Opinion

Guest Voices



Participants in the assembly of the Synod of Bishops meeting in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Oct. 25. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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It is hard for result-oriented Americans to understand that, for Pope Francis, the synodal process is more important than any decision, report or document that comes out of it.

We are eager to know what the synod will decide on specific issues like blessing gay couples, ordaining women as deacons or priests and authorizing married priests.

Spoiler alert: The synod will not decide on these topics this month; it will call for further prayer, conversation and research on controversial topics in preparation for the second session of the synod in October 2024.

Rather than focusing on these topics, Francis wants to overcome the polarization in the church so it can be a true sign and instrument of communion with God and with humanity. He wants the people of God to fulfill their responsibility to announce to the world the Good News of the Gospel, the love and mercy of God toward all humanity and indeed all creation. He wants the entire church to become synodal.

The synod is not an academic conference on the theology of synodality; it is an experience of synodality. It is like the difference between a conference to discuss prayer and going on retreat to pray. It is the difference between talking about love and being in love.

As a result, no document will convey the result of the synod. It will not be enough to read any document that comes from the synod; Catholics must experience the synod, must do synod. The best place to do this is in your parish.

Some of the African participants at the synod report that they are already doing it. They have small Christian communities that meet weekly to converse about the Sunday Scriptures. They pray together and share their reflections. This provides the groundwork for a synodal parish. Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna acknowledged that the European church is lagging behind on such practices.

Every parish in America can have its own synodal experience by adapting the synodal process as described in "Methodology for the working groups," published by the general secretary of the synod.

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The process begins with prayer. In Rome, the synod members began with an ecumenical prayer service followed by a three-day retreat and an opening Mass. While a three-day retreat is impractical for most U.S. parishes, they might benefit from the talks given by Dominican Fr. Timothy Radcliff during the retreat. In any case, praying together is essential to the process.

Like the members of the synod, parishioners should be divided into groups of 10 members sitting at round tables.

In addition, at the synod, there was an experienced facilitator to guide the members of each group in the process. The facilitator's job is not to impose his or her views on the group but to be an impartial moderator who encourages respectful listening and makes sure everyone is able to participate.

Each group also chooses a secretary to draft a report of the group's discussions.

The actual work of the small groups involves "conversation in the Spirit" on the question they want to discern. The question could be a decision facing the parish or any of the topics (Communion, Mission, Participation) outlined in the synod working paper or *Instrumentum Laboris*. Perhaps most fruitful would be reflection on the questions that come out of the first session of the synod, which ends this week.

At the synod, the question for consideration was laid out for the groups in a talk before they began their conversations in the Spirit. Something similar could be done for a parish discernment.

Before meeting in small groups, each participant is asked to prayerfully prepare his or her own contribution to the question "by entrusting oneself to the Father, conversing in prayer with the Lord Jesus and listening to the Holy Spirit."

When the group meets, going around the table, each person has four minutes to speak from his or her own experience and prayer. This is more about sharing experiences than articulating arguments. Jesuit Br. Ian Cribb, who has led many communal discernments, suggests each participant begin by saying, "In my prayer, I ..." The group listens attentively to each participant but does not immediately respond.

The group then pauses for a few minutes of silent prayer and reflection.

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This reflection is not followed by debate. Nor is it the time to add what you did not get a chance to say the first time around.

Rather, "from what others have said, each one shares what has resonated most with him or her or what has aroused the most resistance in him or her, allowing himself or herself to be guided by the Holy Spirit: 'When listening, did my heart burn within me?'"

Cribb suggests that as they go around the table the second time, each participant's short intervention begin with, "I heard in the group ..." or "I was moved by ...."

This is followed by another period of silent prayer and reflection.

The group then engages in open "dialogue on the basis of what emerged earlier in order to discern and gather the fruit of the conversation in the Spirit." At this point participants can say what they will. The purpose is not to force agreement but "to

recognize intuitions and convergences; to identify discordances, obstacles and new questions; to allow prophetic voices to emerge."

If multiple groups are involved, then each group reports its work to the others in a plenary session. Everyone should feel represented in the report from their group.

After listening to all the reports, the groups meet again to reflect on what they have heard. They then distill the fruits of the plenary session and formulate a final report, including proposals for next steps.

Such a process is a far cry from a parish meeting presided over by the pastor who announces and defends his preordained decisions. It is also different from a meeting where people loudly argue with each other over what is going on in the parish or debate other church topics. Such meetings often lead to more polarization, not less.

Pope Francis is offering a better way. Are we willing to try it?

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