Opinion
NCR Voices
Cardinal Mario Grech, center, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks at a news co

Cardinal Mario Grech, center, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks at a news conference at the Vatican Oct. 27, 2022, to present the document for the continental phase of the Synod on Synodality. Also pictured are Italian Jesuit Father Giacomo Costa, adviser to the secretary-general of the synod, and Anna Rowlands, professor of Catholic social thought and practice at Durham University in the United Kingdom. (CNS/Junno Arocho Esteves)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry has rolled out a series of online talks that will help theologians and informed lay Catholics better grasp what this synodal process is all about. The first set of video lectures focus on the history, theology and practice of synodality. And they are wonderful.

The series, sponsored by CELAM, the bishops' conference for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious or CLAR, among other groups, opens with an introduction from Luxembourg's Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, who serves as the relator general for the synod. He begins by

noting that we live at a time when "normal authorities are not accepted, especially authorities from above." And he asks, "How can decision-making, decision-taking happen in such a world that rejects authorities from above?"

"Synodality is the answer to that question," he asserts. What is more, "synodality is a treasure of the church of old. Synodality brings the Holy Spirit again as an actor in the church."

He mentions the Christocentrism that characterized Vatican II and invites us to consider now the role of the third person of the Trinity. I wish he had added something about the relationship of pneumatology and Christology, for the Holy Spirit is always the Spirit of Christ.

The cardinal adds that synodality is important not just for decision-making, but also "for the aspect of mission of the church. A synodal church is always a church in mission." He invited those watching to create not simply a theology of synodality, but "theologies of synodality," in the plural.

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Hollerich does not come across as "a man who has rejected his solemn obligation as a bishop and a cardinal, let alone as a baptized follower of Jesus Christ in the Catholic Church, to 'hold fast to the deposit of faith in its entirety,' " as Fr. Gerald Murray of The Catholic Thing and EWTN described him.

Hollerich's introduction is astute and provocative, and it is certainly a challenge to those who think that doctrine does not develop and that they have mastered the riddles of salvation. I suspect most people find a lot of common sense in what he says.

The next pre-recorded lecture comes from Boston College's Rafael Luciani, who was part of the group that met at Frascati, Italy, last year and drafted the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the synodal process, "Enlarge the Space of

Your Tent." Here he discussed "Form and Reform in a Synodal Church."

Luciani begins by discussing the sensus fidei, the sense of the faithful, noting that it was invoked in the dogmatic definitions of the great Marian dogmas of recent times, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. "But today this is deepened in light of synodality and it is conceived as a spiritual dynamic that activates the co-responsibility of all the ecclesial subjects, the Christifidelis, all the faithful," he added.

This emphasis on the spiritual dynamic is often missing from discussions of synodality, and it warrants continued focus because it puts the lie to the idea that this is simply "a meeting about meetings," a managerial exercise, the mindset of modern corporations invading ecclesiology.

Later, Luciani quotes Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, on the same theme of the spirituality involved in this process: "The strength of the synodal process lies in the reciprocity between consultation and discerning, and this will lead to future developments of synodality."

Put differently, we listen to the Holy Spirit by prayerfully listening to each other, as well as to the Word of God and the teachings of the church.

The process cannot be rote or stale. "Synodality not only proposes a method," Luciani said, "It enables the exchange, and the consultation and the processes of participation that allows [the church] to integrate the diversity and the originality of the gifts of all the faithful."

This is a sea change from the days of "pray, pay and obey," to be sure. He quotes Lumen gentium 32: "The pastors and the other members of the faithful are bound to one another by mutual necessity."

Synodality is designed to enrich that binding to one another for which the council fathers called. This synodal process is not about introducing a libertine "anything goes" theology or praxis. It is about renewing and enlivening the bonds that exist by reason of our shared baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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Italian theologian Serena Noceti's video lecture also focuses on "Form and Reform in a Synodal Church." Her presentation is translated simultaneously, so the original Italian bleeds through in the background. You need to listen carefully.

Noceti starts by focusing on synodality's relationship to mission, noting the emphasis on the missionary aspect of the church in Pope Francis' programmatic apostolic exhortation, Evangelii Gaudium, which he repeated in his first full encyclical, Laudato Si'. "Pope Francis also proposes a reform in a synodal perspective, that is, a church that wants to rethink its internal relations, its structures, its way of being and acting according to that journey together, to make a synod according to a community discernment and a synergy in pastoral life," Noceti observes.

Situating the synodal reform in the context of the ecclesiology of Vatican II, Noceti asks: "When is a reform effective? What should we live and achieve? [How] is this ideal vision that animates us realized concretely in our daily lives? What are the conditions, the preconditions for an effective reform?”

These are the kinds of questions that demonstrate the value of a synodal process. It is not uncommon in the life of the church that a bishop institutes a reform but has no inkling whether or not it is "realized concretely" in the lives of the people of God. You need to ask them.

This online course — it is called a MOOC, or massive open online course — also features presentations by Argentine theologian Fr. Carlos Galli, one of the key theologians for the theology of the people that has so shaped Pope Francis; Massimo Faggioli, the foremost ecclesiologist in the U.S.; and theologian Kristin Colberg from St. John's in Collegeville. And a host of heavy hitters. The free course, intended to be viewed over three weeks, id available through March 26.

Kudos to Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry for pulling off this massive undertaking. It is a real service to the church and a valuable resource to anyone trying to better understand this synodal journey.