

# THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

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## Part 1: “Synods and the Synod on Synodality”

Since Pope Francis announced the [Synod on Synodality](#), the reactions to it have been mixed. Some enthusiastically welcome the synod and view it as a tremendous opportunity for the Church to address issues of the day. Others are skeptical about its importance at all, sometimes jokingly referring to it as a “meeting on meetings,” which does not sound exciting or promising. Still others are worried that it has more potential for harm than good and are therefore against the entire project.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the upcoming Synod on Synodality and the variety of reactions to it, I will be offering a series of articles to help clarify what the synod is and what it is not. Once the synod itself begins, I will offer reports of its progress as it unfolds.

In this first article in the series, I place the Synod on Synodality within the larger context of synods in general. I discuss what synods are and explain the various types of synods. Finally, I specify which category of synods the Synod of Synodality belongs to.

The term ‘synod’ is Greek in origin. The prefix ‘syn-’ means “together” or “with.” The root word ‘hodos’ refers to a road, a path, a way, or the act of traveling as in on a journey. Thus, ‘synod’ literally refers to “traveling together on a path,” but its application is more metaphorical. The term denotes a kind of assembly that is working toward a common aim. In this sense, ‘synod’ is a synonym of the Latin word ‘concilium’ (council).

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In the technical, theological sense, a synod is a “general term for ecclesiastical gatherings under hierarchical authority for the discussion and decision of matters relating to faith, morals, or discipline.”<sup>2</sup> There are different kinds or species of synods that fall under this genus. The highest form is an ecumenical council. That is why the Second Vatican Council sometimes refers to itself as a “sacred [or holy] synod.”<sup>3</sup> An ecumenical council is defined in the glossary of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as follows: “A gathering of all the bishops of the world, in the exercise of their collegial authority over the universal Church. An ecumenical council is usually called by the successor of St. Peter, the Pope, or at least confirmed or accepted by him.”<sup>4</sup> There are also provincial or regional synods that take place among bishops of a particular geographical area. Additionally, a “*diocesan* synod is an assembly of priests and other members of Christ’s faithful who assist the bishop by offering advice about the needs of the diocese and by proposing legislation for him to enact.”<sup>5</sup>

Following the [Second Vatican Council](#), Pope St. Paul VI established what is now called the synod of bishops. He did this through an apostolic letter, *Apostolica*

*Sollicitudo*,<sup>6</sup> issued *motu proprio* (meaning “of his own accord” or “on his own initiative”). Therein, he wrote: “We hereby erect and establish here in Rome a permanent Council of bishops for the universal Church, to be directly and immediately subject to Our power. Its proper name will be the Synod of Bishops.”<sup>7</sup>

A synod of bishops differs from an ecumenical council in a couple of different ways. First, unlike an ecumenical council, not all the bishops of the world are invited to attend. Rather, representatives are elected among the episcopate and religious congregations. The pope can also add up to a certain number (15% of the elected members) on his own initiative. Another difference from an ecumenical council is that a synod of bishops normally acts like an advisory board to the pope in these sessions rather than as co-teachers or co-legislators (with exceptions possible). The pope typically writes his own post-synodal apostolic exhortation wherein, after receiving input from the synod members, he addresses the issue(s) at hand. As per the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* [henceforth *CIC*], the member bishops discuss and express their desires to the Roman Pontiff, but they do “not resolve [the questions for consideration] or issue decrees about them unless in certain cases the Roman Pontiff has endowed it with deliberative power, in which case he ratifies the decisions of the synod.”<sup>8</sup>

In the apostolic letter establishing the synod of bishops, Paul VI set forth rules for how elections and appointments of members are to be conducted. For a given synod, the pope sets the theme or determines the issue(s) to be discussed by the synod members. He also sets the agenda for the synod.

According to the establishing document, the synod of bishops can meet in one of three kinds of sessions: general, extraordinary, or special, each having its own rules for election of members, etc. The three types of sessions are not precisely defined in the apostolic letter, but the 1983 *CIC* offers its own definitions thereof, with some alteration of the terminology. What the apostolic letter calls a general session is designated in the *CIC* as “an ordinary general session.”<sup>9</sup> What the apostolic letter refers to as an extraordinary session is referred to in the Code as an “extraordinary general session.” It does not specify the kinds of issues addressed by an ordinary general assembly. However, it does specify what an extraordinary general assembly addresses. It “treat[s] affairs which require a speedy resolution,”<sup>10</sup> distinguishing it from an ordinary general session. A special session is essentially tied to regional issues. Accordingly, the *CIC* says: “A synod of bishops gathered in a special session consists of members especially selected from those regions for which it is called.”<sup>11</sup> The Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, popularly called the Amazon Synod, conducted in 2019, is an example of a special synod.

What we have called the Synod on Synodality, more officially called the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops “*For a Synodal Church: Communion,*

*Participation and Mission*,” is, obviously, an ordinary general session, as the official name suggests. We will discuss this upcoming synod, including its process and purpose, in the next article.

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For example, see United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [henceforth, USCCB], “National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the 2021-2023 Synod,” (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2022), 3, [USCCB website](#), which states: “Here in the U.S., the beginning of the diocesan phase of the Synod was met with a combination of excitement, confusion, and skepticism. ‘Several dioceses noted some apprehension and even opposition as they began their synodal listening—ranging from those who felt the process would be futile, to some who were afraid of what it would change.’”

<sup>2</sup> William Fanning, “Synod,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (NY: Robert Appleton Company, 1912).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see *Dei Verbum* 1, in *The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection*, ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* [henceforth CCC](Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), p. 873.

<sup>5</sup> CCC, p. 900.

<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, apostolic letter, [Vatican website](#), September 15, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*.

<sup>8</sup> Code of Canon Law, c. 343, in *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* [CIC](Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), 109.

<sup>9</sup> CIC, c. 346, §1.

<sup>10</sup> CIC, c. 346, §2.

<sup>11</sup> CIC, c. 346, §3.

## PART II Synod on Synodality

Since Vatican II, there have been several assemblies of the synod of bishops. In this regard, the Synod on Synodality is nothing new. However, the Holy Father has set forth three phases for this particular synod: (1) a diocesan phase, (2) a continental phase, and (3) the final conclusive phase.<sup>1</sup>

In the first phase, which began in October 2021, each diocese, under the guidance of the local bishop, began collecting input from the faithful of that diocese, following documents and a questionnaire sent by the Vatican to the bishops (see [“Synodus Episcoporum” here](#) and [“The Preparatory Document” here](#)). Then, the dioceses were “to

submit their contributions to their Episcopal Conference.”<sup>2</sup> Each episcopal conference (e.g., the USCCB) then assembled to discuss the results further, eventually producing a draft text synthesizing the process and results. That text was then sent to the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops along with the contributions of the individual dioceses. Additional contributions from Catholic theology faculties/universities and from groups of superior generals of religious orders were also sent to the General Secretariat.<sup>3</sup> After consulting these contributions, the General Secretariat drafted a first *Instrumentum Laboris*, which was used in the subsequent phase.

The second, continental phase involved a dialogue between the bishops of a given continent about the *Instrumentum Laboris* just mentioned. Together, each continent drafted a document and sent it to the General Secretariat. In turn, the General Secretariat drafted a second *Instrumentum Laboris* based on the input from the continental phase.

For the third and final (universal Church) phase, the bishops appointed and/or elected for the Ordinary General Assembly received the second *Instrumentum Laboris* as the basis of their deliberations, the first session of which will take place in October of this year (2023). A second session of the Ordinary General Assembly will take place in October 2024.

Who will participate in the synod? “For now, the list of voting members is complete, numbering 363 cardinals, bishops, priests, religious and lay men and women—a first in the history of the synod.”<sup>4</sup> [Their names are available here](#). Other, non-voting participants will also attend, bringing the total to around 450, with more potentially to be added later. Among these will be experts in relevant fields and even “representatives of non-Catholic Christian communities.”<sup>5</sup> Bishop Barron was elected by the USCCB as one of the American delegates.

What is the purpose of the Synod on Synodality? It is helpful to start by considering what the purpose of the synod of bishops is in general and then, in light of this, to address the purpose of this particular General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

Theologically, the synod of bishops is rooted in Christ’s establishment of the college of Apostles, who—under the headship of St. Peter—were entrusted with the propagation of the Gospel and given authority to teach, to govern, and to sanctify. As the Second Vatican Council teaches: “Just as in the Gospel, the Lord so disposing, St. Peter and the other apostles constitute one apostolic college, so in a similar way the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are joined together. . . . These factors are already an indication of the collegiate character and aspect of the Episcopal order” (*Lumen Gentium* 22).<sup>6</sup> Individually, bishops are entrusted with the pastoral care of their particular dioceses. Collectively, they work together—united with the pope—for the good of the whole Church and the advancement of the

Church's mission to the nations. In his apostolic letter establishing the synod of bishops, Pope St. Paul VI states that the synod of bishops is a means of assisting in his own apostolic duties. He therefore specifies its purpose; he established it "with the aim of providing them with abundant means for greater and more effective participation in Our concern for the universal Church" (*Apostolica Sollicitudo*). In short, the purpose of the synod of bishops is for bishops to work together with the Holy Father to address issues concerning the good of the Church and the advancement of the Church's missionary activity. The bishops call to his attention the needs and challenges of their own local churches as well as offer their suggestions on how to handle pastoral matters.

This upcoming Synod on Synodality has the same fundamental aim as the synod of bishops in general but—as with all synods—directed toward a particular theme, in this case, how the Church can function in a more synodal fashion at all levels: parochial, diocesan, regional, and universal. As the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the first session of the General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality puts it, the impetus for this synod is "the desire for a Church that is also increasingly synodal in its institutions, structures and procedures, so as to constitute a space in which common baptismal dignity and co-responsibility for mission are not only affirmed, but exercised, and practiced" (21, emphasis original).

The aim of this synod, then, is more practical than doctrinal. As [Archbishop Samuel Aquila \(Denver\) has stated](#): "Pope Francis has made it clear that the synod on synodality is not about changing long standing Church teaching."<sup>7</sup> It is about how the entire people of God—clergy and laity alike—can work together more effectively for the advancement of the Church's mission.

Furthermore, synodal does not mean democratic or congressional. As [Bishop Barron reports](#): "Francis was clear and explicit. He told us, in no uncertain terms, that a synod is 'not a parliament,' and that the synodal process is not simply a matter of canvassing the participants and counting votes."<sup>8</sup> The synod of bishops is essentially an advisory body. It gives insight and offers advice to the pope, but it is the pope's decision on whether or how to implement any suggestions the synod recommends.

Similarly, being more 'synodal' on more local levels does not mean that the authoritative roles of clergy are being undermined. While part of synodal cooperation involves soliciting the laity's perspective—finding out what their questions, struggles, and suggestions are—it does not mean doing what the laity want in every instance. It is still up to the hierarchy to determine concrete actions and to teach doctrine. Accordingly, Pope Francis himself, in his apostolic constitution on the synod of bishops *Episcopalis Communio*, writes that "during every synodal assembly, consultation of the faithful must be followed by discernment on the part of the Bishops chosen for the task, united

in the search for a consensus that springs not from worldly logic, but from common obedience to the Spirit of Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

This last quote already anticipates and responds to one of the concerns that some Catholics have raised about the upcoming synod. In the next article of this series, we will discuss more concerns that have been raised and how we can approach them.

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<sup>1</sup> See [Note of the Synod of Bishops, May 21, 2021, Vatican website.](#)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Carol Glatz, “[Pope appoints hundreds to attend Synod of Bishops on Synodality](#)” (July 7, 2023), [USCCB website.](#)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium 22*, in [The Word on Fire Vatican II Collection](#), ed. Matthew Levering (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Institute, 2021), 74.

<sup>7</sup> Archbishop Samuel Aquila, “[Radical inclusion requires radical love](#),” *Denver Catholic*, February 1, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Bishop Robert Barron, “[What is Synodality?](#),” *Word on Fire* (February 18, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, [Episcopalis Communio](#), apostolic constitution, September 15, 2018, [vatican.va.](#)

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