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Pope Francis leads a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from around the world at the Vatican Oct. 9, 2021. The meeting came as the Vatican launched the process that will lead up to the assembly of the world Synod of Bishops in 2023. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Rome — June 20, 2023
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When prelates and lay delegates gather in October for the Synod of Bishops, they will be asked to directly confront a number of pressing questions — including the possibility of women deacons, access to the priesthood for married men, the integration of LGBTQ+ Catholics, and penance for sexual abuse and the abuse of power, conscience and money — in consideration of how the Catholic Church might transform and expand its structures to become more welcoming to all its members.

In a much anticipated document released June 20, the Vatican's synod office set the stage for a wide-ranging discussion for the first session of a high-stakes meeting that is attempting to respond with "missionary urgency" to the challenges of church life in the modern world.

Known in Latin as an *instrumentum laboris*, the 60-page document will guide the monthlong Vatican summit on a number of themes and concerns that have emerged during a three-year consultative process, which has focused on how the church could become more focused on greater listening and participation of all of the baptized, not just the Catholic hierarchy.

Among the issues and considerations in the document are how a synodal church recognizes and values the central role of the poor; the experience of migrants; victims of sexual abuse, violence and other injustices; the disabled; divorced and remarried Catholics; the need for greater commitment to ecumenism and learning from other faith traditions; and the role of women in the church today.

The newly released document is the culmination of worldwide listening sessions through local churches that took place 2021-2022 and seven continental gatherings held in early 2023.

> 'The radical call is, therefore, to build together, synodally, an attractive and concrete church: an outgoing church, in which all feel welcome.'
> —Synod of Bishops *instrumentum laboris*
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Over the last decade, synodality has emerged as a key theme of Francis' pontificate and as a vehicle of implementing the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and instilling them into the practices and structures of the church today. Earlier this year, Francis dramatically expanded participation in the synod to include lay men and women, for the first time granting them a right to be appointed as full voting members of the Catholic Church's primary consultative body.

The new document — which is framed around three interwoven themes of communion, mission and participation — aims to offer an honest account of the key ideas, difficulties, aspirations and fears of Catholics from every corner of the globe. Those ideas will now be up for discernment and discussion by an estimated 370 synod participants in the synod's first session Oct. 4-29.

**A novel format**

While past synod working documents have primarily been published to serve as an initial draft for a particular synod's eventual final report, the newly released document is structured in a novel format, with an introductory section that offers a vision for what it means to be a synodal church and a second section with three overarching questions meant to guide the synod discussions.

The text is accompanied by 15 worksheets — five for each of the three priority questions — that pose a series of open questions for synod participants to reflect upon individually and collectively.

The three questions that will serve as the framework for this synod are:

1. A communion that radiates: How can we be more fully a sign and instrument of union with God and of the unity of all humanity?
2. Co-responsibility in mission: How can we better share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel?
3. Participation, governance and authority: What processes, structures and institutions are needed in a missionary synodal church?

The document is cautious to note that "a synodal assembly cannot be understood as representative and legislative, analogous to a parliamentary structure with its dynamics of majority building" and anchors the synod process in a spiritual foundation, saying it is best to be understood as a liturgical assembly.

"Ancient tradition tells us that when a synod is celebrated it begins with the invocation of the Holy Spirit, continues with the profession of faith, and arrives at shared determinations to ensure or re-establish ecclesial communion," the document states.

But while underscoring the spiritual dimension of the synodal process, the document does not shy away from demanding synod delegates consider concrete responses to a number of neuralgic topics in church life today. Becoming a synodal church, the document notes, requires the participation of all its members, including the pope, bishops, clergy, consecrated life and the laity alike.

Among the more than 100 specific questions posed as a way of offering concrete responses to the questions of communion, mission and participation are:

- What concrete steps are needed to welcome those who feel excluded from the church because of their status or sexuality (for example, remarried divorcees, people in polygamous marriages, LGBTQ+ people, etc.)?

- How can we discern the baptismal ministries necessary for mission in a local church, whether instituted or not? What spaces are available for experimentation at the local level? What value should be attributed to these ministries? Under what conditions can they be received and recognized by the entire church?

- What concrete steps can the church take to renew and reform its procedures, institutional arrangements and structures to enable greater recognition and participation of women, including in governance, decision-making processes and in the taking of decisions, in a spirit of communion and with a view to mission?

- What new ministries could be created to provide the means and opportunities for women’s effective participation in discernment and decision-making bodies?

- Most of the continental assemblies and the syntheses of several episcopal conferences call for the question of women’s inclusion in the diaconate to be considered. Is it possible to envisage this, and in what way?

- Could a reflection be opened concerning the discipline on access to the priesthood for married men, at least in some areas?

- How does the exercise of the episcopal ministry solicit consultation, collaboration, and participation in the decision-making processes of the people of God?

- On the basis of what criteria can a bishop evaluate himself and be evaluated in the performance of his service in a synodal style?

- How should the role of the bishop of Rome and the exercise of his primacy evolve in a synodal church?

In addition to the issue-specific questions, the document calls for a consideration for the ways in which the church's preparation for ministry, particularly its seminaries, might need to change to become more synodal, as well as for a consideration of how the church's canon law may need to be revised.

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**A new methodology**

While many topics enumerated in the synod's working document were once considered taboo in certain quarters of Catholicism, and indeed the Vatican itself, the document builds on many themes and concerns that were first published as part of the synod document that guided the continental synodal meetings.

That document, titled "Enlarge the space of your tent," was published in October 2022, and with the final reports of the continental assemblies are considered the foundation for the synod working document. Delegates are encouraged to utilize the entire body of documents in their preparation and participation in the October meeting.

During that meeting, working groups of approximately 12 members each will have discussions structured around four modules: what it means to be a synodal church, communion, mission and participation.

While acknowledging the vast range of issues that synod delegates will have to confront, the working documents note that the primary goal of the first session will be to outline areas of in-depth study that will be carried out in a synodal style in the lead-up to the synod's second session in October 2024. Only then will the synod's final proposals be presented to the pope for his consideration.

At a June 20 Vatican press conference following the document's release, Cardinal Mario Grech emphasized that the entire synod process is guided by the Holy Spirit and that none of its conclusions have been forewritten.

"To presume to write the conclusions first would be tantamount to blaspheming the Spirit," he added, noting that is a working document not of the Holy See but of the whole church.

Grech, who is the head of the Vatican's synod office, told reporters that over the past two years, he has encountered many bishops skeptical of synodality, and who, once involved in the process, found it to be a "priceless treasure."

Adorer of the Blood of Christ Sr. Nadia Coppa, president of the International Union of Superiors General, a worldwide organization of nearly 2,000 leaders of women's religious congregations, praised the document, saying that the church needs spaces to address controversial issues together in an evangelical manner.

Coppa said that women religious around the world will be engaged in the discernment process and asked to use the document to reflect on their work and the mission of co-responsibility.

Helena Jeppesen-Spuhler, who was a member of the Swiss delegation to the European Continental Assembly, said that after Vatican II the church in Switzerland adopted a number of more "participatory processes," including parish councils, oversight of church's financial resources and other pastoral assemblies meant to include greater participation of lay members.

According to the working document, such structures are necessary to strengthen relationships with all the people of God and to help "penetrate into the daily life of the church at all levels."

One notable change in the upcoming synod, according to Jesuit Fr. Giacomo Costa, who serves as consultor to the General Secretariat of the Synod, is that unlike past synods, which have taken place in the Vatican's synod hall — an auditorium with stadium style seating — the October meeting will take place in the Vatican's Pope Paul VI audience hall to allow participants to sit at round tables, which he said will be more conducive for discussion.

"Conversation in the Spirit has made us experience the profound dignity of all the baptized by valuing each voice," Costa said.

“The radical nature of Christianity," the working document states, "is not the prerogative of a few specific vocations, but the call to build a community that lives and bears witness to a different way of understanding the relationship between the daughters and sons of God, one that embodies the truth of love, one that is based on gift and gratuitousness."

"The radical call is, therefore, to build together, synodally, an attractive and concrete church: an outgoing church, in which all feel welcome."

At the press conference, Grech said people should not view the document through a progressive or conservative lens.

"We can do without this distinction," he said. "We are the holy people of God."

***Editor's Note**: This story has been updated to include information from a June 20 press conference.*

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **July 7-20, 2023** print issue under the headline: Synod document sets stage for wide-ranging debate on women, Catholic ministries and structures.