

What You Need to Know About the Church's Synod and Its Final Report

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“We do not need a sedentary and defeatist Church,” Pope Francis said at the closing Mass for the Synod of Bishops on Oct. 27 during the Synod on Synodality, a three-year initiative where Catholics across the world were invited to discuss how the Church can better understand them.

“[We need] a Church that hears the cry of the world and—I want to say it, maybe someone will be scandalized—a Church that gets its hands dirty to serve the Lord.”

The Pope’s homily, delivered from his wheelchair in St. Peter’s Basilica, emphasized the theme of continued discernment at the heart of the final 51-page synod document released Oct. 26. Forgoing the customary apostolic exhortation, a document typically released by prior popes several days after the conclusion of other synods, the Holy Father chose to conclude the Synod on Synodality by ratifying this final report and approving it for immediate publication.

In an address to synod participants in the Vatican’s Paul VI Hall, he explained his decision, saying: “There are already very concrete indications in the document that can be a guide for the mission of the Churches, on the different continents, in the different contexts: that is why I am making it immediately available to everyone, that is why I said it should be published.”

What is significant about Pope Francis’ decision and the 51-page final report he chose to immediately release instead of an exhortation? To answer that, it’s essential to look back at this multi-year process and identify what is distinct about this synod in the first place.

What is a Synod? Exploring Pope Francis’ Vision: In early 2021, Pope Francis first announced the synod, requesting Catholics from all around the world to submit their feedback and perspectives to their dioceses, in accordance with the question: “What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our ‘journeying together?’” The feedback gathered from the initial phases informed the framework for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which concluded last week.

The first synod meeting was held at the Vatican in October 2023, and was distinguished by voting lay delegates – both laymen and laywomen. In choosing to implement the synod as a three-year process, the Pope sought to provide an opportunity to discern moving forward together as the people of God, expressed in the most “ordinary way[s] of living and working.”

The 2023 meeting, which took place from Oct. 4 to 29, concluded with the release of a 42-page summary report titled “A Synodal Church in Mission,” which centers around the call for a greater “exercise of co-responsibility” among all Christian believers throughout the world. Appealing to Scripture, tradition, and the teachings of Vatican II, this document, approved by the 344 voting members present, provided a comprehensive definition of synodality, saying: “Synodality can be understood as the walk of Christians with Christ and toward the kingdom, together with all humanity; mission-oriented, it involves coming together in assembly at the different ecclesial levels of life, listening to one another, dialogue, communal discernment, consensus-building as an expression of Christ’s making himself present alive in the Spirit, and decision-making in differentiated co-responsibility.

The remaining questions, perspectives and proposals from the 2023 meeting were brought to the second meeting of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which concluded with the release of the final 51-page document.

What was special about this Synod meeting?: The third and final meeting of the Synod on Synodality formally opened on Oct. 2 with a papal Mass. A penitential liturgy was held the night before, which concluded a two-day retreat for the delegates. The structure of meetings have been largely similar, as the 368 voting delegates sat together at tables, engaged in periods of silence, and listened to information presentations.

Several of the largely controversial topics focused on by the media were not extensively emphasized at this meeting, and instead have been taken up by ten specialized theological study groups. These study groups, which are continuing to study substantial matters like women's access to the diaconate and *Fiducia supplicans* (the document released last December that provides clarification about topics such as blessing same-sex couples), are coordinated by the administrative body of the Holy See, the Roman Curia, and will provide delegates with final reports on their findings in June 2025.

Throughout the sessions, Pope Francis and many of the delegates emphasized the importance of unity and mutual listening as foundational to the synodal journey. Pope Francis has described the synodal process as an opportunity to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading the Church, and encouraged all members to embrace humility and openness, trusting the Spirit to guide them through an array of difficult and complex cultural, pastoral and doctrinal questions.

“So often we get caught up with niche issues that we talk about in Europe or in North America,” Australian Bishop Anthony Randazzo said at a news conference on Oct. 4, stating that a strong emphasis placed on issues such as women's ordination and LGBTQ issues originates from “churches and communities that have great wealth, great access to technology, and resources.”

Meanwhile, Archbishop Andrew Nkea Fuanya of Cameroon offered his perspective on the African synodal process at a Vatican briefing on Oct. 22, stating that “synodality comes very alive in the small Christian communities because you don't live in anonymity as a Catholic,” and adding that the controversies regarding women's place in the Church are “a little bit strange” because “African women actually run our churches,” pointing to the women catechists in Cameroon churches.

Were women in the room, and who were they? Was that unusual?: In 2021, Sister Natalie Becquart was the first woman to vote at any Vatican meeting. Pope Francis had appointed Sr. Becquart as an undersecretary to the synod, prompting the synod secretary general Cardinal Mario Grech's to remark that “a door has been opened.” Other than Sr. Becquart, there were 82 women participants, with 54 being voting members, present at the synod. This group was made up of both lay women and women religious.

Women delegates ranged from Sister Rosmary Castañeda Montoya, a Dominican sister from Columbia, to Julia Oseka, a Polish national attending St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. She is the second-youngest synod delegate, an aspiring physics teacher, and has described herself as an “active feminist in the Church.” Catherine Clifford, co-editor of the “Oxford Handbook on Vatican II” and a theologian at Ottawa's St. Paul University, was another voting member, as was Cynthia Bailey Manns, an African American woman serving as the director of adult education at her parish in Minneapolis.

When it was first announced that laypeople, including laywomen and women religious, would be voting members of the synod back in 2021, a significant amount of buzz was generated. Some expressed concern that this could disrupt the balance between lay involvement and the Church's clerical structure.

Pope Francis suggested that this decision to expand the demographic of voting members is rooted in Vatican II's teaching that bishops participate in ministry with, not distinct from, God's people. "We are being asked to work together symphonically, in a composition that unites all of us in the service of God's mercy, in accordance with the different ministries and charisms that the bishop is charged to acknowledge and promote," he said at the start of the 2024 meeting.

What does the final document say? What happens with the document now? : Before it was released, Archbishop Paul D. Etienne of Seattle noted that the document will not necessarily meet the expectations of what people are hoping to see. "The topic of the synod is synodality. That's the first step," the archbishop told Catholic News Service on Oct. 24, "And it is no secret that the church moves slowly when it comes to decision making."

British Dominican Father Timothy Radcliffe, who served as a spiritual adviser at the synod, expressed a similar sentiment as Etienne, saying that, "many people in the Church still struggle to understand the nature of the synod, they tend to see it as a parliamentary body that will make big structural changes," adding that "that's the model that dominates our world, but that's not the sort of body it is."

The 51-page final document has already inspired a diverse range of reactions from Catholics all around the world. After three years, and thousands of listening sessions, the document doesn't advocate for the kind of change proposed by major reform groups, but rather has "highly concrete indications" that will guide the Church in her next steps.

The document contains five primary sections and focuses on five types of conversion: spiritual, relational, procedural, institutional and missionary. Proposals in the final text include establishing a council of leaders from Eastern Catholic Churches to better advise the Holy Father, working to continue implementing more protocols and greater accountability to protect against child sexual abuse and expanding the role of laypeople in Church dialogue and leadership. It also references the ongoing conversation regarding women and the diaconate, saying that the "question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open," a gesture towards one of Pope Francis' aforementioned theological study groups.

What is the significance of Pope Francis choosing to ratify this document, rather than to release a post-synodal apostolic exhortation? By ratifying the document, he has further emphasized the collaborative nature of the synodal process, affirming the collective input from the global Church. This decision reflects a commitment to a more participatory model of governance within the Church, aligning with the core principles of synodality—communion, participation and mission.

Moving forward, the Church's ten study groups are expected to complete their research by June 2025. As with the previous components of the synodal process, this is a longer period of time that intentionally allows for deliberate, reflective and prayerful decision making.

"The Holy Spirit calls and supports us in this learning, which we need to understand as a process of conversion," the Holy Father said, addressing synod participants on Saturday evening, reminding Catholics around the world that the close of this three-year process is "not an endpoint but a continuous process of conversion."