Vatican
Vatican News



Then-Bishop Mario Grech of Gozo, Malta, applauds at the start of the first session of the synod for the Amazon at the Vatican Oct. 7, 2019. Pope Francis appointed him as secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops in 2020. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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In the aftermath of Pope Benedict XVI's forceful denunciation of gender theory in 2008 that sparked an uproar among LGBTQ activists, three openly gay Maltese citizens announced they were excommunicating themselves from the Catholic Church in protest.

In response, then-Bishop Mario Grech of Gozo, Malta, delivered a blunt message: "Whoever does not accept Christ's teachings should be honest with themselves and excommunicate themselves from the church."

Those words felt like a slap in the face to the local Maltese group known as Drachma , formed in 2004 with the aim of providing a welcome space for LGBTQ+ Catholics and other people of faith.

So it came as a surprise to them when, during a Drachma-sponsored lecture series called "Gender, Sexuality and Spirituality" in the summer of 2014, Grech showed up at one of the meetings on his own initiative.

Grech had been appointed as the country's delegate to the Vatican's upcoming synod on the family that October, a summit Pope Francis had called to discuss major challenges facing marriage and family life.



Prelates leave the opening session of the extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family Oct. 6, 2014. At that session, Pope Francis told delegates to speak freely and without fear. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"He arrived humbly, shy and cautious," recalled Joseanne Peregin, a founding member of the Drachma Parents' Group.

"I have come to listen," Peregin recounted Grech telling the room of just over 20 people.

And when it came time for Peregin to speak, she didn't mince words: "I hold you personally responsible for making my son give up on the church," she told Grech — specifically citing his terse message in defense of Benedict XVI's 2008 remarks.

"He was clearly moved," Peregin told NCR. "At the end, he put his hand on his heart and asked forgiveness on behalf of the church," she said.

"We knew that we were talking to not so much a bishop, but a man who understood the pain of the families in the same way that the church is supposed to be a mother," she continued. "After that, people saw a change in attitude. It was evident

that something was brewing."

'An event to a process'

In 2019, the Vatican announced that Grech had been named as secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, effectively serving as Pope Francis' point person to not just organize and oversee synod meetings that take place in Rome every couple years on a particular theme — but to put synodality at the heart of the reforms taking place in the Francis papacy.

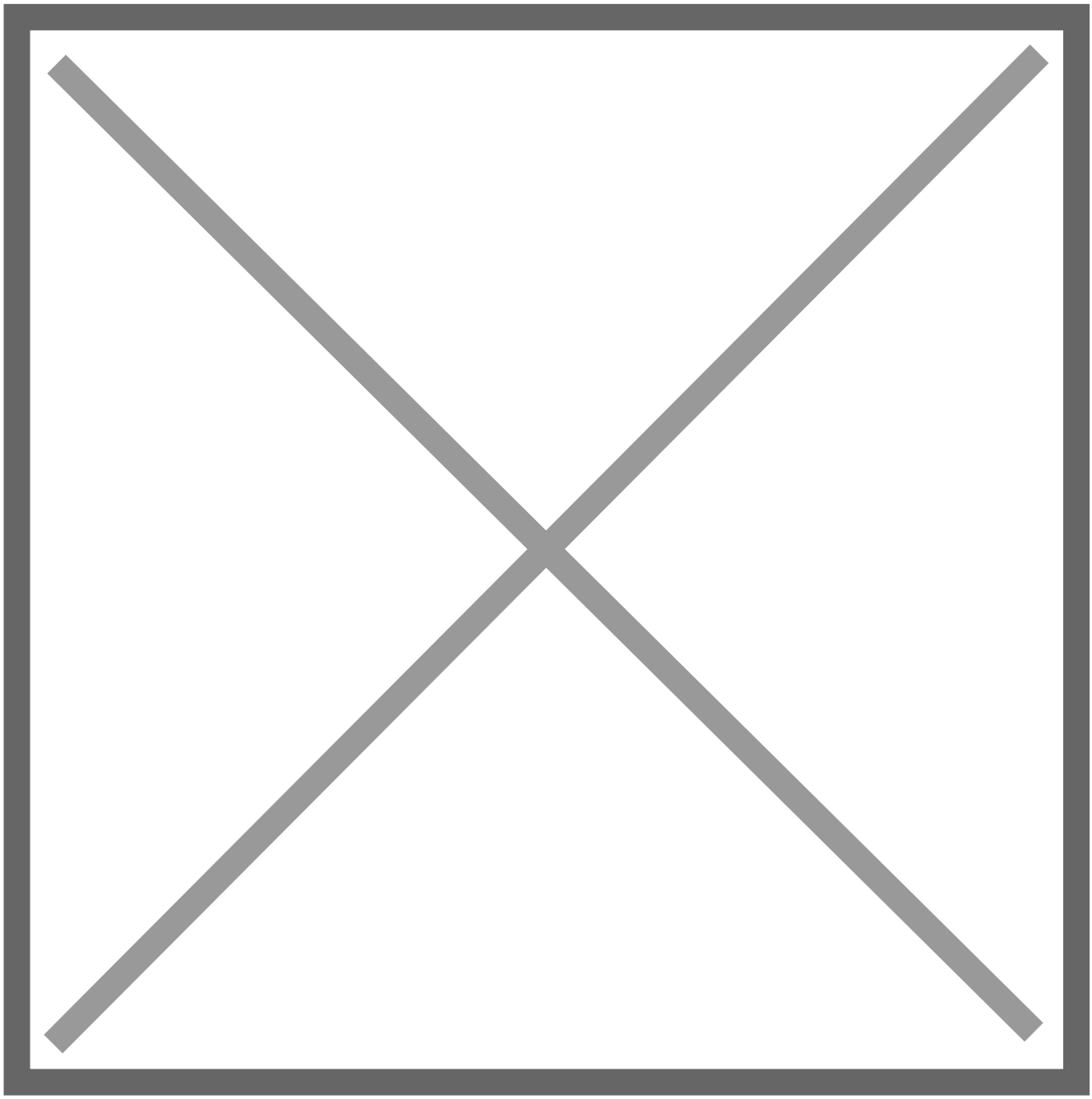


Synodality, the cardinal would later explain, was becoming more than just an event, but a process and a new way of being church that would allow the global institution to become more consultative and listen to all of the people of God.

In March 2020, the Vatican announced the next synod's theme: "For a synodal church: Communion, participation, and mission," and a year later, Grech implemented a major overhaul of the entire process.

No longer would the synods begin and end with a meeting in Rome. The synod on synodality would have three major phases that commenced with listening sessions in dioceses across the globe, followed by continental assemblies and culminating in a Vatican summit.

In October 2021, Francis officially opened the multiyear synod, a process that has been characterized as the "largest attempt at human consultation in the history of the world." Inside the church, reactions have been stark — with some Catholics heralding it as a new era of change and co-responsibility and detractors warning that it is a "hostile takeover of the church" that must be resisted.



Pope Francis gives the homily as he celebrates a Mass to open the process that will lead up to the assembly of the world Synod of Bishops in 2023, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 10, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Remo Casilli)

Now, as some 464 Catholic bishops, religious and lay representatives descend upon Rome next week for the first session of the synod (it has been extended to two parts, set to conclude in October 2024) for a process that will bring together some of the pope's top allies and some of his sharpest critics in the same room, all eyes are on the man in the center of the synodal storm — Cardinal Mario Grech — who Francis has tapped to help him navigate turbulent waters.

A 'true defender of the faith'

Asked about the weight of this responsibility, Grech is quick to deflect attention, insisting that he is not the protagonist of the synodal journey.

"My job — our job — is to listen to what the Holy Spirit is trying to communicate to the church through everybody," he told NCR in a 90-minute interview in his office in the spring. "Our call is to ask the Holy Spirit to help us discover how the people of God can work together."

But this sense of patient discernment and accompaniment hasn't always defined Grech's ecclessial sensibilities.

Grech was born in Gozo — which is Malta's second largest island, but no bigger than Manhattan — in 1957, a time when most Gozitans attended daily Mass. Despite the intensely Catholic identity of the island, it wasn't until just before he went to university that the young Grech began to consider a priestly vocation.



Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, comes from the small village of Qala on the island of Gozo, Malta. In this 2018 file photo, tourists take pictures near crashing waves as a fisherman practices his hobby at the Xwejni Salt Pans outside Zebbug, on Gozo. (CNS/Reuters/Darrin Zammit Lupi)

At the time, he was volunteering for a local organization that cared for disabled people and one day, while driving a young man who had recently started using a wheelchair due to an accident, Grech said he began to think: "This is a young man my age, full of energy. He is an artist. Why him and not me?"

"This triggered some thoughts in my heart," Grech recalled. "I decided I should do something for others."

Soon after that, he enrolled in the local diocesan seminary, where, in 1984, he was ordained as a priest. Studies in Rome followed, first at the Pontifical Lateran University and then a doctorate in canon law from the Angelicum.

After completing his academic work, Grech returned home to Malta, where for two decades, he held a number of pastoral assignments and posts inside the diocesan curia until Pope Benedict XVI named him bishop of his home diocese at the end of 2005. He was then 48.

His old seminary classmate and current chancellor of the diocesan curia, Fr. Eddie Zammit, recalled that as bishop, Grech was "never a clerical person and always a man of the people."

"He loved the church, but he didn't very much love all the decorations that went with it," Zammit told NCR.



Fr. Eddie Zammit, left, who attended seminary with Cardinal Mario Grech, stands with his longtime friend in the Sistine Chapel. (Courtesy of Eddie Zammit)

But according to Zammit, Grech was also a disciplinarian, and when it came to dealing with pastoral matters, "he didn't feel so much freedom."

Simply put, said Zammit, "he was a true defender of faith and very enthusiastic about it."

When Malta was considering legalizing divorce in 2011, Grech was a leading opponent of the legislation. And, as Peregin recalled, when Pope Benedict XVI in

2009 offered a staunch defense of heterosexuality, Grech echoed the pontiff's words in a statement that the local press referred to as the "If you're gay, go" message.

Zammit believes Grech's views began to shift with Francis' election in 2013, recalling that Grech was particularly taken by the new pope's constant description of the church as a "field hospital," motivated first by caring for those in need before addressing questions of morality and doctrine.

"He started feeling the hurts of other people in a new way," Zammit remembered. "Before he was more concerned about applying the teachings as a theory than he was about hearing the concerns of others."



Pope Francis leads a prayer meeting at Ta' Pinu National Shrine in Gozo, Malta, April 2, 2022. Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, grew up in Gozo, a predominantly Catholic island where he previously served as bishop. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Implementing Vatican II reforms

Grech's first experience with synodality came in 2012 as a delegate to Pope Benedict XVI's final synod, focused on the theme of the new evangelization.

Reflecting on that occasion, Grech told NCR that what was most remarkable about it was how unremarkable it was — and what a different experience it was when he arrived in Rome in 2014.

While synods under both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI had a reputation for being tightly controlled with little space for actual debate, Francis immediately began to shake things up, telling delegates at his first synod in 2014 to speak freely and without fear.



Grech, who had no formal studies of the history or theology of synodality during his priesthood, recalls the 2014 synod as a game changer in terms of opening him up to what was possible.

"Practically that was my formation, my baptism," he said with a laugh.

In 2015, during the second session of the synod on the family, Grech recalled Francis giving a speech to mark the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's creation of the Synod of Bishops.

In that speech, the pope laid down a marker, saying that synodality is "the most evident manifestation of a dynamism of communion which inspires all ecclesial decisions" and indicated it would become the pope's major vehicle for driving reform in his papacy.

Grech recalled leaning to the bishop next to him in the middle of the pope's speech as he was trying to absorb what the pope was saying. "We are making history," Grech whispered.

"In that speech, he was already setting a vision for the future," Grech remembered, saying that it was obvious that the pope was still trying to "share with the whole world his insights of Vatican II."

Specifically, said Grech, the pope was trying to properly elevate what one of the council's principal documents, *Lumen gentium*, spoke about as the prophetic voice of all the baptized and the whole people of God.



Joseanne Peregin, second from right, is shown with her children. Peregin, a founding member of the Drachma Parents' Group in Malta, said Cardinal Mario Grech softened his views of LGBTQ Catholics after attending a Drachma-sponsored lecture series in Rome in 2014.(Courtesy of Joseanne Peregin)

One year earlier, at the first session of the synod on the family, Grech, too, had dipped his toes in the synodal waters in an effort to give voice to those in the church that are often ignored.

Just days before he was set to offer a few remarks to the full 2014 synod, he had heard that Peregin was also in Rome to give a presentation at another event organized around the synod, the "Ways of Love" conference, focusing on pastoral care for gay and transgender people.

She called on that synod to revisit language from the the Catechism of the Catholic Church describing gay sex acts as "intrinsically disordered," to stand in solidarity with LGBTQ young people considering suicide and to enter into a new dialogue with gay Catholics and their families.

After Peregin delivered her speech, she received an email from Grech asking for a copy of her full remarks.

"Pray for me to have the same courage," Peregin recalled Grech writing to her after receiving them.

On Oct. 8, 2014, Grech took to the floor of the Vatican's synod hall and in a speech that left Peregin and other Drachma members "shocked," he called on the church to recognize the complex realities of family life today and specifically said it was time to revisit the way the church talks about certain issues.

"I must confess to facing the urgency of this need while listening to families of homosexuals as well as to the same persons having such an orientation and who feel wounded by the language directed towards them in certain texts, for instance in the catechism," he said. "It is necessary to learn to speak that language which is known to contemporary human beings and who acknowledge it as a way of conveying the truth and the charity of the Gospel."



New Cardinal Mario Grech of Malta attends a consistory for the creation of 13 new cardinals in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Nov. 28, 2020. (CNS/Reuters pool/Fabio Frustaci)

Peregin noted that a month after the synod concluded, Grech returned for another meeting with the LGBTQ group where he reported that the backlash to the speech was immediate. But, he also told them he received one major consolation: A few days after he delivered it, during a coffee break, Francis tapped him on his shoulders and thanked him for his courage.

'Processes before issues'

During the summer of 2019, Grech was on a diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes when he received a phone call from an unknown number. He stepped out of the store where he was shopping for religious articles with his parents to take the call. When he realized the pope's voice was on the line, he sat down on the pavement.

The pope's message was brief, but friendly: He'd like Grech to come to Rome to talk about a few matters. They would do it over lunch.

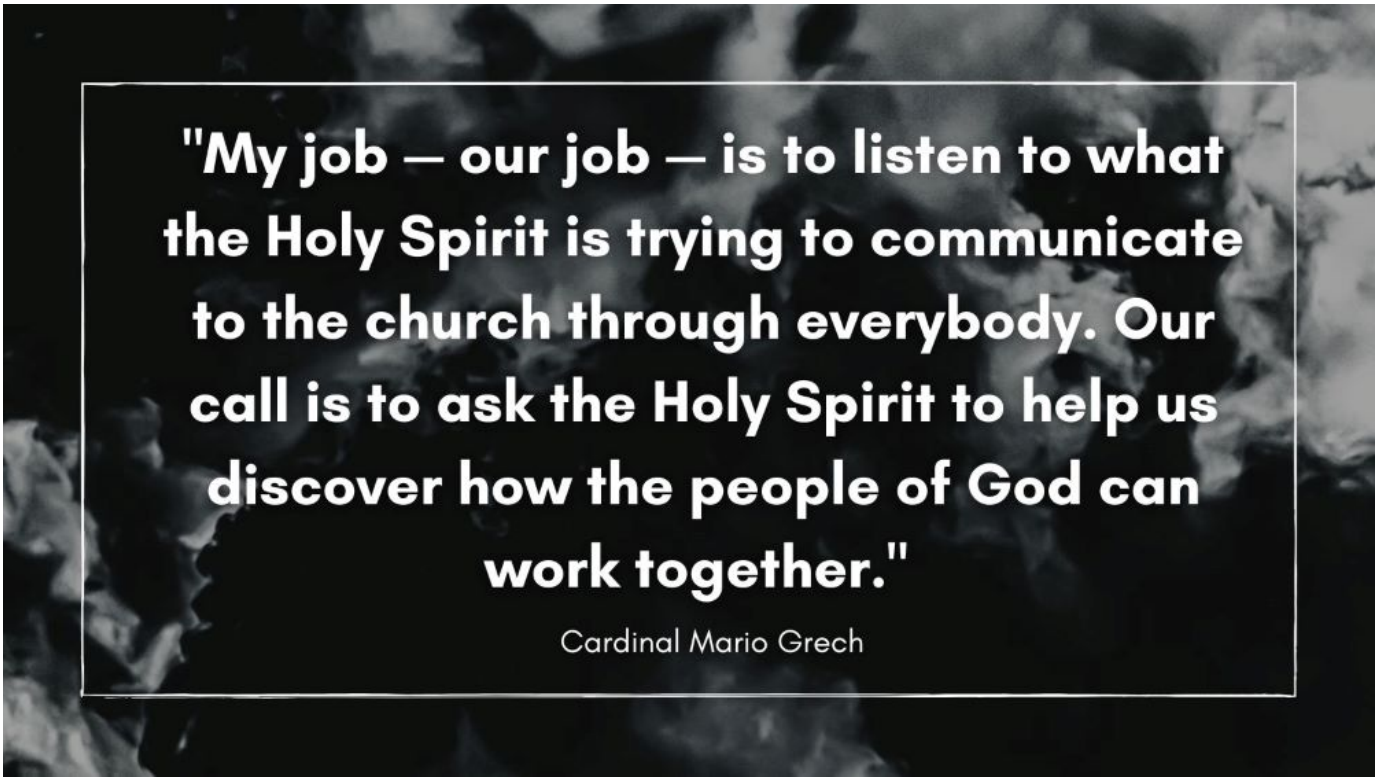
"He asked me if I had any dietary restrictions," Grech recalled. "He notices these little things."

A few weeks later, Grech found himself in Rome. The pope said he wanted to get to the point so Grech could enjoy his meal. And without much fanfare, Francis asked Grech to lead the synod office.

Grech recalled listing a number of reasons why he thought the job wouldn't be a fit, but the pope insisted that he had done his homework. He left the meal telling the pope that he would go home and pray about it.

"Whatever your answer will be, we will remain friends," the pope told him.

"For me, it was complete freedom," Grech recalled.



But the pope had also told him that if he would accept, he would like for him to come to Rome to be a part of that fall's synod, focusing on the needs of the nine-nation Amazon region, in order to provide him a firsthand experience of how synods work behind the scenes. Soon thereafter, Grech accepted the job.

Shortly after Grech took charge of the synod office, the world was interrupted by a global pandemic — radically altering the way every facet of society functioned, including the church.

In an interview during this period, Grech — who Francis elevated to the College of Cardinals in November 2020 — didn't mince words about what this should mean: "It will be suicide if, after the pandemic, we return to the same pastoral models that we have practiced until now."

Part of the last three years of the synod process has been an attempt to answer the question of what sort of church — and critically, what structures are necessary and unnecessary — for the church to operate in today's world.

As delegates prepare the monthlong Vatican meeting, the synod office has compiled a 60-page document outlining a number of questions to guide the discussions. Among the issues participants are asked to confront head-on are the possibility of women deacons, access to the priesthood for married men, the integration of LGBTQ+ Catholics, and penance for sexual abuse and the abuse of power, conscience and money.



Pope Francis greets Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, during a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from around the world at the Vatican in this Oct. 9, 2021, file photo. Francis appointed Grech to lead the synod office in 2020. (CNS/Paul Haring)

But in an interview with NCR, the cardinal said that the question of church structures (or ecclesiology) must be addressed before tackling specific issues.

"Once we become more synodal, then the church, I believe, will be in a better position to address the particular issues," Grech said.

"This is fundamental: Processes before issues," he continued, adding that it would be impossible to tackle every pastoral issue in one synod.

Pandora's box?

When Zammit and Grech were in seminary in the early 1980s, the place was flourishing, with more than 40 men training to be priests. Today, said Zammit, there are 10.

On an island of less than 40,000 residents, where Gozitan families go back centuries, Zammit says one thing that he and Grech, now 66, often talk about is "how quickly social life in Malta has changed."

While Gozo remains the most Catholic region of Malta, "secularization is creeping in," said Zammit.

This reality, he said, has made it clear to Grech that the church needs new strategies for evangelization.

"This office has to connect with those who have left and those that are not in the church," Grech said. "This is a very wide category that includes not only those who do not practice, but even those who are in the church but not fully in the church."

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But that outreach has stirred fierce resistance, with screeds published ahead of the meeting characterizing the entire process as a "toxic nightmare."

In August, one U.S. traditionalist cardinal wrote the foreword to a book sent to many synod delegates, warning that the synod on synodality is a "pandora's box" threatening "to demolish Holy Mother Church." Other synod skeptics have cautioned that the process will weaken the authority of bishops.

Asked about such criticisms, Grech offered a gentle smile and insisted that "I understand them."

"New things can create apprehension, doubts," he said. "Don't forget we have a tradition. We are proud of the tradition and I am proud of the tradition. Anything that can create a risk or danger, can create apprehension."

As for the charge that the synodal process will undermine the authority of the church's bishops — the traditional guardians of the faith — he says that "there is no synodality without bishops."

"Bishops are there to help us to follow the line. I don't use the word defend," he said. "They have the responsibility to guarantee that the discernment carried out by the ecclesial community is correct. This is a challenge on our shoulders, it's not easy."

Synod officials sit at table. Nearby is a computer screen showing faces of people participating

Officials of the secretariat of the Synod of Bishops are pictured at the Vatican during an online meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences June 15, 2021. From left are Xaviere Missionary Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops; Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops; and Bishop Luis Marín de San Martín, undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops. (CNS/Courtesy of Synod of Bishops)

Pressed on concrete changes that could emerge from the synod, Grech again focuses on process.

A canon lawyer by training, he said the Vatican should put together a group of canonists, as well as theologians who are experts in the theology of canon law, to "reflect how synodality can be the backbone of the structure" of the entire church.

"I would love to have that today," Grech said, adding that synodal structures already exist in canon law — such as pastoral councils and finance councils for local parishes — and that they need to be better enshrined into the practices of the church.

One concrete outcome of the 2019 synod for the Amazon was the approval of a first-of-its-kind "ecclesial conference" for the Amazon region that is lay-led, rather than governed by bishops.

Asked if this might be another synodal outcome, with a move toward ecclessial conferences rather than episcopal conferences, Grech said he believed it would likely not be a move from one structure to another, but rather the formation of additional structures.

But, he maintains, nothing is predetermined: "If I come here with an agenda or fixed ideas," the cardinal said, "I am not listening."

Message from Cardinal Mario Grech

Click here to watch Cardinal Mario Grech's video message about the Continental Assembly for North America, released Feb. 13 by Vatican News.

'A free heart'

Since the launch of the current synodal process in 2021, Grech has participated in hundreds of Zoom meetings with local churches, and as the COVID-19 pandemic subsided, he began to travel around the world speaking about synodality and getting a firsthand look at how it was being implemented. During the continental phase of the process alone, in less than two months, he attended the meetings in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Reflecting back on this period, he said that what was clear to him was that "the people of God were more open to get along with this process rather than us [bishops]."

"Synodality is ingrained in the nature of the people of God," he continued. "In the laity, I felt we are not bringing something new. To the contrary, we were harping a chord in their heart and they were ready to sing and to dance to this music."

While aware that this music might sound like clanging cymbals to others, Grech said that looking ahead at what's to come, he has "a free heart."

Cardinal Grech stands near rows of coffins as he prays at a memorial for migrants.

Then-Bishop Mario Grech and Imam Mohammed El Sadi deliver messages in front of the coffins of 24 migrants during an interfaith burial service outside Valletta on Gozo island in Malta April 23, 2015. Grech was appointed secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops in 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Darrin Zammit Lupi)

Papal biographer Austen Ivereigh — who was one of the collaborators that helped draft the synod's initial working document for the continental phase and will be a facilitator at the upcoming Vatican summit — said that in working with Grech, he's witnessed a "sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of synodality."

He specifically pointed to the decision to extend the synod as a multiyear process and over two meetings in Rome, which he believes is a testament to Grech's "great confidence in the process."

"The more I've gotten to know Grech, the more I've gotten to understand what the Holy Father saw in him," Ivereigh said. That, he believes, is a shared trust in "the workings of the Holy Spirit" — something that Ivereigh said the pope clearly saw in Grech in 2014 at Francis' first synod.

Now, on the eve of the first synod under Grech's watch, Paola Lazzarini, who is the president of *Donne per la Chiesa*, an umbrella group of Catholic women's organizations, told NCR that she appreciated Grech's efforts to implement and oversee the pope's ambitious synodal process.

And while she believes it is progress that one of Grech's current deputies is a woman — Xavière Sr. Nathalie Becquart — and that for the first time in the synod's history, women have been granted the right to vote on the assembly's final document, she said these developments under his leadership fall short of the expectations of many women's organizations.

Those expectations, she said, include parity in the number of votes for women and men and the equal inclusion of women in drafting the synod's final outcome document, which she hopes will help to elevate the voices of women theologians.

Helena Jeppesen-Spuhler, a Swiss delegate to the European continental synodal assembly who will also be a European representative at the October synod, agrees that more space needs to be made for women, but said "for now, this is still a synod of bishops."

Recalling conversations with Grech both in Prague and in Rome, she told NCR that she found the cardinal "really synodal" and, surprisingly, able to talk to people at the same level.

"There was no clerical behavior," she said. "He is not authoritarian."



Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, center, appears with Pope Francis during a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from around the world at the Vatican Oct. 9, 2021. Francis officially opened the multiyear synod on synodality in October 2021. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

Zammitt, reflecting on his near five-decade friendship with Grech, said that all the priests in Malta are following the synod process closely, all very aware of the

resistance it has met in certain quarters — but all confident that Grech will strike a balance of not betraying the church's tradition while opening it up to something new.

"He will listen to everyone, he will listen to all the issues heartily, but he will not compromise our theological patrimony," Zammit said.

As for those that believe that nothing will change, Zammit rejects that, too.

"He hates going to a meeting and achieving nothing," he said. "He's always aiming at concrete results, not superficial ones."

Reflecting on her own family's journey, Peregin said it took her a number of years to absorb her son's coming out as gay before becoming an outspoken Catholic advocating for her son to have a place in the church.

She said she believes Grech has been on his own journey with the people of God, and that's why Pope Francis selected him as his point person for this process.

"He had a very, very strong opinion and then he changed. And the reason for that change was meeting the people," Peregin said. "This synodal process, he lived it. He lives it. If I was the pope, I would want exactly those kinds of people."

And for her, Grech embodies the essence of synodality: being open to conversion — and like that of the whole church — *still* converting.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 13-26, 2023** print issue under the headline: Cardinal Mario Grech: Central figure in pope’s plan to change Catholic Church.