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Pope Francis joins leaders and members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops for a workin

Pope Francis joins leaders and members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops for a working session Oct. 23 in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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As Pope Francis' major summit on the future of the Catholic Church enters its final week, bishops and laity were reminded of the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the church's "living tradition," including the participation and inclusion of all of the "people of God."

As delegates commenced work on their hotly anticipated final document from the monthlong meeting, Australian Fr. Ormond Rush — one of the world's leading scholars on Vatican II — encouraged the synod's more than 450 members to be attentive to the "traps" of "being drawn into ways of thinking that are not 'of God.' "

"These traps could lie in being anchored exclusively in the past, or exclusively in the present, or not being open to the future fullness of divine truth to which the Spirit of truth is leading the church," said Rush on Oct. 23. "Discerning the difference between opportunities and traps is the task of all the faithful — laity, bishops, and

theologians — everyone."

Rush's remarks, made during one of the synod's occasional open sessions, drew heavily on the writings of the late Pope Benedict XVI. As Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, the future longtime Vatican official and pontiff participated in the council and served as a drafter of some of its key texts. At the time, Ratzinger articulated a distinction between so-called "static" and "dynamic" understandings of the church's tradition.

Rush said the "living tradition" of the church, as taught by the council, is guided by the Holy Spirit through the interrelated means of the work of theologians, the lived experience of the church's faithful and the oversight of church authorities.

"Sounds like a synodal church, doesn't it?" Rush asked.

In recent weeks, some synod delegates have expressed skepticism over the inclusion of lay persons in the Synod of Bishops. Some delegates have also expressed frustration about the assembly's discussion of issues — such as better inclusion of LGBTQ persons and women's leadership in the church — that they argue have previously been settled by the church's tradition.

Rush, who has been a theological adviser to the Vatican's synod office, seemed to offer an indirect reply to those critics in his remarks, noting that the council taught that divine revelation is not something in the past, but rather an "ongoing encounter in the present."

"The same God, in the same Jesus Christ, through the enlightenment and empowerment of the same Holy Spirit, is forever engaging with, and dialoguing with, human beings in the ever-new here and now of history that relentlessly moves humanity into new perceptions, new questions and new insights, in diverse cultures and places, as the world-church courses through time into an unknown future until the eschaton," he said.

"This synod is a dialogue with God," he told the delegates, who are now preparing to begin making recommendations for the assembly's final report. "God is waiting for your reply."

Rush spoke on Oct. 23 during what will likely be the synod's final livestreamed session. The participants will now meet in small groups throughout this week for discussions about the assembly's final document, which is set to be voted on in the

evening of Oct. 28.

In coming days, the synod delegates are also expected to vote on the publication of a separate, brief "Letter to the People of God" that is meant to convey the general experience of the synod process.

Both documents are expected to provide a framework for further areas of reflection and engagement with the local levels of the church, ahead of the second session of the synod in October 2024.

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At the start of the Oct. 23 meeting, Dominican Fr. Timothy Radcliffe said that as synod delegates prepare to head home, they will be asked, "Whose side are you on?" when asked about some of the synod's contentious issues.

"We shall need to be profoundly prayerful to resist the temptation to succumb to this party-political way of thinking. That would be to fall back into the sterile, barren language of much of our society. It is not the synodal way," said Radcliffe, who also led a three-day retreat for delegates prior to the start of the synod.

"The synodal process is organic and ecological rather than competitive," he said. "It is more like planting a tree than winning a battle, and as such will be hard for many to understand, sometimes including ourselves!"

"But if we keep our minds and hearts open to the people whom we have met here, vulnerable to their hopes and fears, their words will germinate in our lives, and ours in theirs. There will be an abundant harvest, a fuller truth," he continued. "Then the church will be renewed."

[NCR news editor Joshua J. McElwee contributed to this report.]

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