



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

The purpose of this document is to provide for catechetical leaders some of the background and an educational piece on what a synod is, what synodality is, and what this particular synodal process that is taking place over the next two years is.

This document has three sections. They are:

- 1.) What is a synod? What does that word mean? This section will give a little history of synods and their nature and purpose.
- 2.) What, then, is synodality? Is that even a real word? This section will try to explain how synodality is actually the Church's true identity and nature.
- 3.) What, then, is *this* synodal process – that we began in October 2021 – going to be like, and how is it different from previous synods?

This section will reveal the unique character of this synod that Pope Francis has called for.

1.) What is a synod? What does that word mean? This section will give a little history of synods and their nature and purpose.

The word synod itself simply means an assembly of the clergy and sometimes also of the laity in a diocese or other division of a particular Church. There are synods in other Christian denominations as well. A synod is a council of a church, usually convened to decide an issue of doctrine, administration, or application. The word synod comes from the Greek word for “assembly” or “meeting” and is comparable to the Latin word for “Council.”

In the Catholic Church, the terms “synod” and “council” have become pretty synonymous, and both mean an authoritative meeting of bishops for the purpose of church administration in the areas of teaching faith and morals or of governance in church discipline or law. Ecumenical Councils are the most authoritative expressions of formal synodal gatherings, always in communion with and under the authority of the Pope.

In 1965, Pope St. Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops as a permanent institution of the Catholic Church, as an advisory body of the pope, setting the stage for the renewed understanding of synodality being emphasized and explored today. A synod of bishops generally meets every three years and is designated an “Ordinary General Assembly.” However, ‘Extraordinary’ synods can be called to deal with specific situations. There are also “special” synods for the Church in a specific geographic area such as the one held from November 16th through December 12th, in 1997, for the Church in America.

The themes of other Modern Catholic synods include the following:

- 10th synod in 1998 "The Bishop: Servant of the Gospel of JESUS CHRIST for the Hope of the World"
- 11th synod in 2005 "The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church"
- 12th synod in 2008 "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church"



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13th synod in 2012 "New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith"

In 2014, there was an Extraordinary General synod for "The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization"

These synods usually culminate in documents being produced by the Vatican – usually called an Apostolic Exhortation from the Pope -- and perhaps a celebratory gathering of the people.

Individual dioceses have run different kinds of synods with different groups of people, for example young people, from time to time.

2.) What, then, is synodality? Is that even a real word? This section will try to explain how synodality is actually the Church's true identity and nature.

We need to make sure that we all understand this concept of synodality.

Synodality refers to the very essence of the Church, her constitutive reality, and is thus oriented towards evangelization. It is an ecclesial way of being. Synodality is the Church being one body – though many members – one in Christ. Synodality is the Church being an indivisible and inseparable unity, in union with Christ. Synodality is a unity in plurality in the power of the Spirit, with the Church being called to open new paths while embarking on that same journey.

“In the first millennium, ‘journeying together’—that is, practicing synodality—was the ordinary way in which the Church, understood as ‘People united in the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,’ acted” (Preparatory Document, 11). When there was disagreement and division in the early Church, bishops gathered to listen and discern the path forward. These were the first synods which developed at all levels of the Church—local, regional, and universal. St. John Chrysostom said that “Church and Synod are synonymous.” (Preparatory Document, 11).

A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing... It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of Truth’... in order to know what He says to the Churches...

Synodality has thus marked the Church from her very beginning and has been expressed in various ways, as the style of the Church's life and mission, as particular structures and processes, or through decisive events.

The Church is nothing other than the ‘journeying together’ of God's flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord,



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It's about being truly open to the other and open to dialogue.

A synodal church calls for participation, solidarity, and transparency in administration, and it does not consign the fate of the entire People of God to the grasp of small but powerful groups.

The first level of the exercise of synodality is had in the particular Churches. In the institution of the Diocesan synod the priests and laity are called to cooperate with the bishop for the good of the whole ecclesial community.

There are what are called "organs of communion" in the local Church: the Presbyteral Council, the College of Consultors, Chapters of Canons and the Pastoral Council. Only to the extent that these organizations keep connected to the 'base' and start from people and their daily problems, can a synodal Church begin to take shape: these means, even when they prove wearisome, must be valued as an opportunity for listening and sharing.

Synodality represents the path by which the Church can be renewed by the action of the Holy Spirit, listening together to what God has to say to His people.

Thus, in a synodal church... there is the need to promote a sound decentralization, where the Pope doesn't take the place of the bishops, and the bishops don't take the place of the People of God.

In a real way, the Diocesan Pastoral Council is already a practice in synodality.

3.) What, then, is *this* synodal process – that we're beginning now – going to be like, and how is it different than previous synods? This section will reveal the unique character of this synod that Pope Francis has called for.

God is at work in the world, and we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us.

The Church, as a human institution, is always in need of continual reformation, in keeping with the mission she has received. This synod is an opportunity to promote the revitalization of the Church.

Pope Francis is calling for "a conversion of our activity as a Church that" includes "the active participation of all the members of God's People."

As Church, we are attempting to "journey together" as the People of God, listening to the Holy Spirit.

We want a synodal church: a communion where all members gather in assembly and take an active part in the Church's evangelizing mission.



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This path will be so much more than just a Synod of Bishops on Synodality. This synodal process will take place over two years, and it will include consultations at parish, diocesan, national, and continental levels before a summit of bishops in Rome in 2023.

A synod on synodality can sound like talking about talking, but it's meant to be something entirely different. The name of this synod officially is "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission." One of the primary goals of this synodal process is a sense of renewed communion across the entire Church. This synodal process is meant to be a journeying together.

Pope Francis has called upon the Church to rejuvenate her synodal roots. He has opened a two-year synodal process which he hopes will reframe and renew our common journey forward. First and foremost, the Synod is a call to pray, listen, and discern together what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church today—all for the sake of the Church's evangelizing mission. The Church needs to strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission, and it is precisely this path of synodality that can achieve that.

The pope wants the entire, universal Church to undertake this path together, so that we all might grow together through this concrete experience of synodality. He says that in this process the bishops need to remain open to everything that comes from the local churches – the local churches being the dioceses, namely all of us in this diocese. In this synod, the bishops are making this journey together with the People of God, and since we are all connected, the contribution of everyone is precious in this process of mutual listening to the Holy Spirit.

All the baptized are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out only by the bishops, while the rest of the faithful remain passive recipients.

This synodal process in which the Church wishes to journey together with men and women, sharing the travails of history, also wishes to rediscover the inviolable dignity of peoples and the function of authority as service.

The major component of this synodal process is the phase of diocesan consultation, which we're officially beginning this weekend. The Synod process begins by listening to the people of God, who share also in Christ's prophetic office. The bishops want to listen to God's people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us. The bishops want to take particular care to involve also those who are further away and are consulted with greater difficulty.

A key question to help focus this process is this: A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, "journeys together." How is this "journeying together" happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take to grow in "journeying together?"



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In the words of the Holy Father “...the purpose of this Synod, and therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but to ‘plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands’” (Preparatory Document, 32).

This process will require contemplation, meetings, listening to others, but first listening to God. This is not meant to be just another gathering, but one centered on God and God’s plan to save humanity. It’s a meeting rooted in reality but looking at God, and God is looking at us.

It is the responsibility of all the baptized to get involved. You can’t remain on the sidelines, looking in.

We are beginning a process of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every person can participate and contribute. We’re looking for positive constructive thoughts and suggestions. We’re looking toward the future, not remaining focused on the past.

The People of God need to be heard. No one is to be excluded from this process. All people are welcome: baptized or not.

We look forward to this journey together. Most importantly, please pray for this process. Thank you.