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Jesuit Fr. James Martin delivers the homily during the closing Mass for the Outreach LGBTQ Catholic Ministry Conference at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in New York City, June 18, 2023. Martin was among those chosen by Pope Francis to be participants in the upcoming synod. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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The Vatican on July 7 released the full list of participants for its upcoming global synod of Catholic bishops and lay delegates, which includes noted LGBTQ advocate Jesuit Fr. James Martin and all four U.S. cardinals created by Pope Francis — offering a clear sign that despite often being a minority in the U.S. church, the pope intends to have these voices as a part of the discussion on the future of the Catholic Church.

Cardinals Blase Cupich of Chicago; Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C.; Robert McElroy of San Diego; and Joseph Tobin of Newark, New Jersey, will be among 48 individuals hand-selected by the pope to take part in a high-stakes meeting in October that will consider a range of sensitive issues in church life — including the role of women, LGBTQ Catholics, clergy sex abuse and more.

In addition, Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley — a member of the pope's council of cardinal advisers — and Seattle's Archbishop Paul Etienne were among the pope's personal nominations. Notably, among the 10 prelates from the United States taking part in the synod, they include both some of the most prominent backers and opponents of the 2021 proposal to draft a policy on denying Communion to pro-choice Catholic politicians, which the Vatican cautioned against.

In total, nearly 400 synod participants — with the U.S. representing one of the largest contingents — will gather in Rome for the closely watched meeting that is expected to produce a vigorous debate on how the Catholic Church might transform and expand its structures to become more welcoming to all its members.

Representing the U.S. bishops' conference will be its president, Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the Archdiocese for the Military Services; Bishop Robert Barron of Winona–Rochester, Minnesota; Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York; Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana; and Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas.

These bishops were previously selected by private vote of the bishops' conference and confirmed by the pope. Flores, who has led the U.S. bishops' synodal preparations, had previously been selected by the Vatican's synod office as one of six other members to serve on the synod's preparatory commission.

In April, the Vatican announced that for the first time in history, the Oct. 4-29 Synod of Bishops will include lay men and women as full voting members of the Catholic Church's primary consultative body.

Each of the seven global regional bishops' conferences have nominated 10 participants who will participate in the gathering, along with five religious women and five religious men on behalf of the two global umbrella groups representing men and women's religious orders.

The 10 North American delegates include Sami Aoun, a Maronite Catholic from Quebec; Cynthia Bailey Manns, director of adult learning at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Community in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Catherine Clifford, a theology professor at St. Paul University in Ottawa, Canada; Richard Coll, executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development for the U.S. Catholic bishops; Sister of Charity of St. Mary Sr. Chantal Desmarais; Fr. Ivan Montelongo of El Paso, Texas; Wyatt Olivas, a young adult musician from Cheyenne, Wyoming; Julia Oseka, a student at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia; Order of the Company of Mary Our Lady Sr. Leticia Salazar, chancellor of the Diocese of San Bernardino, California; and Linda Staudt, former director of the London District Catholic School Board in Canada.

Francis' personal picks for U.S. synod delegates mark a stark contrast to the members elected by the broader U.S. church hierarchy, which has often been at odds with the pope's pastoral priorities emphasizing a more open, welcoming church.

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At a July 7 Vatican press briefing, Cardinal Mario Grech — head of the Vatican's synod office — defended the selections as the pope's prerogatives in response to a question from a reporter who said that Francis' picks seemed to be ideologically skewed.

In 2021, when the U.S. bishops were considering drafting a divisive document regarding Communion and pro-choice Catholic politicians, it was Rhoades, the-then chair of the bishops' doctrine committee, who was responsible for overseeing the controversial process.

Among the most vocal critics of the proposal were Cupich, Gregory, McElroy, Tobin and Etienne — all now tapped by the pope to participate in the synod. While their stance may have been in the minority at the time, their personal selection by the pope indicates that Francis is willing to give them a broader platform to make their voices heard.

Over the last year, McElroy has published a series of essays reflecting on the synod process and calling for "radical inclusion" in the church, particularly among the divorced and remarried and LGBTQ Catholics, as well as voicing his support for the restoration of the female diaconate. His writings set off a firestorm among conservative Catholics, with one U.S. bishop suggesting the cardinal to be a heretic.

Martin, who is an editor at America magazine, has often attracted the ire of some U.S. bishops for his work with gay and lesbian Catholics. In June, he was one of organizers of the high-profile Outreach conference for LGBTQ Catholics, where, despite petitions from right-wing organizers to cancel the event, Pope Francis offered his support.

When Broglio — a former Vatican diplomat who has supported religious exemptions for coronavirus vaccines and has blamed gay priests for the clergy abuse crisis — was elected in November 2022 as U.S. bishops' conference president, it was largely seen as a referendum on to what extent the leadership of the U.S. church was not aligned with the Francis' magisterium. Among those challenging him was Etienne, a strong champion of the pope's priorities. Now, they will both be present in Rome for the synodal discussions.

Barron is the former rector of Mundelein Seminary in Chicago and previously served as an auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He is perhaps best known as the founder of the Catholic multimedia outlet Word on Fire Ministries, a wildly successful enterprise that has recently come under scrutiny for its handling of sexual misconduct allegations and Barron's controversial collaboration of right-wing papal critics such as Jordan Peterson.

Among other participants will be 20 representatives from the Roman Curia, including American Cardinal Kevin Farrell, who heads the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life, and the newly named head of the Vatican's doctrinal office, Argentine Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández.

Notably, the pope has also invited former Vatican office heads, such as Cardinal Marc Ouellet, former head of the Vatican's Dicastery for Bishops, and Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, the former head of the doctrinal office, to serve as synod delegates. Both men have, at various occasions, expressed open skepticism about proposals that have emerged from the synod process.

The Vatican also noted that in the coming weeks, representatives from other Christian churches will be invited to participate in the event as non-voting fraternal delegates.

"Many other churches are journeying with us and we are journeying together on this synodal journey," said Xavierian Sr. Nathalie Becquart, who serves as the No. 2 official at the synod office.

According to the recently published working document for the synod, the primary goal of the Oct. 2023 meeting will be to outline areas of in-depth study on a range of issues regarding Communion, participation and the church's mission 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.

A full list of all of the participants may be found here on the Vatican's website.

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