Opinion

Guest Voices




Dozens of Post-it Notes with prayers and requests from young people are seen on the wall at the Synod of Bishops' booth in a park in Lisbon, Portugal, during World Youth Day Aug. 1-6. (OSV News/Courtesy of the Synod Secretariat)



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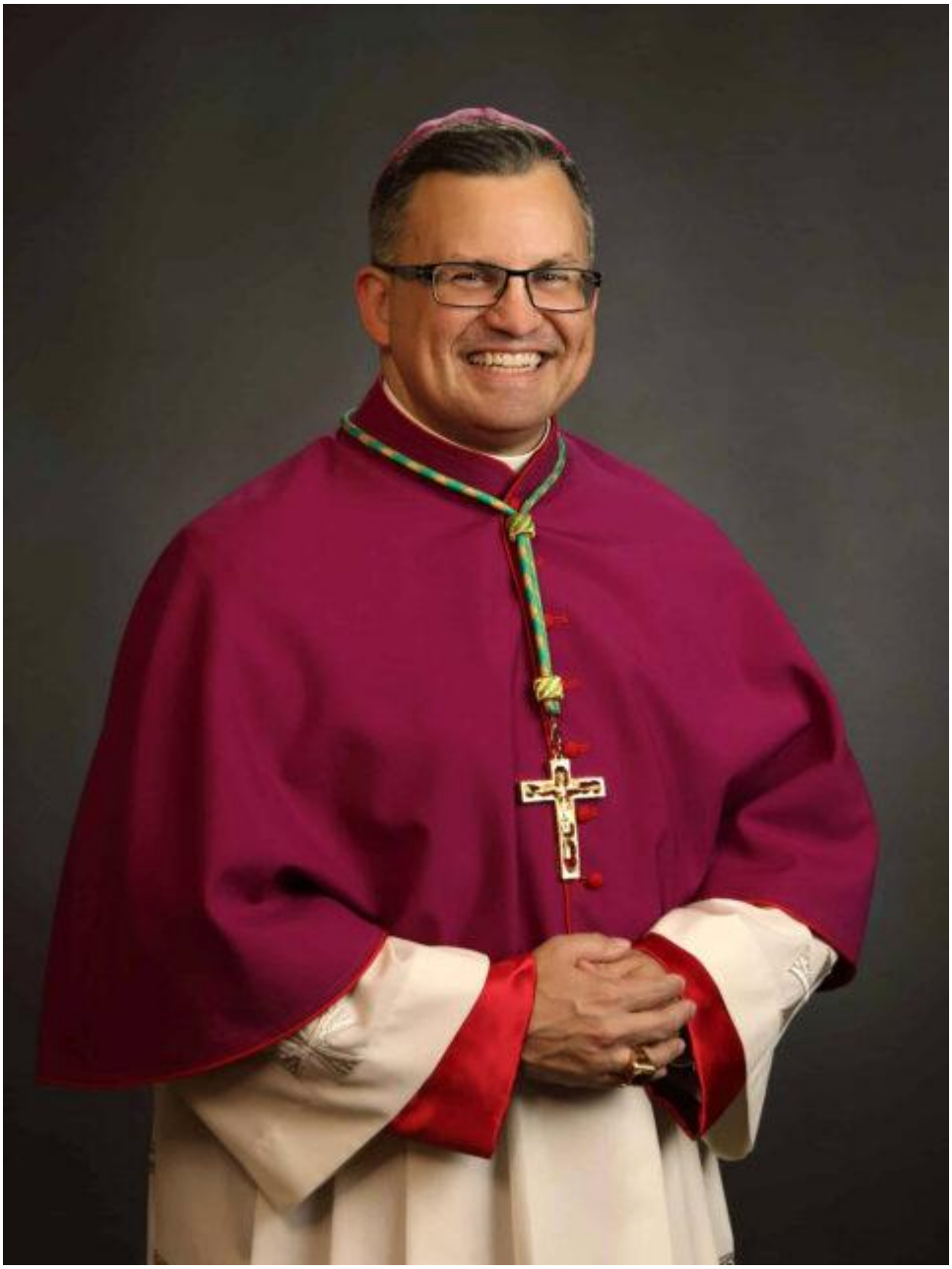
In January, Cincinnati's Catholic Archbishop Robert Casey announced his plans to hold an archdiocesan synod next year, asking southwest Ohio's Catholics to prepare for "a time of prayer, a time of listening to the Holy Spirit and to one another in order to discern God's will for our local church in the years ahead."

When I spoke to the archbishop recently, I noticed how often he spoke in terms of "we" rather than "I." When any leader speaks that way, we have good reasons for hope.

Cincinnati's synod is an important way the Catholic Church is embracing synodality, Pope Francis' signature vision that he called the whole Roman Catholic Church to in 2021 as a next step in the living-out of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Leo XIV has made clear that synodality will continue under his leadership.

Synodality literally means "walking together," and it is a way of thinking about church governance that dates to the earliest moments of Christianity. Synodality invites the members of the church to full participation in dialogue, discernment and decision-making.

The Second Vatican Council, drawing inspiration from those first-generation Christians, taught us that baptism is the foundational sacrament of the church. Every baptized person is responsible for God's mission in the world. In calling the church to synodality, Francis asked Catholics to imagine how the church can embrace that idea today.



Archbishop Robert Casey. (Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati)

Synodality has been an active part of church governance since Vatican II. The bishops of the world, realizing how being together and listening to one another at the council had changed them, wanted to institutionalize the experience so that other bishops could see the church they glimpsed at Vatican II. They created the Synod of Bishops that brings bishops from all around the world together to meet in Rome. Since 1967, synods have met, inviting bishops to discern together about the family, about young people, about the role of laypeople and about other important questions.

Synodality is about listening to all voices and believing with confidence that the Holy Spirit can speak through every baptized person. All the baptized "have been anointed by the Holy One, and have received all knowledge," in the words of the New Testament's First Letter of John. When a sense of faithful consensus emerges from the whole church, we can discover what God is asking Catholics to do. We only need to get out of the way and create the space for the Spirit to speak. In this way, at its heart synodality asks the whole church to think and act just as Casey spoke — less in terms of "I," more in terms of "we."

Synodality is not democracy, as some have worried. Democracy asks each person to speak from a perspective of self-interest or private opinion, then sifts the results to learn what the most people say. Synodality is different. It is about listening to one another prayerfully, creating space for the Holy Spirit to be heard. Dialogue rooted in deep, mutual listening brings a community together in discernment. The result is not a most-popular choice, but a shared vision that often is nothing anyone expected. Decisions should surprise us because they do not come from us, but from the Spirit who speaks through us.

This was the process behind the Synod on Synodality in 2023, a meeting in Rome that followed successive phases of listening around the world in what has been called the "biggest consultation exercise in human history." First locally, then nationally and then continentally, the world's 1.2 billion Catholics had volunteered which issues facing the church seemed important. In October 2023 and again a year later, the gathering in Rome addressed those issues.

For the first time, bishops were not the only ones invited. Lay women and men also participated. The synod produced a Final Document, which Francis not only approved but accepted as official teaching. From now until 2028, the whole Catholic Church is called to implement this document.

When Casey announced that Cincinnati would hold an archdiocesan synod, he was responding to the Final Document, which calls for synodal assemblies in dioceses all over the world. It intends for local churches to discern together about how they can become more synodal and pursue their priorities through processes of mutual listening and shared discernment.

Now comes the time when the whole church is meant to transform itself, joining synodal structures to its more familiar hierarchical structures. There is a lot of work to do.

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Casey has hope for what Cincinnati will accomplish. Installed in April of 2025, he is still meeting the people of an archdiocese that covers 19 counties from rural southwestern Ohio to urban Cincinnati and Dayton and that contains all the diversity of those rural and urban settings. Synod 2027 will accelerate the getting-to-know-you process. It will bring the whole archdiocese into meaningful conversation not just to meet their new bishop, but to really meet each other.

There are other potential challenges. The archdiocese recently completed a pastoral planning process, reorganizing its more than 200 parishes into 57 groupings, laying groundwork toward a more manageable footprint to meet the uncertain finances and demographic changes that nearly every Catholic diocese faces.

Casey sees these challenges as ripe for how synodal encounters bring people together. "As we consider how we are going to be church at this present moment in time, that's where we need to have dialogue and the discernment, and get into the weeds to ask, 'What is the Lord asking us to do in this time and place?'" he told me. "It benefits us" to have these conversations.

It is notable that Cincinnati is one of a very small number of U.S. dioceses that have responded so far to the Vatican's call for ecclesial assemblies to implement synodality. The response in the United States more generally has been anemic, and synod officials in Rome have noticed. Considering the great influence of the United States in the global church, that is a dangerous problem for synodality.

All this is why the boldness we are watching unfold in Cincinnati is worth our attention. "The struggle with synodality is that it's so countercultural at this moment in time," the archbishop told me. The world tells us every day to avoid people who aren't like us and, even in the church, "the practice of [synodality] is unfamiliar," he said.

Hope must guide us. Hope is not just an "optimism toward the future." Hope is "a much deeper virtue that is tied to the past, that places us firmly in the present, and that sets us on a path to the future." Casey says, "We need to help our people find that hope."

Synodality has been "baked into our ministry as a Catholic Church since the first days," he told me. It asks us to become what we already are. "Jesus founded a synodal church."