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Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, begins a news conference to present an update on the process for the synod on synodality, at the Vatican Aug. 26, 2022. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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It is becoming clearer every day in the lead-up to the 2025 conclave that the vote for the next pope might be a referendum on Pope Francis' efforts to involve more laypeople in decisions on the future of the Catholic Church.

If the cardinals want to advance Francis' vision of synodality — a church where everyone participates in decisions and the mission — then they are expected to consider whether Cardinal Mario Grech of Malta should become the next pope.

Since 2020, Grech, 68, has served as secretary general of the Synod of Bishops. In this capacity, he was Francis' point person organizing and overseeing the synod meetings that took place in Rome every couple years on a particular theme.

Even more than that, Grech and his office have been responsible for putting synodality, the efforts to make the church more welcoming and inclusive, at the heart of Francis' reform agenda.

No cardinal being considered for pope represents the synodality effort more completely than Grech. For the cardinal from Malta, it is a make-or-break gambit for pope.

The 2021-24 synod on synodality invited Catholics from around the world to offer their hopes, fears and anxieties about church life in the modern era.

Millions of Catholics responded and over the course of the yearslong exercises, the Vatican allowed for open and free-ranging discussion on topics once considered taboo in the church.

In a break with tradition that irritated many conservative Catholics, the topics of women's ministry, LGBTQ Catholics, clergy sex abuse, the desire to hold bishops accountable and other issues were put on the table for debate.



Cardinal Mario Grech distributes Communion during Mass with synod participants at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter’s Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 21, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

In some countries, the effort electrified the faithful. In the United States, many bishops were dismissive and showed such muted enthusiasm for the pope's initiative that leading progressive cardinals close to the pope felt the need to step up and call for action.

The synod's final document, which Francis accepted in October 2024, stopped short of proposing dramatic changes — such as the restoration of the female diaconate or greater recognition of LGBTQ Catholics. Yet, notably, the synod on synodality did not close the door on those opportunities either.

In mid-March, from his hospital bed in Rome, as he battled pneumonia and had an oxygen tube in his nose, Francis was not done. He approved plans to extend the synod and its implementation into 2028.

The move, while directed by Francis, would have emerged out of the office of Grech, and it was widely interpreted as Francis' wanting to ensure that the process and its reforms outlive him.

The pivotal role of the prelate in Francis' pontificate and his journey to lead this office was, in many respects, a surprise to even him.

Grech was born in Gozo, Malta's second largest island, no bigger than Manhattan, in 1957, when most Gozitans attended daily Mass. Despite the intensely Catholic identity of the island, it wasn't until just before he went to university that the young Grech began to consider a priestly vocation.

At the time, he was volunteering for a local organization that cared for disabled people. One day, while driving a young man who had recently started using a wheelchair due to an accident, Grech said, he began to think: "This is a young man my age, full of energy. He is an artist. Why him and not me?"

In a 2023 interview with the National Catholic Reporter, Grech said, "This triggered some thoughts in my heart. I decided I should do something for others."

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Seminary studies soon followed, first in Malta and eventually in Rome, where he earned a doctorate in canon law from the Angelicum.

After completing his academic work, Grech returned home to Malta, where for two decades, he held a number of pastoral assignments and posts inside the diocesan curia until Pope Benedict XVI named him bishop of his home diocese in 2005.

During his early years as a bishop, he doubled down on the need for the church to be a strong defender of its doctrine.

When Malta was considering legalizing divorce in 2011, Grech was a leading opponent of the legislation. And when Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 offered a staunch defense of heterosexuality, Grech echoed the pontiff's words.

The local press referred to Grech's statement as the "If you're gay, go" message, and many local gay Catholics felt as if they had no choice but to leave the Catholic Church.

But according to a longtime friend and fellow priest, Grech's views began to shift with Francis' election in 2013. Fr. Eddie Zammit told NCR in 2023 for the profile of Grech that the Grech was particularly taken by Francis' constant description of the church as a "field hospital," motivated first by caring for those in need before addressing questions of morality and doctrine.

In 2014, as a delegate to Francis' first synod on the family, Grech surprised many when he took to the floor of the Vatican's synod hall and called on the church to recognize the complex realities of family life today.

"I must confess to facing the urgency of this need while listening to families of homosexuals as well as to the same persons having such an orientation and who feel wounded by the language directed towards them in certain texts, for instance in the catechism," he said.

"It is necessary to learn to speak that language which is known to contemporary human beings and who acknowledge it as a way of conveying the truth and the charity of the Gospel," he said.



Pope Francis smiles at Cardinal Mario Grech as the first assembly of the synod on synodality concludes Oct. 28, 2023, in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Among those taking notice was Francis. In 2019, the Maltese prelate was on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France, when he received a call from Francis inviting him to Rome for a private meeting. A few weeks later, Grech obliged and was asked to lead the Vatican's synod office, effectively spearheading the pope's reform efforts. In 2020, Francis elevated him to the College of Cardinals.

Over the last five years, Grech has traveled around the world making the case for Francis' vision of synodality. He has maintained that it's not his job to put his thumb on the scale and weigh in on the outcome of certain hot-button issues. Instead, he has insisted that it's only his job to help encourage discussion.

Given the global scope of synodal efforts, Grech knows personally almost all of the men who will enter the conclave with him — giving him a rare advantage in a conclave where many of his fellow electors don't know each other.

In Rome, Grech has a reputation as a private and reserved figure.

He smiles easily. But he is not dynamic. His inner circle is said to be small. Given the vast organizational efforts required to pull off the international synod on synodality, Grech clearly understands the inner workings of the Roman Curia.

Now, his fellow cardinals will have to decide if he is too much of a creature of it to help change it.

Regardless, many of those with an appetite for continuing the reform have this synodal standard bearer on their shortlists.

This is part of a series on the leading candidates in the 2025 papal election. The National Catholic Reporter's Rome Bureau is made possible in part by the generosity of Joan and Bob McGrath.

This story appears in the **Papal front-runners: The men who could be pope** and **Who will be the next pope?** feature series.