Opinion
Horizons
Guest Voices
Columns
Spirituality



Sr. Mary Teresa Barron, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles, speaks during a news conference on the Synod of Bishops on synodality at the Vatican Oct. 7. The synod runs through Oct. 27. (CNS/Justin McLellan)



by Colleen Gibson

Columnist

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

October 11, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

A few weeks ago, in the run-up to the opening of the second session of the synod on synodality, the Prayer of the Faithful in our parish offered an intention for the synod and its delegates. Together we prayed: "For the synod: that as delegates gather in Rome this week, they may carry with them the cares and concerns of the communities they represent — speaking freely, listening deeply and engaging prayerfully in their efforts to follow the Spirit's guidance."

After Mass, a parishioner stopped me in the church foyer. "Is that still going on?" they asked.

My face clearly revealed I didn't know what they were talking about.

"The synod," they retorted. "I thought that happened last year."

I paused for a moment to consider how best to respond. For all the listening sessions we had held, the events we had promoted, the language of synodality we had integrated into our liturgy and the practices we had made a part of our parish processes, this person had clearly missed the memo: The synod is far from over.

In many places, synodality has been slow to take hold, if the concept or practice was ever introduced in the first place. In the case of our parishioner, though, the added year had thrown them for a loop.

> This is the way forward: to walk humbly with one another and with our God so that trust and dialogue might be built.
>
> Tweet this

As the second session of the synod on synodality completes its second week, what has become abundantly clear is that what was once outlined as a two-year process will, in fact, take a lifetime. In short, synodality isn't going anywhere.

What the synod on synodality has made abundantly clear is that we are called to be a missionary church rooted in synodality. With its intensive listening, engaged encounter and communal care, synodality promises a radical return to the principles of faith and discernment that are so fundamental to who we are and who we're called to be as a church. Cultivating a culture of synodality is filled with promise, though not without the growing pains that come with allowing our hearts and minds to be reformed by the Spirit.

For those in tune with the happenings of the Vatican and the global church, the flurry of activity surrounding this second session of the synod points to the pain and the promise of synodality in action.

Coming into this session, speculation and urgent pleas arose. The well-founded fear that critical issues — including women and their role in the church, the pastoral need to restore women's ordained ministry as deacons, and the dignity of and ministry to the LGBTQ+ community — might somehow be swept away has stirred up cries for inclusion. In response, interviews, articles, online prayer services, and in-person gatherings have lifted up the importance of these issues. Some commentators, like Jesuit Fr, Thomas Reese, have urged the synod to set its own agenda. This would mean deviating from the prescribed plan for the second session, which seeks to define how to be a missionary church rather than engaging these forefront issues.

Related: Undeterred by Vatican official's comments, women aspire to diaconate

One must ask, however, how the church can fulfill its missionary call without thoughtfully engaging in prayerful discernment around these key issues and marginalized populations. How can issues that repeatedly surfaced in reports from the continental phase and ecclesial group feedback be sidelined at this critical moment if the deep listening and heartfelt responding, so critical to synodality, are to be embraced?

The answers to such questions are unclear. We can't be completely sure that these issues have been put to rest as discussions occur behind closed doors. What we can be assured of, as the second session began, is that the appeals to the Holy Spirit have continued.

From the opening retreat days to the penitential prayer service held Oct. 1 to the opening Mass Oct. 2, a Spirit-filled call for freedom from fear and for honest dialogue has rung out. As Pope Francis prayed at this session's opening liturgy, "Let

us walk together, let us listen to the Lord, let us be led by the blowing of the Spirit." This is the way forward: to walk humbly with one another and with our God so that trust and dialogue might be built.

In the days since Pope Francis prayed these words, the second session has descended into the sacred space and silence of such dialogue. Beyond the gaze of onlookers, delegates are doing the hard work of synodality. While curiosity (or even cynicism) might tempt us to imagine what is transpiring in the synod hall, all we can truly be sure of (and pray for) is that all those present are speaking honestly, praying earnestly and listening deeply as they seek to follow God's will.

This is the hope of all synodal conversations: that they would be based in earnest engagement, committed listening and complete and utter dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit.

As we seek to embrace the synodal way, we must recognize that synodality is anything but static. Freedom and flexibility are par for the synodal course. Listening hearts must be open to change; they must allow themselves to be transformed by the Spirit, to ebb and flow as prayerful dialogue directs the course. Our part as people of faith is to be attentive to the Spirit's stirrings — not only in our own hearts and lives, but in the life of the larger community and in the life of the church.

This may or may not mean that everything I think should happen will. In fact, by the nature of the communal discernment at the heart of synodality, we know that it won't. Instead, we must allow ourselves to let go of what is "ours" individually for the communal need and desire of the larger body.

We trust that this is what is transpiring in the synod hall as we hold vigil outside. We pray that delegates are speaking forthrightly, carrying communities with them and fostering community with one another. No doubt, the Spirit is stirring. We must trust that what the Spirit desires for the church and all the people of God will not be denied.



Pope Francis and members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality gather in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 8. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Does this mean that everything will be sorted out by the time the second session of the synod on synodality concludes Oct. 27? Of course not.

Likely, Oct. 27h will leave us with more questions than answers. Some will be disappointed in what was once seen as a movement of great hope and promise. Some will say that we never should have had any hope at all. Some will confess that their synodal hearts are broken. With a synodal spirit, we must hold all these feelings. We must offer our needs and desires, anxieties and anticipations, heartbreaks and hopes to God. And we must hold one another, resting assured that the synodal way is not one of tectonic shifts but of step-by-step journeying together toward communal change.

With this in mind, we need to resolve ourselves to see that Oct. 27 is not an end, but a step on the synodal way. We have come this far together; dialogues have been opened, and with them, hearts and minds have been, too. Women and men, lay

people and clerics, young and old from around the world have stood side by side as delegates. This is monumental.

Our job now is to ensure that the work begun in this synodal moment is not confined to a select group or a specific space. With patience and practice, we must continue these conversations. We must listen attentively and affectionately to one another. We must welcome the Spirit in our midst and reform our structures to allow every voice to be heard. We must continue to practice the skills of synodality and the discipline of synodal listening. Only then will we feel the freedom that the Spirit brings, embracing the transformative power of the Gospel and discovering what it truly means to be the synodal church we're being called to be, both now and forever.

Advertisement

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.