Opinion

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Pope Francis poses for a picture with participants of the Synod of Bishops' 16th General Assembly in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Oct. 23. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)



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At the synod on synodality, the Western media focused on a limited number of hot-button issues — women's ordination, married priests and blessing of gay couples. But hidden in the synod participants' 40-page synthesis are some surprising gems that could lead to significant reform in the church.

The first is a new stress on lay involvement. Compared with other Christian churches, the Catholic Church is very hierarchical. This synod, especially the conversations at roundtables, was structured so that lay voices, including women and young people, were heard and respected. "Synod path called by the Holy Father is to involve all the baptized," the report notes. "We ardently desire this to happen and want to commit ourselves to making it possible."

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Second, the synod promotes "Conversation in the Spirit." The term refers to a practice that "enables authentic listening in order to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Churches," the report explains, adding that " 'conversation' expresses more than mere dialogue: it interweaves thought and feeling, creating a shared vital space."

Third, the report acknowledges disagreements and uncertainties. In the past, the hierarchy tended to cover them up, presenting a united front to the faithful and the world. But on its first page the synod's report acknowledges "The multiplicity of interventions and the plurality of positions voiced in the Assembly" and admits "that it is not easy to listen to different ideas, without immediately giving in to the temptation to counter the views expressed."

In each following chapter, any disagreements and uncertainties are listed under "matters for consideration" that "require deepening our understanding pastorally, theologically, and canonically."

The report also acknowledges its divides. "The Church too is affected by polarization and distrust in vital matters such as liturgical life and moral, social and theological reflection," it reads. "We need to recognize the causes of each through dialogue and undertake courageous processes of revitalizing communion and processes of reconciliation to overcome them."

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Fourth, the report addresses the concerns of women. "Women cry out for justice in societies still marked by sexual violence, economic inequality and the tendency to treat them as objects," it says. "Women are scarred by trafficking, forced migration and war. Pastoral accompaniment and vigorous advocacy for women should go hand in hand."

The church must "avoid repeating the mistake of talking about women as an issue or a problem. Instead, we desire to promote a Church in which men and women dialogue together, in order to understand more deeply the horizon of God's project, that sees them together as protagonists, without subordination, exclusion and competition."

The synod concluded that in the church "It is urgent to ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry."

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Fifth, it did not forget the poor, "who do not have the things they need to lead a dignified life." Instead it insists on their dignity, cautioning the church to avoid "viewing those living in poverty in terms of 'them' and 'us,' as 'objects' of the Church's charity. Putting those who experience poverty at the center and learning from them is something the Church must do more and more."

Sixth, it charges the church with combating racism and xenophobia, saying it must take action against "a world where the number of migrants and refugees is increasing while the willingness to welcome them is decreasing and where the

foreigner is viewed with increasing suspicion." In addition, "Systems within the Church that create or maintain racial injustice need to be identified and addressed. Processes for healing and reconciliation should be created, with the help of those harmed, to eradicate the sin of racism."



Participants of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops attend a daily session of the monthlong synod on synodality in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Oct. 16. (AP/Domenico Stinellis)

Seventh, abuse in the church must be dealt with, suggesting that the church explore the possibility of setting up a juridical body separate from the bishop to handle accusations of clerical abuse, saying, "It is necessary to develop further structures dedicated to the prevention of abuse."

Eighth, the synod participants called for reforming priestly formation. "Formation should not create an artificial environment separate from the ordinary life of the faithful," the report said, and called for "a thorough review of formation programs, with particular attention to how we can foster the contribution of women and

families to them."

It recommended joint formation programs for "the entire People of God (laity, consecrated and ordained ministers)." It also called on episcopal conferences to "create a culture of lifelong formation and learning."

Ninth, the synod called for a regular review of how bishops, priests and deacons carry out their ministry in their diocese, including "regular review of the bishop's performance, with reference to the style of his authority, the economic administration of the diocese's assets, and the functioning of participatory bodies, and safeguarding against all possible kinds of abuse."



Synod on synodality participants attend a daily session in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Oct. 11. (AP/Maria Langarica Correa)

Tenth, the report took on liturgical language, saying the texts used in Catholic rites should be "more accessible to the faithful and more embodied in the diversity of cultures." It later suggested that liturgy as well as church documents need to be

"more attentive to the use of language that takes into equal consideration both men and women, and also includes a range of words, images and narratives that draw more widely on women's experience."

Eleventh, it raised the possibility of offering Communion to non-Catholics, or what it called "Eucharistic hospitality (*Communicatio in sacris*)." Saying it was a pastoral issue as much as an ecclesial or theological one, the report noted that such hospitality was "of particular importance to inter-church couples."

Twelfth, the report took aim at what it means to be a deacon in the church. As it is, the deaconate is largely seen as a steppingstone to priesthood. The report questions the emphasis on deacons' liturgical ministry rather than "service to those living in poverty and who are needy in the community. We therefore recommend an assessment of how the diaconal ministry has been implemented since Vatican II."

Thirteenth, reform of the Roman Curia must continue. The synod affirmed Pope Francis' statement in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate evangelium*, released in March 2022, that "the Roman Curia does not stand between the Pope and the Bishops, rather it places itself at the service of both in ways that are proper to the nature of each."

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The synod called for "a more attentive listening to the voices of local churches" by the Curia, especially during periodic visits of bishops to Rome, which should be occasions for "open and mutual exchange that fosters communion and a true exercise of collegiality and synodality."

The synod also asked for a careful evaluation of "whether it is opportune to ordain the prelates of the Roman Curia as bishops," implicitly suggesting that lay people might hold top Vatican positions.

Fourteenth, the report said canon law needs updating. "A wider revision of the Code of Canon Law," it reads, "is called for at this time" to emphasize the synodality of the church at all levels. For example, it suggests, pastoral councils should be mandatory in parishes and dioceses. It also held up for imitation a recent plenary council of Australia.

Lastly, the synod wants to promote small Christian communities, "who live the closeness of the day-to-day, around the Word of God and the Eucharist" and by their nature foster a synodal style. "We are called to enhance their potential," the synod's members said.

You will not find these gems written about in the media, but if we let the media tell us what to see in the synod, we might miss important opportunities for church reform.

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