

# With the diocesan phase of the synod about to begin, 'This is a chance to listen to one another'

Catholic dioceses around the world are preparing for a journey as they approach the diocesan phase of the next Synod of Bishops, whose theme is "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission."

Pope Francis will open the process Oct. 8 at the Vatican, and diocesan bishops are asked to formally begin their involvement with liturgies Oct. 17. Bishops from around the world will gather in Rome in October 2023.

The goal of the process is for the Church to become more synodal – that is, to learn better how to "journey together." Doing that will require dialogue [and input from all the People of God](#), according to diocesan leaders who are looking at the road map and figuring out what they will need along the way.

## Road map for the journey

Much of that road map is contained in the *vademecum*, the handbook the Vatican created for dioceses, and [the Vatican's preparatory document](#), which offers background information.

According to that document, "The fundamental question that guides this consultation of the People of God, as mentioned at the beginning, is the following: A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, 'journeys together.' How is this 'journeying together' happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our 'journeying together'?"

“Synodality is the way the early Church operated, in which all the People of God are consulted, in dialogue with the bishops,” said Sister of St. Joseph Katie Eiffe, vicar for religious and director of synodal planning for the Diocese of Syracuse, New York. “We’re not in any way dismissing the role of the hierarchy. The goal is that the hierarchy and all the People of God – not only Catholics, but other Christians, members of other faith communities, people who are alienated from the Church for whatever reason – are listened to. ... It’s a way of being Church which engages the entire People of God in discerning with the bishops what the Holy Spirit is calling us to as a Church.”

Sister Katie and her committee are now working to plan as many listening sessions as possible, she said.

“It’s not going to be a meeting of just the people who work for the diocese, or even who work for the parishes,” she said. “I think we’re going to have to use all kinds of invitational methods: newspaper articles, social media. It’s key for us to invite all those groups. It doesn’t matter if you go to church every Sunday. If you don’t go to church every Sunday, we’d like to know why. What prevents you? What discourages you? ... It needs to be a welcoming invitation. We want to know what are your hopes and dreams and anxieties and concerns?”

## **Reaching out to the margins**

The Diocese of Davenport, Iowa, is hoping to hold at least one listening session in every parish and in other institutions and organizations, said Patrick Schmadeke, the diocese’s director of evangelization.

Bishop Thomas R. Zinkula will celebrate the opening Mass the morning of Oct. 17, and in the afternoon, the diocese will host its first listening session, Schmadeke said. That session, to which representatives of each of the diocese’s 74 parishes have been invited, will be conducted over

videoconference, and that is where the diocese will distribute materials and resources for parishes to hold their own sessions.

“We want to put them in a good position to live out the synodal process,” Schmadeke said, noting that there are urban, suburban and rural parishes in the diocese’s area of eastern Iowa.

“The demographics of the people that any given parish will reach out to will vary,” Schmadeke said. “What sort of demographics might you want to consider listening to? If there’s a homeless shelter or food pantry in your parish, how will you include the people who use that? We want to offer maybe some suggestions for locations for listening sessions, because if a listening session is held in the parish hall, the people who show up are going to be active in the parish already. That’s good – we want to listen to them – but [reach out to the margins](#), too. We want to be intentional about that.”

## **‘The buy-in of the priests’**

The Diocese of San Bernardino, California, is also working on plans to reach out. The country’s sixth largest diocese, it has parishes of all kinds – in cities and rural communities near California’s borders with Nevada and Arizona.

“We have 27,000 square miles, and we definitely have some outlying parishes,” said John Andrews, the diocese’s director of communications. “It is going to be a challenge probably in terms of providing the guidance to the smaller, more outlying parishes in how they can have the listening sessions.”

Diocesan leaders have been talking for about six months about the synod, spending a lot of time discussing how to reach out to people who are on the margins or disengaged from the Church.

“We understand that’s priority one,” Andrews said. “How that’s going to take place, we don’t really know yet, but we do know that it’s always key and critical to have the buy-in of the priests and the pastors. There has to be engagement and enthusiasm on the parish level.”

## **The importance of listening**

The Diocese of Brooklyn, New York, with 177 parishes in 22 deaneries in Brooklyn and Queens, started by reaching out to all of its councils: the College of Consultors, its councils for priests and religious, and the pastoral council, said Father Joseph Gibino, vicar for evangelization and catechesis.

With Mass celebrated in more than seven languages some Sundays, the language apostolates – Spanish, Polish and those for Asian and African languages – were important voices to hear from as well, Father Gibino said, as are various institutes in the dioceses.

Looking at that, Father Gibino said, “It would seem that we left out parishioners. So we are going to ask each parish where possible to do a listening session, so we will hear from them as well. We have immigrants from all over the world. We are completely urban. The whole synod document makes it clear we cannot leave out the poor, the disenfranchised and those on margins. In our diocese, we will gather everyone together in these sessions. We really have an opportunity to sit down and listen. We want frank, honest and open sharing of how we’re going to journey together.”

That doesn’t mean, he said, that the sessions will be open for debate or argument.

“We don’t want this to be a parliamentary procedure,” Father Gibino said. “This is a chance to listen to one another. What is the mission of the Church in the 21st century? How are we in communion with one another? When we begin to listen to the

Holy Spirit, our hearts and minds are changed. That's why it's so important to ground this in prayer."

At the end of the diocesan process, each diocese will submit a 10-page report to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops by April 1 – something all the diocesan leaders said will likely be a challenge.

But, they said, it will be worth it as their dioceses find their own new paths to journey together.

"With respect to evangelization in particular, I hope this initiates a new season of intentionality, of getting outside the four walls of the parish," said Schmadeke of the Diocese of Davenport. "We have the document we need to send to the USCCB in April, and that document will be important. But just as important is the posture of listening and ongoing discernment."

*Michelle Martin writes from Illinois.*