News



NCR Vatican Correspondent Christopher White participated in the Nov. 2 panel discussion "The Synod: What happened? What didn't? What's next?" The event was organized by Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut. (NCR screenshot/Sacred Heart University)



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It was "impossible not to feel a certain buzz or energy that something historic was taking place," said NCR Vatican Correspondent Christopher White as he reflected on the recently concluded monthlong Synod of Bishops on synodality.

White shared his experience covering the synod of bishops as a virtual panelist for Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, event on Nov. 2. He joined theological and synod delegate Catherine Clifford and Daniel Rober, associate professor and chair of the department of Catholic studies at Sacred Heart University. The panel was moderated by Michael Higgins, distinguished professor emeritus at Sacred Heart University.

"The Synod: What happened? What didn't? What's next?" was hosted by the university's Center for Catholic Studies and featured a wide range of topics, including synod highlights and lowlights, seminary formation, synod communications and synod reactions, as well as a question-and-answer period with an in-person audience of teachers, faculty and students.

> 'I do think the growing sense of communion inside the synod hall helped lessen the divisions outside the synod hall.'
> —Christopher White
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"Synods just bring everyone to town," said White, as he described his experience talking to people from around the world about their involvement in synodality in their home regions. "For journalists, this is real serious on the ground training, and that was a real gift."

As each participant shared perspectives on the meeting, conversation turned to the communications questions related to Pope Francis' intervention in the early days of the synod asking members to refrain from speaking publicly about the nature of the proceedings.

Both White and Clifford said that there was a fundamental difference between people attempting to sway proceedings with public commentary, or specifically

highlighting private conversations, and people communicating their experience in the hall, or in generalities about topics being discussed during the sessions.

"I do think it's important, as a journalist, for people to speak because I think the synod is best understood through the experience, rather than the text it produces," White said.

All three panelists addressed the importance of listening and participation during the meeting.

"I think this was a school for bishops, aimed at helping all of us simply learn how to listen," Clifford said. "The goal was not to paper over the differences or the divergences in our points of view. We have not had creative spaces for conversation and dissent in the Catholic world for decades."

Clifford said that although sessions included frank discussions and sharp differences, the process was valuable. "We can disagree vehemently about things and still respect each other," she said.

Rober, speaking at the university, said he was struck by the image of the pope sitting at a table with other delegates. "I think the symbolism of the pope as a participant in these discussions, who is there as a member of the faithful, has real significance for this synod and the broader pursuit of synodality," he said.

Asked about criticism from traditional and conservative Catholics, Clifford described the common mission and purpose people shared in the hall. "It was not correct to represent the synod and the people in the hall as being interested in setting aside the tradition of the church," she said. "Everyone in the hall loves the church, and is here to serve the church."

White agreed. "I do think the growing sense of communion inside the synod hall helped lessen the divisions outside the synod hall," he said.

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At the conclusion of the panel, participants were asked about next steps in local communities. One audience member said that they had not heard much about the synod in their home diocese or parish.

"The leadership of the U.S. bishops has had a tepid response to synodality," White said. He cited Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, as someone who has championed synodality in the U.S. Conference of Bishops despite "a lot of roadblocks and obstacles in his way, including at the very top."

Still, after her time in the synod hall, Clifford remained optimistic.

"If we actually did those 81 recommendations [in the synod report], this would give the whole church a makeover top to bottom. The work of doing that will take a generation. We won't see the results of this overnight, but stay tuned. This is a remarkable moment, a turning point and transition in the life of the church."

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