Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis meets with parish priests from around the world who were chosen by their bishops to share their reflections with the Synod of Bishops on synodality May 2 in the Synod Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis signed a letter on synodality in the presence of parish priests and urged them to be "missionaries of synodality," said several of the priests present.

Father Donald J. Planty Jr., pastor of St. Charles Church in Arlington, Virginia, and one of the U.S. pastors at the meeting, said, "He told us, 'I want you to take this letter, and I want you to put it into action. I want you to share it and speak to your bishops about it and speak to your brother pastors about it.'"

The pope signed the letter May 2 as he met with more than 200 parish priests in the Vatican Synod Hall. The meeting came at the end of an April 29-May 2 gathering designed as an opportunity for the priests to share their experiences and offer input for the drafting of the working document for the Synod of Bishops on synodality's second assembly in October.

Planty, who served for a time in the Vatican diplomatic corps and in the Vatican Secretariat of State, said it was clear that what participants from around the world had in common was "love for our identity as priests and our mission as priests."

Clearly, he said, some priests have difficulty getting parishioners to open up and share their hopes, dreams and skills — a crucial part of building a "synodal church" where people listen to one another and share responsibility for the life of the parish and its missionary outreach.

That is not a problem in the United States, Planty said. "Especially in a country of an Anglo-Saxon democratic tradition," people are used to sharing their opinions, including with their priests. They comment after Mass or send an email or phone the parish office.

"A priest who really knows his parish, loves his parishioners, has his finger on the pulse of the parish" not only through the pastoral council and finance council but "also through other, informal settings," he said. Such a pastor "knows his people, consults with them, listens to them, takes their advice, and ultimately that factors into his pastoral decisions and planning and actions."

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Father Clint Ressler, pastor of St. Mary of the Miraculous Medal Catholic Church in Texas City, Texas, said spiritual discernment adds a key factor because synodality "is not listening to the voice of the people, but the voice of God in the voice of the people."

"It isn't just about your voices and your opinions," he said. "We have to all be willing to then go deeper beneath those voices to try to hear what the Spirit is saying among us."

People are hesitant about synodality when it is erroneously presented as debating "the issues that are controversial in the church" and "whether or not this is some new instrument to foment change in doctrine or church teaching," he said. When that happens, "I think it's disturbing. It's scary. It's unsettling," and it leaves some wondering, "Why are we going to let the people decide what God wants?"

Father Paul Soper, pastor of St. Margaret Mary and St. Denis parishes in Westwood, Massachusetts, and secretary for ministerial personnel in the Archdiocese of Boston said priests and laypeople who have fears or concerns about synodality are afraid of different things.

"The fear of the priests is that there is a degree of randomness to the process," he said, and that the synod "is going to be recommending big changes in the life of the church somehow or another that will have come from a bunch of random voices rather than from a clearly traceable conciliar process."

"I think what the people fear is different," he said. "I think that they fear that this is a conversation that's not going to go anywhere. That it will simply, in the end, be a collection of reflections on the process of reflecting — a meeting on meetings, if you will."

But, he said, his experience in evangelization has taught him that the "deep listening" or "contemplative listening" that the synod process is teaching people is what will enable Catholics to understand other people's stories and invite them into or back into a relationship with Jesus and with the church.

Father Robert L. Connors, director of the Office for Senior Priests in the Archdiocese of Boston and episcopal vicar of the archdiocese's south region, said the synod's emphasis on listening also can help Catholics "learn the art of respect in a world where there is very little respect."

And, especially in parishes and dioceses where there is growing diversity, he said, synodality helps people realize, "we're all in this together."