

As dioceses across the world embark on synodal path the experts offer advice



This weekend, dioceses in the U.S. and around the world will formally launch a local consultation process leading to the 2023 synod on synodality in Rome.

Supporters bill it as one of the most important events in the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council and the greatest consultation exercise in human history.

But as the diocesan phase of the ambitious two-year project begins, many Catholics are either wholly unaware of the “synodal path” or unsure of its significance.

The synodal process starts with a diocesan consultation lasting from October 2021 to April 2022. A second, continental phase will take place from September 2022 to March 2023.

The third, universal phase will begin with the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, on the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission,” at the Vatican in October 2023.

The process will be guided by two texts -- a preparatory document and handbook -- released last month by the Vatican.

But at an event in Rome last weekend, Cardinal Mario Grech, the secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, said it would be wrong to see the texts as an attempt to dictate the direction of the global process. The cardinal explained that the documents were not intended to “pre-establish the conditions of the path or dictate the way, obliging the Church to follow a path established in advance.”

With that caveat noted, CNA asked theologians what the preparatory documents tell us about where the synodal path could lead.

While they expressed enthusiasm about the synod on synodality’s potential for renewal, they voiced reservations about the vagueness surrounding its ultimate goals, the preparatory texts’ theology, and the timing of the process.

The promise of synodality

Christopher Ruddy, an associate professor of historical and systematic theology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., said that there was “a lot that’s really commendable” in the texts.

“To be trying to foster deeper communion in the Church, deeper participation, greater mission — those three goals are all really worthwhile,” he told CNA in a phone interview.

“I think that sense of co-responsibility — that all of the faithful are called to take an active part in the life and mission of the Church — is something that’s really important and is still a work in progress.”

He added: “The emphasis on listening and discernment, and trying not to reduce the synod to a parliament or political struggle, is really good.”

Father Thomas Weinandy, OFM Cap., a former member of the Vatican’s International Theological Commission, praised the global scope of the synodal process.

“It could enliven not only the local churches but the entire worldwide Church,” he told CNA via email.

“[Through] a global growth in faith through the working of the Holy Spirit, Jesus would more fully be called Lord of all of the world to the glory of God the Father.”

“Also, the faith of the Church could be confirmed and strengthened and people could be helped to live holy lives. It could enliven a whole worldwide evangelization. All of this would be marvelous to behold.”

Images of the Church

Ruddy, who teaches a course on Vatican II, noted that the preparatory document seeks to root the synodal path in the ecumenical council held in Rome in 1962-65.

“It’s very clear that it’s placing itself in a sort of trajectory of Vatican II and the idea that the Church is a pilgrim People of God journeying towards the Kingdom,” he said.

“And of course that’s conciliar teaching and it’s scriptural, but there are other things that don’t get emphasized as much in terms of looking at the Church, like the images of the Church as the Body of Christ or the Temple of the Holy Spirit, or even the Bride of Christ.”

“These are all obviously legitimate and valid ways of looking at the Church, but they bring out different emphases. I think that sometimes when you’re emphasizing one dimension of the Church, or one image, it has its strengths but also its limits.”

Ruddy said that highlighting the image of the Church as a people “walking together” (the origin of the word “synod”) raised the question of “where it is journeying to.”

“I think there needs to be a clear sense of the goal here. I think of that line, ‘it’s not the destination, it’s the journey,’ and I’ve never liked that. When you’re on a journey, you need to be surprised sometimes by that, but you do need to have a sense of why you’re doing this and where you’re ultimately heading.”

He added: “Even granting that this document is just trying to get something going, I think it’s still important to have a sense ultimately of where you’re going, so that it doesn’t just become amorphous.”

Referring to the Bible, he noted that when the Israelites were in the desert, they were seeking the Promised Land, and when people went up to Jerusalem in Jesus’ time, they did so for a definite purpose.

“They weren’t just trying to journey together, they were trying to go somewhere,” he said.

Consulting all the baptized

The synod on synodality’s handbook urges dioceses to include “all the baptized” in the process.

It says: “Special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith, etc.”

Ruddy said it made sense to consult those who no longer take part in Church life, just as a company would seek to listen to dissatisfied customers so it could improve its service.

The role of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is critical to Pope Francis' understanding of synodality. As he put it last weekend, "the synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present, there will be no synod." The 60-page handbook mentions the Holy Spirit 50 times.

"How are you going to have listening sessions, and so forth? It'd be hard to begin with, but I think the COVID situation makes things a lot trickier right now."