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Catherine Clifford, professor of theology at St. Paul University in Ottawa, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 26. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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As the Catholic Church's synod on synodality continues, it is drawing on lessons learned from decades of ecumenical friendships and dialogues and is sharing its experience with ecumenical partners with one goal in mind: helping all Christians take responsibility for the mission of sharing the Gospel, said several synod participants.

"This is an important example of what we call receptive ecumenism, learning from one another's best practices, each church recognizing the need for renewal and growth, so that we might all better live the Gospel," said Catherine Clifford, a synod member and professor of theology in Canada, who has been involved in international ecumenical dialogues.

Clifford was one of the synod participants who spoke at a Vatican briefing on the synod Oct. 26, a briefing focused mainly on the ecumenical dimension of the synod process.

Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Iosif of Western and Southern Europe, a fraternal delegate, noted that the international Catholic-Orthodox theological dialogue has been focused on the theme of synodality and primacy, looking at ways leadership has been and is exercised and shared in the Christian community throughout history.

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Opoku Onyinah, a televangelist from Ghana and former chairman of the Church of Pentecost there, told reporters he was impressed at how the assembly insisted that each participant have an equal time to speak and to share and how prayer was woven throughout each session.

"The decision which will finally be taken will be the decision of the Holy Spirit and the people — not only the bishops, or the pope, but the synod," he said. "I consider it an excellent attempt to break barriers of division and bring Christians together in that Christ-like journey we are all taking."

"The Catholic Church has set a pace for Christian unity," he said. "I've learned from it, and it will be appropriate for other churches and other Christians to follow suit."

Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, noted that fraternal delegates have been invited to the synods from the beginning but their participation in the synod on synodality — focused on the responsibility of all the baptized — has special significance since they, too, are baptized in Christ.

"The Holy Father is convinced that the journey of this synodal process must be ecumenical, and the ecumenical journey must be synodal," the cardinal said. "There is a mutual relationship between ecumenism and synodality, because all Christians, all the baptized, are invited and obliged to profess the faith, to testify to the truth and love of the Christian faith."



Cardinal Kurt Koch, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 26. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

And, just as synodality and mission go together, so do ecumenism and mission, he said, noting that the modern ecumenical movement began with a meeting in Scotland in 1910 where various Christian communities recognized how their divisions were hindering their ability to convince people of the truth of the one Christian faith.

"When we are not united, our mission of (sharing) the love of Jesus Christ for humankind and for this world is not credible," the cardinal said.

Clifford told reporters, "The whole ecumenical movement is a movement of renewal and reform of the churches. The Second Vatican Council and its reforms also had the goal of evangelization. Why change and renew the structure of the church? So that it can proclaim the Gospel more effectively, more credibly."

The Catholic Church's push for synodality, she said, is asking how the church can be "more faithful to the God-given dignity and gifts of all the baptized, and we're looking at all the structures and practices to see what needs to be renewed and we're doing this together with other Christians who are asking similar questions."

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