



Pope Francis, Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury and the Rev. Ann Burghardt, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, join other Christian representatives for an ecumenical prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square Sept. 30, ahead of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The synod opens Oct. 4. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Justin McLellan

Rome correspondent

[View Author Profile](#)
jmclellan@ncronline.org



Catholic News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

Join the Conversation

Vatican City — September 30, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

On the eve of a three-day spiritual retreat for participants in the assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis prayed that members of the church may embrace silence to listen to the voice of God and one another.

"Silence, in the ecclesial community, makes fraternal communication possible, where the Holy Spirit draws together points of view," the pope said to members of the synod, Christian leaders and young people in St. Peter's Square Sept. 30. "To be synodal is to welcome one another like this, in the knowledge that we all have something to share and to learn, gathering together to listen to the spirit of truth in order to know what the Lord is saying to the churches."

Synod participants were scheduled to spend three days together at a spiritual retreat outside Rome before the synod assembly formally opens Oct. 4.

Seated before the San Damiano cross, in front of which St. Francis of Assisi said he heard Jesus tell him to "rebuild my church," Pope Francis prayed that "the synod be a 'kairos' (moment) of fraternity, a place where the Holy Spirit will purify the church from gossip, ideologies and polarization."

Alongside Pope Francis were the leaders of 12 Christian churches and communities, including Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II and the Rev. Anne Burghardt, general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. Some 4,700 young people from 51 countries and belonging to different Christian traditions also were present in the square, according the ecumenical Taizé

Community which organized the event. The Vatican said some 18,000 in total were present.



Young people lead the prayers as Pope Francis and the leaders of other Christian communities gather for an ecumenical prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square Sept. 30, ahead of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The synod opens Oct. 4. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)

Many of the young participants in the prayer vigil completed a pilgrimage through Rome, walking to St. Peter's Square after a time of praise and worship at the Basilica of St. John Lateran, the cathedral of the Diocese of Rome, on the other side of the city.

Pope Francis told the group that just as silence is necessary to listen to the different perspectives that exist within the Catholic Church, "silence is essential for the journey of Christian unity."

Silence "is fundamental to prayer, and ecumenism begins with prayer and is sterile without it," he said. "The more we turn together to the Lord in prayer, the more we feel that it is he who purifies us and unites us beyond our differences."

To put the vigil's message into action, eight minutes of silence was observed in the ornate square which was decorated with Dutch flowers. Earlier in the day, Pope Francis had created [21 new cardinals](#) at a consistory in the square.

The pope noted that the silence that fell upon the square was "not an empty silence, but a moment filled with faith, expectation and readiness."

"In a world full of noise, we are no longer accustomed to silence; indeed sometimes we struggle with it, because silence forces us to face God and ourselves," he said. "Yet it lies at the foundation of the word and of life."

Advertisement

Before the vigil, young people from Lebanon, Indonesia and Slovenia shared their experiences of participating in the Catholic Church's synodal journey. Tilen from Slovenia shared that he was struck by how a single question could start an "all-night series of listening, disagreeing, growing, and seeing how taking the time to listen to each other helped us to go deeper."

Ukrainian children dressed in traditional outfits and Nigerian musicians performed before for the vigil, which was accompanied by music from the Taizé Community.

Joined at the center of the stage by the other church leaders, Pope Francis closed the prayer vigil by praying that the Holy Spirit would fill the synod participants with "wisdom and courage in order to be servants of communion and bold witnesses of your forgiveness in today's world."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. [View the full series.](#)