Opinion

Guest Voices



Pope Francis speaks at an event marking the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops in Paul VI hall at the Vatican in this Oct. 17, 2015, file photo. The pope in his speech outlined his vision for how the entire church must be "synodal" with everyone listening to each other, learning from each other and taking responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Catherine E. Clifford

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 10, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis' decision in late April to include lay persons as full participants with voting rights in the upcoming Synod of Bishops is a significant step towards making the synod a body that more adequately represents and embodies an act of discernment by the whole entire people of God.

In exhorting the pastors of the local churches to embark upon a synodal process with the whole community of the baptized and listen to the voices of the marginalized, the pope has been seeking to reawaken the muscle memory of the ecclesial body.

The successors of the apostles are relearning the importance of consulting the whole church, in the image of the first Apostles (Acts 6:5; 9:22). A more synodal church — the goal of the present synodal process — better reflects the nature of the Christian community as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2; John 14:6), a community of disciples on a shared journey of faith.

On many occasions Francis has astutely diagnosed the debilitating consequences of failing to receive fully Vatican II's recognition of the equal dignity and co-responsibility of the baptized through the creation of spaces for their meaningful participation in the discernment of the church's missional needs and priorities.

In the 60 years since the council more than two-thirds of Catholic dioceses have yet to experience a canonical diocesan synod or some other form of diocesan synodal assembly. Few have functioning pastoral councils. Including the voice of the laity is essential, Francis argues, given their innate sense of the faith, that capacity in all the baptized to discern "what is truly of God."

In a 2016 letter to Cardinal Marc Ouellet, he urged: "Let us trust in our People, in their memory and in their 'sense of smell,' let us trust that the Holy Spirit acts in and with our People and that this Spirit is not merely the 'property' of the ecclesial hierarchy." Simply stated, lay Christians have a "nose" for the truth of the Gospel.

Advertisement

Over the ten years of his pontificate Francis has endeavored to make the international synod of bishops a more vital instrument of encounter and dialogue, of teaching and learning. Since its creation in 1965 by Pope Paul VI, it had remained largely an instrument of the papacy. Under Francis' leadership, it is evolving into a dynamic forum for the concerns of the local churches.

Speaking on the 50th anniversary of its foundation, Francis sketched out how the synod reflects the quality of synodality inherent in the whole church. "It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening together, all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' [John 14:17], in order to know what he 'says to the Churches' [Revelations 2:7]."

Prior to Vatican II, Catholic ecclesiology generally distinguished neatly between the "teaching church" and the "learning church" to highlight the pastoral teaching office of bishops on one hand, yet with a reductionist image of the laity as passive receivers of magisterial teaching on the other.

Francis rightly contends that the Vatican II's recovery of the early church's grasp of the sense of the faithful in all the baptized precludes this "rigid separation." The whole church is a teaching church, just as the whole church is a learning church, called to seek a deeper understanding of Jesus' message and proclaim it. This is the root of his understanding of all the baptized as evangelizers.

For this reason, Francis expects that bishops actively consult their people prior to every meeting of the international synod. It is but the culmination of a process that begins at the grassroots.



Pope Francis greets participants 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/Vatican Media)

"The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life," the pope said in the 50th anniversary speech. "The Synod process begins by listening to the people of God, which 'shares also in Christ's prophetic office,' [referencing *Lumen Gentium*] according to a principle dear to the church of the first millennium: '*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractaro debet*' [Whatever concerns all must be considered by all]."

Essentially, if in the exercise of their pastoral teaching office the college of bishops is to teach the faith of the whole church with authority, they are bound to attend to the voice of all the baptized. The present synodal process is not a one-off. It is a step on the path to renewing the *modus operandi et vivendi* of the church.

Genuine consultation takes much more than online surveys. It requires the development of more adequate structures for lay participation if bishops are "to listen to everyone and not simply those who tell [them] what [they] would like to hear" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 31). The 2018 apostolic constitution of the Synod of Bishops, *Episcopalis Communio*, makes such listening processes mandatory. It remarks that while the international synod "is essentially configured as an episcopal body," a gathering of bishops, "this does not mean that the Synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary," it exists "to give voice to the entire People of God."

All votes in the synod remain consultative, including those of the bishops. Counting less than a quarter of all participants, the vote of lay participants can hardly tip the scales. Yet, their weight is not negligible. The synodal gatherings planned for October 2023 and October 2024 are unlikely to arrive at definitive answers to the many complex issues raised through the consultations of the preceding phases of the synodal process. But it ought to advise the pope as to *how* these might be addressed in a more transparent, open and participatory way.

As experiences of pastoral and missionary conversion transform the hearts and minds, they naturally seek a more substantial embodiment in new structures and procedures. Their effective use will inevitably require renewed formation in the ways of discernment. The voice of the laity can no longer be discounted in the exercise of the pastoral teaching office.

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