

Synodality—and ‘controversial’ issues—are here to stay

Five takeaways from the synod’s final document

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We have completed our work as synod delegates and have, with the approval of Pope Francis, published our final document: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.” What are the highlights of this document?

Synodality is a “constitutive dimension” of the church. The final document says that synodality, along with, for example, the concept of the magisterium or the tradition of social justice, is an essential element of the church. It is a path that enables the church to be more “participatory and missionary” and can no longer be considered a curiosity, a practice to be dabbled in or a passing fad.

Decision-making must be participatory. It would be impossible to read this document and not understand that all people should have a voice in both the church’s decision-making and decision-taking processes, a recognition that the Holy Spirit is active and alive in all the people of God—not simply in cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests. The final document also helpfully outlines procedures for listening and discernment, and includes a strong call for the people of God to have “a greater voice in choosing bishops” (Paragraph No. 70) and for transparency, accountability and evaluation at all levels of the church (No. 95).

Bishops and pastors are “obliged to listen.” The call for listening and participation is central to the document. And it is bishops and pastors who are most strongly called to listen to the voices of the faithful in their dioceses and parishes. On the parish level as well, the church is encouraged to listen to all, especially to those who feel marginalized. The synod recommends that parishes consider instituting a “ministry of listening and accompaniment.”

Pastoral councils, diocesan synods and other participatory assemblies should be mandatory. We delegates grappled with how best to ensure that the faithful are able to be heard and can participate in the life of the church, which is centered, in most parts of the world and for most people, in parish life. A variety of consultative bodies in both the Latin and Eastern Catholic churches are central to participation, accountability and transparency, including: diocesan synods, presbyteral councils, diocesan and parish pastoral councils, and councils for economic affairs.

These are all provided for in canon law, but they often exist only “nominally.” Therefore, we delegates insisted “that they be made mandatory...and that they can fully play



Pope Francis shakes hands with James Martin, S.J., as Giacomo Costa, S.J., special secretary of the synod, looks on at the Vatican on Oct. 4.

their role, and not just in a purely formal way...” (No. 104).

Some “controversial” issues are not center stage but are included. At the beginning of the synodal process, there were high hopes among many people that the synod would resolve some controversial issues, including the ordaining of married men to the priesthood, the ordination of women to the diaconate and L.G.B.T.Q. issues. For the most part these issues were handed over to the 10 “study groups” for further discernment.

Nonetheless, many of these topics were in the background of our discussions. It is hard to talk about women’s roles in the church without the topic of ordination to the diaconate arising.

We said, in a much larger section on women: “There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women’s access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue” (No. 60).

As for L.G.B.T.Q. issues, there was considerably greater openness to the topic this year and ease of discussion overall. In the document, the term “L.G.B.T.Q.” is not used—not surprising, since it is still anathema for some delegates—but we ask the church to listen to those who “experience the pain of feeling excluded or judged, because of their marital situation, identity or sexuality” (No. 50).

It is quite a feat that 350 delegates from around the world could agree on this kind of language.

The final document is sure to delight some, disappoint others and perhaps even anger some people. But it is only the first step of a process for our church, as we journey with the risen Christ “together on the road”—which is, of course, the ancient meaning of *synod*.

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