Opinion
Guest Voices
A young man puts his head through a cutout frame to take a photo "hugging" Pope Francis at

A young man puts his head through a cutout frame to take a photo "hugging" Pope Francis at the Synod of Bishops' booth in a park in Lisbon, Portugal, during World Youth Day Aug. 3. (CNS/Courtesy of the Synod Secretariat)



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According to the media, the most important issues facing the Synod on Synodality are the possibility of married priests, women deacons and the blessing of gay couples. The first session of the synod will take place in Rome this October, with a second session in October 2024.

I personally hope the synod deals with these issues, but making these topics the principal focus of the synod would be a big mistake. They certainly are not central in the mind of Pope Francis, nor are they central to the "*instrumentum laboris*," or working paper, that will guide the initial meetings of the synod.

For the "*instrumentum laboris*" and Pope Francis, the priority issues are communion, participation and mission. If the synod does not foster greater communion, participation and mission, then it will be a failure. Francis' hope is that the fruit of the next assembly will be that the Spirit inspires the church to walk together as the people of God in fidelity to the mission the Lord has entrusted to it.

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Communion is central to who we are as church. According to the "*instrumentum laboris*," citing the Second Vatican Council, the church is a sign and instrument of union with God and the unity of all humanity. People should see this union with God and this human unity in the life of the church. The church should be a preeminent way for people to attain this union. Fostering that communion is at the heart of what it means to be a synodal church. If we forget that while we squabble over who can or cannot be a minister, then we miss the point.

Likewise, arguing over who can be a priest should not make us forget that we are all responsible for the church's mission in service of the gospel. If we all accepted our responsibility for the mission of the church, the clergy would be much less important to the life of the church.

Our need for communion and our co-responsibility for the mission lead to questions about participation, governance and authority — where authority is service and decisions are made through discernment. Participation and discernment are not simply for the synod; they are the lifeblood of every local church.

This is not to say the synod will ignore real problems in the world. The "*intrumentum laboris*" reports the particular situations experienced by the church in different parts of the world. These include too many wars, the threat of climate change, as well as "exploitation, inequality and a throwaway culture, and the desire to resist the homogenizing pressure of cultural colonialism that crushes minorities." Added to this is "persecution to the point of martyrdom," as well as self-inflicted wounds of sexual

abuse and the abuse of power, conscience and money in the church.

But these problems will not be solved by resolutions or documents, according to Francis, but through greater communion, co-responsibility in mission and increased participation in the life of the church.

In other words, even if I got what I wanted out of the synod — married priests and women priests — but the church became less a sign and instrument of union with God and the unity of all humanity, then the synod would not have achieved its goals. If I got what I wanted, and the church remained clerical with a passive laity, then the synod would have been a failure. If we continued as usual with just different people in charge, then we missed the revolution Francis is calling for.

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Progressives are thinking too small. Through the synod, Francis is calling for a spiritual shake-up much greater than anyone can imagine. He is not looking for a few thousand new clergy to keep the church going. He wants a mass movement that makes the gospel alive in our time. On the other hand, conservative Catholics fear this movement will get out of control. They want the Spirit to be under the thumb of hierarchy.

According to the "*instrumentum laboris*," this revolution has already begun in the preparations for the synod: "The first phase renewed our awareness that our identity and vocation is to become an increasingly synodal Church: walking together, that is, becoming synodal, is the way to truly become disciples and friends of that Master and Lord who said of himself: 'I am the way' (Jn 14:6)."

The spiritual conversations that have occurred in parishes and dioceses around the world have already fostered communion and helped people become more aware of their responsibility for the mission of the church in service of the gospel.

The synodal church began growing at the grassroots and hopefully will bloom at the synod in Rome.

The hope is that the synod will "continue to animate the synodal process in the ordinary life of the church, identifying which pathways the Spirit invites us to walk along more decisively as one People of God," according to the "*instrumentum laboris* ."

Francis is betting his papacy on the hope that these local ripples of synodality will combine into a tsunami that will transform the church so that it is truly a sign and instrument of communion with God and the unity of all humanity. The church will become God's instrument for the transformation of the world.

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