Columns
Spirituality



Student pilgrims met with the secretary of the synod at the Vatican Oct 18, 2024, to share their questions and hopes for the synodal church of the 21st century. (Courtesy of CENTERS)



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Walking into St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican for the first time, I was certainly not expecting to see the main altar and other parts of that grand space dutifully surrounded by scaffolding. Nor was I expecting to see similar scenes throughout the city's streets.

I later learned that it is in preparation for the 2025 Jubilee Year celebrations. The "ever ancient" is in the process of being made "ever new."

This renewal stirs images of what the synod on synodality could mean for our ever ancient and ever renewing church and world — an upholding and reinforcement of all that we are. It is also a specialized project, involving the hearts, hands, voices and experiences of everyone.

During the third week of the second session of the synod of synodality, more than 150 undergraduate and graduate students from more than 15 universities throughout the United States had the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Rome to engage with synodality. Together, we formed the Catholic Education Network to Encounter Rome and Synodality (CENTERS), having the opportunity to interact with synod delegates and raise our voices in service of the many communities we represent.

It may be tempting to romanticize the potential of "conversations in the Spirit" as a synodal practice. These conversations indeed hold the power to draw us intimately together as the people of God, in service to the universal church. Yet synodality itself is nothing new; what is new is the invitation to stretch our understanding of what it means to be a church that practices synodality.

Stretching those boundaries, while on pilgrimage, was exactly what we did as CENTERS. Being on pilgrimage taught me that stretching these boundaries belongs to all of us, in friendship with the principal protagonist —the Holy Spirit.

Holding and receiving the stories of fellow pilgrims and people we encountered on the way proved to be an immense privilege, a sacred ground on our journey through that city of countless pilgrims.

Witnessing the exhaustion of some synod delegates reminded us that true listening demands a constant exchange of gifts — the gift of self that is being given and received. Without the Spirit, perseverance in this process of exchange would quickly become unbearable and sloppy.

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On the final days of the pilgrimage, a group of us visited the Basilica of St. Bartholomew on Rome's Tiber Island, home to hundreds of stories and artifacts of 20th- and 21st-century martyrs from every part of the world. The display presented a cloud of witnesses that assured me of the value of the universal church in that space.

Their stories convinced me it's worth it, for love of God and one another. They introduced me to what it means to be and embody church — relentless in their spirit of self-giving and trust. They reminded us of the personal cost we are each called to pay in cultivating authentic communion and mutual bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood.

The stories of these martyrs were reinforced during a tour of the statues of women located in St. Peter's Square, led by the group Discerning Deacons. Titled "Women of Courage and Confidence," it invited us to contemplate the lives and key roles in co-responsibility that lay and consecrated women assumed in the life of the church down the centuries.

Each time I walked through St. Peter's Square that week, I couldn't help but feel their stories around me. St. Clare urges us to embrace this historic moment in our church, embracing a renewed culture of synodality. St. Catherine of Siena calls us to "cry out with a thousand tongues," declaring, "I see the world is rotten because of silence."

Together, they call us to be a church that dreams and walks together, carrying the Spirit's very dreams through our lives.

While it is concerning that many Catholics across the world remain largely unaware of the proceedings of the synod on synodality, this gives each of us the opportunity to start conversations and create spaces for the work of synodality in our own communities.

This work feels even more urgent now that the synod on synodality has concluded. Of course, everyone's collaboration is necessary! Becoming a truly synodal church in the Spirit will take time and effort. Though synodality is not an end in itself, the *instrumentum laboris*, or working document of this session, reminds us that

synodality ought to be expressed in the ordinary way of life and working of the church, especially if we wish to serve humanity for generations to come.

What might a synodal church look like in your context? Perhaps it's time to start our own renewal and, like St. Peter's Basilica, put up some scaffolding.

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