News



Bishops attend a Nov. 16, 2022, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)



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A little more than two weeks after Pope Francis wrapped up the first of his two major Rome summits on the future of the Catholic Church, the U.S. bishops will meet for their fall assembly in Baltimore Nov. 13-16 and are expected to discuss the four-week event.

The American prelates will have a packed agenda for their gathering, which also includes a vote to implement a new framework for Indigenous ministry, reauthorizing their anti-racism committee, and likely approval of parish bulletin inserts about Catholics' responsibilities in political life, for use ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

But the Oct. 4-29 Synod of Bishops will be a major topic of importance for the U.S. bishops' fall plenary. The prelates will be meeting less than a month after the synodal assembly issued a report that discussed many pressing issues impacting the church's mission in the modern world, including questions of better inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics and women's leadership.

"I'm going to be very interested to see how enthusiastic those who participated in the synod are in describing their experience," said Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese, a journalist who has covered the bishops' conference for decades.

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He suggested that the prelates chosen by Francis to attend the synod — such as Cardinals Blase Cupich of Chicago and Robert McElroy of San Diego — will be "predictably enthusiastic" about its work. But Reese told NCR that he will be paying close attention to how receptive will be those bishops whom the conference elected to attend the synod.

Those bishops include Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York; Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota; Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana; and Military Services Archbishop Timothy Broglio, the president of the bishops' conference.

"How strongly the elected representatives of the conference speak out in favor of the consultations that are now going to be taking place will matter a lot. If they're enthusiastic about the synod, then hopefully all the bishops will get on board and support the consultative process leading up to the second session of the synod," Reese said.

Another conference-elected prelate who attended the Vatican assembly was Bishop Daniel Flores, who coordinated the synodal process for the U.S. bishops. Flores, bishop of Brownsville, Texas, is expected to update them on the synod, as he has in previous conference plenary sessions.



Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, sits next to Pope Francis during the assembly of the Synod of Bishops Oct. 10 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"As we have moved through the synodal consultations, from the sessions in our local parishes and dioceses, the regional and national gatherings, and the more recent

continental report, we have all learned and heard many things," Flores told the bishops at their June assembly in Orlando, Florida.

During the synod session in Rome, Flores took his turn sitting next to Francis as a delegated president of the gathering. On X, formerly Twitter, Flores posted photos of spiritual excursions he and other delegates took during the synod. On Oct. 29, Flores posted a quote from Francis' homily at the synod's closing Mass where the pontiff spoke of the need "to adore God and to love our brothers and sisters" as the "great and perennial reform" of the Catholic Church.

"I don't know of a clearer way to say this," Flores posted.

Also expected to address the U.S. bishops in Baltimore will be Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the Vatican's ambassador to the United States — who has taken the opportunity at recent bishops' gatherings to emphasize synodality. At their June assembly, Pierre touched on the indications that several bishops in the United States had been resistant to what Francis has said is the need for a synodal church.



Then-Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the apostolic nuncio to the United States, speaks June 15 during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' spring plenary assembly in Orlando, Florida. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

"It may be that we are still struggling to understand synodality. Perhaps it has been hard for us to embody this 'style of God.' Perhaps 'the adventure of this journey' has made us a bit 'fearful of the unknown,' " Pierre said in his June remarks.

Massimo Faggioli, a theologian and church historian at Villanova University who has written and spoken extensively about the synod, told NCR that "if precedent is any

indication," he doubts that the U.S. bishops' conference will launch any kind of initiative related to the synod and the assembly report's recommendations without first receiving guidance from the Vatican.

"And I don't know if there'll be anything coming from Rome proposing what episcopal conferences should do or are invited to do in the wake of the synod," Faggioli said.

Besides the synod, Reese said he expects the other significant matter to emerge from the bishops' agenda will be their discussion and vote on approving the new introductory letter and bulletin inserts for their quadrennial "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" teaching document.

"The November before presidential elections, [the bishops' plenary] is always focused on 'Faithful Citizenship,' " said Reese, adding that observers study what the bishops say and emphasize in their official guidance to how Catholic voters should approach political issues.

Noting that Francis warned of the urgency of climate change in his Oct. 4 exhortation *Laudate Deum*, Reese said: "I'll be looking to see how much of an emphasis the bishops put on global warming. This is clearly a priority for Francis, probably the most important issue facing the world in a century. How important do the bishops think it is?"

According to drafts of the "Faithful Citizenship" introductory letter and bulletin inserts obtained by NCR, climate change is identified in a couple of inserts as an issue impacting the common good, but is not presented as a matter of high priority. Echoing language from the bishops' 2019 introductory letter, abortion is referred to as "a preeminent concern" in the introductory letter while issues like racism, health care, wars and famine, gun violence and the death penalty are mentioned as "other grave threats to life."



Bishops vote Nov. 12, 2019, during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)

"There are many bishops in the conference for whom abortion is the single most important issue," Reese said. "It's the priority of priorities, and anything that distracts from that, in their minds, is left-leaning, and that includes things like global warming, concern for the poor, health care and immigration."

Regarding the introductory letter's emphasis on abortion "as a preeminent concern," Alessandra Harris, an author and co-founder of Black Catholic Messenger, suggested that "every educated adult in America knows the U.S. Catholic Church's position on abortion."

She also told NCR that the church "has done its job to underscore its pro-life position."

"But the church is sorely lacking in its education and political advocacy around issues that are equally important, such as racism, climate change, gun violence, and

health care," Harris said. "When you look into those issues, you will find that due to the structural and systemic racism still pervasive in society, Black Americans are most affected by racism, climate change, gun violence, and health disparities."

The draft introductory letter and bulletin inserts often quote from *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis' 2020 encyclical "on fraternity and social friendship." The inserts are each organized around a Catholic social teaching theme such as solidarity, human dignity, the common good, subsidiarity, and the church's role in public life.

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> —Massimo Faggioli
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At their November 2022 plenary, the bishops opted to publish a new introductory letter and bulletin inserts, instead of rewriting "Faithful Citizenship." The bishops plan to begin revising "Faithful Citizenship" after the 2024 election, with the goal of preparing a new edition for approval at their November 2027 plenary.

The bishops have not issued a new version of "Faithful Citizenship" since 2007. Since then, several observers said, new important issues have risen in public life, such as the threat that Christian nationalism poses to democracy.

But mirroring the political polarization in the culture, Faggioli said, the bishops' conference is currently in "a state of paralysis" regarding its ability to form consensus on political guidance to Catholics.

"Revising the letter and the inserts is the best the bishops' conference can do right now. Everything has become incredibly tense and contentious," Faggioli said.

Less contentious than the 2024 presidential election will be the votes in Baltimore that the bishops will cast for six standing committee chairmanships, as well as that of conference secretary, who also serves as chairman of the bishops' Committee on Priorities and Plans.

The current conference secretary, Archbishop Paul Coakley of Oklahoma City, is up against Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon. The position is up for a vote because Coakley in November 2022 was elected to complete the term left vacant by Broglio, who was elected conference president.

The bishops will also elect chairmen of the committees on Catholic education, communications, cultural diversity in the church, doctrine, national collections, and pro-life activities.

This story appears in the **USCCB Fall Assembly 2023** feature series. View the full series.