

# Pope's new synodal process "effects the Church and everyone in the Church"

On May 21, 2021, Pope Francis surprised the Church by announcing that the Synod of Bishops, postponed due to the pandemic, will be preceded by a synodal process that includes "listening to all of the baptized" in every local diocese before the bishops gather again in 2023.

## Synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission

In the ninth year of his pontificate, the pope has launched an ambitious two-year worldwide synodal process that will culminate in October 2023 in Rome with the XVI ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The title of the 2023 Synod of Bishops is *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*.

Originally planned for October 2022, the next synod is now comprised of a two-year process that will unfold in three phases between October 2021 and October 2023: A diocesan phase, a continental phase, and a universal phase.

In comments made to Vatican media, Cardinal Mario Grech, head of the Vatican's office of the Synod of Bishops, said the change "from an event into a process" was chosen because "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 Second Vatican Council teaches that the people of God participate in the prophetic office of Christ," says Cardinal Grech. "Therefore, we must listen to the people of God, and this means going out to the local churches."

Cardinal Grech explained, "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.'"

He added, "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."

Cardinal Grech emphasized the importance of allowing everyone to have their voices heard, "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."

### Synods, a typical practice of the first millennium Church How many Synods has Pope Francis convened?

**2014 The Synod on the Family – The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization.** This session was called to define the current situation of families and collect participants' experiences and proposals.

**2015 The Synod on the Family – The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World.** The purpose was to reflect on points from the 2014 synod and "formulate appropriate pastoral guidelines" for the pastoral care of the person and the family.

**2018 The Synod on Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment.** Its preparatory document stated, "the Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today."

**2019 The Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region.** The purpose was "to identify new paths for the evangelization of this segment of the People of God, especially the indigenous peoples."

**"A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing.'"**



Photo by Vatican News - Synodal Process

## Three-stage synodal process



Pope Francis will open the three-phase event from the Vatican on Oct. 9-10, 2021

• **PHASE 1: (Oct. 2021–April 2022.)** The synodal process is held in Catholic dioceses.

Each diocese undertakes consultation meetings with local Catholics and hosts its own "pre-synodal" gathering to produce a summary to submit to the national bishops' conference. In "a period of discernment," the national conference reviews the texts received from the local dioceses and composes its own document to submit to the Vatican's office for the Synod of Bishops. Vatican officials will create a first draft of the synod's *instrumentum laboris*, (Latin for 'working instrument' or working document), from the submitted texts by September 2022.

• **PHASE 2: (Sept. 2022–March 2023.)** Bishops meet at the continental level.

In the second phase of the process, bishops gather on each continent to create texts about their discussions and submit them to the Vatican. A second draft of the *instrumentum laboris* will be created from these texts and released by June 2023.

• **PHASE 3: (October 2023.)** The bishops meet in Rome for the final phase. The theme of the final phase is: "For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission."

### The History of synods

According to Cardinal Mario Grech, head of the Vatican's office of the Synod of Bishops, "Synods were a typical practice of the first millennium Church, a practice that continued in the Orthodox Church. The theme

of synodality weakened in ecclesial practice and ecclesiological reflection over the course of the second millennium in the Catholic Church.

"Pope Paul VI made it clear that the Synod can be improved like any ecclesial body. It was a start. Without that beginning, there probably would not be talk about synodality and the Church as constitutively synodal. 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."

### Synod and synodality

**Synod.** In the document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the International Theological Commission (ITC) explains that "'Synod' is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church . . . Composed of a preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path), it indicates the path along which the People of God walk together."

"Since the first centuries," the ITC says, "the word 'synod' has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by."

**Synodality** is a novel term that means "walking together," based on its Greek roots. Its more frequent use in recent decades, according to the ITC, "is a sign of something new that has been maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today, and one that 'needs careful theological clarification.'"

### Preparatory document and handbook released

The Vatican has issued a preparatory document and a "handbook" for dioceses as part of the global church's preparation for the 2023 assembly of the Synod of Bishops, discussing the theme, "For a synodal church: communion, participation and mission." The materials were released Sept. 7, 2021, at a news conference at the Vatican and online in English and Spanish at [www.synod.va/en.html](http://www.synod.va/en.html) and [synod.va/es.html](http://synod.va/es.html).

The handbook includes prayers, a description of synodality, the objectives of the synodal process, and the main questions to which the local Catholic communities are asked to give feedback. It underlines that dioceses should focus on "maximum inclusion and participation" among baptized Catholics in the diocesan phase of the synod process.

According to the Vatican, the preparatory document is "a tool to facilitate the first phase of listening to and consulting the People of God in the particular Churches" for the diocesan phase of the synod.

