

# What is happening with the worldwide Synod?

## Background: The Second Vatican Council

Many Catholics know of Vatican II—the great Church Council of our times, held at St. Peter’s in Rome from 1962-1965. This council was one of only a handful of such meetings in the Church since the Middle Ages! Nearly 2500 bishops from all over the world participated. Sixteen documents came out of it, laying a foundation for the church as we know it today. Most Catholics know of the changes in the celebration of the Mass that followed: changing the orientation of the altar; the Mass no longer conducted in Latin; Communion received in the hands; and others. What’s not quite on the radar is the underlying spirit as expressed in the many documents. Indeed, it was seen as a huge outpouring of the Holy Spirit to the Church in the modern world. St. John XXIII described the result of the Council as a “New Pentecost.”

So much was expressed so quickly by the council fathers that one could hardly expect that all the manifestations would be realized in a few years, much less immediately. The ramifications have taken decades to work their way into human habit. Since Spirit is a work in progress, most Catholics have yet to fully wrap their heads around many of the insights of the council fathers—like the co-responsibility of the laity for the mission of the Church itself.

One of four principal council documents, *Gaudium et Spes*, says in the very first sentence, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the [people] of this age... are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.”



*Painting by Franklin McMahon, 1962*

## 2021-2024 Synod: For a Synodal Church



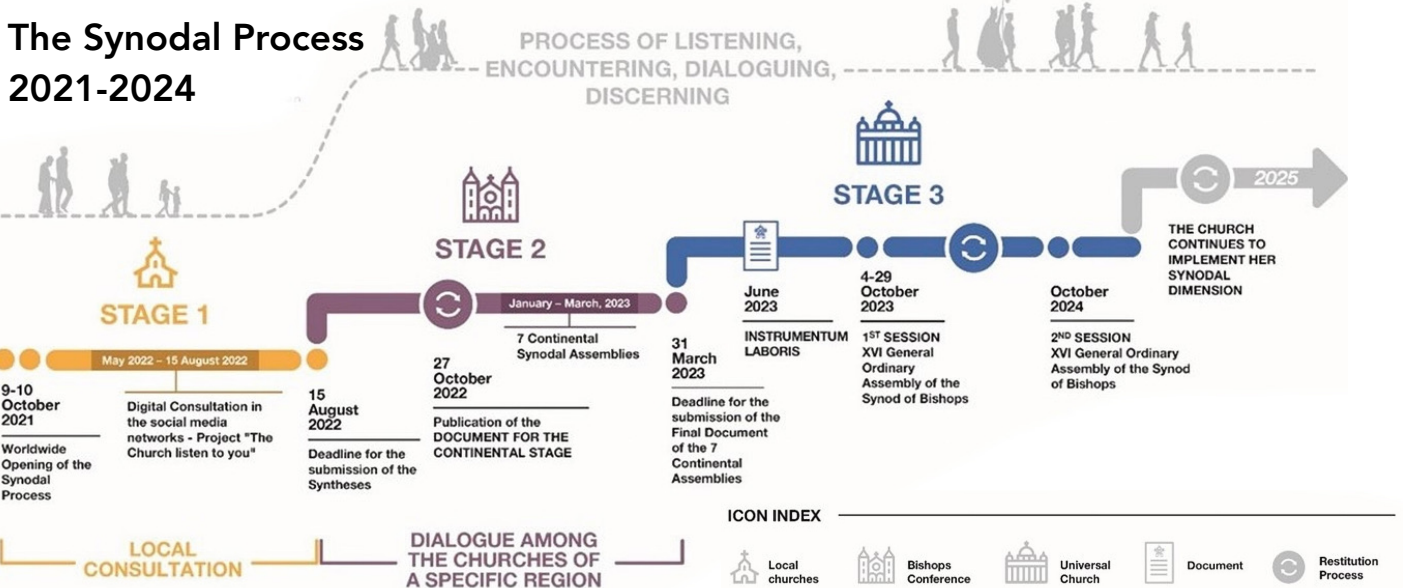
In 2021, in order to implement the Council, Pope Francis launched perhaps his most ambitious project—the Synod for a Synodal Church. **Everyone** in the church was asked to describe those very “joys, hopes, and griefs.” Whereas previously bishops might be asked to do the describing, our pope wanted to hear directly from us! The purpose of this exquisitely creative method was “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.” And further, Pope Francis proposes that we ought to be sharing these very same communications of the heart on a regular basis. That’s what followers of The Way of Jesus do. Thus, millions of Catholics all over the world took part in synodal sessions to speak, listen, and discern.

# The Worldwide Synod Continues

Over 150 reports or “syntheses” of synod meetings came to the Diocese of Pittsburgh Synod office from parishes, schools, various lay groups and gatherings, and groups of religious men and women. Reports from all over the world flowed to the Vatican Synod office. Further assemblies and synthesis reports on national and continental levels led to an *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL) published in May 2023. The document provided the basis for reflection by the Synod of Bishops in October. This assembly included representative bishops from all over the world, along with members of religious orders and lay people—men and women. Their task was to “outline paths of in-depth study” (IL) before the Synod of Bishops reconvenes in 2024 to consider how to act upon what the Holy Spirit is saying through the minds and hearts of Catholics around the globe.



Synod opening, September 2021, by Vatican Media



## The Heart of Synodality

Amid all of these reports and meetings, there are three important things to keep in mind about the Synod and synodality.

First, the focus is not mainly on the documents that will be produced. It is on the **process itself**: the People of God learning to speak boldly from our experiences, listen deeply to others, and discern together prayerfully what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do.

Second, the Synod is for a **synodal Church**. That is, this process should be part of our decision-making at every level of the Church—including our parishes.

Third, the goal in the end is not inward-looking, but that we follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in spreading the **Good News of Jesus** to the world. Indeed, if we embrace synodality, we can become a prophetic sign to the world that people from all over the globe can work together on a shared project for the good of all.