Opinion
NCR Voices



Synod members, along with Pope Francis, attend the morning session in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Oct. 15. The Synod of Bishops synod on synodality runs through Oct. 27. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Most of the synodal proceedings are behind closed doors, and the pope has asked participants not to speak to the media. Still, core issues are emerging.

One attendee told me that the aula itself held one of the hermeneutical keys. Unlike the hall where previous synods were held, in which the seats are arranged theater style, hierarchically you might say, and all facing the dais, the large aula used for this synod has round tables, all on one level. A cardinal might be seated next to a nun and across from a layperson. The whole manner in which dialogue is happening is changed.

The seating arrangement symbolizes the altered state of ecclesial deliberation the pope seeks. Similarly, in 1964, during the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI surrendered his coronation tiara as a sign of his commitment to the poor. He never wore it again, and no pope since has been crowned. There is no going back.

These gestures cannot be dismissed as mere symbols. We're Catholics: Symbols matter.

Governance is at the heart of the debates in the current synod. It is an issue that runs into immediate cultural difficulties. Accountability has been a subject of discussion but there is no Italian word that corresponds to our English word "accountability." That goes a long way toward explaining the difficulties faced by anyone seeking to reform the Roman curia!

> The church must become less focused on institutional maintenance and more focused on its mission.
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Dogmatic issues are involved as well. Papal primacy, defined by Vatican I, needs to be balanced by episcopal collegiality, defined at Vatican II, and this has been

obvious for some time. In his book, *The Election of Pope Francis*, Gerard O'Connell recalls that before the 2005 synod, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, president of the Italian bishops' conference, said, "with John Paul II, papal primacy has touched its high point but also its end point."

At a pastoral-theological forum for synod delegates on the "Exercise of the Primacy and the Synod of Bishops," several theologians wrestled with the problem. Professor Catherine Clifford of St. Paul University in Ottawa explained how Vatican II pointed toward synodality. The conciliar decree Christus Dominus said, "Bishops chosen from various parts of the world, in ways and manners established or to be established by the Roman pontiff, render more effective assistance to the supreme pastor of the Church in a deliberative body which will be called by the proper name of Synod of Bishops." Pope Paul saw the synod of bishops as a continuation of the council, according to Clifford.

Both the decrees of the council and of the subsequent synods had to be approved by the pope, and there is not a hint that will change. What is changing is the bishops' self-understanding. Just as St. Cyprian of Carthage said, "The church is in the bishop and the bishop is in the church," Clifford suggested we could "transpose" this principle to say today, "the bishop is in the synod and the synod is in the bishop." Each bishop is responsible for his own diocese, but he is also responsible, under the leadership of the pope, for all dioceses.

Before the synod opened, I wrote, "I suspect that while the i*nstrumentum laboris* has set the 'hot-button issues' to the side, they will come up anyway in these discussions about the competencies of the local churches to exercise liberty 'in doubtful matters' without harming the unity 'in essentials.' " As my colleague, NCR Vatican correspondent Christopher White has reported, that is exactly what is happening. The synod is wrestling with how to permit pastoral differences between the churches while guaranteeing the pope's authority to maintain unity among the churches.



Synod participants speak at a public theological and pastoral forum about the primacy of the pope in a synodal church in Rome Oct. 16. From left are: Fr. José San Jose Prisco, dean of the faculty of canon law at the Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain; Fr. Dario Vitali, coordinator of theological experts assisting the synod; Archbishop Timothy Costelloe of Perth, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference; Catherine Clifford, a theologian and member of the synod from Canada; and Klara-Antonia Csiszar, a professor of pastoral theology at the Catholic University of Linz, Austria. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

J.D. Flynn at The Pillar mischaracterized the debate when he wrote, "my thought is that the pope will listen to these voices, then call vaguely for bishops' conferences to be taken seriously, but stop short of the idea that they have the teaching authority of the pontiff." Bishops' conferences do not have the same teaching authority of the pope, but what teaching authority do they have?

One synod delegate told me the sister churches need to learn to listen to each other, and not just once a year in Rome. Just as a bishop tries to get his parishes working

together, the pope wants bishops to listen to each other. The three-minute long "set speeches" by delegates are "deadly" according to one participant, but the conversations at the tables are robust and reflect the listening that is the hallmark of synodality.

The synod delegates also are focusing on how they can share the gifts each church brings to the universal church. This language about gifts is vitally important. If authority within the church is conceived in terms of power, we will misunderstand it. As Company of Mary Sr. Gloria Liliana Franco Echeverri, the current president of the Latin American and Caribbean Conference of Religious, or CLAR, noted during another pastoral-theological forum, "ministry is rooted in grace."

The changes the synodal process hopes to achieve are rooted in a theme that has now spanned five pontificates: Evangelization. The church must become less focused on institutional maintenance and more focused on its mission. One synod participant said that the bishops are really wrestling with this. Emphasizing the *ad extra* mission requires that they first feel solidly grounded *ad intra*.

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And they don't. In the West, the bishops are overwhelmed by cultural forces. In the Global South, bishops confront desperately poor peoples who struggle to live.

Will the synod achieve its reorientation of the church, a reorientation begun at Vatican II but with a long road ahead? Not in a month. Not in a year. But my sense after a week at the synod is that hearts are changing. Whatever difficulties we face are not less than those the pope's namesake, St. Francis, confronted. The revolution in the church begun by St. Francis, you will recall, started when he first kissed a leper.

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