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Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops pray before a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 26, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Thomas Reese

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I confess I fell asleep several times reading the new working document for the synod on synodality, which will have its second session this October. The working document, or [*instrumentum laboris*](#) as it is officially known, sets the agenda for the next iteration of the synod. The first convening occurred last October after a worldwide consultation with listening sessions aimed at surfacing concerns people have about the Catholic Church.

Much of the document presents a theological justification for synodality. Whether it will convince people who oppose the process remains to be seen.

The working paper insists, "Synodality is not simply a goal, but a journey of all the faithful." The goal is for the whole people of God to become an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel. "Through his Church, guided by his Spirit, the Lord wants to rekindle hope in the hearts of humanity, restore joy and save all, especially those whose faces are stained with tears and who cry out to Him in anguish."

The synodal process began with a listening phase, which was followed last October by discernment in prayer and dialogue to discover what steps the Spirit is asking us to take.

This was followed by further consultations to discover "how to be a synodal church in mission." The objective of the consultation was "to identify the paths we can follow and the tools we might adopt in our different contexts and circumstances in order to enhance the unique contribution of each baptised person and of each Church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today."

Time for a cup of coffee. Just kidding.

The vision of a synodal church presented in the *instrumentum laboris* is beautiful, but it is terribly abstract. We need to experience synodality to truly understand it, just as we need to experience love to understand it. A philosophical dissertation on love does not cut it. Talking about synodality does not cut it; we need to experience it.

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Those who have experienced synodality speak highly of it, especially "conversations in the Spirit," where small groups (around 10 people) listen and share their experiences, views and hopes for the church.

In preparation for the second session of the synod, the focus was: "How can the identity of the synodal People of God in mission take concrete form in the relationships, paths and places where the everyday life of the Church takes place?"

Under the direction of Pope Francis, all the hot-button issues surfaced at the first session of the synod have been sent to committees for further study. He wants the second session to focus on "how to be a synodal church in mission."

As a result, the *instrumentum laboris* presents the theological foundations of the vision of a missionary synodal church promoted by Pope Francis.

"In Christ, light of all the nations, we are one People of God, called to be a sign and instrument of union with God and of the unity of all humanity," explains the document. "We do this by walking together in history, living the communion that is a partaking in the life of the Trinity, and promoting the participation of all in view of our common mission."

Synodality involves a style of being church that includes "listening to the Word of God, listening to the Holy Spirit, listening to one another, listening to the living tradition of the Church and its Magisterium."

Such a vision requires rethinking how we present the Gospel in today's context. Old theological arguments are unintelligible to contemporary people.



Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops start a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 18, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

A synodal church also calls for a renewal of liturgical and sacramental life "starting with liturgical celebrations that are beautiful, dignified, accessible, fully participative, well-inculturated and capable of nourishing the impulse towards mission."

This would include "the use of language that is more inclusive and to a range of images from Scripture and Tradition in preaching, teaching, catechesis and the drafting of official Church documents."

The Eucharist needs to be "a sign of the unceasing gift of grace that conforms us to Christ and makes us members of his Body and nourishment that sustains us on the path of conversion and mission" so "that the Eucharistic assembly manifests and nourishes the missionary synodal life of the Church." Take note, those running the [Eucharistic Revival](#) in the United States.

The foundational section is followed by "three closely interwoven sections, which illuminate the missionary synodal life of the Church from different perspectives":

I) from the perspective of the Relationships — with the Lord, between brothers and sisters and between Churches — which sustain the vitality of the Church in ways more profound than the merely structural; II) from the perspective of the pathways that support the dynamism of our ecclesial relationships; III) from the perspective of the places that are the tangible contexts for our embodied relationships, marked by their variety, plurality and interconnection, and rooted in the foundation of the profession of faith, resisting human temptations to abstract universalism.

Time for another cup of coffee.

What the document is trying to say is that the church is more about relationships than structures, which are only there to support relationships. What is desired is a "Church less focused on bureaucracy and more capable of nurturing relationships with the Lord, between men and women, in the family, in the community, and between social groups."

[Related: US bishops' Eucharistic Revival misses how synodality makes for better Eucharist](#)

The synod has been asked to encourage the full participation of women, young people and the marginalized in parishes, dioceses and other ecclesial realities, including positions of responsibility.

Although the synod will not consider the possibility of married priests or women deacons and priests, it is open to greater involvement of laity in church ministries, such as "the ministry of coordinating a small church community, the ministry of leading moments of prayer (at funerals or otherwise), the extraordinary ministry of communion, or other services not necessarily liturgical."

The working paper notes that in the Latin church, laypeople can be delegated to do baptisms and weddings. Church rules could also be changed to allow laypeople to preach at Mass.

In other words, lay men and women could be allowed to do everything that deacons can do without worrying about ordination.

The document encourages formalizing the [ministry of catechists](#), which has been so successful in Africa, where there are few deacons. It also proposes a new "ministry of listening and accompaniment."

These ministries would not include ordination, but they could be officially recognized and empowered by the church. Quoting Vatican II, the working paper says, the task of pastors is "to acknowledge their [the faithful's] ministries and their charisms, so that all may cooperate unanimously, each in her or his own way, in the common task."

Such a vision of the church moves "from a pyramidal way of exercising authority to a synodal way."

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This "path will entail a new way of thinking about and organising pastoral action, which takes into account the participation of all baptised men and women in the mission of the Church, aiming, in particular, to bring out, recognise and animate the different baptismal charisms and ministries."

These positive relationships and ministries require "a deeper formation in the knowledge of how the Spirit acts in the Church and guides it through history," including "formation in listening" and discernment. The purpose of this formation is to form "men and women capable of assuming the mission of the Church in co-responsibility and cooperation with the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8)." The document calls for "the participation of women in formation programmes alongside seminarians, priests, religious, and lay people."

While emphasizing the role of consultation and discernment, the *instrumentum laboris* also affirms "ultimately the responsibility of the competent authority" for decisions. "The authority remains free from a juridical point of view since the consultative opinion is not binding." However, "if a general agreement emerges, the authority will not depart from it without a convincing reason."

The document sees the exercise of authority as "a moderating force in the common search for what the Spirit requires, as a ministry at the service of the unity of the People of God." But this also requires transparency, accountability and even a process for evaluating the use of authority in the church. The working paper

acknowledges that "the lack of transparency and accountability fuels clericalism."

All of this happens in unique communities rooted in a place and a culture. "The variety of liturgical, theological, spiritual, and disciplinary traditions demonstrate how much this plurality enriches the Church and makes it beautiful." The church must avoid the temptation of "an abstract and homogenizing universalism."



Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops gather for morning prayer Oct. 27, 2023, in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Today, place cannot not be understood in purely geographical and spatial terms. "Rather, it points to our belonging to a web of relations and a culture that is more dynamic and mobile than in the past."

The document concludes by noting the existence of parish, deanery and diocesan councils as well as episcopal conferences, which act as instruments for the consultation, planning and decision-making as envisaged by existing canon law. With the appropriate adaptations, they could prove to be even more suitable for

giving a synodal approach a concrete form.

"These Councils can become subjects of ecclesial discernment and synodal decision-making and places for the practice of accountability and the evaluation of those in positions of authority." Episcopal conferences could also be given more authority, even "doctrinal authority," to respond to sociocultural diversity of the church with "liturgical, disciplinary, theological, and spiritual expressions appropriate to different socio-cultural contexts."

In short, the October synod is being asked to reflect on "how to be a synodal Church in mission; how to engage in deep listening and dialogue; how to be co-responsible in the light of the dynamism of our personal and communal baptismal vocation; how to transform structures and processes so that all may participate and share the charisms that the Spirit pours out on each for the common good; how to exercise power and authority as service."

The challenge will be to answer these questions by pointing to paths and tools that are helpful in fostering relationships and discernment in churches in different places, while avoiding abstractions that will put people to sleep.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. [View the full series.](#)