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Pope Francis meets with members of the preparatory commission for the general assembly o

Pope Francis meets with members of the preparatory commission for the general assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican March 16, 2023. Pictured to the left of the pope are: Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod; Jesuit Father Giacomo Costa, commission coordinator; Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas; Father Dario Vitali; and Msgr. Tomasz Trafny. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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At the end of their first meeting, three members of the preparatory commission for the assembly of the Synod of Bishops said they know some Catholics have very high expectations for the process while others have intense anxiety.

The seven-member commission met at the Vatican March 13-16 and had an audience with Pope Francis on the last day of their gathering.

Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, who has been coordinating the synod process for the bishops of the United States, was one of the members whose

appointment was announced by the Vatican March 15.

He told Catholic News Service the meeting with the pope was "very encouraging" because "he speaks very beautifully about the church and about how close to his heart is the issue of participation and building up communion."

Francis, he said, knows some people have exaggerated expectations for the synod while others have exaggerated anxiety because it is not completely clear where the process is leading, although the pope has spoken frequently about strengthening a "synodal church," one in which all the baptized members listen to one another and share responsibility for the church's life and mission.

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"You know," Flores said, "sometimes the human condition is something of a messy affair — that's my phrase, not his — and if God was waiting for us to get our act completely together to help us get to a better place, he'd be waiting a long time."

In the local, national and continental phases of the synod process, he said, people made a "great investment of spiritual and personal energy and of time," reading, praying and listening to one another.

One thing Flores said became very clear to him is that he and other people in his diocese need to be much more intentional and creative in "reaching out to people who, because of their own personal circumstances, don't feel free or confident" about joining in the life of their parishes or dioceses.

"The church sometimes can become a little too comfortable and only the comfortable feel comfortable there," he said.

Flores said the March meeting at the Vatican was basically an "orientation" meeting, but members have been told they will read and review all the reports from the continental stage of the synod reflection, assist in preparing the synod working document and help during the synod itself. The commission members were not told if they would be full voting members of the synod, but he said it is likely.

Pope Francis, at a meeting with members of the newly appointed preparatory commission for

Pope Francis, at a meeting with members of the newly appointed preparatory commission for the general assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican March 16, 2023, sits between Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod, and Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, general relator of the upcoming synod. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

That would mean that Mercedarian Sr. Shizue "Filo" Hirota from Tokyo, the only woman on the commission, would be a voting member of the synod. Francis had said in an interview earlier in March, that whoever participates in a synod as a member "has the right to vote. Whether male or female. Everyone, everyone. That word everyone for me is key."

The March meeting, Hirota told CNS, included a presentation on the "episcopal mission" and special responsibility of bishops in the synodal discernment process.

"But a bishop is, of course, part of the people of God. And a bishop has a responsibility to listen to his people," she said. "So, although numerically in this synod, most members will be bishops, there will be a good number of laypeople, women and non-bishops who will be like a memory or a reminder of the ecclesial journey that we have made."

The pope and synod organizers are looking for something "quite different," she said. "It really should be a prayerful, spiritual reflection" for all the assembly participants so the conversation is not an intellectual debate, but an experience of the Holy Spirit moving through the community gathered in the synod hall.

Pope Francis meets with members of the preparatory commission for the general assembly o

Pope Francis meets with members of the preparatory commission for the general assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican March 16, 2023, the day after the synod office announced their appointments. The seven members include: Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas; Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, president of the Australian bishops' conference; and Mercedarian Sister Shizue "Filo" Hirota from Tokyo. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

"Of course, there are certain controversial issues, and we have to look at them," Hirota said. "But the synod is not just about LGBTQ Catholics or women, it is about

the church."

Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, president of the Australian bishops' conference, also is a member of the commission and brings with him the experience of the four-year process of the Australian church's Plenary Council, which concluded in July 2022.

While the council's preparation included widespread listening, Australian Catholics held more listening sessions as part of the synod process.

The bishops, Costelloe told CNS, noticed "some consultation fatigue," but also were impressed with how the prayerful listening done before the Plenary Council became almost second nature during the synod listening sessions.

Having an atmosphere of "prayer and deep reflection" at the plenary, he said, "seemed to me to create a deep sense of respect for each other," and he hopes that will be repeated at the synod assembly in Rome in October.

Another result from the plenary the archbishop said he hoped the synod also will experience is an acceptance that some of the more controversial issues facing the church may not be resolved at the synod.

"There's a wisdom and maturity about saying, 'Well, at the moment it's clear that we're not able to resolve this issue. Are we therefore going to allow it to tear us apart? Or are we going to just accept that for the moment?'" the archbishop said. "We live in this rather messy and non-satisfactory situation, but we're not going to allow it to destroy us."

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