Opinion

Guest Voices



Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services sits at one of the English-language tables during the Synod of Bishops on synodality in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Oct. 22, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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The second session of the synod on synodality had fallen into a tranquil lull before an eruption on Oct. 18. NCR has reported about the frustration that boiled over when Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández failed to attend a meeting with delegates concerning study group five.

Study group five has been shrouded in mystery since Pope Francis placed it under Fernández's supervision to investigate questions that include restoring women to the diaconate. Roughly 100 of the delegates attended a scheduled update to learn more about the group's largely unknown work.

When Fernández failed to attend and staff circulated handouts inviting written comments rather than providing any information, delegates vented their outrage. It was a rough day.

This turn of events may be a good sign.

One delegate told me that the frictions that had emerged during the first session in 2023 had been replaced in the second session by a more subdued and polite reticence. Now in their second year of meeting, the delegates have been so synodally successful that they've formed a community — one apparently so harmonious that no one wanted to disturb it with the kind of *parrhesia* ("speaking frankly") that Francis has called for. That reserve met an end on Oct. 18.

I arrived in Rome on Oct. 14 to teach my course on synodality and join a group of U.S. institutions of higher learning who had brought 140 students. We engaged in a public conversation with leaders from the secretariat for the synod, delegates and other synod participants.

Before the ruckus on Oct. 18, I worried about this suddenly soporific synod's success. Everyone I asked verified the same picture of a sleepy gathering. Some even said they were occasionally bored.

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Teaching my course on synodality, "ruckus" was a word I had in mind more and more as I worried about the quietude in the synod hall. Francis used it in *Christus Vivit*, his apostolic exhortation that followed the 2018 synod on the youth (though, in his native Spanish, what Francis said — "*Hagan lío*!" — was "Make a mess!").

We talked in class about how the synodal process calls us to embrace the messiness of being a church. Urging a mess this way proceeds from a confidence that the Spirit is present when people from different starting points listen to one another in dialogue, speaking freely and frankly. "I trust the Holy Spirit," Bishop Daniel Flores told us in the Paul VI audience hall, "The church has been messy for 2,000 years."

Indeed, the church has been messy since before Peter quarreled with Paul. But quite often we avoid that messiness and tell the story of a church where nothing really changes or was contentious before our time.

That tidiness is dangerous.

It creates an impression that the church is an object of preservation rather than a subject of creation. Interrupting the action of the Spirit this way can take many forms. In our daily lives, we do it when we do not really listen to other people's experiences. The cardinals can obstruct or frustrate the Spirit even when they choose a pope. And, of course, a synod where no one speaks very frankly also might be a way of frustrating the Spirit.

In every case, we are the ones who bar the Spirit from the room. And, perhaps also we are holding the Spirit at bay in how we respond to Francis' call to synodality in our parishes and our dioceses as well.



Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, speaks at a news conference in the Vatican press office during the Synod of Bishops Oct. 3, 2024. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

I was thinking about this when one of the students who came to the synod was asked what the experience meant to her. She said the week had taught her to "appreciate other people's backgrounds," and instantly I could imagine someone scoffing. Of course a university student in 2024 would say that.

But pause a bit over that judgment and notice how much it presumes to know what the Spirit is doing and at what pace. We don't really know what is at work in that student, and so the rush to that judgment is a problem. It is much like the way that skeptics dismiss the synod on synodality as a "meeting about meetings."

Our desire to direct this synod toward concrete results or scoff when no concrete results emerge shuts the windows and doors of the house so the Spirit cannot rush in. We need to be more willing to be surprised, more patient while the Spirit works to change all of us.

The first session last year was exciting because it aired so many problems long gone unaddressed by the church. The synod made a pivot, moving emphasis from issues to process, in the months between the first session and the second session. Process does not grab our attention the way controversial issues do, and how we will do something also is harder to talk about than the results we will produce.

But process is important. We won't reach anything like an understanding of issues or discern how God is calling the church to act on issues without a process that is inclusive, careful and prayerful.

Now is a critical moment in this three-year synod when we are confronted by the importance of committing ourselves to synodality as a process, learning how to be a synodal church. The ruckus that returned the synod to *parrhesia* on Oct. 18 might be our opening in this second session to reflect on that.

We must learn to be patient when answers do not arrive as quickly as we would like, remembering that is often how prayer works too. We also must become better listeners to the Spirit and to each other so that we can speak with candor and hear fruitfully from one another the frankness that leads us all into the Spirit.

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Finally, we must accept the messiness that comes with this. "The protagonist of the synod is the Holy Spirit." Our role is to give up our expectations while embracing all the uncertainty and messiness that will unleash.

It's a frightening prospect.

But when we listen to the Spirit, Flores told us, there is no reason to "lose any sleep that the faith of the church will be compromised." God is with us.

On a free afternoon, I walked the Roman Forum, excavated by archaeologists across the last few decades. To be in Rome is to see the passage of time in layers of stone. The dome of the Santissimo Nome di Maria church soars over the ruins of the Forum Traiani much as Pope Sixtus V topped off Emperor Trajan's Column with a

sculpture of St. Peter in 1587. The Roman Empire, one permanent, world-dominating institution gives way to another, the Roman Catholic Church. It is a sobering reminder in this precarious time for the church that permanence is our idea and history makes no promises.

Our expectation of permanence is a sort of a trap. It beguiles us to believe we know how things will turn out. There is no danger the church will disappear like the empire, of course. But our notions about what the church is or should be permanently is the trap synodality invites us to escape.

As the synod on synodality now races to its conclusion, it is time for each of us to do that.

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