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An older white man in a clergy collar and black suit and pectoral cross speaks into a microphc

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, relator general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks at a news conference to present an update on the synod process, at the Vatican in this Aug. 26, 2022, file photo. Looking on is Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the synod. The upcoming assembly of the Synod of Bishops will be focused on communion, participation and mission. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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The principal task of the continental assemblies and the assemblies of the Synod of Bishops in 2023 and 2024 is to learn and strengthen a process of listening as a church to the Holy Spirit and not to address all the issues being debated in the church, top officers of the synod said.

The theme that Pope Francis has chosen for the general assembly "is clear: 'For a synodal church: communion, participation, mission.' This is therefore the sole theme that we are called to explore in each of the stages within the process," their letter to bishops said.

"Those who claim to impose any one theme on the synod forget the logic that governs the synod process: we are called to chart a 'common course' beginning with the contribution of all," said the letter, published Jan. 29, and signed by Cardinals Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, and Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, relator general of the synod.

Addressed to the world's bishops, the letter focused on the current "continental" stage of the synodal process, and the role of the bishop in the synodal process.

The bishops, "in your particular churches, are the principle and foundation of unity of the holy people of God," they said, and "there is no exercise of ecclesial synodality without exercise of episcopal collegiality."

The 2018 apostolic constitution on the Synod of Bishops ("Episcopalis Communio") "transformed the synod from an event into a process, articulated in stages," the letter said. That means that since its opening in 2021, the synod has been "addressing and developing the given theme," first in the stage of listening to all Catholics, then in the discernment of the bishops' conferences or synod of the Eastern Catholic church and now in the continental assemblies.

However, the cardinals wrote, "far from weakening an episcopal institution," in highlighting the process-oriented nature of the synod, the 2018 document "makes the role of pastors and their participation in the various stages even more crucial."

The college of bishops is part of the synodal process when each bishop "initiates, guides and concludes the consultation of the people of God entrusted to him" and when the bishops together exercise discernment in the successive stages, they said.

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"The more we grow in a synodal style of church, the more all of us as members of the people of God -- faithful and pastors -- will learn to feel 'cum Ecclesia,' (with the church) in fidelity to the word of God and tradition," it said.

Grech and Hollerich said they were writing because there are "some who presume to already know what the conclusions of the synodal assembly will be" and others who "would like to impose an agenda on the synod with the intention of steering the discussion and determining its outcome."

"The expectations for Synod 2021-2024 are many and varied," they said, "but it is not the task of the assembly to address all the issues being debated in the church."

"It is precisely because of the intrinsic relationship between the different phases that other themes cannot be surreptitiously introduced, thereby exploiting the assembly and disregarding the consultation of the people of God," the letter said.

The working document for the continental stage, titled "Enlarge the space of your tent," the cardinals said, "truly manifests that the only rule we have given ourselves is to constantly listen to the spirit," so that the faithful, the college of bishops and the pope are all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, it said, the themes that document proposes "do not constitute the agenda of the next assembly of the Synod of Bishops, but faithfully return what emerges from the syntheses" sent in by bishops' conferences and Eastern Catholic synods, "providing a glimpse of the face of a church that is learning to listen to the Spirit through listening to one another."

The continental assemblies, which began in January and were to conclude by March, are asked to "identify the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local churches around the world and discussed during the first session of the synodal assembly in October 2023," the letter said.

The ordinary general assembly will be held in two sessions, spaced one year apart: the first October 4-29, 2023, and the second in October 2024.