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Pope Francis is projected on a large screen in front of a hall of people

Pope Francis speaks at a Vatican conference, "Pastors and lay faithful called to walk together," Feb. 18, 2023, in the Vatican Synod Hall. The meeting was sponsored by the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Laypeople are not "guests" in the Catholic Church and priests are not the "bosses," Pope Francis said; rather all the baptized belong and share responsibility for its life and mission.

To fulfill its mission, the church must "overcome autonomous ways of acting or parallel tracks that never meet: clergy separated from laity," or the "Roman Curia separated from particular churches" or movements separated from parishes, he said.

"The path God is indicating for the church is precisely that of living more intensely and concretely the path of communion and walking together," Francis said Feb. 18 as he closed a three-day conference sponsored by the Dicastery for Laity, the Family

and Life.

The meeting brought together more than 200 participants -- laypeople, priests and bishops -- from 74 countries to talk about the theological basis of co-responsibility in the church and practical steps to overcome the challenges to making it a reality.

Creating silos or divisions in the church is "the most serious temptation" Catholics face today, Francis told the group. "There is still a long way to go for the church to live as a body, as a true people, united by the one faith in Christ the savior, animated by the same sanctifying Spirit and oriented to the same mission of proclaiming the merciful love of God the Father."

The aim of the conference and of the whole process of the Synod of Bishops on synodality, he said, is to remind all the baptized that they are called to be missionary disciples and that the only way to be effective is to be united and to recognize and share the gifts and talents of all.

Co-responsibility, he said, "is not learned theoretically; it is understood by living it."

When clergy and laity are focused on sharing the Gospel and helping the poor, they naturally draw closer to another and the "complementarity" of their different gifts become obvious, he said.

From the beginning of his pontificate 10 years ago, the pope told the conference participants, "I said that I dream of a missionary church."

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But too often, he said, the church is a "prison that does not let the Lord out, that keeps him as its own when the Lord came for mission and wants us to be missionaries."

Mission is the motive for the focus on the co-responsibility of the laity in the church, he said.

"The need to value the laity does not come from some theological novelty, or even from the functional needs left by the diminishing number of priests," he said, and it is not about making amends "to those who have been sidelined in the past."

"Rather, it is based on a correct vision of the church: the church as the people of God, of which the laity are a full part along with ordained ministers," he said. "Thus, ordained ministers are not the masters, they are the servants; the shepherds, not the bosses."

Francis said that starting in the seminary, those who hope to become priests must have "a daily and normal" experience of working with laypeople so that once they are ordained, communion is a natural expression of belonging to the church and not some exceptional or occasional project.

"It is time for pastors and laity to walk together, in every area of the church's life, in every part of the world," the pope said. "Laypeople, and especially women, need to be more valued in their human and spiritual skills and gifts for the life of parishes and dioceses."

In addition to "preaching" through the way they live their faith in the midst of the world, he said, they can and should collaborate with priests to strengthen parish life, in everything from helping with religious education to preparing engaged couples for marriage.

"They should always be consulted when preparing new pastoral initiatives at every level -- local, national and universal," the pope said. "They must be present in the offices of the dioceses. They can help in the spiritual accompaniment of other lay people and also make their contribution in the formation of seminarians and religious."

"I would like all of us to have in our hearts and minds this beautiful vision of the church: a church committed to mission and where we unify our forces and walk together to evangelize; a church where what binds us is our being baptized Christians, our belonging to Jesus," he said.