Vatican

View from the Vatican



Participants meet 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 was less than two weeks into Pope Francis' high-stakes Vatican summit on the future of the Catholic Church when multiple reports emerged about participating delegates storming out of the room.

In one case, a bishop didn't want to be photographed sitting next to a priest with whom he had numerous disagreements. In another, a cardinal believed that the Oct. 4-29 Synod of Bishops was a misnomer because it now included the equal participation of the laity — a criticism that has reverberated throughout the monthlong meeting.

The incidents weren't exactly a surprise, as the roughly 450 bishops and lay delegates taking part in the assembly had been warned by one of the synod's principal organizers that tensions in the room would emerge.

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> —Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich
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"We are not afraid of tensions," Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg told participants on Oct. 9. "Tensions are a part of the process, as long as we consider ourselves to be sisters and brothers, walking together."

During the second and third weeks of the synodal assembly, issues that include the role of women's ministries in the church and questions surrounding how to respond to LGBTQ Catholics — as well as the very nature of synodality itself — brought to the surface a number of disagreements among its members.

Francis has asked synod members to refrain from speaking publicly about the nature of the proceedings this month. This account is based on interviews with multiple delegates who requested anonymity because of the pope's request. They each described the synod's revamped and expanded process as a positive development,

but one with a steep learning curve.

For synod organizers — and, indeed, the pope himself — disagreement was all part of the plan.

The official guidelines for the meeting have assigned the synod's small groups the task of outlining areas of both convergence and divergence — as well as issues that need further study and theological reflection.



Sr. Samuela Maria Rigon, superior general of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 23. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

One day after hearing accounts of sharp disagreements, I asked one synod member to corroborate some of the things I had heard.

Indeed, it was all true, the person confirmed, adding: "We're not even at first base here. We can't even get to discussing many of these issues, because so many people in the room haven't been trained in the practice of synodality. That's what

this month is providing."

"So, it's sort of a boot camp?," I asked. "Exactly," they replied.

Some people in the Vatican's Pope Paul VI hall this month, where the synod is meeting, are here because they wanted to be, while others are here because someone else chose them. It's a bit like the draft versus voluntary enrollment.

Many of the bishop members were elected by their fellow prelates to represent their respective countries, as is outlined by the church's Code of Canon Law and Francis' 2018 apostolic constitution defining the structure of the Synod of Bishops, *Episcopalis communio*.

But when the pope decided earlier this year to extend participation — and the right to vote — to lay delegates, the Vatican synod office specified that lay members were to be nominated based on their previously exhibited commitment to the years-long synodal process.

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Throughout the month, both bishops and lay members have attested that it's very often the laity who are better versed in the practice of synodality — something Cardinal Mario Grech, who runs the Vatican's synod office, told me earlier this year had been his experience with the process to date.

"Synodality is ingrained in the nature of the people of God," he said. "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."

And on Oct. 25, multiple synod members confirmed that Grech spoke directly to all the delegates at that morning's session to underscore that the assembly has the full authority of a synod. By including lay members for the first time, Grech said, the synod had expanded its scope in hopes of integrating the entire church.

But for those unaccustomed to this process, and all that it entails, boot camp has been difficult.

As the month has grinded along, there have been multiple reports of synod delegates complaining that the emphasis on listening — where every roundtable

member is expected to offer their views and several minutes of forced silence requiring delegates to sit with their words before responding — has been a tiresome process.

Sharing a different perspective, another bishop told me that unlike past synods, where delegates could sit in the Vatican's synod hall, with stadium style seating, this synod requires an active listening where participants must look at each other face to face and respond to what is being shared.

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Another delegate recalled an incident at their roundtable where a priest was watching a bishop — who was serving as the roundtable's secretary — take notes to later report back to the full assembly. The bishop, apparently irritated that a priest was looking over his shoulder, snapped that if he refused to stop monitoring him, he would throw him out.

"The bishop didn't seem to understand that in this environment, he didn't have the authority to do that," the delegate said.

On another occasion, a synod participant described to me what they described as the "tyranny of the articulate" — those more accustomed to speaking in public forums — could either inadvertently or intentionally intimidate participants with less experience speaking in such an environment.

Across the board, it seems, this month's bootcamp has echoed what Vatican II expert and Canadian synod delegate Catherine Clifford told my colleague Joshua McElwee and me on our "The Vatican Briefing" podcast at the start of the synod: While the practice of synodality has deep roots in the Catholic tradition, over time the church's synodal muscles "were allowed to atrophy."

Francis, said Clifford, has "taken a wager that we will learn to do this, in the doing. We learn by doing."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 10-23, 2023** print issue under the headline: Bishops walking out, ‘tiresome’ listening: Inside tensions at the synod.