Opinion
NCR Voices



Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, poses for a photo in the offices of the General Secretariat of the Synod at the Vatican April 12. Flores, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, had shepherded the U.S. portion of the synod process and was at the Vatican for a weeklong meeting of the synod preparatory commission. (CNS/Robert Duncan)



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The U.S. and Canadian bishops' conferences released the "North American Final Document for the Continental Stage of the 2021-2024 Synod" last week. It is remarkable both for what it says and for what it does not say, especially the absence of any conclusions or statements of finality. The awareness that synodality is a change in the way we function as a church, not a process with a particular end point, runs through the text, and that is its single most important contribution.

The text opens by noting the "profound joy and enthusiasm" among those who participated in the synodal process. This has been a constant theme heard from every part of the globe and was a dominant theme in the national synthesis report issued last year: People really liked being asked about their faith lives, about the difference their faith makes in their lives and, perhaps most of all, what they like and don't like about the church.

As in that earlier synthesis, the theme of co-responsibility for the life of the church echoes through the report. Indeed, early in the text, the authors note that co-responsibility is a work in process when they observe:

> The North American Synod Team (see Appendix A), in a spirit of co-responsibility, relied upon the delegates to facilitate and report back the fruits of the listening circles at the plenary portion of the Continental Assemblies. This process achieved varying degrees of success, depending on the preparation of the participants.

> If you are one of the readers who scanned the document to see if your pet issue was mentioned, you are being part of the problem, not part of the solution.
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The polite reference to "varying degrees of success" makes one giggle, but it does something else. It attests to a certain candor in this process, which is itself refreshing.

That candor is linked, in the next paragraph, to the recognition that participants not only felt listened to, but that the process of mutual listening had transformed them. The report quotes a comment from one of the preparatory groups:

> The methodology that has emerged from the synodal process – particularly the spiritual conversations – is so important. We have learned that we can learn from listening. We hope this will continue! This is an empowering way to reach out and to attend to places of hurt.

The document is happily rooted in the theology of the Second Vatican Council:

> Expressed over and over in the Continental Assembly of North America was the need to grow into a more synodal Church, starting with the recognition of the dignity of all the baptized. "*Walking together and expanding the tent envelops everyone. All the baptized have a right to be there*" (Session IX Group 2). Every human person possesses the dignity that comes from being created in the image of God. Through baptism, Christians share in an exalted dignity and vocation to holiness, with no inequality based on race, nationality, social condition, or sex, because we are one in Christ Jesus (*Lumen Gentium* 32; cf. Gal 3:28, Col 3:11). "*Synod was a good way for laity and clergy to realize that we are all the Church and that we have a co-responsibility for expanding the tent. If we aim to do that it will take all of us!*" (Session VIII Group 3).

The sentence "All the baptized have a right to be there," the vocation to holiness, the radical equality brought by baptism — none of this would have been found in a pre-Vatican II document of this sort.

Another section points to the hunger for ongoing formation in baptismal dignity and its synodal corollary, co-responsibility. The Christocentrism of the teachings of Vatican II shine through in the sections on Communion with Christ. One phrase especially catches the eye. Discussing the many times the polarization within the church was identified and regretted, the document states: "There was a recognition

that we cannot fully live out our baptismal dignity and responsibility without addressing the areas where our communion with one another, and thereby our communion with Christ, is stressed almost to the breaking point." The recognition that any diminishment in our communion with one another diminishes our communion with Christ is an important connection, and one too often overlooked.

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The section on greater inclusivity contains a remarkable conjunction. The document addresses the "profound sense of suffering of those prevented from receiving the Eucharist." It mentions the divorced and remarried and "those whose objective situation in life contradicts the beliefs and teachings of the Church." The document then adds: "Additionally, some delegates spoke of those wounded by the limitations placed on the pre-conciliar Latin rite."

The juxtaposition is jarring, which is a good thing. Hopefully it will jar those who are insensitive to the experience of suffering, but also remind those who think the church must conform to their ideological yearnings, rather than the other way round, that our shared dignity as baptized Christians, co-responsible for the life of faith and for Christ's church, makes demands, too.

Acknowledgement that tensions have always and will always characterize human life is a welcome step away from the idea that synodality will prove a panacea. There is little naivete on exhibit anywhere in the document. Instead, you see an honest account of the experience of synodality in all its wonderment. The text quotes one of the listening sessions: "The most beautiful thing about this was that from every stage of listening, people responded in an extraordinary way." That conforms with my anecdotal impressions of the synodal process: When you get people together, introduce shared prayer and some hospitality, they respond in an extraordinary way, literally, not in the ordinary, bifurcated, divisive, polarized way we have all come to expect.

Always thrilling was the identification of some of the challenges posed by the culture in a way that transcended the usual left-right indictments of those parts of the culture we do not like. Quoting one of the listening groups:

> "*Consumerism and secularism have provided answers to questions we didn't know we were asking in ways that feel fulfilling but that really aren't. This false fulfillment will collapse and crumble, but the Church offers true fulfillment that will last. Economic/political upheaval are doing great damage, but as we all come – broken and sinful – to the Church, everyone must feel welcomed and at home*" (Session XI Group 7).

This language is reminiscent of that in the finest, but most ignored, document the U.S. bishops have produced in my lifetime, "The Hispanic Presence in the New Evangelization." Good luck even finding that document on the U.S. bishops' website!

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The final section contains reflections from the bishops who participated in the continental stage themselves, as many non-bishop participants wanted to know what the bishops were making of this whole process. It demonstrates an awareness of the concept that we are all still just beginning to become familiar with: Synodality is a two-way street. Yes, the parish listening sessions led to diocesan summations, which led to a national synthesis and now to a continental phase. We Catholics know how input works its way up the ecclesiological food chain. This text recognizes the need to use these intermediate documents to run in the other direction, "to reflect back to our local communities what was said and heard in our synodal consultation."

I was also pleased to see an acknowledgement of the need to manage expectations and to confront the habits of mind that can frustrate synodality. "There is a concern about the danger of false or unrealistic expectations regarding what the synodal process is meant to be and to 'produce,' " the document states. "Western, North American culture automatically thinks in terms both of measurable results and of winners and losers, and the Church's voice can be drowned out by that competitive impulse." If you are one of the readers who scanned the document to see if your pet issue was mentioned, you are being part of the problem, not part of the solution.

The answer to the question "What is next?" is to keep building and strengthening our communion in Christ and with one another by listening patiently, by going to the margins to let the poor teach us, creating ongoing formation in both synodality and

discernment, and engaging charitably the tensions that exist within the church. This document calls us to do all those things and to root them deeply in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and in our Catholic spirituality. It does not identify any goal line to cross.

Synodality is an open-ended process. The Risen Lord told the apostles: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). He promised to be with them, and with us, until the end of the age. He did not disclose when or how that evangelizing call would be completed. He just told us to get into the fields. Now, in our time, synodality is the means by which we can all get back to work.