Opinion

Guest Voices



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by Meghan Clark

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People in the United States often have a kind of cynical view of participation. In an era of "participation trophies," we associate it with bothering to show up — and not much more. We talk about "phoning it in" or "quiet quitting."

For the Catholic Church, participation is something much deeper. The *instrumentum laboris*, or working document, for the upcoming synod on synodality invites us to discern what it means for all the baptized to participate in the body of Christ.

"A synodal church," the *instrumentum laboris* argues, "promotes the passage from the 'I' to 'we.' It is a space within which a call resonates to be members of a body that values diversity but is made one by the Spirit."

Jesus's prayer in the Gospel of John, "that they may be one as we are one" (17:21), is referenced in the synod working document and in the Second Vatican Council as the kind of unity in diversity sought.

Long before he became Pope John Paul II, Karol Wojtyla argued, "As human beings we are capable of participating in the very humanity of other people, and because of this every human being can be our neighbor."

This, for the late pope, was the foundation for Christian virtue. Exclusion or what has often been called alienation was, for Wojtyla, "the negative of participation, for it renders participation difficult or even impossible."

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When I read the *instrumentum laboris*, I see the fruits of a global discernment already begun and a further invitation to prayerfully reflect on the myriad ways we all might participate more deeply and address the barriers that block participation in the people of God for our brothers and sisters.

Vatican II sought to draw attention to the way in which women and men were supported or hindered in living with dignity. "The joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted," begins *Gaudium et Spes*, "are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."

The simple and practical truth of this is demonstrated by the new working document. Skillfully, the *instrumentum laboris* reveals the ways in which the joys and hopes among the people of God are intimately connected to their griefs and anxieties about exclusion and division. Reflecting on what has already emerged, the synod seeks to ensure that no quiet quitting or disappearance goes unnoticed.

Participation, as it emerges in the document, is about belonging to the body of Christ. Thus, what is at stake in questions of unjust exclusion and division is "recognition of a common dignity deriving from Baptism."

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Women are but one example of a group who often feel excluded. The instrumentum laboris notes, "The Continental Assemblies were unanimous in calling for attention to the experience, status and role of women."

Journeying together to uphold the full baptismal dignity of women cannot occur without women.

It is easy to be jaded about calls for participation of women within the church. In 1971, the Synod of Bishops concluded, "We also urge that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church." Yet for the next half century, women continued to be addressed as primarily objects of concern rather than full participants or agents.

Pope Francis has begun to change this in important personnel decisions at the Vatican. This upcoming synod meeting will be the first time that women will be in the room not only as topics of discussion or observers. Women and laypeople will be able to fully engage in the discussions and vote.

The Catholic Church is not a democracy. Voting at the synod is not at all like voting in a civil election. Yet, Francis' decision to allow Sr. Nathalie Becquart as undersecretary and a delegation of laypeople to vote is important. It is a powerful affirmation of the baptismal dignity of the people of God. It also recognizes the

diversity of competencies within the body of Christ.

For some, allowing laity to vote and the very discussion of ordaining women to the diaconate causes them to reject the synod before it has even completed. For others, it does not go far enough. If we start with baptismal dignity, we approach both the invitation and possibilities differently.

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The path outlined in the *instrumentum laboris* and by the pope is not about securing a particular outcome or political victory. Deep participation in the synodal process is itself a desired goal. With faith in the Holy Spirit, the goal is to become more fully the body of Christ. And in that, I find hope.

We must resist the urge to examine division through a lens of culture wars. The working document notes, "the final documents of the Continental Assemblies often mention those who do not feel accepted in the Church, such as the divorced and remarried, people in polygamous marriages, or LGBTQ+ Catholics."

Just as questions of women's participation are about baptismal belonging, so too are the pastoral questions of inclusion for others as well.

The whole church is being invited, challenged and empowered to rediscover what it might mean to be the people of God, always seeking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If you are like me, you might find this a somewhat overwhelming task.

Participation in a synodal church requires ongoing formation. This is perhaps why Francis urged all Catholics to study the pastoral constitutions of Vatican II in preparation for the 2025 jubilee. Themed "Pilgrims of Hope," that jubilee will also mark the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The body of Christ in history is present, always in motion, and all the baptized are members called to fully participate.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **July 21-August 3, 2023** print issue under the headline: Participation and inclusion in the synod are about baptismal belonging.