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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. Pictured to the right of the pope are: Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, general relator of the upcoming synod; Bishop Lucio Muandula of Xai-Xai, Mozambique; Mercedarian Sister Shizue "Filo" Hirota from Tokyo; Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, president of the Australian bishops' conference; and a synod staff member. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Organizers of Pope Francis' ongoing consultation with Catholics around the world said that, following recent discussion assemblies on each continent, there is a growing consensus that the process for the ongoing Synod of Bishops should result in the Vatican giving more deference to local church authorities.

"There is, in fact, more than one way of being the church," said Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, Australia, who said that a significant feature of synodality is the understanding that unity does not call for uniformity within the Catholic Church.

Costelloe's remarks came during a Vatican press conference on April 20 to mark the conclusion of the continental phase of the three-year synod process.

During February and March, seven continental meetings took place in order to reflect on themes that emerged during the first phase of the synod process, which included tens of thousands of listening sessions with Catholics around the world. After the second phase of those gatherings, the third phase will include two month-long assemblies in Rome in October 2023 and October 2024.

The findings from the initial listening sessions were enumerated in a 45-page document released last October. The document, "Enlarge the space of your tent," addressed a number of themes often considered taboo in the Catholic Church, including LGBTQ relationships, women's ordination, liturgical inculturation and clergy sex abuse.

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That report formed the basis of the continental meetings that, according to Costelloe, evidenced widespread enthusiasm for this new era of openness and dialogue.

"There's almost universal appreciation of the process and a desire that we not go backwards, that we've found something precious in the life of the church, which has great potential for the future and that we need to continue down this pathway to the future, to be more fully the church that we're supposed to be," said Costelloe.

Yet Costelloe, who is the president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference and a member of the seven-person team that will organize the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome this October, cautioned that the synod cannot be reduced to just one issue or a handful of concerns.

"It's really a synod on how the church, as it grows in its understanding of being a synodal church, can find more productive or more fruitful ways of beginning to grapple with all of these issues," he said.

Xaviere Missionary Sr. Nathalie Becquart, who is the undersecretary of the Vatican's synod office, said that two of the major questions that are being reckoned with through the synod process are what should be decided at each level of the church

and how to maintain the church's unity, with room for flexibility and local adaptations.

Becquart, who attended four of the seven continental assemblies, said that "each local church has something to share with others," observing that there are both seeds of synodality in every culture, but also obstacles.

Both Becquart and Costelloe emphasized the importance of synodality as a lived experience, rather than something that can be reduced to particular issues or documents.

Costelloe also acknowledged that there are many in the church who either do not understand synodality or are even antagonistic towards it, but he invited them to take part rather than sitting on the sidelines.

"The only way, really, to understand the synodal journey is to engage in the synodal journey and the experience of doing it teaches us what it is," he said.

Beyond the confines of the institutional church, speakers at the press conference highlighted that the process has sought to engage those outside of Catholicism and those coming from other Christian traditions.

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>
> — *Archbishop Timothy Costelloe*
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Msgr. Lucio Ruiz, secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Communications, said that an online "digital synod" process collected 150,000 questionnaires from 115 countries, mainly from participants who are 18-40 years old. Thirty percent of those participants, he noted, were non-believers.

Dominican Fr. Hyacinthe Destivelle, an official at the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, highlighted the ecumenical element of the synod process. Prior to the official start of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October, there will be an ecumenical prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square on Sept. 30.

"Synodality and ecumenism are in fact two paths that have a common goal: a better witness of Christians today, 'so that the world believes,'" said Destivelle, quoting from the Gospel of John.

As the conclusion of the continental stage of the synod is now complete, the process now moves forward to the October 2023 meeting, expected to draw over 300 Catholic leaders and ecumenical observers to Rome for a month of discussions.

From April 12-19, a team of some 20 bishops, priests, pastoral workers and theologians from five continents met in Rome to review final synthesis reports from the seven continental gatherings and to begin drafting the synod's working document, known as the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which will serve as the basis for discussions in Rome this October.

Becquart told reporters that the goal is to publish the document by the end of May and said the aim was to bring together global expertise and to develop a document not from the writers' own ideas, but "in a spirit of discernment."