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Cardinals and bishops process to the altar to concelebrate with Pope Francis the opening Mass of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican Oct. 4. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Pope Francis on Oct. 4 officially opened a long-anticipated Vatican summit on the very future of Catholicism, encouraging its participants — bishops and laypeople alike — to reject the temptations of doctrinal rigidity and to embrace a vision of the

church that is open and welcoming to all.

"The blessing and welcoming gaze of Jesus prevents us from falling into some dangerous temptations: of being a rigid church, which arms itself against the world and looks backward; of being a lukewarm church, which surrenders to the fashions of the world; of being a tired church, turned in on itself," Francis said in a homily in St. Peter's Square that marked the start of the monthlong Synod of Bishops' synod on synodality.

Some 450 delegates from all over the world have descended onto Rome for the occasion, representing a wide array of views and often sharp divisions on some of the hot button issues facing the church, such as clergy abuse, the role of women's ministry, inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics and other questions surrounding the structure of church authority.

Pope Francis giving his homily during Mass in St. Peter's Square on Oct. 4 (NCR photo/Rhina G

Pope Francis delivers his homily during Mass in St. Peter's Square on Oct. 4. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

While the synod will allow widespread debate on these issues, the pope used his opening homily to caution against relying on "human strategies, political calculations or ideological battles" and instead urged "unity and friendship" in the weeks ahead.

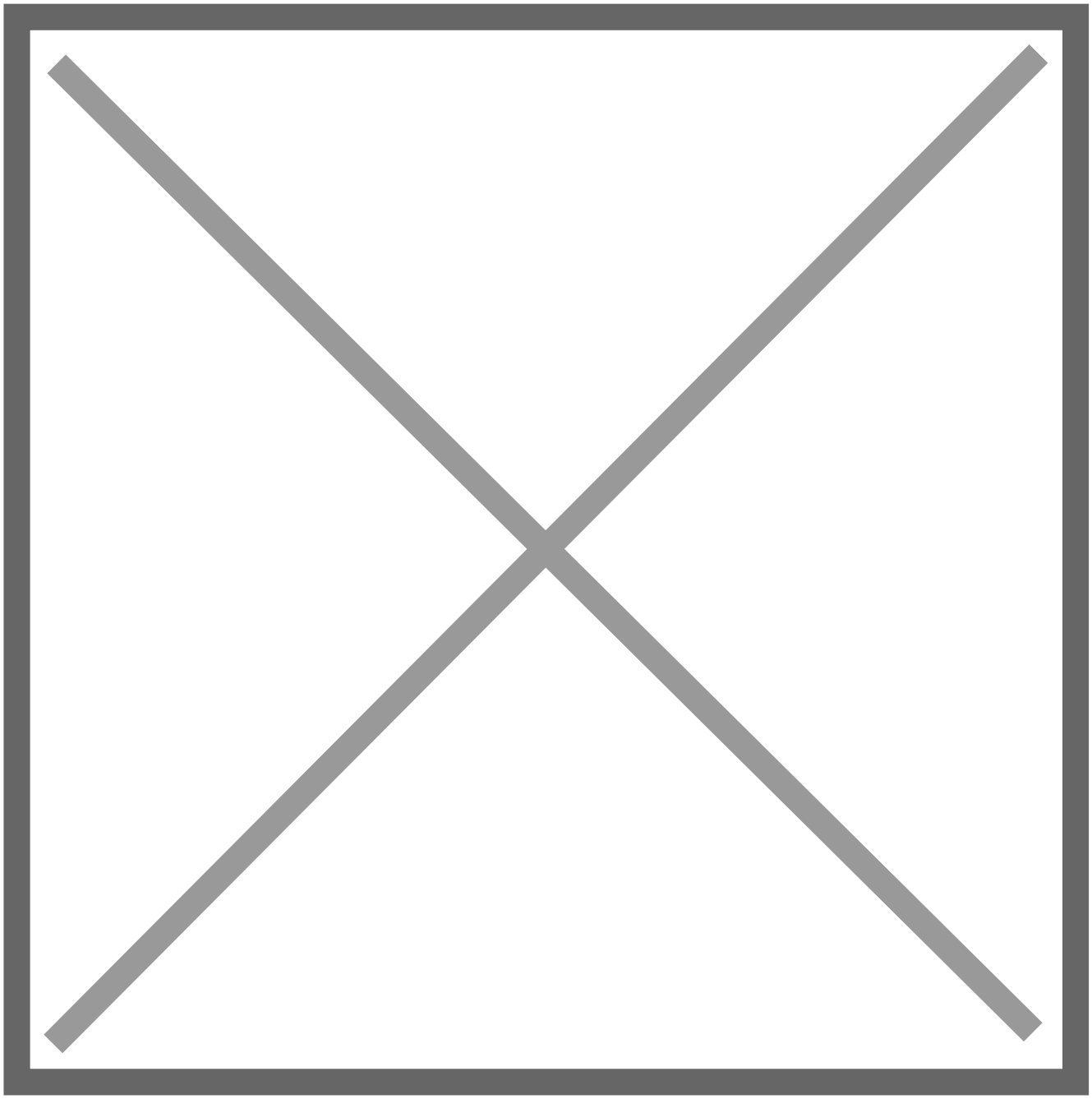
"This is the primary task of the synod: to refocus our gaze on God, to be a church that looks mercifully at humanity," he said.

"A church that is united and fraternal, that listens and dialogues; a church that blesses and encourages, that helps those who seek the Lord, that lovingly stirs up the indifferent, that opens paths in order to draw people into the beauty of faith. A church that has God at its center and, therefore, is not divided internally and is never harsh externally," he continued.

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> —Pope Francis
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Francis went on to draw a parallel to the Second Vatican Council, the series of pivotal 1962-65 assemblies that instituted a number of church reforms, and were widely viewed as opening the institution up to the modern world.

" 'It is necessary first of all that the church should never depart from the sacred patrimony of truth received from the fathers,' " said Francis, quoting Pope John XXIII, who convened the council. " 'But at the same time she must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.' "



Pope Francis celebrates Mass in St. Peter's Square for the opening of the Synod of Bishops on Oct. 4. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

As the Mass began, lay delegates joined bishops — including the newest men just elevated to the College of Cardinals on Sept. 30 — in the official procession to the altar. Their walk together was set against the facade of St. Peter's Basilica as the pontiff looked on, amid a thinly attended congregation in the square.

The 86-year-old Francis, who has made synodality the centerpiece of his papacy and the primary vehicle for implementing church reforms, told those gathered under the warm October sun that in the month ahead, they are invited to be a church that "does not impose burdens" and instead "repeats to everyone: 'Come, you who are weary and oppressed, come, you who have lost your way or feel far away, come, you who have closed the doors to hope: the church is here for you!' "

Speaking briefly off the cuff, Francis repeated a refrain that he has used often in recent months: that the church should be open to "*tutti, tutti, tutti*" — "everyone, everyone, everyone."

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The Oct.4-29 meeting marks the fifth synod of Francis' decade-long papacy. While previous synods have addressed controversial topics such as Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics, the state of young people in the Catholic Church and the needs of the nine-nation Amazon region, this synod — which will take place in two-sessions, in Oct. 2023 and Oct. 2024 — is likely to be the most contentious of any of Francis' assemblies to date.

On the eve of the synod, five prominent retired conservative cardinals publicly warned that the pope may risk error or confusion by inviting open debate on so many sensitive topics.

But after a two-year process leading to this moment, which has included listening sessions with Catholics around the globe, Francis charged those gathered at Mass to look with a "welcoming gaze towards the weakest, the suffering and the discarded."

Following the Mass, the synod delegates gathered in the afternoon of Oct. 4 for their first working session, where they heard again from Francis and then from the two primary cardinals leading the synod assembly.

The pope focused his remarks, made largely off the cuff, on the role of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the synod's discussions. The pope told the members that they should remember that they are not the "protagonists" of the event, but rather the Spirit is.

Francis also noted global expectations that the gathering might focus on hot-button issues, mentioning in particular that he had seen media focus on the possibility that the Catholic Church might ordain women as priests. The pope repeated his frequent refrain that the synod is not a "parliament," but a place for communal discernment.

Luxembourg Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, the synod's relator general, or main coordinator, mentioned in his remarks how the assembly is organized with new seating arrangements compared to previous synods. The some 460 participants are seated at roundtables, facing one another. Hollerich said the arrangement allows for "genuine sharing and authentic discernment."

"It mirrors the experience of the People of God along the synodal path that started in 2021," said the cardinal. "Roundtables also remind us that none of us in a star in this synod."

After Oct. 4, the synod members will continue to meet for six days a week through Oct. 29, and will discuss topics and questions surrounding the themes of communion, participation and mission. They will alternate between general assemblies and meetings in small working groups.

In addition to being the synod's opening Mass, the Oct 4 morning liturgy also celebrated the Catholic feast day for St. Francis of Assisi, the 12th-century Italian *poveretto* and Pope Francis' namesake.

The pope told the synod delegates that the saint "did not criticize or lash out at anyone," but instead "took up only the weapons of the Gospel: humility and unity, prayer and charity."

The pope's exhortation to the delegates: "Let us do the same!"

***Editor's Note**: This story was updated after initial publication to include information about the synod's first working session on Oct. 4.*

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: Synod doors open at the Vatican.