Lucy Robie, a member of St. Thomas the Apostle Parish in Fortville, Indiana, asks a question o

Lucy Robie, a member of St. Thomas the Apostle Parish in Fortville, Indiana, asks a question of Dominican Fr. Timothy Radcliffe at SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Indianapolis Dec. 6, 2023, after the priest gave a presentation on the Synod on Synodality as part of a tour of U.S. cities. (OSV News/The Criterion/Sean Gallagher)



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The title of the newly released document — "National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Interim Stage of the 2021-2024 Synod" — is almost as dry as a set of jury instructions. But the contents, the result of a round of nationwide consultations since last October's Synod meeting in Rome, capture the dynamics of the church in this country that ring true.

The opening section sets forth two images, the church as a "Safe Harbor" for people and the sense that ours is a "Fiery Communion." Both metaphors are well-chosen. The report notes that the staples of parish life from prayer groups and Bible studies to Catholic schools are the places where people experience that deep sense of community to which the church is called.

The "Fiery Communion" speaks to some of the tensions found within the Catholic community, and the document does not obfuscate or sugarcoat those tensions.

Region III's submission noted that some Catholics "were challenged by the Church's 'indecisiveness,' by 'lack of reverence,' and by the perception that the Church is 'changing the traditional methods' and accepting current 'things against our church rules.' " RegionVIII noted, "some are very worried about how the Church responds to LGBTQ and other marginalized people … others want to stand firm in the Church's teaching and not shy away from the truth."

The tensions point to the need for the synodal process itself. Region VII's submission said, "If we don't talk about difficult topics, we can become like a dysfunctional family." The submission from Region XIII acknowledged that healing the divisions within the church will be something of a slog: "Listening to others will have its challenges. We will find disagreements, we will find the need for greater discussion, we will find a troubling in our souls, we will at times be presented with such hopeful possibilities. But we cannot know these things if we are not present to each other."

Other challenges are addressed, including the need for better "formation for evangelization." I wish there had been more details about what such formation would look like. Here is an area for further elaboration and study. Similarly, the subject of "Existential Obedience" needs much greater focus in our willful culture than the single paragraph it receives here.

"[Clericalism] is impeding the Holy Spirit and impacts the people of God," Region I said. A priest who participated in the process pointed to divisions among the clergy: "We need to be better at getting past the bitterness and different theologies and political preferences. We need to have charity in the priesthood."

The need for enhanced roles for women was also affirmed by many groups, according to the document. "Men and women across the conversation sessions felt that the Church must do more to recognize and celebrate the contributions of women. […] There needs to be more opportunities for women to hold leadership roles within parishes, dioceses, schools, and organizations," said the Participation Working Group. I hope Pope Francis was listening.

A host of issues are examined because they are sources of tension within the Catholic community, from liturgical issues, to balancing the need to be welcoming while articulating the church's teaching in a clear manner, to the lack of formation in Catholic social teaching and the ossification of some of the church's structures.

Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops pray with Pope Francis before a working se

Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops pray with Pope Francis before a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 16, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

One theme that gets repeated in different ways is the need for greater clarity. "Numerous reports from the listening sessions cited instances of communication, both from the hierarchy and from secular and Catholic media, which reflect and perpetuate division within the universal church and send conflicting messages of what it means to be Catholic." This result did not just happen: Since the start of this pontificate, there has been a concerted campaign by some conservative clerics like Archbishop Charles Chaput, to tell people Francis is sowing confusion, even when his simple Gospel message is quite clear. The campaign has worked, and now the bishops, and eventually Francis' successor, will need to help undo that damage. The damage was not done by Francis but by his critics.

At different points, it is clear that participants in the synodal process view it as a means for resolving, or at least ameliorating, the tensions within the church. For example, in the section on the bishops' listening sessions, the synod is perceived as a tonic from the toxicity of our polarized culture:

Various kinds of polarization were mentioned that affect the fabric of dioceses and of the Church in the United States as a whole. As one bishop expressed it, "[P]olarization within our culture is the greatest threat." Some of these polarizations are political in origin, others more explicitly theological in nature. It was affirmed that integration of a synodal style of conversation, especially in the parishes and dioceses, in search of better human relations and mutual understanding can help diffuse resentment and suspicion. This will require patience and perseverance. As one bishop pointed out, "The Synod fosters communion and creates space for relationship… It is important to come with humility." Another noted, "The Church can be an oasis from polarization."

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That "can be" is carrying a lot of hope, perhaps more than it can bear at this highly polarized moment in the life of both the nation and the church, but it is clear that the synodal process is the most, perhaps the only, viable model for ecclesial

governance that seeks to overcome that polarization.

We know this because of the opening and closing lines in the document's conclusion: "Gratitude for this synodal journey is profound" and "Although people recognized that the Church is complex, they also recognized through the synodal experiences, that the gifts given to the Church are more than enough to tend to any messiness. '(There is power in the) inclusivity of love — [we] can't have too much, and hopefully there's no one we can't love' (Region XIV)" (emphasis mine). Where grace and gratitude abound, God's presence is evident. Where complaints and agendas abound, God is kept at arm's length.

The synodal process, then, is not a "sign of the times" simply because it is happening now. It is a "sign of the time" because "in it one would perceive that abundant 'more' that signals God is at work," as Cardinal Michael Czerny and Fr. Christian Barone, quoting St. Pope Paul VI, explained in their book *Siblings All*. The synodal process moves slowly. There is a lot of editing. There are a lot of meetings. It requires patience all around. But this new synthesis indicates we are on a fruitful path, and that the Spirit of the Lord is with us as we walk together.