News



Dominican Sr. Patricia Wormann (in white jacket), delegate for religious for the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey facilitates a synod listening session with the Felician Sisters of Lodi, New Jersey. (Courtesy of Donna Ciangio)



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Pope Francis' reimagined process for the Synod of Bishops is much like a living body, involving a "breathing in and breathing out" by the members of the church, said Sr. Maria Cimperman, one of some 40 women religious participating in the Oct. 4-29 assembly in Rome.

Cimperman, a theologian from the U.S. and member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, deconstructed the synod process for members of Rome-based umbrella groups of men and women religious around the world in a Sept. 14 briefing.

The event was livestreamed for members of the women's International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and the men's Union of Superiors General (USG), and was the first of three planned online meetings.

The initial presentation gave participants a bird's-eye view of the novelties of the synod, a type of gathering where voting was previously reserved for bishops, but was opened up this time by Pope Francis to include laity, clergy, as well as women and men religious. Some bishops have described synods of the past as collegial ways of governing as a church. And the present one may have the same aim but with a slightly wider involvement of church members.



Sacred Heart Sr. Maria Cimperman (Courtesy of Bryon Photography)

For the first time, church members who are not bishops, including women, will be allowed to vote in what the pope has described, Cimperman said, as a "walking together," even if prelates still hold the majority of votes. Figures the synod office presented in July show that among the assembly's 378 participants, 85 are women. Cimperman is one of almost 40 women religious who will participate. But in her role as an expert and facilitator, she is not among those who can vote.

However, the process still paves a path of continuation of the renewal ushered in by the Second Vatican Council, Cimperman said, calling on the entire church to

participate with the gifts that each member has received from the Holy Spirit and that Pope Francis is urging.

"He's trying to help us see synodality as the church's ordinary way of proceeding rather than simply reserved for large decisions in the church's body," Cimperman said. "The pope is trying to help the church experience a way of walking together and in which the people listen and are heard."

It will require pastoral and missionary conversion that will involve "renewing mentalities, attitudes, practices and structures" so that the church can "be more faithful to her vocation," Cimperman said.

It's a path that has garnered its share of criticism with some like retired U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, who said in a foreword to a book published in August that it has caused confusion, error and division.

But confusion also is arising from what synod detractors are saying, said Sr. Maria Elena Romero, a Capuchin Poor Clare in Wilmington, Delaware, who says she's been praying for the pope, and for those who will be participating in person, that they'll listen to the process inspired by the Holy Spirit without the noise from outside. As a contemplative sister without a way to access news, it's hard to sift through what people are saying the synod is and isn't and what's being decided, Romero said. Even living in a cloistered community, you still hear the chatter, she said.

> 'He's trying to help us see synodality as the church's ordinary way of proceeding.'
> —Sr. Maria Cimperman
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Sr. Patricia Murray, UISG's executive secretary, said in her introduction to the virtual gathering that the process is "like all journeys," encountering periods of smooth walking and occasional obstacles.

"You begin with a certain trepidation wondering what's ahead," said Murray, a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin, also known as the Loreto Sisters.

But the two international unions of women and men religious — UISG and USG respectively — have taken "this commitment very seriously," she said and will embark on a process of their own to live out the pope's call to walk together.

Cimperman explained that since this synod's beginnings, which started in 2021, there has been a back and forth, a breathing in and out, in the form of asking questions and receiving answers between Vatican officials and the people of God throughout the world, including Catholics who are no longer practicing the faith.

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Some of those answers have come from the places you'd expect, such as parishes, and also contemplative communities such as the one where Romero lives. But they've also come from places and people on the "peripheries," as Pope Francis likes to say, and include border communities, refugee camps and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

"What you're seeing, again, is something unique," Cimperman said, with the Vatican asking questions taken to small, then large communities, followed by a listening process of those answers and prayer at the Vatican, then larger continental meetings taking place that yielded other answers that "a group of experts read, reflected, prayed and discerned together" and now have resulted in the larger assembly, Cimperman said.

The process is a natural one for religious communities, which often use "communal discernment" when making decisions affecting the larger group, Cimperman said.

"Going forward, you have much to offer … in your churches and ministries by sharing some of our practices and yet much to gain by the experiences of others," she added.

Those who participate in the presentations for religious communities — with additional virtual gatherings scheduled Sept. 25 and 29 — are asked to reflect on key concepts that make up the theme of the upcoming synod, "Towards a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission."



A group of Benedictine nuns from Fahr Monastery near Basel, Switzerland, call for "Votes for Catholic Women" at the Vatican during the October 2019 Synod of Bishops for the Amazon. (Deborah-Rose Milavec)

The Sept. 14 presentation focused on communion, and Sr. Hermelinda Carbajal, a Mater Misericordae missionary from Mexico now living in Madrid, said it made her think about her role in supporting other religious congregations. Communities often get wrapped up in the world around them, their charisms but there's a need to reach out to other religious brothers and sisters, including those facing tough situations, she said, during a small group breakout session of Spanish speakers from various countries and congregations.

"More and more, we're getting older, we have much work that needs our attention but there are others who need help and that has resonated with me," added Sr. Nilka Cerezo, of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary Immaculate in Colombia. "We have to

open ourselves to those of other charisms, including those from congregations that are disappearing."

But they also mentioned the need to open themselves up to others in their midst, saying some sisters had been educated in certain ways and perhaps that's why they didn't think of reaching out to some of the folks on the margins that the pope talks about, including LGBT people going through difficult moments.

Whether members of religious communities participate in person in Rome, at local events or online, Cimperman said that for the synod to work, it needs to be buoyed by prayer.

"Without prayer, all is lost," she said. "So, we ask you, all of you, our family, friends, co-workers, for prayers. We pray for this work."

Romero said that while contemplative sisters like her may not be able to attend in person, they plan to be part of the walking together with the "silent strength" of prayer.

"Even though people won't see us, there is great strength in prayer and we'll be there," she said.

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