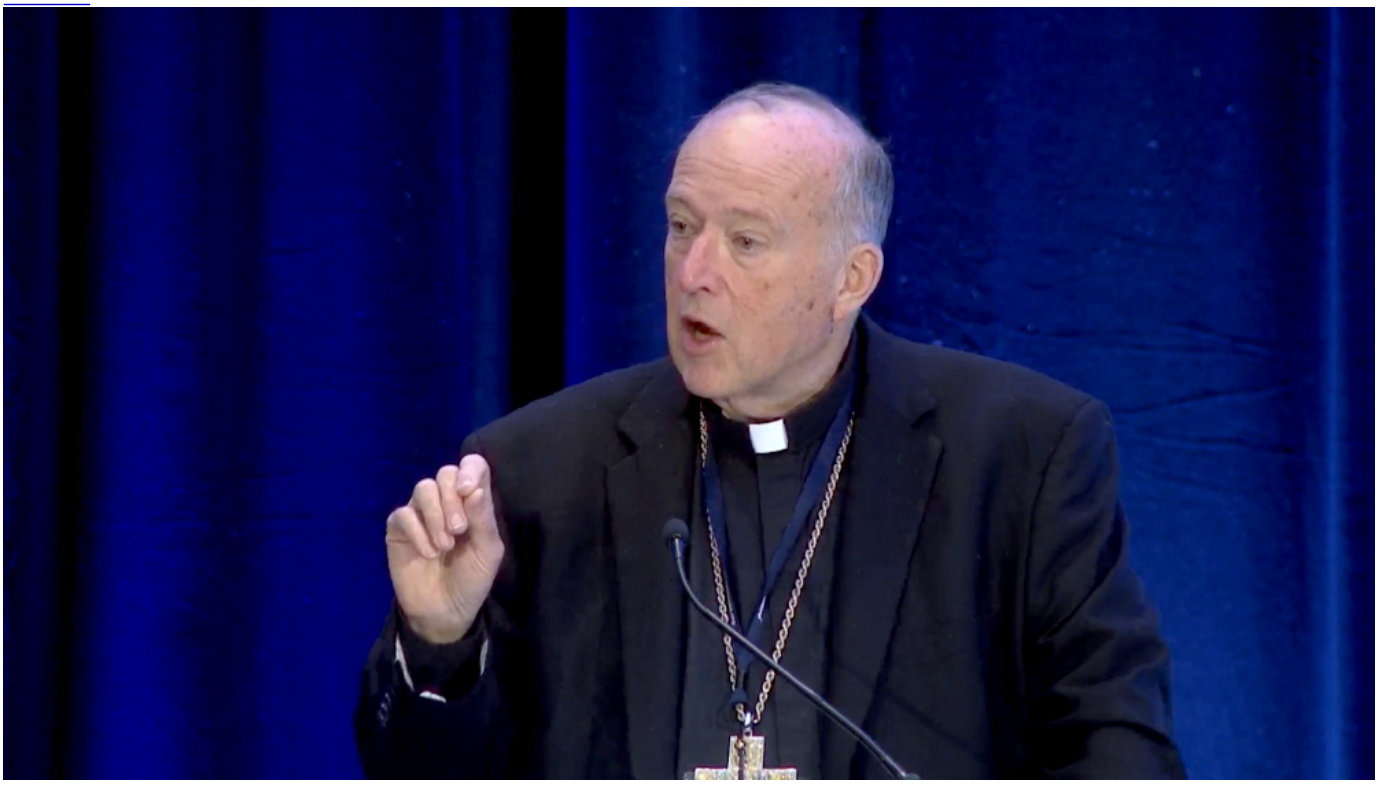
News



Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego speaks Nov. 10 to the Religious Formation Conference's 2023 Congress in Chicago, on how women and men religious can help transform the Catholic Church into a synodal church following the path of the Holy Spirit. (NCR screenshot/Religious Formation Conference)



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Women and men religious have a unique and powerful opportunity to lead the Catholic Church in its synodal conversion, San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy told people gathered Nov. 10 at the Religious Formation Conference's semiannual Congress, being held in Chicago.

Because consecrated men and women have already largely embraced synodality in religious life and are a living example of discernment, their prophetic voices can teach the universal church to follow the path the Holy Spirit is leading us on, he said.

"Synodality is not rooted in specific outcomes, no matter how important," McElroy said. "It seeks nothing less than a recasting of the culture of the church that will endure for generations."

The Congress runs Nov. 8-12. In addition to McElroy's keynote, it features numerous speakers and workshops on topics across formation for religious life. On Nov. 11, the conference will present its Sr. Mary Emil Penet award to Incarnate Word Sr. Teresa Maya for significant contributions to formation ministry.

> 'Listening flows from a recognition that we have so much to learn. Listening lies at the heart of true encounter with the other disciples we meet in the life of the church.'
> —Cardinal Robert McElroy
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McElroy said the process of the synod on synodality, which was held in Rome Oct. 4-29, "testified to the identity of the church as the entire people of God in a piercing manner," because it had not just bishops, but laywomen and men, religious, priests and deacons from around the world, all treated equally. "It was a stark contrast with past synods, where bishops alone voted and the bulk of the sessions were spent listening to a seemingly endless series of speeches that left participants passive and disengaged," he said.

Synodality means to walk together, which requires a transformation from a church marked by clericalism, unneeded secrecy, and what he called "a prison" of being

compelled to present and defend a church without error or sin.

"The Scriptures tell us that God listens attentively to the cry of God's people. Listening is the respect we owe to others in recognition of their equal dignity," McElroy said. "Listening flows from a recognition that we have so much to learn. Listening lies at the heart of true encounter with the other disciples we meet in the life of the church."



Pope Francis and leaders of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops applaud at the conclusion of the gathering's last working session Oct. 28 in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

That is a marked conversion from what happens all too often, he said, noting that synodality requires Christian humility.

"A humble church acknowledges and seeks to atone for the wounds it has brought to others, particularly the sexual abuse of young people. A synodal church genuinely seeks to discern its woundedness and embrace reform," McElroy said. "Its holiness is

exemplified by its humility, not by denial or the protection of its reputation. A humble church confronts the evil of clericalism that corrodes its spiritual and ministerial life."

The synthesis document created at the synod said clericalism "needs to be challenged from the earliest stages of formation." In an aside from his prepared remarks, McElroy said he cannot emphasize enough that the repudiation of clericalism must begin in formation.

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In another aside from his written address, McElroy noted that the synthesis document even calls for accountability and evaluations of bishops.

"On one level, we're accountable to everybody, and on another level we're accountable to no one," he said. "Well, we're accountable to the pope, but you have to be really bad" to merit papal involvement. "You have to really go off the rails."

He said the synod was a powerful encounter with the diversity of the Catholic Church and that, again, religious can lead the way on demonstrating the interplay of unity and diversity.

"Many of you in consecrated life have had deep and powerful encounters with the richness of the global church and know this joy. For us in the assembly, it was profoundly hopeful and illuminating to sit with bishops, lay leaders, priests and consecrated religious and behold how the challenges to and opportunities for enhancing the mission of the church look entirely different across the world," McElroy said. "This truly was a privileged moment of grace."



Br. Alois, prior of the ecumenical Taizé Community, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops as Benedictine Mother Maria Ignazia Angelini, a theologian, listens at the Vatican Oct. 27. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The most inspiring moments of the month in Rome, he said, was the widely expressed desire to bring more women into leadership and decision-making roles within the church.

"Repeatedly during the spiritual and theological reflections which took place during the assembly, the point had been made that Jesus, in his invitation to women as disciples and witnesses to the Resurrection, produced a paradigm shift for the treatment of women in the culture of his time," McElroy said. "Many in the hall felt that the time has come for just such a shift in the life of the church."

He went on to note that while there were more than 80 proposals for action in the synthesis document, "This was the only one that was labeled urgent. The only one."

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While the document is "far more muted" on the exclusion of divorced and remarried and LGBT Catholics, he said, "It does call for the church to genuinely listen and accompany these members of the people of God who live on the periphery of the church." It also notes that Jesus never began from the perspective of prejudices or labels and always listens to the cry for help of those in need.

"Let us pray that in the coming year this beautiful vision of Jesus' pastoral ministry may light the way for the church's ministry to those who are marginalized in the church because of their marriage status or orientation or identity," McElroy said.

Related: Religious share how synodality shapes their decisions, common life — and can help the wider church

Women and men in religious life "have a unique ability to energize, enlighten and spiritually deepen the process of synodality that Pope Francis has launched," especially in the areas of discernment, in humility, lifelong formation, and the type of inclusion shown in Jesus' pastoral ministry.

"You are already enormously committed and effective in supporting all those who are excluded within the life of the church and society. You witness to the rights of the poor, immigrants, the unborn, victims of ethnic and racial injustice and the disabled. You constantly seek to bring all of God's children into the life of the church," McElroy said. "Deepen this mission as the church moves forward on the synodal path. Help us to follow the pastoral example of Jesus in the Scriptures. Help us to embrace all … *todos, todos, todos*."