

## *From the Pastor's Desk: A Reflection on Synodality*

As you may recall, I have been following the work of the **XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops** since planning for it began in 2021. The second and final session concluded on October 27, 2024, with the Final Document issued the day before. It is a phenomenal piece of work that outlines the agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church in the spirit set forth 60 years ago at the Second Vatican Council. It says that the work of the Synod was guided by the interaction of three disciples on Easter Morning: Mary Magdeline, Simon Peter, and the Beloved Disciple, who through their dependance upon one another were able to recognize the risen Lord and give witness to Him, having been called by name and forgiven by Him. From that the synod was able to come forward with the very definition of Synodality: "a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary, so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ." This literally means more lay involvement with the Church's pastor's in discovering the idea of what it means to be Church in the modern world. **I thought, since the diocese has not given much attention to this process, through PROCLAIM or any other of its communication ministries, and because of the TREMENDOUS IMPORTANCE OF SYNODALITY IN THE LIFE OF THE ENTIRE CHURCH FROM THE POPE TO THE MOST SIMPLE AND HUMBLE MEMBER OF VISITATOIN PARISH, you deserved a bit of a summary of what the Final Document said. I ENCOURAGE YOU TO READ THIS INSERT AT YOUR LEASURE SO THAT YOU MAY UNDERSTAND ANY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CHURCH (ESPECIALLY ON A DIOCESAN OR PARISH LEVEL) IN THE COMING YEARS.** This insert is not exhaustive but is reflective of the nature of the Synod's ethos contained in the document.

As I began above, Pope Francis' three-year consultation on the future of the Catholic Church concluded on Oct. 26, outlining the institution's challenges and proposing ways for all the baptized to be involved in charting a path forward. Recommended changes include overhauling training for future priests, greater lay involvement in selecting bishops, expansion of women's ministries and a revision to church law to mandate greater transparency and accountability throughout the church. The document, which was produced by some 400 delegates from around



the world, caps a legacy initiative for Francis — inviting one of the world's oldest institutions to consider how it might become more inclusive and better capable of listening to all its members. How this process advances and how these proposals are implemented and enforced, however, still needs to be fully enfolded.

In remarks following the document's approval by the synod body, the pope approved its publication. Francis said that he hoped the document would be a "gift to the people of God." He said that he did not intend to publish an apostolic exhortation, a magisterial document typically published at the conclusion of the synod offering the pope's own reflections. Instead, he said, the document already contains "highly concrete indications" to guide the church's mission. The pope also noted the work of the special study groups on some of the most contentious issues that surfaced throughout the three-year process. **Their work is expected to continue through June 2025.**

Some of the more important issues were the most contentious ones as well. The synod calls for *a complete update to the current guidelines on how priests are formed and trained, rooting out clericalism, and the document calls for a "significant presence of women" in Catholic seminaries.* The text goes on to envision a **broad reliance on lay-led ministries within the church** and for a greater voice for the laity in choosing bishops. In a synodal church, the document states, **the ministries of bishops and priests are marked by broad collaboration and greater co-responsibility with their flock (including juridical decisions).** Despite a centuries-long practice of accountability to one's superiors in church life, the synod said that the dimension of authorities being held accountable to the community is "in need of restoration."

Over the last three years, revising the church's decision-making processes emerged as one of the synod's primary objectives. The Final Document calls for a **revision of the church's Code of Canon Law from a "synodal perspective," and in particular, a clarification of the distinctions between consultative and deliberative involvement in decision-making.** In addition, the synod recommends the "establishment everywhere" of pastoral and finance councils, involvement of laity in pastoral/financial planning, preparation of an annual report for both financial matters and safeguarding policies and performance evaluations of all ministers and ministries.



The text also highlights the role of participatory bodies — such as diocesan synods, presbyteral, diocesan and parish pastoral councils. While many of the proposals are already mandated in U.S. and other Western dioceses, they have not been universally adopted by the global church. "A synodal church is based upon the existence, efficiency and effective vitality of these participatory bodies, not merely the nominal existence of them," the document states. "Without concrete changes in the short term, the vision of a synodal church will not be credible, and this will alienate those members of the People of God who have drawn strength and hope from the synodal journey," it continues.

On the role of episcopal conferences, the synod declares that such bodies are fruitful in best identifying how to enculturate the faith and that local churches must have the ability to move at different paces.

According to the synod's final document, more study is needed to determine what tenets of Church teaching should be reserved to the pope and what matters can be decided or enacted by episcopal conferences (without dismissing the doctrine of papal infallibility). The synod also encourages the further collaboration of continental groupings of episcopal conferences for a deepening of synodal practices and consultation. Among other proposals in the synod's final text:

- Consultation from Roman dicasteries with bishops' conferences and other relevant parties prior to the publication of major documents;
- More collaboration among members of the College of Cardinals — the elite body responsible for advising the pope on church governance — in order for the diverse group to better know one another;
- Creation of a new synodal study group to examine how liturgical celebrations can offer a better expression of synodality;
- Establishment of a council of patriarchs, major archbishops and metropolitans of Eastern Catholic Churches to advise the pope; and
- More formation and training for those working with minors and vulnerable adults to improve the church's safeguarding efforts.



On Sunday, Oct. 27, the pope presided over a final Mass for the synod in St. Peter's Basilica. Surrounded by the summit's global delegates, Francis encouraged the church to be attentive to "the challenges of our time, the urgency of evangelization and the many wounds that afflict humanity." "A sedentary church, that inadvertently withdraws from life and confines itself to the margins of reality, is a church that risks remaining blind and becoming comfortable with its own unease," said the pope. "If we remain stuck in our blindness, we will continuously fail to grasp the urgency of giving a pastoral response to the many problems of our world." As he officially brought the three-year synod process to its end, Francis declared that it is now time for the church to "get its hands dirty" and "carry the joy of the Gospel through the streets of the world."<sup>i</sup>

As I said at the beginning, I have been following the work of the Synod since its preparatory phase in 2021. It saddened me greatly that the diocesan communication ministry did not follow it and allow you to experience its unfolding and the mystery of *synodality* over the last 3 years. My embrace of the work of the synod has been a source of joy and liberation for me as a season of preparation for me to facilitate the celebration of the Jubilee Year 2025 with its theme: *Pilgrims of Hope*. I hope what I have offered you will provide you with at least a detailed sketch of the work of the Church in reaching out to envision its future synodal life (our future life) in contemporary society. I hope that it will inspire us to strengthen our active participation on our parish community and help our parish to grow in its membership, its embrace of service, its sacramental life rooted in the Word of God, and its true love of the Lord Jesus Christ who gives us all life in our journey toward eternal happiness properly understood. I also hope that it will give our members the courage to participate more greatly in the work of the Church beyond our parish. May this tremendous gift of synodality allow us to embrace the possibility of intimate love of one another within our community and beyond for the good of all.

---

<sup>i</sup> For this paragraph, as well as a few other portions of this reflective I appealed to the article in the National Catholic Reporter entitled, "Synod's Final Report calls for all Baptized Catholics to Shape Future Church," by Christopher White, Vatican correspondent and Ateleia's. Synod's final document is 155 paragraphs: Proposals and Key Themes" The majority of the summaries and reflections remain my own.