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People gather around round tables spread across a large audience hall with an arched roof

Participants in the assembly of the Synod of Bishops gather for an afternoon session Oct. 25 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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The council of the Synod of Bishops will ask Pope Francis to authorize studies on the need to update canon law, revise the rules for priestly formation, deepen a theological reflection on the diaconate -- including the possibility of ordaining women deacons -- and consider revising a document that provides norms for the relationship of a bishop with members of religious orders in his diocese.

"These are matters of great importance, some of which need to be considered at the level of the whole church and in collaboration with the dicasteries of the Roman Curia," said a statement from the Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod.

The council met at the Vatican Dec. 5 to discuss preparations for the second assembly of the synod on synodality, which Francis has said will meet in October

2024. Exact dates have not been set.

In the statement, published Dec. 12, the council said the list of study topics it will ask the pope to approve was requested by members of the synod assembly in October. As part of the synthesis report of the assembly, each of the requests was approved by more than 80% of the synod members.

Studying the topics, particularly their theological implications, was seen by synod members as an important part of responding to questions and concerns raised by Catholics in listening sessions prior to the assembly as they sought to discern ways to ensure the gifts and talents of all baptized Catholics were recognized and welcomed.

"Groups of experts from all continents together with the relevant dicasteries of the Roman Curia and coordinated by the General Secretariat of the Synod will be asked to work in a synodal way on the topics indicated by the Holy Father," the statement said. "A report on the progress of this work will be presented at the second session in October 2024."

With the synthesis report as "the reference point for the journey of the people of God in the time between the two sessions," it said, dioceses and bishops' conferences around the world are asked to engage in further consultation, specifically looking at ways they could or should institute some of the synod assembly's recommendations for bringing more people together in the evangelizing mission of the church.

"We are called and sent by the Risen One to proclaim the Gospel to the world today," the council members said. "Growing as a synodal church is a concrete way to respond to this call and this mission."

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While dioceses and national or regional bishops' conferences are not being asked to repeat the listening sessions they carried out from October 2021 to the spring of 2023, they are being asked to gather people to reflect on the synthesis report.

In particular, the synod council asked them to discuss, "How can we be a synodal church in mission?"

"The objective of these new reflections is to identify the paths we can follow and the tools we might adopt in our different contexts and circumstances in order to enhance the unique contribution of each baptized person and of each church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today," it said.

The council said it was not looking simply for "technical or procedural improvements to make the church's structures more efficient, but rather an invitation for reflection on the concrete forms of the missionary commitment to which we are called that express the dynamism between unity and diversity proper to a synodal church."

"What ways of relating, structures, processes of discernment and decision-making with regard to mission make it possible to recognize, shape and promote co-responsibility?" the council asked. "What ministries and participatory bodies can be renewed or introduced to better express this co-responsibility?"

Acknowledging the limits of time and resources, the council said the consultation they hope for will differ in each diocese.

"In this stage, in addition to the participatory bodies at diocesan level and the synodal team already established, it will be important to involve people and groups that express a variety of experiences, skills, charisms, ministries within the people of God and whose point of view is of particular help in focusing on the 'how,' " it said. The council suggested particularly parish priests, catechists, leaders of small Christian communities, religious men and women, leaders of Catholics schools, universities and hospitals and theologians and canon lawyers.

Dioceses are asked to send their reflections to their national bishops' conferences or Eastern Catholic synod of bishops, which are asked to submit a report of no more than eight pages to the synod office in Rome by May 15.