



Unpacking Synodality: Understanding and Engaging the Synodal Path

Synodality is a way or style of being Church. In particular: a united, inclusive, and missionary Church. The worldwide Synod convoked by the Universal Church, “[For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission](#)”, is an opportunity for the global Catholic community of faith to live into the call to be a “pilgrim Church” (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#) 48).

Synodality is the act of engaging in authentic dialogue within and beyond the sacramental bounds of Church. St. Pope Paul VI noted, “Speaking generally of the dialogue which the Church of today must take up with a great renewal of fervor, we would say that it must be readily conducted with all (people) of good will both inside and outside the Church. The Church can regard no one as excluded... Its catholicity is no idle boast. It was not for nothing that it received its mission to foster love, unity and peace among (all)” ([Ecclesiam Suam](#) 93-94).

Pope Francis reiterated this when saying that synodality is “a constitutive element of the Church” and, echoing St. John Chrysostom (cf. [Explicatio in Ps. 149: PG 55, 493](#)), he noted “‘Church and Synod are synonymous,’ inasmuch as 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” ([Address for the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops](#), 2015).

As a pastoral leader, it is your role to accompany Catholics in your community in walking the synodal path and to infuse a spirit of synodality and dialogue in your local setting.

Explaining what exactly “synodality” is and why the 2021-2023 Synod is taking place is an

important initial step. The Synod [Preparatory Document](#) offers some excellent ways to elucidate this process, but here are some simple ways to help unpack what this journey all about:

- **A “synod” is an opportunity for the Church to reflect on a particular pastoral area.** The word literally means “*journeying together*” (from the Greek word *synodía*), to indicate that this process should always be done in the company of others and never alone.
- **The 2021-2023 Synod is a worldwide journey –** people on every continent are engaging in deep consultation and discernment at the same time. Walking the path together is a sacred act of solidarity and catholicity.
- **The Church is exploring a new way of being Church** to equip our local churches to live together in *communion*, achieve greater *participation*, and move forward more intentionally in our *mission* in and throughout the world.
- **No one is excluded.** Everyone is invited to participate in consultations. It is through genuine encounter in the presence of the Holy Spirit that is the most fruitful.
- Grounded in the movement of the Holy Spirit, the main objectives (detailed in [Preparatory Document](#) 2) are to prayerfully seek to embrace and explore the giftedness and co-responsibility of the People of God; bring to light and convert prejudices or distorted practices not rooted in the Gospel; regenerate current and broken relationships; appropriate the fruits of

recent synodal experiences; and better engage and build up the Church's credibility as reliable collaborator beyond its church walls.

There will be questions about what walking a synodal path means for the Church, especially as it relates to your local area. As Pope Francis has said, "Journeying together – laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome – is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice" ([Address for the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops](#), October 2015). "Synodality" is an unfamiliar term in the United States, especially among lay people. However, the concept has biblical roots (see [Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church](#) by the International Theological Commission, published March 2018) and is already present in many civic and secular institutions within the U.S. At the USCCB Plenary Assembly in 2021, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio (Papal Ambassador) to the United States, [shared his insights on synodality](#) with the bishops, where he responded to several concerns or questions that have arisen when considering this Synod. He explained that:

- Synodality *is not* a meeting about meetings or an abstract concept.
 - *It is* a way to help address the reality of our present situation.
- Synodality *is not* about changing traditional truths about Christian doctrine.
 - *It is* about how our teachings can be applied in the changing context of our times.
- Synodality *is not* a parliament underpinned by a political battle.
 - *It is* about being vulnerable yet moving us toward a better place.

He shared that the synodal process of bringing everyone together could be "**an answer to the challenges of our time** and to the confrontation, which is threatening to divide this country, and which also has its echoes in the Church." ([Address to the U.S. Bishops](#), November 2021) People are increasingly worried about social and ecclesial challenges today; these insights can serve as a way pastoral leaders can accompany the People of God on the path toward synodality. The emphasis on *communion*, *participation*, and *mission*, informs and helps direct the Church's response to *division* (and polarization), *isolation*, and *injustice* in the world.

It is recommended that pastoral leaders engage the People of God in regular communication around the 2021-2023 Synod, listening to concerns and patiently sharing these basic points and other background materials contained in the Synod [Preparatory Document](#) and the [Vademecum](#) (handbook document, literally meaning "to go with me"). Consider providing update sessions at regular intervals to keep people aware of local, diocesan, national, and international developments related to Synod 2021-2023, so that they will know how their input is moving in and through the structure of the Church and to keep a "synodal spirit" integrated into the life of your community



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