News




Pope Francis meets with the leadership of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican April 17. The USCCB is set to meet in its spring plenary June 14-16 in Orlando. From the left are: Fr. Michael Fuller, USCCB general secretary; Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore, vice president; Archbishop Timothy Broglio of head of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, president; and Fr. Paul Hartmann, associate general secretary. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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When the U.S. Catholic bishops gather for their spring plenary assembly in Orlando, Florida, June 14-16, the prelates will hear updates on their three-year initiative to revive Americans' interest in attending Mass each week. They will also discuss possible updates to the ethical guidelines for Catholic health care institutions.

What the bishops apparently will not hear are any briefings about recent developments or upcoming milestones related to Pope Francis' ongoing process for the 2021-2024 Synod, the three-year global effort at listening and dialogue that the pontiff has said is what "God expects of the church of the third millennium."

The synod's absence from a preliminary agenda the bishops' conference released for the June 14-16 meeting is the latest stark example of how the U.S. episcopate has sometimes resisted or dismissed Francis' priorities for the universal church.



Massimo Faggioli, a church historian and theologian at Villanova University, called it "astonishing" that the U.S. bishops' draft agenda does not include discission of Pope Francis' ongoing process for the 2021-2024 Synod. (Courtesy of Massimo Faggioli)

"It's astonishing that [synodality] is absent from the agenda, but it reflects a more general problem in the Catholic Church as a whole in the U.S., where interest for the synod has been weak or, in some cases, it's been resisted," said Massimo Faggioli, a church historian and theologian at Villanova University.

In mid-April, the bishops' conferences of the United States and Canada released a 39-page report, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission," which marked the end of the synod's continental stage. The report will be used to help set the agenda for the two planned meetings of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023 and October 2024.

Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese, a journalist who has covered the bishops' conference for decades, said it seems the U.S. prelates will not publicly discuss the synod until their fall assembly in November, after the synod's first session.

In the new U.S. and Canada synod report, participants in the continental process say the Catholic Church needs to better listen to and incorporate the marginalized voices of youth, the poor, the LGBTQ community, clergy sex abuse survivors and women.

"While clarity is still needed around exactly what a fully co-responsible Church looks like, delegates proposed the examination of a variety of aspects of Church life, including decision-making roles, leadership, and ordination," the report said.

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> —Fr. Tom Reese
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No such examination was listed among the action items or topics of discussion in the preliminary agenda for the U.S. bishops' spring plenary, as released on May 3.

Reese told NCR that while he was "terribly unhappy with the lack of real enthusiasm for the synod from the bishops," he believes it's now "too late" for the bishops to say or do anything of substance regarding the synod.

"They didn't do enough work on the synod in the past and they did not seem to be very supportive of the synod so it's not surprising that they're not doing anything now," Reese said.

Beyond the synod, one controversial issue may come up in Orlando: how Catholic health care providers should treat transgender people.

In March, the bishops' Committee on Doctrine issued a document rejecting gender-affirming medical treatments for transgender individuals and reasserting that Catholic providers must not perform such procedures.




Bishop Andrew Cozzens listens to a question during a Nov. 17, 2021, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Although the plenary agenda does not mention that document, it does state that the bishops will consider revising the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, which give what the prelates call "authoritative guidance" on how Catholic health care institutions can act in various situations.

The bishops are also slated to vote on a plan for the ongoing formation of priests, for developing a pastoral statement for people with disabilities and for approving priorities to shape the conference's strategic plan for 2025-2028, among other action items.

On June 15, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's ambassador to the United States, will kick off the plenary's public portion with an address. Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the Archdiocese for the Military Services will also deliver his first speech as president of the bishops' conference. Broglio was elected to a three-year term as

president in November 2022.

The conference's communications office noted in its May 23 advisory that the meeting agenda had not yet been finalized and was "therefore, subject to change."

## Follow USCCB public sessions

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will gather for the 2023 Spring Plenary Assembly in Orlando, Florida, June 14-16. Public sessions will be held on the mornings of June 15 and 16 and livestreamed at the USCCB website.

But the fact that the three-year synod, described by some as the largest consultation exercise in human history and the most consequential event for the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council, was not even mentioned in the bishops' preliminary agenda struck some observers as telling.

"This is a church that is highly skeptical in many quarters about [the synod], so unfortunately the agenda of the bishops conference is not a great surprise. It fits a certain type of culture among many in the clergy in the United States today, not just the bishops," Faggioli said.




This is the logo for the U.S. bishops' three-year National Eucharistic Revival. (OSV News/Courtesy USCCB)

The bishops' three-year initiative to revive Mass attendance is known as a Eucharistic Revival. The initiative will culminate in a four-day National Eucharistic Congress in July 2024 in Indianapolis. The bishops have created a separate nonprofit organization to handle the logistical planning and fundraising for the congress, which was originally estimated to cost $28 million but has since been trimmed to $14 million.

Plans for the eucharistic congress and revival, including a document on "eucharistic coherence" that the bishops are using as a resource, grew out of contentious debates among Catholic bishops in 2020 and 2021. Some prelates said openly that they wanted to discuss denying Communion to Catholic politicians such as President Joe Biden and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi because they support abortion rights.

**Related:** US bishops defend planned $28 million eucharistic congress amid criticism

In contrast to their relatively muted response to Francis' calls for the synod, the U.S. bishops as a whole have devoted large amounts of time and resources for the eucharistic revival, planning various events at the diocesan and parish levels, working with sponsors to create tracts and "Eucharistic Procession tool kits," and organizing four pilgrimage routes from different regions of the country to the congress in Indianapolis.

Jaisy Joseph, a theologian and religious studies professor at Villanova University, told NCR that the synod's absence on the bishops' agenda helped to shed light on her recent experiences as an Eastern Rite Catholic.

"I was surprised recently to discover various mobilization efforts within the Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago for the Eucharistic Revival after what seemed like hesitant and half-hearted efforts at synodality," said Joseph, who described the situation as "an unfortunate division of focus" for the U.S. Catholic Church.



Jaisy Joseph, a theologian and religious studies professor at Villanova University, has seen "mobilization efforts within the Syro-Malabar Diocese of Chicago for the

Eucharistic Revival after what seemed like hesitant and half-hearted efforts at synodality." (Courtesy of Jaisy Joseph)

"In some ways, by separating the eucharistic revival from synodality, we are separating the Christological from the pneumatological," she said, referring to the study of the person and role of Jesus Christ vs. the study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

"A renewal of both theological aspects are necessary for who we are as a local reality in the US and how we participate in the universal reality of the Church led by Pope Francis," she said. "To the extent that the revival responds to the wounds and concerns for healing that are present in the listening sessions, it is able to build on the hopes expressed that such sharing was not in vain."

The U.S. bishops' approach to the synod and the eucharistic revival is consistent with an American Catholic tendency to see evangelization and other facets of church life through a programmatic lens, said Hosffman Ospino, chair of religious education and pastoral ministry at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry.



Crosses representing different regions of the United States are seen during a Sept. 21, 2018, session of V Encuentro, or the Fifth National Encuentro, in Grapevine, Texas. During their upcoming meeting, the U.S. bishops are expected vote on the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry, which grew out of the September 2018 Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic Ministry. (CNS/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

"It's seen as something that happens within a particular moment, where you do it for two to five years and then you move on to the next concern," Ospino said. He told NCR that the Catholic world outside the United States, particularly in Latin America, has embraced synodality as a way of being the church in the world.

"But my sense is that there are many pastoral leaders in parishes and dioceses that feel since the synodal consultations have already taken place in the United States, we're off the hook and we should not worry about this," Ospino said.

"If that's the case, then it is a bit of a disappointment because we still have not understood then what synodality is all about," he said. "That would be a missed opportunity for us to use a language that can help us to renew conversions, to enhance and strengthen whatever we call evangelization and pastoral activity."

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However, even if the synod is not added to the agenda, synodality will still play a role at the bishops' spring plenary. Among the action items is an expected vote on the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry, which grew out of the September 2018 Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic Ministry. Ospino described the Encuentro as "one of the best exercises in synodality we have seen up until now."

Said Ospino, "If we as Catholics have the humility to recognize that Hispanic Catholics, through the Encuentro process, are modeling for us a way of being a church that is synodal, then the approval of this plan and the actions that result from it can be seen as a way of carving a path forward for the rest of the church."

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2023** feature series. View the full series.