News



Pope Francis leads a meeting with the presidents and coordinators of the regional assemblies of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Nov. 28, 2022. Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, attended the meeting. The Holy See requested further consultation of the faithful ahead of October's second, and final, meeting of the Synod on Synodality. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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April 22, 2024
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On a Saturday morning in March, about 80 Catholics gathered for two hours at the Archdiocese of St. Louis' headquarters in a southwest St. Louis suburb.

Their aim was to reflect on two questions: "Where have I seen or experienced successes — and distresses — within the Church's structure(s)/organization/leadership/life that encourage or hinder the mission?" and "How can the structures and organization of the Church help all the baptized to respond to the call to proclaim the Gospel and to live as a community of love and mercy in Christ?"

"Behind it is really just, 'How can we be a more welcoming church?'" said Marie Kenyon, director of the Archdiocese of St. Louis' Peace and Justice Office and a member of its synod committee who coordinated the March listening session. "I thought they (the discussions) were really thoughtful."

Those two questions were asked across the United States during diocesan listening sessions in the first months of 2024. They were drawn verbatim from a Jan. 2 letter from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops conveying a request from the Holy See for further consultation of the faithful ahead of October's second, and final, meeting of the Synod on Synodality.

Diocesan reports from these sessions were due to the USCCB April 8. Julia McStravog, the USCCB's senior adviser for the synod, said most of the diocesan reports have been filed, but some dioceses have been granted extensions.

Bishops approached the listening sessions in different ways that best fit the needs of their diocese's people, she said.

"It will be interesting to see once we have all of those (reports) how the conversations went," she said of the diocesan listening sessions. "Some dioceses … had listening sessions that focused on specific groups or areas that are kind of lacking in these other stages (of the synod process), so, bringing priests more into

the conversation, speaking with deacons."

The dioceses' three-to-five-page reports will be condensed into 15 regional reports, which will inform a national report due to the Holy See May 15. That report is expected to be made public as a matter of transparency, McStravog said.

The national report will include synthesis from 17 additional national listening sessions the U.S. synod team led earlier this year. These sessions brought together experts to speak on particular synod focus areas, including Catholic higher education, campus ministry, Catholic schools, women, lay movements, young adults, youth, social justice, health care, migration, poverty, vocations, consecrated life, diocesan clergy and seminarians, and bishops.

With the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission," the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops — also known as the Synod on Synodality — is in an interim phase between its two-session meeting at the Vatican. After a two-year preparation phase, the first meeting in 2023 drew more than 450 participants (including 364 voting delegates) worldwide to Rome for most of October.

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The meeting is scheduled to continue Oct. 2-27. In a December communication, the Holy See's General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops asked episcopal conferences around the world to prepare for that session with continued consultation, guided by the 41-page synthesis report produced at the end of the synod's first session.

That consultation, according to the December document, was to be chiefly guided by the question "HOW can we be a synodal Church in mission?" The USCCB's January letter — signed by Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Texas, USCCB doctrine committee chairman and synod coordinator — conveyed this request.

While the synod is addressing a range of issues, the December communication from the Synod Secretariat quoted Pope Francis: "The synod is about synodality and not about this or that theme .... The important thing is how the reflection is done, that is, in a synodal way."

For leaders facilitating the participation of U.S. Catholics, that meant trying new consultation approaches. The preparation period in 2021-2023 invited all U.S. Catholics to participate, with diocesan, national and continental consultation. The U.S. synod team flipped that approach for the interim phase, choosing smaller groups of experts for what Richard Coll, executive director of the USCCB's Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development and a synod delegate, called "richer and deeper" conversations.

Coll and McStravog are members of the U.S. synod team, along with Flores; Alexandra Carroll, assistant director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development; and Father Michael J.K. Fuller, USCCB general secretary.

Those sessions were facilitated by working groups with different areas of expertise, including diocesan leaders, USCCB staff, bishops, theologians and professional experts. The U.S. synod delegates were also invited to participate.

"The synod continues to be an invitation to creativity and experimentation, so we've done them a little bit different than how we did before, in that we're working in groups that have been leading the way and coordinating these listening sessions with particular focus areas," said McStravog. "They put their brains together and came up with invitation lists, and that was to make it manageable."

With 15 to 30 participants, these listening sessions have been much smaller than the 12 continental phase's listening sessions held virtually in December 2022 and January 2023, as part of the synod process leading up to the Synod General Assembly's first meeting in October 2023. The continental listening sessions drew more than 100 people each, McStravog said.

"What this has done actually is given a different tenor to the conversation because they're more intimate and smaller," she said. "We're still playing with our best practices and learning our best practices. Is it smaller, is it bigger? How to do it online. … So there will be an assessment after all of this for the U.S. synod team to say, how did this go? What were the best practices? Were all of these good ideas? Did some of these fall flat and maybe we need to move on?"

Coll, whom the U.S. bishops appointed in 2021 as their synod liaison, expects what the U.S. synod team shares with the Holy See — as well as similar documents from all over the world — to influence another working document from the General Secretariat of the Synod, led by Cardinal Mario Grech of Malta, ahead of October's

meeting.

The U.S. synod delegates expect to review and reflect on that document together, he said, in preparation for the next session of the synod meeting.

"It really is a learning process, a very dynamic process," Coll said of the continuing synod process, particularly the recent listening sessions. "I think it's one that has gotten traction, so far, with the people we've been working with. People seem interested, committed, with ideas. It has been a very grace-filled process to see in action."