

# Synodality 'Redivivus'

*What a priest  
should do*

Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops start a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall on Oct. 18, 2023. Five U.S. priests traveled to Rome from April 28-May 2, 2024, to share their experiences of parish life with the ongoing Synod of Bishops on synodality. The five were selected by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as part of a 300-member worldwide delegation. CNS photo/Lola Gomez

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**By Father Ronald D. Witherup**

After the conclusion of the Synod on Synodality on Oct. 29, 2023, there was a flood of media articles and reports attempting to assess the synod and what it did, or did not, accomplish. The headlines of one newspaper screamed: “Vatican synod ends without clear stances on women, LGBTQ.” Similar headlines appeared in numerous other media sources.

Unfortunately, such bold statements show a flawed understanding of what the synod was about. It was only the first act of a dual session. The second and final session of the synod focusing on synodality is set to begin next month. If we are to avoid a repeat of some of the misunderstandings from the meetings in 2023, then we priests should consider ways to help our people understand what the synod represents, and what it does not mean.

Catholic consciousness of the deep biblical and theological roots of synodality seems pretty shallow. Priests, in my judgment, have a special responsibility to help set the record straight for our congregations. This means that we need to have a larger, more historically nuanced perspective that we can pass on to our people. As an aid to that task, I offer here an assessment of seven common myths about synodality that we need to debunk.

**Myth No. 1: Synodality is a recent invention, a novelty.** Not so. The foundations of synodality appear in the New Testament, where we hear of the early Church coming together in an assembly to consider issues of great importance. Acts 6:1-6 and 15:1-21 recount two such gatherings.

The word “synod” itself comes from two Greek words (*syn* meaning “with” and



Pope Francis leads a meeting with the presidents and coordinators of the regional assemblies of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican on Nov. 28, 2022. CNS photo/Vatican Media

*hodos* meaning “way,” or “path”) meaning “walk together.” Although this word does not occur in either of the Acts passages, a closely related word (*synagō*, meaning “come together, meet”) does occur in Acts 15:6, with a synonymous verb in Acts 6:2.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the main issues that brought Church leaders together for serious consultations were, first, the issue of redressing the Hellenists’ claim against the Hebrews and, second, the question of how to welcome the gentiles, non-Jews, into the family of faith. Synods, or Church councils, were thus serious affairs. In fact, the word “synod” is almost exclusively an ecclesiastical term. While the Latin Church came to prefer the term “council,” Church synods are an ancient consultation and decision-making process.

Although the Second Vatican Council used the concepts of synod and council interchangeably, the 1983 Code of Canon Law introduced a distinction between a synod and a council to preserve the distinction between a plenary, ecumenical

council and a representative synod of bishops or a regional synod (described by the International Theological Commission in 2018).

The fact that a pope in the 21st century would choose to make synodality a hallmark of his papacy is not a real surprise, given the reestablishment of the Synod of Bishops near the end of the Vatican II by Pope St. Paul VI. The council itself was a kind of primary model for how synods might work, though it was even beyond a synod. Such convocations require good preparation, broad consultation and the involvement of laity, clergy, theological experts and the bishops, as well as authorities in the Roman Curia.

**Myth No. 2: Synodality is a form of democratic or parliamentary governance inappropriate to the Church.** It is almost a truism to affirm that the Church is not a democracy. Pope Francis has said this on more than one occasion, and any theologian knows the truth of this assertion. Democracies are based upon, at least idealistically, votes on important measures in which the majority vote predominates and dictates how to move forward. From the very beginning, even evident in the biblical texts referenced above, synods were a form of consultation for the good of the Church. Acts shows that the leaders of the Church — like Peter, James the brother of the Lord and John, among others —

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## POPE FRANCIS DEFINES A SYNOD

"I should mention that the synod is neither a convention, nor a 'parlor,' a parliament nor senate, where people make deals and reach a consensus. The synod is rather an ecclesial expression — i.e., the Church that journeys together to understand reality with the eyes of faith and with the heart of God; it is the Church that questions herself with regard to her fidelity to the deposit of faith, which does not represent for the Church a museum to view, nor just something to safeguard, but is a living spring from which the Church drinks, to satisfy the thirst of and illuminate the deposit of life.

"The synod works necessarily within the bosom of the Church and of the holy People of God, to which we belong in the quality of shepherds — which is to say, as servants.

"The synod is also a protected space in which the Church experiences the action of the Holy Spirit. In the synod, the Spirit speaks by means of the tongue of every person, who lets himself be guided by God, who always surprises; God, who reveals himself to little ones, who hides from the wise and intelligent; God, who created the law and the Sabbath for man and not vice versa; by God, who leaves the 99 sheep to go in search of the one lost sheep; God who is always greater than our logic and our calculations.

"Let us remember, however, that the synod will be a space for the action of the Holy Spirit only if we participants put on apostolic courage, evangelical humility and trusting prayer."

— Pope Francis, Opening Remarks for the Synod of the Family, Oct. 15, 2015

convoked the faithful to address critical issues. These consultations were based on personal testimony and the Church's concrete experience in the desire to verify that the Holy Spirit was acting in their midst as they sought to make just decisions about how to proceed. These bold moves showed that decisions could be made based on broader participation. This was not, and cannot be, merely a democratic process. It is an act of discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

**Myth No. 3: Synodality is a threat to the traditional hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church.** The Catholic Church is without doubt a hierarchically organized entity. It is based upon the notion of apostolic succession from Jesus' chosen apostles, under the leadership of Peter and his inherent "Petrine function," to the bishops, successors of the apostles. Yet the biblical foundations of ecclesiology indicate that all the members of the Body of Christ participate in its life.

St. Paul expressed this best in his magnificent and extensive image of the Body of Christ in which each individual member of the body has a role to play (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-31). Paul is clear that each one's identity and gifts (charisms) all come from the same Holy Spirit. He is also clear that these are given for the building up of the body, not for personal exaltation. Finally, he emphasizes that each member contributes something important, even the least dignified! He also indicates a certain hierarchy of values, beginning with apostles, prophets and teachers (v. 28). Yet this hierarchy does not diminish the contribution of each and every member of the body.

**Myth No. 4: Synodality is really only for bishops.** Although Paul VI reinstated the Synod of Bishops shortly before the end of the council, the council itself had encouraged active lay participation in the Church's life, and not simply as a financial or supportive resource (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, No. 30).



### MARY, ICON OF THE SYNODAL CHURCH

"When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers."

— Acts 1:13-14



**HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE**

"The Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the Church's life: The plan of our salvation is worked out by the grace of the Spirit. He is one who takes the lead."

— Pope Francis, address for the opening of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Oct. 4, 2023

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On this point, Pope Francis moved forward beyond what his predecessors had done. Unlike any previous synod, he invited laywomen and men, and some religious sisters, to participate, giving them a vote in the proceedings. They were not merely vocal participants. This was in keeping with a desire the pope had expressed on numerous occasions to see women, in particular, brought more into the authoritative decision-making process. Although he clearly reaffirmed that ordination to the priesthood is out of the question, he has nonetheless appointed some women to high-ranking positions in the Roman Curia. Making at least some laypeople active participants in the final decisions of the synod has made it clear that synodality is not merely for bishops.

By their baptism, the laity also participate in the royal and eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ, prophet, priest and king. This was an essential teaching of the council's

Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (cf. Nos. 2 and 3).

Francis explains this stance quite explicitly in the constitution *Episcopalis Communio* (2018), which updated the norms of the synod: "Although structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God, specifically via the bishops, established by God as 'authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church,' demonstrating, from one assembly to another, that it is an eloquent expression of synodality as a 'constitutive element of the Church'" (No. 6).

**Myth No. 5: Synodality jeopardizes the unchanging doctrinal teaching of the Church.** Such an assertion is false on two counts. First, it presumes that doc-



Parish priests who were part of an international gathering to provide input to the Synod of Bishops on synodality met in small groups May 1, 2024, at a retreat center in Sacrofano, outside of Rome. CNS photo/Courtesy of the Synod of Bishops



trine doesn't change. This would be to deny that the tradition of faith is a living tradition. Precisely because it is living, the tradition can be reformulated in light of new insights and in response to new situations, all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pope St. John XXIII drew attention to this perspective in his opening address to Vatican II (*Gaudet Mater Ecclesiae*, Oct. 12, 1962): "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominantly pastoral in character."

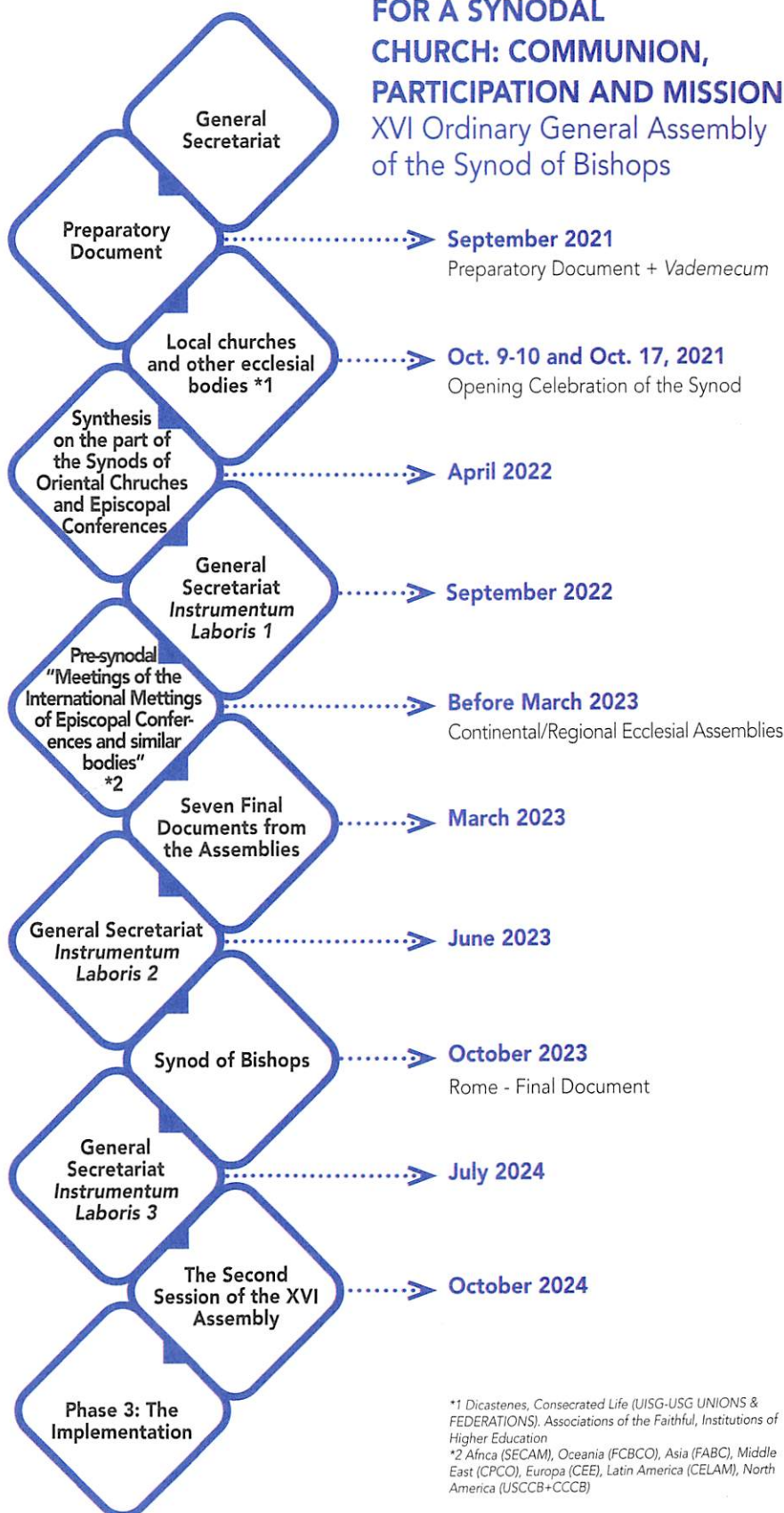
The council itself picked up the first sentence of this quotation in *Gaudium et Spes*, which invites theologians to aid in this process of finding "more suitable ways of communicating" the Church's doctrinal deposit (cf. No. 62). Is this not why the Church teaches that both Scripture and Tradition go hand in hand? Unlike some denominations that see tradition as mere human invention, a Catholic approach sees it as the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit, guiding the Body of Christ to ever deeper understandings of the mystery of salvation.

**Myth No. 6: Synodality is a fad that will disappear when the present papacy comes to a close.** No one has a crystal ball to see what will happen after the current synod concludes. We should recall, however, that Pope Francis did not establish the modern version of the synod. That distinction goes back to Paul VI in 1965, as described above. Synodality in its present form thus builds upon Vatican II itself. The Synod of Bishops will have its 60th anniversary in October 2025, during the second session of the Synod on Synodality.

For his part, Pope Francis celebrated the golden anniversary of the Synod of Bishops in 2015 when he gave a speech on October 17 that year to commemorate the

## TIMELINE OF THE UNIVERSAL SYNOD

### FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops





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anniversary. He reinforced the three main levels of synodality. The first is on the local level of “particular churches” — that is, the diocesan level, where consultation can touch each individual member of the Body of Christ. The second is the regional level, especially conferences of bishops and ecclesiastical provinces, where information can be collated, prioritized and sent on as concerns from various regions. Finally, the universal level expresses the true synodality of the Church in the actual assembly of the delegates, elected and appointed, to the synod itself in Rome. With such a structure envisioned, it is hard to imagine that it will simply fade away, even if new approaches and emphases to synodality

may well appear in the future.

**Myth No. 7: Even if synodality is valid, it is more appropriate to Protestant or Orthodox churches, not Catholic.** Given the foundations of synodality found in the New Testament, at a time when what might be called “the great church” had yet to experience the serious divisions that marred the Body of Christ thereafter, it would be difficult to defend this myth. The Catholic Church is synodal and conciliar to its core. When Pope Francis used the word “constitutive” when discussing synodality, he was affirming synodality as an essential part of the Catholic Church’s identity. As emphasized in the first myth discussed above, the roots of synodality

## SYNOD DOCUMENT SEEKS RESPONSES TO WELCOMING, SERVING EVERYONE

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — The working document for the October assembly of the Synod of Bishops on synodality called for responses to how all the baptized can better serve the Catholic Church and help heal humanity’s “deepest wounds.” The document said the synod should spur the church to become a “refuge” and “shelter” for those in need or distress and encourage Catholics to “allow themselves to be led by the Spirit of the Lord to horizons that they had not previously glimpsed” as brothers and sisters in Christ. “This is the ongoing conversion of the way of being the Church that the synodal process invites us to undertake,” the document said.

The document, called an *instrumentum laboris*, was released at the Vatican July 9. It will serve as a discussion guideline for the synod’s second session Oct. 2-27, which reflects on the theme: “How to be a missionary synodal Church.” The reflections are the next step in the synod’s overarching theme: “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission.” Synodal practice “calls us to mutual care, interdependence and co-responsibility for the common good,” it said, and it is willing to listen to everyone, in contrast to methods “in which the concentration of power shuts out the voices of the poorest, the marginalized and minorities.”

precede any of the divisions of the Church that occurred throughout history. To consider it merely an Orthodox or Protestant practice would be to deny its more ancient roots.

If these seven myths cannot be considered an exhaustive list, I think they illustrate the most neuralgic issues.

### On the Front Lines

In light of these myths, what priests are to do is particularly important, since they obviously serve on the front lines of the Church’s ministry. Responses to this question will take many different forms and will depend on all kinds of diverse contexts. In general, however, I can offer a few of my own recommendations as the final session of the Synod on Synodality looms.

My first piece of advice is to help calm fears and suspicions among the faithful. In our present age of social media, rampant conspiracy theories and general fear that modern life is out of control, priests need to help people obtain a more objective perspective. Helping to clarify the myths about synodality can be one way to reorient unwarranted exaggerations about what synodality means and what it will accomplish. If we remain calm and objective, and if we humbly admit that we don’t know how the results of the synod may play out, it can help temper fears and anxieties. Debunking the common myths about synodality will help. I am not suggesting a series of homilies on the topic, although an occasional homily in line with the readings of the Sunday might well be appropriate. But other means to disseminate accurate information exist, such as parish bulletins, adult education sessions, parish letters or even Bible-study groups examining the biblical foundations of synodality.

A second tactic is to put into practice the principles of synodality at the local level. Parish council meetings, staff meetings, committee meetings and the like would be natural venues to exercise a bit of syn-



## COMMEMORATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

odality. It would help illustrate synodality concretely to parishioners, serving as a reminder that decision-making is not only accomplished from the top down.

The third piece of advice is, or should be, self-evident. Priests need to educate themselves and keep current on what is happening on the level of the universal Church. Naturally, priority is often rightly given to the local and diocesan scene. Yet broadening our parishioners' perspectives is also part of our task as ministers of the Word, sacrament and pastoral charity. The whole point of worldwide preparations for the first session of this two-session synod was to seek out the broadest set of opinions possible and to ensure that the issues on the local level reached the universal level.

Synodality was not conceived only as a top-down movement, especially under Pope Francis. Even though it was always perceived as consultative, it was not for mere show. It was to help ensure that the concerns of the average baptized person would be heard and, at least in part, form the basis of future Church policies. Priests, as presbyters or true "elders" in the com-

On Oct. 17, 2015, Pope Francis, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, made the following comments: "Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself. If we understand, as St. John Chrysostom says, that 'Church and synod are synonymous,' inasmuch as the Church is nothing other than the 'journeying together' of God's flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord, then we understand too that, within the Church, no one can be 'raised up' higher than others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person 'lower' himself or herself, so as to serve our brothers and sisters along the way."

munity, should seek to know the facts about synodality as it progresses and be articulate about them.

A fourth task should also be obvious. We need to encourage our parishioners to pray earnestly for the success of the synod. If we believe in the power of prayer, then it is most appropriate to orient our prayer in this direction, especially in the days prior to the synod and throughout it. Practically, making at least one petition of Sunday's universal prayer for the synod and its participants will help draw attention to this event. One could also consider a local or

diocesan-wide novena, the nine-day devotion leading up to a major event or celebration.

There is also a fifth possible action. After the synod ends, and when the final decisions are announced, it might be good to organize local sharing sessions once more to give people a chance to discuss the results. Some may well be controversial. Also, there will likely be certain people dissatisfied with one result or another, or maybe disappointed that a favorite issue was not resolved. Offering people a chance, first, to hear what the synod says and, second, to air their reactions might well promote a better overall reception of the synod.

In conclusion, we priests can play a vital role in helping to make synodality a constitutive element of the Church's life in our day. Explaining its biblical roots and its place in the Church's life from the very beginning can help assuage concerns that some of our faithful have, sometimes based on misleading or downright false information.

Let's do our part to set the record straight and to open ourselves once more to the breath of the Holy Spirit acting in the life of the Church. **TP**



Pope Francis presides over a prayer for peace in St. Peter's Basilica with cardinals and members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican on Oct. 27, 2023. CNS photo/Lola Gomez

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