News



Participants take part in a continental assembly of the European Catholic Church Feb. 6 in Prague, Czech Republic. The assembly was held as part of Pope Francis' ongoing process to reinvigorate the Synod of Bishops.
(Prague.synod2023.org/Anicka Guthrie)



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"Something special happened here," Archbishop Eamon Martin, president of the Irish bishops' conference, said at the close of a continental assembly of the European Catholic Church held this month as part of Pope Francis' ongoing process to reinvigorate the Synod of Bishops.

As in-person participants, among them the representatives of 39 bishops' conferences across Europe, filed out of the assembly venue in the Czech Republic capital of Prague, the leader of the Irish church said in a video statement that there had been "huge diversity, a huge range of opinions" and "a strong acceptance that the body of Christ is wounded and in need of healing in so many ways."



Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh, Northern Ireland, is pictured Oct. 16, 2018, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The Prague assembly is one of seven continental assemblies taking place in February and March in preparation for the first of two back-to-back gatherings of the Catholic Synod of Bishops, to be held in Rome in October 2023 and October 2024.

The Prague gathering was divided into two parts. The first stage, from Feb. 6-9, saw some 600 members of the laity, priests and bishops come together in person and

online. One hundred and fifty-six of the 200 in-person participants were delegates of the various European bishops' conferences. 390 participants took part online; 10 delegates for each of the 39 European conferences.

In his introduction to the assembly, made available online, Czech theologian Fr. Tomas Halik recalled how Pope Benedict XVI, after a visit to the Czech Republic in 2009, first expressed the idea that the church should, like the Temple of Jerusalem, form a "courtyard of the Gentiles."



Czech theologian Fr. Tomas Halik is pictured in a 2015 photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"While sects accept only those who are fully observant and committed, the church must keep a space open for spiritual seekers, for those who, while not fully

identifying with its teachings and practices, nevertheless feel some closeness to Christianity," Halik said.

He told Europe's bishops, priests and lay leaders not to fear that "some forms of the church are dying" and that the turn of Christianity towards synodality, or the transformation of the church into a dynamic community of pilgrims, may have an impact on the destiny of the whole human family.

Discussions in Prague were structured around listening, dialogue and discernment against the backdrop of the overarching theme of the three-year synod process: "communion, participation and mission."

Clergy sexual abuse was one of the recurring themes raised by delegates, as well as the role of women in the church and the marginalization of LGBTQI people. According to a statement from the 14-member Irish delegation, "The deep and raw wounds of the abuse crisis were kept at the heart of the discernment."

Alongside hot button issues delegates also explored how the overarching document for the synod's continental stage, released by the Vatican in October with the theme "Enlarge the space of your tent," might foster greater inclusivity from the church — including among migrants and refugees; those with disabilities; young people; single parents, and even supporters of the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass.

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Over the course of the week, representatives of all the national churches across Europe provided insights into their national synod processes, which took account of the "concrete, and very diverse, realities that shape the experience of being church and following Christ in Europe today," said the Irish delegates.

While delegates reportedly welcomed the opportunity to discuss issues previously considered off limits within the church, organizers of the assembly clearly sought to balance this openness with managing expectations of far-reaching change.

Divisions were evident between reform minded Catholics, who, looking to the German Synodal Way, saw the gathering in Prague as a litmus test for synodality and the church's capacity for reform, and more conservative groups anxious to put a check on what they think could turn into a runaway horse.

Cardinal Mario Grech, the secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, told the Prague assembly that the Oct. 4-29, 2023 gathering in Rome would neither discard Catholic teachings nor reject those who question those teachings. He said that journeying with those competing tensions through the methodology of "spiritual conversations" allowed participants to name their concerns, listen to the concerns of others, and discern together how the church is called to respond in a more pastorally sensitive way.

The Irish delegation praised that methodology, saying it "enables the church to model unity in diversity, to name and explore our tensions, identifying creative tensions which, illuminated by the light of faith, can enhance and enrich the mission of the church."



Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks during a news conference at the Vatican Oct. 27, 2022, to present the document for the continental phase of the synod on synodality. (CNS/Junno Arocho Esteves)

However, a Polish delegate, Aleksander Bańka, reportedly told the assembly on Feb. 7 that the Rome synod should be careful not to "succumb to the temptation to build some other church, but to seek answers to the question of how to realize the spirituality of synodality within the one church of Christ, with its hierarchical structure."

Speaking in a podcast interview following the presentation of the delegation from England and Wales on Feb. 6, Fr. Jan Nowotnik, director of mission for that bishops' conference, said the main task in Prague was to look at the synodal reports from the various European countries.

"Virtually every country talks about the role of women, the LGBTQ+ people and then also the role of formation in mission," said Nowotnik. "I would say those have resonated the greatest, really, and alongside that, actually, to be fair, the role of young people."

He acknowledged there wasn't "total agreement" on some of those topics. "I know that some painful words have been said and there have been anxieties — you can sort of feel that tension sometimes in the room," said the priest.

To those observing proceedings from outside, that tension was perceived as "pushback," Luca Badini Confalonieri of the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research in the U.K. told NCR.

"The most common refrain has been to appeal to spiritual conversion and focus on Jesus as a way of deflecting requests for structural reform," said Confalonieri. He said he was "particularly stricken" by a talk in Prague from the Riga, Latvia Archbishop Zbignevs Stankevics.

Confalonieri said Stankevics highlighted the Latvian bishops' efforts against legalizing same-sex unions in their country. "While his was a minority view, it was a stark reminder of that wild variety of opinions among Catholics in Europe alone," said Confalonieri.



This is the official logo for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Catholic delegates have praised the conciliatory atmosphere of debates on the church's future direction, at a continental assembly in Prague, preparing Europe's recommendations for next October's Rome Synod on Synodality. (OSV News illustration/Courtesy of the Synod of Bishops)

Ursula Halligan, a respected Irish journalist who was part of the Irish delegation told NCR: "Old habits die hard."

Halligan, who is also a joint coordinator of the lay reform group We Are Church Ireland, said "the hierarchical church remains a deeply unfriendly place for women and LGBTQI people."

"Many of the presentations didn't prioritize the role of women and eight delegations had no women at all on their in-person teams," she said.

She also highlighted how some of the presentations caused pain to LGBTQI delegates, including to Halligan herself. "I felt dehumanized by them," Halligan said, although she acknowledged that other presentations were more supportive.

On Feb. 9 a text formulated by an editorial drafting team of six writers of various nationalities summarizing and synthesizing the contributions of the previous three days was read out to delegates by Nowotnik, one of the four-person England and Wales delegation. However, there was no vote on the issues in the text and no written text was distributed.

Speaking about the decision not to hold a vote, Christian Weisner, spokesperson for the international lay reform group We Are Church, told NCR: "The difference between traditionalists and reformers [mainly between Eastern and Western Europe] was very clear."

Weisner said he thought gathering organizers "wanted to avoid concrete numbers pro and against" on specific issues.

The second part of the Prague assembly, from Feb. 10-11, saw the presidents of the European bishops' conferences meet behind closed doors to review the final document and produce a commentary on the text. These two documents will be sent to Rome for use in October.

In a statement issued after the conclusion of the assembly, the Council of European Bishops' Conferences, or CCEE, pledged to "work tirelessly to enlarge the space of our tents" so that ecclesial communities become "places where everyone feels welcome."

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