

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

About Listening Sessions

Universal Synod on Synodality

Synod
2021
2023



What is a Synod?

Synod is an ancient practice in Christianity. In the Acts of the Apostles (Chapter 15), we hear about Peter and Paul being “welcomed by the church, as well as by the apostles and the presbyters” (Acts 15: 4) to listen, discuss, and discern together how to reconcile Jewish and Gentile religious practices.

Early in the Church, St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) described the “Church and Synod as synonymous.” Local Churches gathered with their bishops to discuss matters related to their local situation throughout the first millennium. As the Church grew in numbers and territory, this practice grew to provincial (regional) and universal (ecumenical) councils that included bishops, clergy, religious and laity.

The practice of Synodality continued into the second millennium, even as decision-making was increasingly reserved to bishops and the Holy See. The Second Vatican Council, an ecumenical council, emphasized the communion of the Church and reclaimed the image of the Church as the Pilgrim People of God journeying together towards holiness. “...there is but one People of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly and not an earthly nature. For all the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit...” (Lumen Gentium no. 13).

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St. Pope Paul VI created the modern structure of the Synod of Bishops in 1965 after the close of the Second Vatican Council. St. Paul VI wanted the collaboration and dialogue between bishops, theologians, religious and the lay faithful to continue after the Second Vatican Council. Since 1967, the Church has held a Synod of Bishops approximately every two or three years to examine an issue affecting the Church. At each of these Synods bishops have consulted with members of the clergy, religious and the laity.

What is different about this current Synod is what we are undertaking right now: a return to the most ancient practice; a discernment on the grassroots level, with the entire People of God, which our theology describes as “everyone.”

What will happen at the listening sessions?

The sessions begin with prayer. People will be asked to organize themselves in groups of less than ten and reflect on the following questions:

- Where and how do you personally experience Church today? Describe your personal experience
- What joys do you experience?
- What difficulties and obstacles have you encountered?
- What insights do you have?
- What is your dream or vision for our church in the future?
- Are there any aspects of the Church's evangelizing mission that you would like to see?
- How do you value the Church's social mission to care for the poor and marginalized, as well as its efforts to address poverty and social change?

Each person is asked to speak once until everyone in the small group has spoken, giving everyone an opportunity to share. We ask everyone to limit themselves to less than three minutes of speaking. It is important we give space for the Holy Spirit to speak to each of us, both by listening to others and in the silence.

Who can participate?

Everyone! Pope Francis has called for all people of good will to share what they are discerning to be the Holy Spirit's calling.

That means Catholics and everyone else!



What is the purpose of the listening sessions?

These listening sessions are the first phase of a universal gathering of the Church, called a Synod.

In this first phase, Pope Francis is asking each of the approximately 2,250 dioceses in the Roman Catholic Church to gather people in their territory to listen to each other's joys and hopes, and griefs and anxieties (c.f. *Gaudium et Spes* no. 1). After we listen to each other, we are called to encourage one another to grow in holiness. Listening and speaking within the Church always involves prayer. We are listening and praying together so we can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit.

The “goal” of this activity is not to create a new vision or pastoral plan with objectives. Instead, we are going back to the beginning of our Church to understand what the Holy Spirit is calling us to become.

Our diocesan commission will compile what is said at the listening sessions and send it to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. There, staff will compile reports from the 195 dioceses in the United States and send that to the Vatican. In October 2023 all of the bishops around the world will gather in Rome to convene formally as a Synod of bishops.

Who will be facilitating the sessions? Do you have ground rules so no one dominates a session?

There will be trained facilitators guiding each session. All are asked to abide by our Group Etiquette Code:

- Discernment is a key part of the synodal process. Discernment means speaking, listening, and prayerfully reflecting, so pausing in silence between speakers to consider what is said is helpful.
- Discernment is not making a decision, coming to a consensus, or asking God to affirm a decision. It is a process of sifting through our lives and attempting to see things the way God sees them and then acting accordingly.
- Active listening is an essential part of discernment. It is not necessary and not expected for people to respond to each other.
- The listening session is a safe place to talk — we will treat each other and what anyone says with reverence and respect.
- One person speaks at a time and each person limits how long he/she speaks so that everyone has time to share.
- We all will listen with an open mind – listening for understanding rather than listening to make a response.
- We may pause the conversation at certain intervals to reflect and pray.
- Avoid arguing or comments that seek to advance a personal agenda.
- Each person only speaks once, giving everyone an opportunity to share. Please limit yourself to less than three minutes of speaking. It is important we give space for the Holy Spirit to speak to each of us, both by listening to others and in the silence.
- We will be reporting our themes and discussion to the Diocese, who will forward to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).
- No names of individual participants or groups will be shared in a document.

As participants, when we tell others of our experience of the consultation, we will not attribute anything we share to particular people or groups.

