



Members of a Haitian dance group in Boston wait to perform outside the Basilica and Shrine of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Oct. 16, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)



by Patrick Saint-Jean

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

October 5, 2023

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

I was born in a Christian country where everyone is a Vodouisant. In Haiti, there is a common [saying](#) that goes like this: "Haiti is 70% Catholic, 30% Protestant and 100% Vodou."

Vodou, as an African diasporic spiritual system of belief that was born based on the spiritual needs of the trans-Atlantic enslaved, is one of the spiritual practices of the African people in the West. Upon their arrival in Saint-Domingue, now Haiti, the enslaved created something that could bring them together.

For them, this ancestral spiritual practice was a doorway to meet Christ. Vodou was a way to come to gather, to pray, discern and open themselves to the work of the Holy Spirit. This was their culture and spiritual avenue where they encountered the Spirit.

Like many other local spiritual systems, Vodou appeals to many who take shelter in the margin of the Gospel. This helps to connect them with all spiritual possibilities, including how people speak, eat and pray, as a way to connect with the Divine.

Growing up in a Black, Haitian, Christian family, I was often advised to "be careful with anyone who practices vodou. This is not from God."

Although my ancestors were formerly enslaved from the federation of Senegambia that arrived in the Americas in 1719, they were baptized Catholics, then Southern Baptists, before they gained their freedom. Yet they were always keen on this idea that the Holy Spirit resides in Europe, Jesus is Catholic, and if God was a human, he would probably be a white man.

Advertisement

My dear beloved, holy, loving family just like your family could not escape this false image of Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God in their religious imagination.

Since Vodou was always misunderstood by the Eurocentric mind of the enslavers, they forced their enslaved to undermine their own spiritual practice. Thus, about two centuries later, my parents imagined Vodou as a stranger to Christianity.

Today, the church is inviting us to see possibility in something other than what is familiar to us — something natural to us — new yet challenging: the synod.

This synod in Rome will be a new way for us to challenge the lack of spiritual imagination that was inculcated in us. This will be an invitation to see Christ in another culture. This will be a synodal invitation for the church of Christ.

This synodal experience will be a spiritual experience for us where we are invited together to reflect on something different: possibility. The enslaved, the native, had their own culture, their own way of praying. Yet the circumstances of the time brought them together and they gave birth to something new that gathered them as one group.

Perhaps we can learn from the model of the enslaved as one of the many spiritual practices during this experience. We can pray for the grace of openness to other cultures in the church. This synod will be an opportunity for us to believe in possibility once again. This experience of the synodal culture is a new way to meet Christ today in our midst.



Vodou pilgrims place their hands on an image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel before the start of a Mass marking her feast day at the Mount Carmel Church in Saut d'Eau, Haiti, on July 16, 2021. The devotion plays a role in both Catholic and Vodou spirituality. (AP/Matias Delacroix)

The synod in Rome will be a spiritual opportunity for us Catholics to sit down together and review the source of our Christian identity. The synod is a spiritual opportunity to listen to the Holy Spirit.

The word 'synod' from Greek is *syn hodos*, which can be examined into two parts. First, *syn*, which translates as "together," and second, *hodos*, which means "way." Thus, the invitation from the pope is an opportunity for us to come together as one church as we are with Christ.

This is an invitation for us to come on the journey and share this path with our spiritual ancestors in faith and pledge our humanity as people who ought to live together. This is a reminder of the letter of St. Paul to the Ephesians, "in all humanity and creation be gathered together with God" as one people, one synodal church ([Ephesians 1:10](#)).

As a religious Roman Catholic, contrary to what I learned from my Protestant parents, I believe that, through the synodal exercise, we are invited to be open to several spiritual systems, including Vodou, that can help us to discern together. Pope Francis is inviting us to experience something different: Christianity is not Western culture, Jesus Christ is not Catholic, and God is not a white man.

The synodal church invites us to see the plurality of the church's gift in each other: the gift of preaching, listening, dancing, worshiping, and acting together. The synodal church invites us to be open, to open our heart, and to act with God just as the psalmist says, "If today you hear his voice, harden not your heart."



Haitian American liturgical dancers participate in a Mass Aug. 6, 2023, in Homestead, Florida, at the Land of the Pierced Hearts retreat center. (OSV News/Tom Tracy)

Perhaps, this synod is an opportunity for us to hear the voice of the Lord and to learn as well as listen from our heart. Let us open our hearts to listen, open our hearts to feel, know, and to sense.

This synod will be the work of the Holy Spirit. We do not know what will come out of it, but we know that God will be thriving in this culture.

Just like [Karl Rahner](#) was invited to reflect and see a church in "potency" that feeds herself from her close relationship with God, this synod is a reality that invites us to see more in the church, to understand that there is something more in the church other than what we can see. We ought to believe in the possibility of everything from the Holy Spirit.

This synod invites each community to find a place for growth into their gift of identity where God is at work through practice and ritual. More than ever, it is essential to recognize how inculturation can be deeply aligned with the church and how this move toward an experience of listening, discernment and openness, which are the hallmarks of synodality, stands as an important, constitutive dimension of the church of now and tomorrow.

This synod is an invitation to once again let Christ be Christ in each culture. Just as the enslaved did through Vodou, this is an opportunity for a communal discernment in finding the best ways to promote the communion of the Gospel with culture.

This is an experience to see and find a Christ who is at work in all cultures, and who once again reminds us that salvation belongs to the people of God. This is an invitation to the spiritual and cultural work of justice where God comes to be one with each of us.

Just as Pope Paul VI reminded us at the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council that the church is on perpetual reformation, "*perennis reformatio*," so does Pope Francis. Not only a church that is engaging in several years of discernment, but also a church that is culturally in a permanent quest for conversion and transformation. The Vatican II document [Lumen Gentium](#) reminds us that the church is always growing, transforming and journeying like this synodal experience, which is not a [one-off](#) occasion, but an experience of becoming.

This is an opportunity for us to enter a new culture where we can have a church that acculturates in a synodal way as her "potency" and her way of "being church." This synodal experience, as the pope [reminds](#) us, is a road map for our way together.

Let's engage in this new spiritual experience with possibility. Are we ready?

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