Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Francis and members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops gather for a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 23, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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The *instrumentum laboris* for October's second session of the synod on synodality was issued this week, and as NCR's Vatican correspondent Christopher White reported, it differs from last year's working document significantly. Instead of raising a series of issues guaranteed to generate controversy, it focuses more on the challenge synodality poses to the way the church goes about its business of making decisions, hearing a variety of voices, recognizing and wrestling with the diversity of cultures in which the Gospel is called to take root.

The goal is not to fix this problem or resolve that tension. The goal is to get the entire church focused on its mission of proclaiming the Gospel in the world today.

The most striking feature of the text is the hopefulness that pervades it. It opens with a powerful, evocative passage from the prophet Isaiah, 25:6-8:

> On this mountain the Lord of the universe will make for all peoples
> a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
> of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
> And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
> the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.
> Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
> and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
> for the Lord has spoken.

The sacramental quality of the vision is as noteworthy as its hopefulness. But the most obvious fact is that it is God who acts. He feeds us better than we can feed ourselves. He wipes away the things we can't wipe away: our tears, our disgraces, even our death.

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How often do we Catholics fail to communicate the joy of which Isaiah speaks and which Christ, through the Communion in his body and blood, makes present? Or, more problematic to the synodal project, how often do we fail to think that it is God's call, his actions in the world, his objectives, that we are called to embrace and proclaim, rather than our own version of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Hint: If you read the Gospels, or the decrees of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, or the major magisterial documents since the council, or the catechism, and you don't think anything there challenges you to change your opinions or goals in any way, chances are you are not listening to the Lord, only to yourself.

It was good to see a quote from the U.S. synodal synthesis, one that points to the possibilities of the synodal process as well as its limits: "Gratitude for this synodal journey is profound. Much has been done to move along the synodal path as companions in the U.S. Church. Mindful of Pope Francis' notion of a culture of encounter, tensions remain that will require continued reflection and dialogue. These tensions need not disrupt the communion of charity in the Church."

Do all of us (any of us?) really believe "these tensions need not disrupt the communion of charity in the Church"? It is so much easier being right than it is being charitable. Yet, in diocese after diocese, we hear that people are engaged in this synodal process and they are grateful for it, even if the tensions are not resolved.



Pope Francis prays while holding a crosier during Mass in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 29, 2023, marking the conclusion of the first session of the Synod of Bishops on synodality. The second session of the Synod on Synodality took place at the Vatican Oct. 2-27, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In other dioceses where the synodal process is not engaged, the sense of alienation — between bishop and people, between more conservative and more liberal Catholics, between older and younger Catholics — remains unaddressed and festering.

Whatever results emerge from the synodal process, it at least opens a path for a "communion of charity" in a culture that is characterized by easy hostility and intense polarization.

In the section titled, "The Church, People of God, sacrament of unity," we find a passage that is a kind of corrective to both the nostalgia that sees tradition as something no longer alive and developing, and the particularly un-Catholic, uber-American habit of thought that mistakes the theological concept of "people of God"

for a sociological category. The *instrumentum laboris* states:

> The People of God is the communal subject that goes through the stages of salvation history on its way to fulfilment. The People of God is never simply the sum of the baptised; rather, it is the "we" of the Church, the communitarian and historical subject of synodality and mission, so that all may receive the salvation prepared by God. Incorporated into this people through faith and Baptism, we are accompanied by the Virgin Mary, "a sign of sure hope and comfort for the pilgrim people of God," by the apostles, by those who have borne witness to their faith to the point of giving their lives, and with the saints who have gone before us.

When someone says "according to polls, a majority of Catholics say X," they are not speaking about the people of God.



People pray during a Mass at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in the Corona neighborhood of the New York borough of Queens. (OSV News/CNS file/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Two themes that increasingly present themselves as essential to the church's finding a way forward are the need to recapture and better proclaim our theology of grace and gratitude, and an awareness that Vatican II's most important insight into the church's social teaching is in *Lumen Gentium*, which states: "The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race."

Paragraph 20 of the *instrumentum laboris* brings these two insights together powerfully:

> In an age marked by increasing inequalities, growing disillusionment with traditional models of governance, democratic disenchantment and the dominance of the market model in human interactions, and the temptation to resolve conflicts by force rather than dialogue, synodality could offer inspiration for the future of our societies. Its attractiveness stems from the fact that it is not a management strategy but a practice to be lived and celebrated in a spirit of gratitude.

Read and ponder those sentences many times.

The section on accountability is vitally important. "While the practice of accountability to superiors has been preserved over the centuries, the dimension of accountability of authority to the community must be recovered. Transparency must be a feature of the exercise of authority in the Church."

The days when "Father knows best" must give way to "Father knows best when he knows what the community he serves think and feel."



Parish priests who are part of an international gathering to provide input to the Synod of Bishops on synodality meet in small groups April 29 at a retreat center in Sacrofano, outside of Rome. (CNS/Courtesy of the Synod of Bishops)

One phrase touched on some of the tensions that emerged at the first session of the synod last October, and one fears will prove problematic. "Adopting a synodal style enables us to overcome the idea that all Churches must necessarily move at the same pace on every issue," the document states. "On the contrary, differences in pace can be valued as an expression of legitimate diversity and an opportunity for the exchange of gifts and for mutual enrichment."

The phrase "same pace" assumes that everyone is moving in the same direction. On an issue such as ministering to LGBTQ Catholics, there is sometimes a presumption in the West that the churches of the Global South will catch up, but that is not how many Catholics in the Global South view it.

The section that deals with the Petrine ministry is careful to preserve the prerogatives of the bishop of Rome by yoking his ministry to synodality itself. It calls

for "sound decentralization" but is clear that it is the pope who decides what is and is not sound.

In an era rife with centrifugal forces, we should be careful to preserve the authority of the pope, who is charged with maintaining and advancing the communion of charity, which alone corresponds to the prayer of Jesus that "all may be one."

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Eighteen months ago, I counseled American Catholics on the need to manage their expectations regarding the synodal process. Before that, in February 2022, I noted, "We Americans are planners and doers, and we conceive of grand projects with definite objectives," and advised, "There is a time and a place for religiously motivated activism to be sure, but the synod is not that time and place. The synod requires us Americans to set aside our activist, goal-oriented, project-centered sensibilities."

This new working document reflects those concerns. Specific agendas will frustrate the synodal process because it is well-nigh impossible to listen to the Holy Spirit if we insist on trying to achieve our particular goals.

The focus on ecclesiological processes and approaches may not make headlines, but they were and are the predictable outcome of the synod. That really is exciting, even if it is not edgy.

In a world characterized by intense polarization, the church is called to help us all take the edge off. The work of building a "communion of charity" is more grunt work than grandstanding, but it is the work to which the church is called.

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