

May 24, 2021

The synodal process

Pope Francis launches the most important global Catholic project since Vatican II

In the ninth year of his pontificate, Pope Francis has launched an ambitious three-year worldwide "synodal process".

It will culminate in October 2023 in Rome with the XVI ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

At that point, Francis will be almost 87 years old. By that age, all of his predecessors on the Chair of Peter had either died (with the exception of Leo XIII) or had resigned (such as Benedict XVI and Celestine V).

And if, God forbid, the Jesuit pope should not make it to 2023, this "synodal process" will have already begun. It's his insurance policy against the possibility that his pontificate will be promptly archived as a quick break before another pope returns to the status quo.

Even if there should be a conclave between now and the 2023 Synod assembly, the synodal process will be an integral part of the next conclave's agenda in a way not totally different from the papal election of June 1963.

The deceased pope, John XXIII, had already launched the first session of the Second Vatican Council in the autumn of 1962. His newly elected successor, Paul VI, continued the Council and brought the ship into port in December 1965.

It was no coincidence that Francis and his highly regarded Synod secretary general, Cardinal Mario Grech of Malta, announced the synodal process just before Pentecost, the event when the Holy Spirit manifests itself through multiple languages and reveals unity in diversity.

[An ambitious project with various risks](#)

But this global synodal process is not only ambitious, it is also risky because of its different phases – local, national/continental, and central – that will highlight the radical differences in the ecclesial and existential conditions of local Churches.

For instance, it will be curious to see what the diocesan phase of this synodal process will look like in places such as Hong Kong, China or Belarus.

Synodality requires a minimum of religious freedom (freedom to gather or to publish documents), which is currently minimal or nonexistent for Catholics in many countries.

Moreover, the coronavirus pandemic has now become a problem mostly for poor and middle-income countries. It, too, will have an impact on how some local churches are able to celebrate synods at the diocesan and national levels.

This new global synodal process also has to merge with ongoing national synodal paths that are already unfolding (Germany and Australia) or in the planning stages (Ireland and Italy).

Currently in the Catholic Church there are vastly different ideas about synodality, even among its advocates.

Is the aim to create a more pastoral and less clerical Church or is it to push for doctrinal developments on certain critical issues (such as the role of women in the Church, teaching on sexuality, etc.)?

What will the bishops do?

Cardinal Grech, in an important interview with official Vatican media, stressed that the bishops and the national episcopal conferences will play a crucial role in this process.

By October 2021, the bishops will have to appoint persons or teams to oversee the process (particularly of consulting the People of God) at the diocesan and national levels.

We already have a good idea who the bishops are and how their national conferences operate. But we do not know who they will choose as lay collaborators and advisors, or how they plan to select them.

These appointments will give important clues about the type of synodal process the bishops have in mind.

Cardinal Grech intimated that this new effort to implement synodality actually denotes a shift from the age of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, though he did not mention the two by name."

Perhaps in the past there has been so much insistence on the *communio hierarchica* that there arose the idea that unity in the Church could only be achieved by strengthening the authority of pastors," the 64-year-old cardinal said."

In some respects, that path was in some ways necessary when after the Council various forms of dissent had appeared," he added.

Dissent does not manifest itself in organizations and movements today, but mostly in individuals who leave the Church -- quietly, though often bitterly.

Being part of the ecclesial conversation

This synodal process is an invitation.

Discernment by the bishops will be the focal point, but this process will be also a discursive process – a language-process to paraphrase what Jesuit historian John O'Malley wrote about Vatican II as a "language-event".

The Church is not a parliament, and Francis has often warned against interpreting synodality as parliamentarism.

But within this ecclesial conversation persuasion will play a role. And this opens a huge problem in some Churches, such as in the United States where "money talks", as the saying goes.

The bishops will have to defend the synodal process from the never-neutral role of "independent" and militant neo-Catholic media, cyber-militias and – in a disguised, but no less dangerous way – donors and pressure groups that now controls much of the conversation in ecclesial spaces.

Catholicism simply has no experience of running synodal events at the national and global levels in an information ecosystem that is largely shaped by digital and social media. These media are beyond the control of the institutional channels run by the hierarchical Church.

This synodal process is also the restitution of the ecclesial conversation to the entire People of God. Up till now particular agendas and idiosyncratic movements have monopolized the conversation.

This new process is, in a sense, an act of rebalancing the politics that will have to have preferential options in the Church.

Women and young people

Without a non-perfunctory "prise de la parole" by women (to quote French Jesuit Michel de Certeau), this effort towards synodality will be meaningless.

This synodal process will live or die by the kind of acknowledgment it gives to the word of women, who, for far too long, have been treated as guests in their own house. This is especially true for the Catholic Church in the Western hemisphere, but not only.

This synodal process will also have to make relevant space, in both its liturgical and conversational moments, for young people– and not just for the hand-picked "churchy" types.

As Pope Francis noted in his letter to the youth four years ago: "St. Benedict urged the abbots to consult, even the young, before any important decision, because 'the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best'." (Rule of St. Benedict, III, 3)

The Vatican and the world's bishops will have to manage a variety of expectations. Some expect this synodal process to be like a nice gathering for small Church talk, while others see it as the opportunity to raise epochal issues – something like a Vatican III.

This synodal process will likely be neither.

An unprecedented invitation, an important ecclesial event

But, at the same time, the Church's leaders must not immediately dash expectations, either. This synodal process will have to defeat the cynicism and bitterness that sadly defaces some of our ecclesial conversations today.

The concept of synodality as "the people walking together" is essentially the opposite of the "ecclesioclastic" rage where the Catholic Church seems to be blamed for everything and anything.

But this synodal process could go sideways very quickly and, in some local Churches, become a means for a faction to wield reactionary power.

Recent Church history is full of failed "ecclesial events" that reinforced mechanisms of exclusion.

One would search in vain for the word "synodality" (let alone the concept) in the teachings of Francis' predecessors.

What is about to start has its roots in the Second Vatican Council and could become the most important ecclesial event in global Catholicism since Vatican II.

The biggest risk of this synodal process is that it could reinforce the resentment of many Catholics against an institutional Church that continually invites people but never really lets them in.

However, this is an unprecedented invitation coming from the pope, and it should be received with hope.

Source: <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/the-synodal-process-2021-2023/14358>

Cardinal Grech: Transformation of Synod to create space for People of God

Cardinal Mario Grech, the General Secretary for the Synod of Bishops, explores the new synodal process, saying the changes were made so that “every voice might be heard, the decision-making process in the Church always begins with listening... because only in this way can we understand how and where the Spirit wants to lead the Church.”

By Andrea Tornielli

The Synod of Bishops becomes a space that helps the People of God hear the voice of the Spirit. This is the meaning behind the innovations introduced on Friday regarding the new synodal process. Cardinal Mario Grech explained these innovations in an interview with Vatican Media:

Q: Why was the Synod postponed?

The Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will be celebrated in October 2023. On the one hand, there was the dramatic situation of the pandemic, which demanded patience for an ecclesial event that still requires the physical presence of bishops in Rome for its celebratory phase. On the other hand, there was the need to apply with appropriate time the norms of the Apostolic Constitution, *Episcopalis communio*. Pope Francis published this important document on 15 September 2018, transforming the Synod from an event into a process. Before, the Synod was, to all intents and purposes, an ecclesial event that opened and closed in a fixed time - generally three to four weeks - involving the bishops who were members of the Assembly. That celebratory form responded to the configuration given to the Synod by Pope Paul VI in 1965. In the *Motu Proprio, Apostolica sollicitudo*, 15 September 1965, the Pope established a body of bishops “directly and immediately subject to the authority of the Roman Pontiff,” who participated - as the title of the *Motu Proprio* says - in the Petrine function of “concern for the Universal Church.” The aim of the Synod was to “promote closer union and greater cooperation between the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops of the whole world,” to “see to it that accurate and direct information is supplied on matters

and situations that bear upon the internal life of the Church and upon the kind of action that should be carrying on in today's world,” and to “facilitate agreement, at least on the essential points of doctrine and on the course of action to be taken in the life of the Church.”

Q: What does half a century of the history of the Synod of Bishops teach us?

The history of the Synod illustrates how much good these Assemblies have brought to the Church, but also how the time was ripe for a wider participation of the People of God in a decision-making process that affects the whole Church and everyone in the Church. The first sign was small but significant, the questionnaire sent to all in preparation for the first Synod on the Family in 2014. Instead of sending the bishops the *lineamenta* prepared by experts, which seeks responses that assist the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops in drafting the *Instrumentum laboris* for discussion at the Assembly, the Pope called for a wider listening of all ecclesial realities. The speech in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod (17 October 2015) completely opened the scene for “synodality as a constitutive element of the church.” One of the most quoted phrases of Pope Francis taken from that speech is as follows. “It is precisely this path of *synodality* which God expects of the Church in the third millennium.” He also described the synodal Church as a ‘Church of listening,’ in which each of us learns from one another, the People of God, the College of Bishops, and the Bishop of Rome. In fact, the synodal process is defined by the idea that “the Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life.” This means listening to the local church, the People of God. Listening at the intermediate levels of synodality, especially the Episcopal Conferences, where the bishops exercise their function of discernment, and finally at the level of the Universal Church, in the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. *Episcopalis communio* does nothing other than approve these ideas.

Q: To summarise, what are the various innovations that this document introduces?

The first and greatest innovation is the transformation of the Synod from an event into a process. I have emphasised, whilst the Synod before consisted of and in the celebration of the Assembly, now each Assembly of the Synod develops in successive phases, which the constitution calls the “preparatory phase, the celebratory phase, and the implementation phase.” The purpose of the first phase is the consultation of the People of God at the level of the local churches. In the address of the 50th anniversary, the Pope strongly insists on listening to the *sensus fidei* of the People of God. One might say that this is one of the strongest themes of the current pontificate. Many commentators rightly emphasise the theme

of the Church as the People of God. However, for Pope Francis the *sensus fidei* best characterises this *people* that makes them *infallible in credendo*. This traditional aspect of doctrine throughout the history of the Church professes that “the entire body of the faithful... cannot err in matters of belief” by virtue of the light that comes from the Holy Spirit given in baptism. The Second Vatican Council teaches that the People of God participate in the prophetic office of Christ. Therefore, we must listen to the People of God, and this means going out to the local churches. The governing principle of this consultation of the People of God is contained in the ancient principle “that which touches upon all must be approved by all.” (*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbari debet*) This is not about democracy, or populism or anything like that. Rather, it is the Church that as the People of God, a People who by virtue of baptism, is an active subject in the life and mission of the Church.

Q: Why is this first preparatory phase important?

The fact that this phase is called preparatory could be misleading, as if it were not truly part of the synodal process. In reality, without this consultation there would be no synodal process, because the discernment of pastors, which constitutes the second phase, emerges from listening to the People of God. I would describe these two closely related acts as complementary. Pastors are called to discern those issues that emerge from none other than this consultation. The *Instrumentum laboris* emerges from the foundation of these two acts, which refer to two subjects: the People of God and their pastors. The discernment of pastors culminates in the Synodal Assembly, which gathers the discernment of all the Episcopal Conferences, (national and continental) and the Council of Patriarchs of the Eastern Churches. This choral act involves the entire Catholic episcopate in the synodal process. How can we not hope for great fruits from such a broad and participatory synodal journey? Moreover, how can we not hope that the indications that emerged from the Synod will become, through the third phase, that of implementation, a vehicle of renewal and reform of the Church?

Q: What was the reason that moved the Pope and the Synod Secretariat to undertake this new path?

The synodal process was not thought up in some office away from reality, rather it emerged from the journey of the Church throughout the post-conciliar period. In the beginning, everything was limited to an assembly of bishops. However, Paul VI made it clear that the Synod can be improved like any ecclesial body. It was a start. Without that beginning, we probably would not be here talking about synodality and the Church as constitutively

synodal. The theme of synodality had weakened in ecclesial practice and ecclesiological reflection over the course of the second millennium in the Catholic Church. Synods were a typical practice of the first millennium Church, a practice that continued in the Orthodox Church. The novelty in the Catholic Church is that synodality re-emerges as the crowning of a long process of doctrinal development. Synodality helps advance and clarify our understanding of Petrine primacy at Vatican I, collegiality at Vatican II, and today through a progressive reception of conciliar ecclesiology, especially Chapter II of *Lumen Gentium* on the People of God, expressing the way which synodality is a modality for everyone to participate in the journey of the Church. This is a great vision, which unites the tradition of the Eastern and Western Churches, giving to a synodal Church that principle of unity that was lacking even in the Church of the Fathers, when the function of unity was exercised by the emperor! From this synodal journey, we can also expect with confidence great fruits on the ecumenical level. The Pope reminds us in his speech in the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the Church. Synodality offers us an adequate framework for understanding hierarchical ministry, especially the Petrine ministry. As Pope Francis notes that, “the Pope is not above the Church; but within it as one of the baptised and within the college of Bishops as a bishop among bishops, called at the same time - as Successor of Peter - to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches.” The synodal process is the litmus test of this truly high vision of the Church.

Q: What fruits can we expect from this new way of celebrating the Synod?

The next synodal assembly focuses on synodality. The fruits that can be hoped for are already implicitly indicated in the title indicated by the Pope for the Assembly: “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission.” For a long time, there was talk of *communio* as a constitutive element of the Church. Today it is clear that this communion is either synodal or it is not communion at all. It seems like a slogan, but its meaning is precise: synodality is the form of communion of the Church-People of God. In this journey together of the People of God with her pastors, in the synodal process everyone participates, each according to his or her own function - People of God, College of Bishops, Bishop of Rome – as a reciprocity of subjects and functions which moves the Church forward on its path under the guidance of the Spirit. We must not hide the fact that perhaps in the past there has been so much insistence on the *communio hierarchica* that there arose the idea that unity in the Church could only be achieved by strengthening the authority of pastors. In some

respects, that path was in some ways necessary when after the Council various forms of dissent had appeared. However, that cannot be the ordinary way of living ecclesial communion, which requires circularity, reciprocity, journeying together with respect to the various functions of the People of God. Therefore, communion becomes the participation of all in the life of the Church, each according to his or her specific condition and function. The synodal process demonstrates this very well.

Q: Several times, Pope Francis has stressed the importance of the holy People of God and the need to give more space to women in the Church. At the same time, he has warned of the risk of clericalism. How does the document on the synodal process respond to these concerns? Are you working to introduce other novelties that allow for a fuller participation of the people of God in all its constitutive elements?

The whole People of God is involved in the synodal process. The importance assigned to the People of God is evident in the consultation, which is the founding act of the Synod. I repeat, consultation is already part of the synodal process, it constitutes its first and indispensable act. Discernment depends upon this consultation. Whoever says that it is not relevant, that it is simply a preparatory act, probably does not understand very well the importance of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God. As I have observed, in the ancient Church this was the only instance of infallibility recognized in the Church, “the entire body of the faithful... cannot err in matters of belief.” Here all have their place and the opportunity to express themselves. The desire of the General Secretariat is to allow everyone to make his or her voice heard, that listening is the true ‘pastoral conversion’ of the Church. God willing, one of the fruits of the Synod is that we might all understand that a decision-making process in the Church always begins with listening, because only in this way can we understand how and where the Spirit wants to lead the Church.

Q: What will be the role of the bishops?

We must not forget that the moment of discernment is entrusted above all to those bishops who are gathered in the assembly. Some may say that this is clericalism, which is the desire to keep the Church in positions of power. However, we must not forget at least two things. The first, continually reiterated by the Pope, a synodal assembly is not a parliament. Making it work with representation or quota systems risks reviving a kind of conciliarism, that has largely been buried. The second, the Council teaches that bishops are “the principle and foundation of unity in their particular Churches.” The bishops therefore have a function of discernment, which belongs to them because of the ministry they carry out for the good of the

Church. In my opinion, the strength of the process lies in the reciprocity between consultation and discernment. There lies the fruitful principle that can lead to furthering development of synodality, of the synodal Church and of the Synod of Bishops. However, we cannot know everything straight away, the more we walk, the more we learn as we go along. I am convinced that the experience of the next Synod will teach us much about synodality and how to implement it.

Source: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-05/cardinal-grech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html>

21 May 2021