

What Is the Worldwide Synod About?

In the last handout, we looked at the **process** for the worldwide synod. But what is the Synod about?

What Was Heard?

In the fall of 2022, a Vatican team sifted through synod reports from all over the world. They noted that millions participated. “Many emphasised that this was the first time the Church had asked for their opinion and they wish to continue this journey.” [17] Here are some of the main themes. [Numbers in brackets refer to the paragraph numbers of the document.]

Listening that becomes welcoming

“Many communities have already understood synodality as an invitation to listen to those who feel exiled from the Church,” [38] including women, young people, LGBTQ people, single parents and divorced people who remarried. “Those who feel at home in the Church feel the absence of those who don’t” (Episcopal Conference of Ireland). [29]

Mission

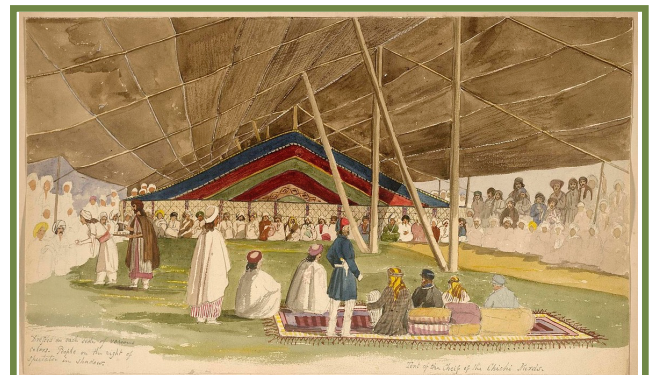
“The Church’s mission is to make Christ present . . . through reading the Word, the celebration of the Sacraments and through all actions that care for the wounded and suffering.” [41] How can families pass the faith on to our children in the midst of cultural change?

Participation and co-responsibility

In recognition of the baptismal dignity of all Christians, people expressed a “deep and energetic desire for renewed forms of leadership . . . that are relational and collaborative,” and forms of authority capable of uniting us in co-responsibility. [59] Almost all reports “raise the issue of full and equal participation of women.” [64]

Structures and spirituality of synodality

We don’t need to be afraid of tensions, but open to articulating and facing them through communal spiritual discernment. [71] We will need synodal structures and institutions, and people trained in using them.



“Tent of the Chief of the Chichi Kurds,” by Frederick Charles Cooper, 1850. British Museum. Wikimedia Commons.

The authors of the Vatican summary, titled “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” used the image of a tent to describe the Church. The tent cloth encloses a shared space of welcome, the ropes that balance tensions recall our need for discernment together, and the pegs that anchor the structure remind us of the fundamentals of our faith, which hold firm but can move from place to place.

The Working Document for the October 2023 Synod Assembly

In past meetings of the Synod of Bishops, the working document served as a draft statement on the topic at hand. In contrast, this document presents the priorities and tensions “that emerged from listening to the People of God” as **questions** addressed to the Synodal Assembly. [10]

It includes a description of a synodal Church, three major questions, and fifteen worksheets that probe the major questions in more detail.

Three central questions for the Synod Assembly (paraphrased)

How can we better radiate our communion with God and with all humanity?

How can we, as laity and clergy together, learn from each other to co-responsibly share the burdens and the gifts and the joys of service to our gospel mission?

What are the processes and structures of participation and authority that need to be improved or created for a more missionary and synodal Church?

“Largely, what emerges from the fruits, seeds and weeds of synodality are voices that have great love for the Church, voices that dream of a Church of credible witnesses, a Church that is inclusive, open and welcoming Family of God” (Episcopal Conference of Zimbabwe)

What's Different about this Synod Assembly?

About 20% of the 360+ voting members are not bishops. Fifty-four members are women, the first time women have been able to vote in a Synod of Bishops.

Work has been divided between full gatherings and small discernment groups, using the method of “conversation in the Spirit.”

The main objective of the first session will be to “outline paths of in-depth study” based on the fruits of the worldwide consultation.

The Assembly met this year from October 4-29 and will meet again in October of 2024. What will happen in between is not yet clear.

The worksheets for the assembly do not shy away from difficult areas such as women being ordained deacons, the need for more collaborative decision-making, the possibility of married priests, and the continuing “open wound” of abuse crises in the Church. However, raising topics does not guarantee that particular changes will take place.



Cynthia Bailey Manns, director of adult faith formation at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Community in Minneapolis, is one of four laypeople from the United States who will participate as a voting member at the Synod Assembly in Rome this October. (Photo from The Catholic Spirit)

Characteristics of a synodal Church [Working document, 17-31]

A synodal Church:

- is a listening Church;
- is a Church of encounter and dialogue;
- is open, welcoming and embraces all;
- is also a Church of discernment;
- is not afraid of the variety it bears, but values it without forcing it into uniformity;
- promotes the passage from ‘I’ to ‘we’;
- confronts honestly and fearlessly the call to a deeper understanding of the relationship between love and truth;
- is able to manage tensions without being crushed by them;
- desires to be humble, and knows that it must ask forgiveness and has much to learn;
- is increasingly synodal in its institutions, structures and procedures;
- nourishes itself at the source of the mystery it celebrates in the liturgy;
- is a Church whose communion implies a mission.

“Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” and the *Instrumentum Laboris* [Working Document] for the Synod are available at: <https://www.synod.va/en.html>.

XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS

For the First Session
(October 2023)



What Can We Do?

Recognize that other people in the Church will not see things the way that I do. We can address the tensions that exist through prayerful listening to each other. We will come to realize that the Holy Spirit can speak through unlikely people! Our diversity can contribute to a rich unity, like voices in a choir.

Bring synodal practices of listening and discernment into the center of our parishes and organizations. The third and fourth handouts in this series will help you.

Most of us are new at this. It will take time. Learn from others with experience of group discernment.

Be willing to enter into real dialogue with your pastor and others in authority.

Realize the magnitude of what is happening. Pope Francis is asking us to become co-responsible for the mission of the Church. Will we step up to the challenge?