told the gathered synod fathers to "speak with *parrhesia* and listen with humility," using a Greek word that means "boldly" and "without fear."

Synods in the past only involved bishops and a few theological advisers, so when the current synodal process began by consulting the people of God, the lay faithful confronted a tabula rasa. The unknown was conceived as a blank slate, and any of us can project our desires and hopes onto such a slate. Hence the need to manage expectations, at least here in the United States.

I have commented before on the way certain American habits of mind are ill-suited for a synodal process. "The synod requires us Americans to set aside our activist, goal-oriented, project-centered sensibilities," I suggested. Alas, shedding habits that are deeply grounded in the culture is not so easy. Even our language, with its necessary, linear word order forms a cast of mind that presents a challenge, as Boston College professor Cathleen Kaveny pointed out in her magnificent tribute to Latin scholar Fr. Reginald Foster when he died in 2020.

The media isn't going to do the synodal process any favors either. Look at the headline to the article describing the Frascati text: "New Vatican synod document mentions women's ordination, LGBTQ relationships." That headline is not wrong. The 45-page document does mention those issues. But headline writing and synodal processing are vastly different mental activities. Fundamentally, the synodal process is not about this issue or that issue. It is about a process by which the church understands itself and its challenges, and the document is open-ended even about how the process will work.

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NCR's new publisher, Joe Ferullo, explained his excitement about the synodal process and, surveying the reports that have come in from various synodal gatherings, observed, "Participants demanded greater roles for women, a warmer welcome for LGBTQ+ Catholics and greater attention to the plight of the poor. Over and over, they criticized how leadership has polarized and politicized the church." Again, that is true, but it focuses on the issues more than the process, all of which are outstanding.

I understand the excitement for lay Catholics who finally felt listened to. Kate McElwee of the Women's Ordination Conference spoke for many when she praised the synodal working document because it "presents an embodied synodality that offers a 'path of recognition' for those who have felt invisible or dismissed by their church. Not to overstate the matter, but recognition — being seen and heard — is a small revolution."

The worry is that if too many people get too excited about the prospect of a particular issue being advanced by the process, and the process does not yield such "progress," they will not only be disappointed, they will be disillusioned. You saw some of this on Twitter after America magazine published its interview with Pope Francis. There, for example, when asked about women's ordination, his response was not the reply for which advocates of women's ordination were hoping.

The Vatican has to do a much better job of explaining to the universal church how the synodal process intersects with the demands of doctrinal consistency, how we are all listening to each other not as a sociological exercise, but as a means of better hearing the Holy Spirit. Before the leaders of the synodal process find ways to discern when opinions reflect the bidding of the Spirit and when they reflect poor catechesis, a possibility Pope Francis raised in the America interview, they need to better prepare people for both possibilities, and the outcomes that might follow. We always need to remind ourselves that our conclusions must cohere with the teaching of the apostles if we want to call it Christian, even while we recognize that coherence is a broader category than some of our conservative friends allow.

We in the United States also have to be both forceful in asserting what we think and feel about issues facing the church, including the neuralgic ones, but we also need to be aware that Catholics in other parts of the world may not have the same set of cultural touchpoints as we do. The worldwide Anglican Communion was not fractured over the issue of women's ordination, but it was and remains deeply divided on the issue of homosexuality. We do not know what will prove fractious for our synodal process, but we need to value the unity of the church as much as any particular issue. The adjective "one" is in the creed for a reason.

The Catholic right also has to join the process. The National Catholic Register continues to publish hit jobs on the synodal process from Rome correspondent Edward Pentin, and EWTN’s lead news anchor Raymond Arroyo regularly makes fun of the entire exercise, interviewing a host of papal and synodal critics on the topic such as Cardinal Gerhard Müller and Bishop Athanasius Schneider, auxiliary bishop of Astana, Kazakhstan. This is a grave disservice to conservative Catholics whose voices need to be heard in this synodal process too. There are conservatives who live at the margins too.

This year, I have written several times about the synodal process, about the need to set aside our activist, goal-oriented temperament; leave ideological blinders at the door; why Catholic social teaching can't (yet!) unite the faithful; and that the synodal process needs to continually look outwards if it is to help renew the church. I remain excited about how the Spirit is calling all of us to lean into the future. Self-criticism is not something that comes easily to any of us in an ideological age, but it is vital if this synodal process is to flourish.

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