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Pope Francis speaks to members of the Italian Catholic Action lay association gathered in St. Peter's Square during a meeting at the Vatican April 25, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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The most important outcome of the current Synod of Bishops on synodality is the synodal process itself and not the hot-button topics discussed, Pope Francis said.

With the second synod assembly scheduled for October, the pope said the synod process is approaching its "most challenging and important" stage — the point at which it must become "prophetic."

"Now it is a matter of translating the work of the previous stages into choices that will give impetus and new life to the mission of the church in our time," he told members of the Italian Catholic Action lay association in a packed St. Peter's Square April 25.

But he noted that "the most important thing of this synod is synodality, the subjects and topics (discussed) are there to advance this expression of the church that is synodality."

"For this, there is a need for people forged in the Spirit, for 'pilgrims of hope,' " Francis said, "men and women capable of charting and walking new and challenging paths."

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In March, Francis decided that some of the most controversial issues raised at the first synod assembly "requiring in-depth study" will be examined by study groups;

the groups are to issue preliminary reports to the synod assembly in October and give their final reports to the pope by June 2025.

The 10 themes to be explored by the study groups include the guidelines for priestly formation, the role of women in the church and their participation in community leadership, listening to the poor and the criteria for selecting bishops.

While some questions require deeper study, Francis told the crowd to "be athletes and standard bearers of synodality in the dioceses and parishes of which you are part, for a full implementation of the (synodal) path taken so far."

The Vatican said that 60,000 children, young people and adults were gathered in and around St. Peter's Square for the association's meeting with the pope.

Italian Catholic Action is a lay Catholic association with roots going back to 1867. In 2021, Vatican News reported that the group had more than 270,000 members.

Looking out into the crowd gathered within the arms of Bernini's colonnade, the pope asked them to promote peace by being witnesses of the human embrace.

"At the origin of wars are often missed or rejected embraces, which are followed by prejudice, misunderstanding, suspicion, to the point of seeing the other as an enemy," he said. "All this is unfortunately before our eyes these days in too many parts of the world."

Francis also encouraged them to let themselves be embraced by God's love which is revealed in the Eucharist and in Christ on the cross.

"Brothers and sisters, let us be embraced by him, like children," he said. "We each have something childlike in our hearts that needs a hug. Let us be embraced by the Lord, that way, in the embrace of the Lord we learn to embrace others."

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