News



Pope Francis speaks at a Vatican conference, "Pastors and lay faithful called to walk together," Feb. 18 in the Vatican Synod Hall. The meeting was sponsored by the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Brian Fraga

Staff Reporter

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July 13, 2023

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After nearly two years of parish listening sessions and consultations at the regional, national and continental levels, theologian Catherine Clifford said she thinks Catholics the world over are beginning to understand synodality.

"This is like a long kind of apprenticeship," said Clifford, who teaches systematic and historical theology at St. Paul University in Ottawa, Canada.



Catherine Clifford, a theologian in Canada, is one of 10 non-bishop delegates from North America who will participate as members at the Oct. 4-29 Synod of Bishops on synodality in Rome. (Courtesy of Catherine Clifford)

Clifford is one of 10 non-bishop delegates from North America who will participate as members at the Oct. 4-29 Synod of Bishops on synodality in Rome. On July 7, the Vatican announced the full list of synod participants.

A few days after that announcement, Clifford told NCR she was still digesting the news.

"I just sort of pinched myself," she said. "It's a little overwhelming. I think my sense right now is that this is a real moment of grace, and it's a very momentous kind of movement that we're undertaking in the church today.

"It's a wonderful privilege to participate in and to be a witness to it," said Clifford, who is the founding director of the Center for Research on Vatican II and 21st Century Catholicism at St. Paul University.

Described by some observers as the largest consultative exercise in human history, Pope Francis has made the synod on synodality a key initiative in his decadelong papacy. The pope has said that synodality is what "God expects of the church of the third millennium."

Francis has sought to use the synod's three-year global effort at listening and dialogue to model a synodal church where all the baptized — lay and clergy — journey together. In that church, bishops still govern their dioceses but they consult the faithful and listen to their lived experiences on a regular basis.

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In a synodal church, Clifford said, Catholic lay ministry would also be an integrated part of church life at all levels. She noted that Catholic lay ministry has grown exponentially since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

"These are spirit-led movements," she said. "We have to ask ourselves, 'Have we fully received what the spirit is doing?' "

Clifford said she hopes that the open and honest discussions that the synod is intended to encourage will help the Christian community acknowledge that many traditional structures and practices that once served the proclamation of the Gospel in an effective manner may no longer fit that purpose.

"The church has always adapted in every age," Clifford said. "Today we have to ask ourselves, 'What structures and ministries do we need to enable the church to carry out its mission in the world today?' And that will include our structures of ministry."

However, change engenders fear, she said, especially when changes are seen to be disruptive or potentially destabilizing. Several challenging themes emerged in the global listening sessions, including widespread desires that the Catholic Church do more to welcome LGBTQ people and allow women to serve in leadership positions, including in ordained ministry.

The 60-page working document for the synod that the Vatican released on June 20 indicates that the synod delegates will be asked to directly confront those pressing questions.

"There are huge, heavy complex issues that are being put on the table from the consultative process," Clifford said. "But to me, the most important thing is that we learn from this experience to be more synodal, to do everything in a more synodal way, in a more intentional way, at every level in the life of the church."

Catholics across the ideological spectrum will not resolve overnight their questions or differences regarding the ordination of women deacons, married men in the priesthood, or the church's understanding of human sexuality. But for now the more important thing, Clifford said, is for Catholics to learn to face those issues together.

Said Clifford, "The process is as important as whatever decisions might be taken."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 4-17, 2023** print issue under the headline: Lay synod member Catherine Clifford praises pope’s method of dialogue.