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A light-skinned man with a beard and glasses and black hair speaks into a microphone at a po

Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, is pictured during the 2017 Catholic Convocation in Orlando, Fla. Flores is a U.S. member of the preparatory committee for the October assembly of the world Synod of Bishops. (OSV News photo/CNS file, Bob Roller)

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October's general assembly in Rome for the Catholic Church's Synod of Bishops on synodality aims to address human reality -- not abstractions -- in order to more effectively share Jesus Christ and his Gospel with others, said Bishop Daniel E. Flores, a U.S. member of the global assembly's preparatory commission.

"If we do this right ... in our own local churches we can develop a style of listening and decision-making that involves more hearing from people 'in the trenches,' so to speak," he said, such as hearing from "people who are struggling and who are dealing with families that are in crisis, or families that are struggling, that are split, because of controversial realities that are affecting their lives."

He said, "We can't respond with the Gospel if we don't know what the reality they're facing is. We can't respond to the air."

Flores of Brownsville, Texas, has been leading the synod process in the United States for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and is a voting member at the Oct. 4-29 general assembly. He is also among nine appointed "delegate presidents" who have special duties, including presiding over the meeting on behalf of the pope, who is the synod's president.

Speaking to OSV News Sept. 5, Flores said the synod is designed to teach Catholics to speak with one another -- not past one another -- in an increasingly polarized world and church.

"It's that basic: That we're living in a culture and it's heavily influenced the church. We're talking past each other. Sometimes we're not even addressing the same issues, even though we're using similar words," he said. "There's a need to hear, think and pray, and hopefully the synod will suggest some ways by which the local church and the national church and the continental level ... that we can integrate certain ways by which respectfully things can be spoken without fear."

In March 2020, Pope Francis called for the 16th ordinary Synod of Bishops to focus on the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission." The meeting quickly became known as the "Synod on Synodality." The synod's two-part general assembly begins Oct. 4, with a second session planned for October 2024.

The synod's two-year preparation process invited all Catholics worldwide to identify areas where the church needed to give greater attention and discernment. That feedback was gathered and synthesized by dioceses and then episcopal conferences, before being brought to the continental level. The syntheses from episcopal conferences and continental-level meetings were shared with the Holy See, and they informed a working document known as an "Instrumentum Laboris" for the general assembly's first session.

Released in June, that document asks the synod's 363 voting delegates -- who for the first time include laypeople, clergy and men and women religious among the voting bishops -- to reflect on a range of questions, but most especially three that focus on its themes of communion, participation and mission. The document asks participants to reflect on these priorities: "How can we be more fully a sign and instrument of union with God and of the unity of all humanity?"; "How can we better

share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel?"; and "What processes, structures and institutions are needed in a missionary synodal church?"

Some questions in the working document address areas of contention in the church such as LGBTQ+ ministry, the role of women and their potential for the diaconate, and the relationship between clergy and laypeople.

While the synod and the global efforts to prepare for it have aimed to be the most wide reaching in history, it has also become the center of controversy and polarization, with longtime commentary and recently published books, particularly "The Synodal Process Is a Pandora's Box" with a forward by American Cardinal Raymond L. Burke, suggesting the meeting has a "radical agenda" and opens the church to democracy and heresy.

Asked about the book on his return flight from Mongolia Sept. 4, Francis addressed the fear some Catholics have expressed about the synod changing church teaching, and said those fears are planted by ideologues who want to frighten and divide the church.

"In the church, whenever someone wants to interrupt the journey of communion, they always use an ideology and accuse the church of this or that," the pope said. "But they never accuse it of what is true or sinful." Instead, he said, "they defend a 'doctrine' in quotation marks that is like distilled water; it has no flavor and it's not true doctrine that is in the creed."

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Flores said the synod process will receive what emerged in the preparatory process in light of the church's tradition, with wisdom and prudence.

"The church can afford to be realistic about what people think -- there's no need to be afraid of what people think," he said. However, the bishop added, "There are voices in the church that are also the voices of our own history, of our own tradition, of our own previous experience -- and that too has to be taken into account."

Flores recommends Catholics in the U.S. not worry but "calmly anticipate the assembly."

"A lot of work has gone into it. I think a lot of prayer has gone into it," he said. "Keep in mind that the focus of the synod is to begin asking some questions on how we can live our communion as a church in a more visibly active way than we have, at least in recent history, in a way that advances the mission."

Flores said it's especially important for Catholics in the U.S. to understand that "the focus of the synod is what we can do to adjust how we make decisions and how we talk to each other for the sake of the mission" of announcing Jesus Christ.

Issues of importance to the universal church are being discussed "ultimately so we can be effective in the missionary work of the church," he said.

"The communion of the church is at the heart of it -- how we talk to each other, how we work together, how we listen to each other, how we make decisions in the local church and even the universal church," he said. "There's a way to do that that is uniquely keeping with the way of Christ, and that's what the synod will be asking about. It's really a 'how' question: How can we do this?"

With synodality, Francis is asking the church to develop a posture of deep, active listening, said Julia McStravog, who was recently named senior adviser to the USCCB on synodal matters and is helping to prepare U.S. delegates.

"Dialogue is at the heart of Pope Francis' papacy and we see it everywhere," she said. McStravog told OSV News the synod is a way for the pope "to put it at the forefront of the church's mind at this moment."

Richard Coll, executive director of the USCCB's Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development and the bishops' synod diocesan liaison, who is also among U.S. voting delegates attending the synod, said this synodal approach is not new for the church but is rooted in its tradition. He told OSV News the synod is a chance for the church to work a muscle it has let atrophy.

"I think there's this misperception that exists among many people in the Catholic community that somehow this (process) is an invention of Pope Francis, but I think he sees himself as very faithful to an authentic synodal tradition," he said. "And indeed, if you really want to be historic about it … Vatican II in its emphasis on synodality and its vision of the church was really drawing on sources way back from the early traditions of the church, right from the Council of Jerusalem in A.D. 51. These aren't new revolutionary developments."

Taking synodality to heart means "everybody has a voice," Coll said. "If you really trust the Spirit, if you really believe it's the Holy Spirit that's guiding us here, then there's room for everybody to contribute."

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