News



As part of local and regional synodal meetings for Franciscan friars, Franciscans share a laugh as they take part in a table exercise in Prior Lake, Minn., in October 2024, in which participants practice the spirituality of synodality. From Jan. 14-17, 2025, about 200 Franciscan friars of the Atlanta-based Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe will gather in Kansas City, Mo., with their ministry partners for a "Franciscan Provincial Synod" focusing on their charism, lifestyle and mission. (OSV News/courtesy Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe)



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While "synodality" might be a new concept to Catholics surprised by the Vatican's request that dioceses worldwide engage in community discernment from 2021-2024, the U.S. friars of the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe — humble as they are — would still like to gently remind us it's something Franciscans like themselves have been doing for centuries.

"The term synodal discernment is, of course, ancient. It's new to most people, but it's an ancient practice," explained Franciscan Brother Keith Warner, director of renewal for the friars' synod process, and associate professor of ethics and spirituality at the University of San Diego's Franciscan School of Theology.

The Greek word "synodos" translates as "journeying together."

"Even though throughout our Franciscan history of 800 years we never used the term, we did communal discernment. And St. Francis was guided by the Holy Spirit — he had a devotion to the Holy Spirit, and said the Holy Spirit is the true minister general of the order," noted Warner, referencing the title Franciscans use for the head of the different branches of the Order of Friars Minor, or O.F.M. "As a result of being invited by Pope Francis, as a part of the whole Church, to renew — to practice synodality — that prompted us to say, 'We really need to get back to this kind of discernment in order to move forward.'"

So from Jan. 14-17, 200 Franciscan friars of the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe — and their ministry partners — will gather in Kansas City, Missouri, for a "Franciscan

Provincial Synod" event to examine a path forward, focusing on three vital areas of their communal existence: charism, lifestyle and mission.

Their prayerful deliberations will help define the more than 700 friars as both one province, and one culture.

"This is not exclusive to Franciscans," conceded Franciscan Father Roger Lopez, a former schoolteacher who serves as provincial council. "But we have a flavor; a charism. It's a lens."

In October 2023, the coast-to-coast Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe was formed through the unification of five legacy Franciscan provinces — a regional unit of the international Order of Friars Minor, founded in 1209 by St. Francis of Assisi — with a long history of service to the poor, forgotten and marginalized at locations across the United States, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Jamaica. The province has its headquarters in Atlanta.

They can be found at rural and urban parishes; grade schools, colleges and universities; missions and retreat centers; and serving the homeless, hungry and mentally ill.

In the winter and spring of 2024, local synodal sessions between hundreds of friars, the extended "Franciscan family," and their lay ministry partners were held in 50 local friaries — the places where the Franciscan friars live — around the country. Many young people took part in the process.

The U.S. Franciscans' synod is part of a global discernment led by the Order of Friars Minor, which invited their entities across the world — friars, Secular Franciscans, Franciscan Sisters and lay partners, collectively called the "Franciscan family" — to synodal discussion and renewal.

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Seven regional assemblies followed in the fall, where almost 300 friars gathered to review and discuss reports from the first round. What surfaced in those regional assemblies will be the foundation for discussion and discernment in Kansas City in mid-January, which will be followed by a report to be shared with the international Order of Friars Minor.

The task before them is more critical than ever — both in terms of their own internal organization and identity, and in the context of their continued mission.

As a Dec. 3 press release from the province admitted, "Adding to the challenges of the Synod is discerning where friars are called to serve as they deal with diminishing numbers of friars, vocations and resources and an aging community in the U.S."

"When we came together as a new province — as a new provincial council — we knew that we had already started working on the process of restructuring," Lopez told OSV News, "but we also realized that the one piece that we needed to really focus on was, how do we revitalize? ... So we started looking at, how do we do this?" he recalled. "And we realized that the best way to do it has to be from the ground up."

"We didn't do this primarily for the sake of reorganizing our ministries," noted Warner, referring to the synodal process. "But as a result of renewing our identity as friars, that causes us to think about that with a fresh set of eyes."

Their timing also coincides with the Franciscan centenary — a series of events from 2023-2026 commemorating the 800th year of several significant events in the life of St. Francis, including anniversaries related to the Franciscan rule; his receiving of the stigmata (the wounds of Christ); the first live Christmas creche at Greccio, Italy; and his composition of "The Canticle of the Creatures," a poem basically summarizing St. Francis' spirituality.

While the Franciscans' lengthy history obviously inspires them, "it can't just be something that we put in a glass case on the shelf," cautioned Lopez. "How do we break that open? And then integrate it into our life?"

Brother Warner agreed.

"Part of how I understand Franciscan renewal — to be furthered, or deepened, or fostered — is by linking sacred memory, prophetic imagination, and communal discernment," he explained. "What has God done? What is God envisioning for us in terms of our future in light of the reign of God, and the fulfillment of our lives — and then what steps are we called to take together today?"

"Franciscans are often really good at sacred memory," continued Warner, "but if we only do that, it ends up being just kind of nostalgia. There are some people who are

good at dreaming, but they don't really connect it to what God is actually asking of them today. In some sense, this synod is trying to kind of consciously bring these things together — emphasizing, let's make some decisions together."

And continuous synodal listening, Lopez stressed, isn't just for Franciscans.

"We're in a period of great transition as a nation. How can we be open and vulnerable — and listen to each other, intentionally?" he asked. "I think that's what a synod's about — intentionally listening. I'm going to sit there and listen with an open heart; an open mind — and change may come about."

Lopez also had a request.

"Ask the world to pray for us during this synod, but also during our time to revitalize. I know the power of prayer," he confirmed. "I have no doubt. I have no fear. Just ask the world to pray for us — and to have the courage to embrace it, like St. Francis did so long ago."