

# Synod: Trust the Process

Over the last couple of years, the coverage of the Philadelphia 76ers, the men's professional basketball team, seemed to be about "The Process." I have to admit I never understood what that was, except I liked the slogan: "Trust the Process."

Now, as Pope Francis's Synod reaches its midpoint, I think it's time to "Trust the Process." One indicator: the official documents now call it "The Synod," not "The Synod of Bishops." Another was the shift to "listening" from the static nouns first articulated by the Pope: communion, etc. Once the Vatican office headed by Cardinal Mario Grech, whose most notable appointee is Sr. Nathalie Becquart, started issuing plans, it was clear it was going to be a process that involved the whole Church. And women were not to be peripheral.

I must admit I was suspicious. It was to begin with widespread participation in listening sessions, especially by the laity.

Great opportunity if actually implemented. But then all these diocesan reports were to go to Bishops' Conferences in each country to be collated. "Trustworthy" is not a term I'd apply to the USCCB, so I expected whatever rough edges were left from the local reports would be honed off. And the same in the next step, when the country reports were to go to the Vatican for a similar consolidation.

That Vatican report has now been published, and I am amazed.

An international team of over thirty experts in theology and in process – including twelve women – has come up with "Enlarge the space of your tent" from Isaiah as its central metaphor.

They examine the many recommendations from the reports but also the process itself. "Listening," they say in 3.1, "requires that we recognize others as subjects of their own journey. When we do this, others feel welcomed, not judged." That attitude pervades the document, and gives me hope.

At every stage of this process, including this one, the inclusion of women has been a primary concern. Section 61 puts it clearly: "women remain the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities... yet most decision-making and governance roles are held by men.

It is clear that the Church must find ways... to enable women to participate more fully at all levels of Church life." I eliminated from this point the idea that men should be encouraged to do more. They can step up on their own. I don't want to lose the focus on barriers to women.

The barrier to ordination is the major one, of course, and, as in the USCCB summary, it is not ignored. Removing it is not exactly endorsed – that's still a step too far – but the widespread concern that it be eliminated is acknowledged.

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64. Almost all reports raise the issue of full and equal participation of women: “The growing recognition of the importance of women in the life of the Church opens up possibilities for greater, albeit limited, participation in Church structures and decision-making spheres” (EC Brazil). However, the reports do not agree on a single or complete response to the question of the vocation, inclusion and flourishing of women in Church and society. After careful listening, many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate. Much greater diversity of opinion was expressed on the subject of priestly ordination for women, which some reports call for, while others consider a closed issue.”



Of course, Francis is just the most recent Pope to say ordination is a closed issue, but the process has outflanked the Pope. While its authors say this “is not a conclusive document,” they claim in section 8: “Nonetheless it is theological in the sense that it is loaded with the exquisitely theological treasure contained in the experience of listening to the voice of the Spirit enacted by the People of God, allowing its *sensus fidei* to emerge.” Right back to Vatican II – finally!

Adequate training is necessary for all who preach, I would note, as is recognized in section 93: “the quality of homilies is almost unanimously reported as a problem.” It’s this kind of comment that convinces me that this document is real. There are many examples of truth-telling that are much more profound: the transparency necessary to deal with both abuse and financial

matters; the need to focus on the poor and suffering; a genuine welcome to LGBTQ persons and the disabled.

Does this inspire you to read the whole document? In contrast to the chunky book issued after Vatican II, “Enlarge the space of your tent” is written for you. It uses a graphic that includes more and more people under the tent as the text goes along. It uses quotations from episcopal reports from around the world that illustrate its universality. And it asks for a response from each diocese in sections 106 and 109. “After having read and prayed” with this document, what “resonates?” What “tensions” arise? What “priorities?” Now is the time to send a note to your local bishop to share your answer to these questions.

The last chapter, “The Next Steps,” describes a gathering that I have questioned all along, but makes clear how creative it actually is. There have been a few gatherings of bishops by continent, like Asia and Latin America broadly defined. But section 108, asking all seven continents to gather not only bishops but “representatives of the entire people of God” upsets the usual order of things. Further surprises are those to be welcomed from “other faith traditions” and “with no religious affiliation.” I especially like this: “Pay special attention to the presence of women and young people (laymen and lay women, consecrated men and women in formation, seminarians)” because it recognizes specific young people. Finally, it asks the bishops, in “validating and approving the Final Document,” to ensure that it is “respectful of the process that has taken place and faithful to the diverse voices of the People of God in each continent.”

Of course, the last step in the process in our church is still hierarchical. We have hopes that the two Synods in Rome in 2023 and 2024 will include the diverse voices described here as voting members along with the bishops. But the Pope issues the final document. Even if he does not implement all the suggestions that come from the faithful, he cannot ignore the energy released by this process.

# Synod Advisers Meet Outside Rome to Consider ‘time for change’ in Catholic Church

ROME — During spring of 1965, several dozen bishops and theologians spent six days in a religious house 20 miles southeast of Rome hammering out a draft of what would eventually become *Ad Gentes*, the Second Vatican Council’s decree on missionary work and evangelization.

The gathering included theological notables such as Archbishop Fulton Sheen, Dominican Fr. Yves Congar and then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger. The future Pope Benedict XVI later recalled those days spent on Lake Nemi as one of his “fondest” memories from Vatican II.

Less than 10 miles away from where they gathered is the small town of Frascati, where nearly 60 years later — and in a similar fashion — some 30 theologians, pastoral workers and bishops have been gathering for the past week.

From Sept. 22-Oct. 2, the group has hunkered down on the grounds of another retreat center to draft the working document of the continental phase of Pope Francis’ revamped global synod process, which is taking the synodal process that Pope Paul VI created at the end of the Council and attempting to expand participation beyond the clergy, in order to listen to all of the church’s members.

“There is a tremendous sense of common purpose among us,” said Susan Pascoe, who has held a number of senior roles in both the Australian government and church. “Each of us feels an enormous responsibility to

faithfully draw out what the people of God submitted.”

Pascoe spoke with NCR via phone from Frascati, where she described how representatives from six continents have worked to “authentically” synthesize the reports of 112 participating episcopal conferences from around the world to produce a new document that will guide the synod’s next phase, which will take place through continental ecclesial assemblies in early 2023 ahead of a Rome meeting in October 2023.

Susan Pascoe, pictured in a Vatican synod video (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Synod-va)

Prior to the Frascati meeting, said Pascoe, each participant was given the synod reports from approximately 10-15 countries and encouraged to read them at least three times and then offer a country-by-country analysis and then, eventually, a synthesis of the themes that emerged. “It really is kind of a census of the church in the world,” said Pascoe.

Upon arrival in Frascati, the participants had different rounds of conversations in different small group configurations, based separately on continent of origin, ecclesial status (laity, religious or clergy), and gender.

According to Pascoe, this “slicing and dicing” created a rigorous process that allowed a series of small groups to carefully study the submissions and then present them to the full body of drafters.



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Austen Ivereigh, who is among the drafters and is an organizer of “The Road to a Synodal Church” project in England, said the idea “is to keep giving you different perspectives on the same material.”

He told NCR that the process reflected the global realities of the synodal process, where voices from Africa, Asia and Latin America are “just as strong” as testimonials being brought forward from Europe and North America.

“These are voices that are all equally being heard,” he said.

Ivereigh, who also co-authored the 2020 volume *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* with Francis, described another component of the report review phase — an “empty chair exercise” — which asked, “What voices are we missing here?”

“The assumption is everybody needs to be heard and listened to, and we need a church in which it is possible to do that,” he said, including the “minority voices or edgier voices ... not just for the purpose of this exercise, but modeling a way of proceeding for the church of the future.”

During the summit, Ivereigh said each day begins with a prayer service organized on rotation by members of different continents, followed by small group meetings and then plenary sessions, with an evening Mass before dinner.

On the opening night, Pascoe recalled, all the participants were asked to bring a symbol of what synodality means to them and place it at the altar.

She brought a copy of the “Uluru Statement from the Heart,” a document drafted by Australian Aboriginal leaders in 2017,

which sought to give greater voice and rights to the country’s Indigenous population.

“We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future,” the document states.

Asked Pascoe: “What better example of synodality is there than that?”

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—Austen Ivereigh



Both she and Ivereigh characterized the schedule as demanding, but also said the morning and afternoon tea breaks, an occasional gelato outing into town, and a side trip to visit the former papal palace in Castel Gandolfo provided a sense of fellowship that fueled their efforts.

“There’s an enormous sense of common purpose,” said Pascoe, who said that the group has been “drawing on a bond of trust” as it aims to complete the draft document.

While the drafters have been asked not to discuss the content of the forthcoming document, Mauricio López, who is the coordinator for the Conference of Latin American Bishops’ Center for Networking and Action, told NCR that in synthesizing reports from around the globe “there is a very clear consistency in the recognition that this is a time for change.”

“In this call for change, we can see that there needs to be a different dynamic in how the church listens to the people of God and how it allows itself to be transformed by listening to the people of God,” he continued.

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López, who was one of the organizers of the 2019 Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, said that among the consistent concerns that have emerged in the reports are calls for greater attention to social justice and environmental justice, care for the suffering and the poor, the need for greater concern for the church in conflict areas and the role of women in the church. In all of these findings, he said, there is evidence that it is time for “a different kind of leadership.”

“Service has to be at the center of what it means to be the Catholic Church today,” he said. “Otherwise, clericalism arises very strong, and the abuse of power, sexual abuse and authoritarianism emerges, because we lose sight of our actual core call, which is to serve.”

‘In this call for change, we can see that there needs to be a different dynamic in how the church listens to the people of God and how it allows itself to be transformed by listening to the people of God.’  
—Mauricio López

Pascoe said that over the course of their work together, some participants have described their undertaking as a “gift” while others have talked about it being a “responsibility.”

In the end, she said the consensus has emerged that it is both.

Ivereigh noted that the job of the synthesizers in Frascati is not to provide commentary on the reports and not to formulate theology from them, but rather to “re-present it.” “Our job is we’re representing what we are hearing. We’re not inventing anything new. We’re representing it and we’re giving it a platform,” he said.

The final document for the continental phase of the synod is expected to be released in mid-October. Ivereigh said that it will not seek to resolve the various tensions of church life, but rather to contain them so that the report becomes a “vehicle for discernment.”

“To me, the most sort of moving thing about this is, I think we do all feel that something very important is being born here,” said Ivereigh. “It’s a new way of thinking about the church and the way it operates.”

“We know that we’re treading on sacred ground,” he added, “because these reports really do seek to capture the deepest dreams and desires of the people of God.”

Pictured Left:

*Women who attended the gathering in Frascati outside of Rome are pictured in a Vatican synod video. From left: Sr. Anne-Béatrice Faye; Susan Pascoe; Philomena Njeri Mwaura; Maike Sieben; Sr. Gill Goulding, and Sr. Brigit Weiler. (NCR screenshot/YouTube/Synod-va)*

*The words of Scripture comfort the afflicted  
and afflict the comfortable.*



# Will Laity Be Granted Voice at Next October's Synod?



*Sr. Christine Schenk, CSJ, co-founder of FutureChurch is now director emerita.*

*Her National Catholic Reporter column "Simply Spirit" appears online twice a month and periodically in print.*

*She has authored Crispina and Her Sisters: Women and Authority in the Early Church available through Fortress Press*

Virtually all national syntheses said that although participants were at first skeptical, by the end of the process, they expressed great appreciation for a "synodal way of being church" and want it to continue. Great love for the church, despite all of its flaws, was universally in evidence, as was appreciation for priests and sisters, and love for the Eucharist.

Considering the massive amount of energy the Catholic people — lay and priestly alike — have put into practicing synodality, it seems clear that the synodal process has the potential to be a very big deal for our future ecclesial life. In a recent interview with America magazine, Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, agreed.

Grech said, "[T]he synod is not an event celebrated once every three years but is a process: a process that has a beginning but, believe me, I don't think will have an end, even the present synod that we are celebrating."

So what happens next? By the time synod bishops meet next October, won't this promising beginning be watered down? Plus, despite these honest — grounded in the Holy Spirit—contributions, won't the final decisions (or "discernment" as Grech prefers to call it) be made only by bishops?

Continuing my obsessive predilection, I diligently researched who makes what decisions (discernments) from here on. Here is what I discovered:

To my surprise, synod procedures include laymen and laywomen at every phase of the process, and each phase is designed to build on the previous one. A 35-member international body — which Grech describes as "a mix" of religious and laypeople, men and women, with only two bishops," — met Sept. 22-Oct. 2 in Frascati, Italy, to study the national syntheses and draft a new *Document for the Continental Stage*.

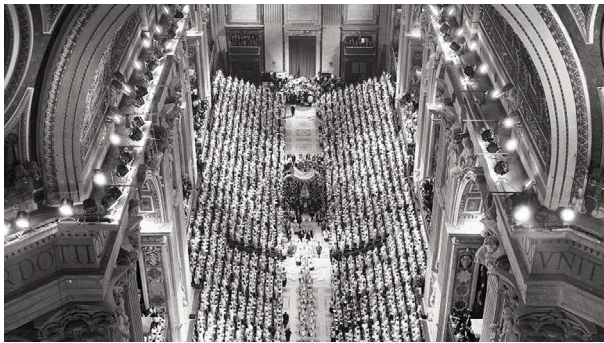
This document will guide the second "continental" phase of the synod consultation. For the last two days of the Frascati meeting, roughly 15 members of the Bishops' Synod Council will join the gathering to review their draft before sending it to Pope Francis for signoff. (Members of the Synod Council were elected at the Ordinary Synod on Youth in 2018).

According to NCR Rome correspondent Christopher White, there are two North Americans in the Frascati group: U.S. theologian Kristin Colberg and Jesuit Fr. David McCallum. Colberg is on the theological commission advising the synod secretariat and an associate professor at St. John Seminary at Collegeville, Minnesota.

McCallum is the executive director of the Discerning Leadership program, a collaboration between Le Moyne College and the Society of Jesus, which aims to "help support Pope Francis' vision for the reform and renewal of the Church through the process of discernment and co-creative synodality."

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The final version of the continental document will be made public by the end of October. It will then be sent to the world's bishops to study before they participate in one of seven continental assemblies.



The synod secretariat explicitly directs that these "should be Ecclesial Assemblies (of the entire People of God) and not only Episcopal Assemblies (of bishops only). Thus, the participants should adequately represent the variety of the People of God: bishops, priests, deacons, men and women religious, laymen and laywomen."

Significantly, this arrangement corresponds to the wish of the majority of the bishops' conferences consulted on the subject by the General Secretariat of the Synod.

The continental phase for North America is comprised of the U.S. and Canada. A communiqué from the U.S. bishops' conference describes regional listening sessions that will reflect on the continental document, to be held in late 2022 and early 2023. These will "inform the composition of the Continental Synthesis," which will be sent to the Synod Secretariat by March 31, 2023, the deadline for all seven continental syntheses. The seven continental documents then become the basis for the final working document — the *Instrumentum Laboris* — for next October's synod.

While I am encouraged to see more inclusive processes, there are no guarantees that any "hot button" issues will advance as the synod phases unfold. In a second America article, Grech indicated the topic of married priests "needs more time," and while he acknowledged a "widespread" desire to consider women's roles in greater depth, his awkward phrasing did not inspire confidence: "And [with] the fact that various churches are taking this same issue seriously, I really hope and pray that in time we will manage to find what is the right vocation of women in the church."

Yet perhaps the first issue is to build an infrastructure for lay inclusion in church decision-making. It seems to me that the worldwide synodal consultations are doing just that.

It should be said that all phases of the synod are consultative (not deliberative), including the 2023 synod itself, unless the pope chooses to grant it deliberative voice (*Episcopalis Communio* 3). This being Catholicism, the pope has the final word.

Yet there can be no doubt that throughout his papacy Pope Francis has gone to great lengths to prioritize an expanded voice for the laity. Two of his apostolic constitutions, *Episcopalis Communio* and *Praedicate Evangelium*, create pathways for synodal discernment and lay decision-making in church governance. *Praedicate Evangelium* actually separates church governance from ordination, locating it instead within a "canonical mission" received from the pope. Last July, Cardinal Marc Ouellet — who is not known for being a progressive — said the pope "can also delegate and thus make members of God's people participants in his power of jurisdiction."

So will any laypeople be granted voice — even deliberative voice — at next October's synod? Stay tuned.

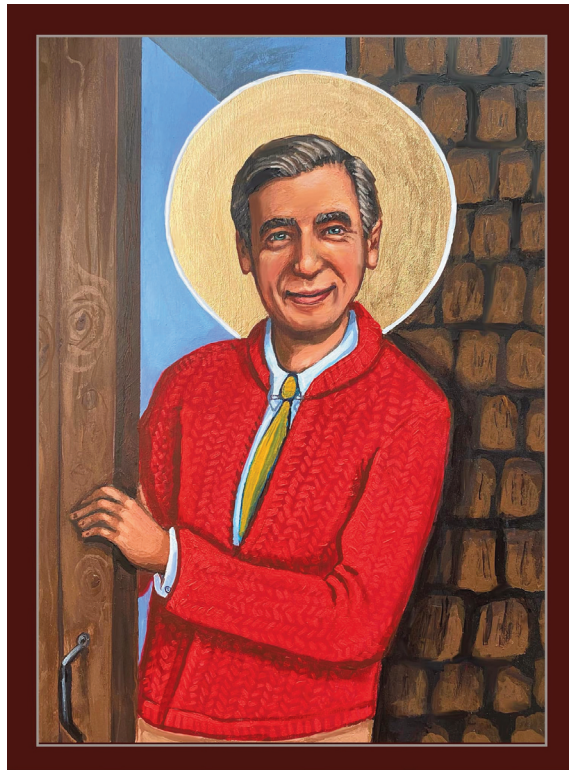
*“Love isn’t a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like struggle.*

*To love someone is to strive to accept that person  
exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.*

*When I say it’s you I like, I’m talking about that part of you t  
hat knows that life is far more than  
anything you can ever see or hear or touch.*

*That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things  
without which humankind cannot survive.*

*Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war,  
and justice that proves more powerful than greed.”*



Fred, commonly know as 'Mister Rogers', was an American television host, author, producer, and Presbyterian minister. He was the creator, showrunner, and host of the preschool television series Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, which ran from 1968 to 2001. I paint him here opening a door for the viewer. Welcoming them in just as they are. [kellylatimoreicons.com](http://kellylatimoreicons.com)