



What is the Synod on Synodality?

Pope Francis has asked the entire world to participate in a synod on the topic “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.” The central question he asks of everyone is:

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in our diocese? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”?

You may be invited to participate in listening sessions at your local parish, or you may wish to give your input online. Participation in a synod should always involve prayer, listening, discussion, and above all, discerning the way that the Holy Spirit is guiding us. Hopefully the questions and answers listed below can help you as you prepare your input.

What is a synod?

“Synod” comes from ancient Greek. It can be translated as “journeying together.” Its literal meaning reminds us of Jesus as the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6) and of Christians as followers of the Way (Acts 9:2). In Christianity it became the proper term for an assembly specifically called to discern, in accordance with the Holy Spirit, answers to important questions for the Church. One of the earliest examples is the Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15. Synods have been used at all levels of the Church, from local diocesan synods all the way up to the Synod of Bishops for the universal Church. They generally deal with how we can best live out our faith in practice.

A synod can be thought of as a type of family meeting. By this analogy, the bishops are like the head of a household, with responsibility for the Church and authority to make decisions for her. In order to make the best possible decisions, they check in with the rest of the family and ask for our experiences and input. Then, taking everything into consideration, they make the decision. Bishop Persico, for example, is using this method for Pastoral Planning in our diocese. A synod is not democratic, and it is not majority rule. It is a means of discussing and discerning God’s will, the God who is drawn always to the poor and little ones.

What is synodality?

The Church has been holding synods since ancient times. While the concept of synodality is old, the word “synodality” is very new. It means the entire People of God assembling together, journeying together, and actively participating in the evangelizing mission of the Church. Pope

Francis is calling us to recognize synodality as the way the entire Church operates. Everyone is involved, everyone contributes. In particular, it means listening to each other and not remaining oblivious in our own bubbles. Synodality is not only for internal affairs, but also manifests the Church’s universal and missionary nature to the world. Hopefully this Synod on Synodality will help us to better understand and live out this emerging concept.



The infallible belief of the faithful: What is the *sensus fidei fidelium*?

One of the reasons that Pope Francis has been emphasizing synodality is that he wishes to better recognize and utilize all the gifts of all the people in the Church. Most of us know that the Magisterium of the Church (the teaching office of the Church exercised by the Pope and the bishops), under certain conditions, can teach infallibly. But the faithful members of Christ's Church also have a corresponding gift. We can believe infallibly. Ideally these two gifts should inform and reinforce each other.

This gift of the Holy Spirit is called the *sensus fidei fidelium*: The understanding of the Faith by the Faithful. Everyone who is baptized is anointed with the Holy Spirit, and this anointing is strengthened by the Sacrament of Confirmation. By the grace of the Spirit, the People of God as a whole does not err in faith, even when it cannot adequately explain the faith. The more faithful a Christian is – participating in the Sacraments, building their relationship with God, feeling with the heart of the Church – the better of an instinct they will have for the True Faith. When we are open to Him, God gives us an intuition about divine realities. And when the entire People of God manifests a belief of faith or morals, that belief cannot be wrong, because the Holy Spirit would not allow the entire Church to go into error.

The *sensus fidei* cannot be determined by majority vote. History shows that individuals and groups in the Church, whether members of the faithful or bishops, can very easily fall into error and sin. The more separated a person is from God and His Church, the less likely they will be to instinctively recognize the truths of the Faith — and we have all sinned and fallen short (Romans 3:23). However, if the faithful stubbornly cling to some belief or obstinately refuse to accept another, for a long time and in many places, even in the face of opposition and persecution, that should be a sign to the Magisterium of the *sensus fidei* at work.

What is discernment?

Discernment is the process for finding out what we should be doing. It might involve doing research or making a list of pros and cons, as you would for any major decision, but it is more than that. Especially in a religious context, discernment means trying to recognize God's will. Fruitful discernment takes place in a space of prayer and study. It includes sincere conversations with appropriate people, self-reflection, and attempting to read the signs that God may be placing around us.

We often speak of someone “discerning their vocation,” which is something every person should do. In a similar way, discernment also happens on a communal level, from the local all the way up to the universal Church. Councils and Synods are always attempting to discern the will of the Holy Spirit, so that what they decide and teach may be what God wishes in that particular context. For communal discernment, dialogue is always more helpful than debate. Discernment should help us to understand our own needs and desires, but the final goal is to accept the will of God.



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