Francis calls for youth synod creativity—How will U.S. bishops answer the call?

At the end of a synod of bishops, the pope customarily issues a document -- a post-synodal apostolic exhortation -- that summarizes the gist of the meeting, and offers his reflections on whatever pastoral issue the synod took up for discussion.

Synods -- at least modern synods -- involve a great deal of time and expense, and often involve the best minds and hearts in the Church. But synodal documents -- good or bad, well-constructed or hastily strung together -- tend to have the same unhappy fate: they are consigned to library or chancery shelves, where they get dusty from disuse.

While there are some notable exceptions, post-synodal documents tend generally to have very few practical outcomes, and very little long-term impact on the life of the Church.

Apart from the substance of its controversy, Amoris laetitia, the exhortation that followed the 2015 Synod of Bishops on the family, is an unusual post-synodal document because it actually provoked a controversy of any kind -- one still unresolved as the Church begins another synod, this one focusing on young adults, the faith, and vocation discernment.

During his Oct. 3 remarks opening the 2018 Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis mentioned the reputation of synodal exhortations for irrelevance, quipping that a synodal text is “generally only read by a few and criticized by many.”

Optimistically, Francis told the bishops gathered for the synod that he hopes the gathering will lead to “concrete pastoral proposals capable of fulfilling the Synod’s purpose.”

Earlier Wednesday, during the synod’s opening Mass celebrated in St. Peter’s Square, Pope Francis called for a meeting “anointed by hope.”

“Hope challenges us, moves us and shatters that conformism which says, ‘it’s always been done like this,’” the pope said.

He added that young people expect of the synod’s participants “a creative dedication, a dynamism which is intelligent, enthusiastic and full of hope.”

The pope’s call for creativity Wednesday encouraged bishops to update their prepared interventions -- the short speeches each synod participant gives during the meeting’s initial sessions -- suggesting that bishops “consider what you have prepared as a provisional draft open to any additions and changes that the Synod journey may suggest to each of you.”

Despite this call, there are observers who argue that the synod structure makes creativity and original thinking a difficult proposition. In the initial meetings of the synod, each participant will be given the opportunity to make a very short speech of approximately four minutes. While those speeches are added into the record, observers say they are not always reflected in the synod's final report.

Of slightly more importance is the subsequent discussion on the resolutions that form synod’s final report, undertaken in groups divided by language. But even that discussion has only a limited capacity to shape the synod’s final text.
There are observers who ask whether the synodal structure allows for any genuine dialogue or debate, and whether the narrowly circumscribed window for intervention is a suitable environment for the prophetic ministry of bishops. Critics argue that the current structure gives most of the power to the Vatican staffers who organize the synods and do much of the report drafting, rather than to the bishop delegates.

At least one observer close to the synod has told CNA that bishops sometimes complain they are called in only to rubber stamp texts mostly regarded as *faits accomplis*.

Francis last month issued a set of changes to the procedural rules for episcopal synods, that, according to some observers, further centralize real decision-making authority within the synod, placing considerable power over proceedings and final report in the hands of the general secretary. Those changes, critics say, mean that bishops will have even less influence over the final text than they did before. And, because of the new rules, the final text of the meeting can now be immediately approved by the pope, in place of an apostolic exhortation released months later.

Still, for the American bishops participating in the synod, Francis’ call for a new way of doing things is likely to resonate. Several members of the U.S. delegation are known as original thinkers and leaders, and some have already begun to signal that they’ll bring to the synod uniques ideas and approaches.

As the sessions begin, it’s worth noting what some bishops from the U.S. delegation might bring to the table.

**Bishop Robert Barron**

Bishop Robert Barron, auxiliary of Los Angeles, is perhaps the U.S. bishop whose intervention in the synod is the most difficult to predict. Barron is a well-known public intellectual, a social media superstar, and the driving force behind the popular “Catholicism” series and Word on Fire catechetical apostolate.

Intellectually, Barron is difficult to pigeonhole. A polyglot with a doctorate from the theology faculty at the Institut Catholique du Paris, Barron’s intellectual interests and influences are broad-ranging. He’s managed to bring those interests to film and television reviews, to YouTube videos immensely popular with young people, and to seminars on preaching and pastoral work that have built a following among millennial priests.

The breadth and depth of Barron’s intellect make him hard to place consistently as a member of any of the ideological camps in which U.S. bishops are typically classified.

So what will he offer the synod?

In a Oct. 2 interview with L.A’s Angelus News, Barron said that he would prioritize ministry to young people in the context of their own culture. “We have to get them, we have to invade their space,” Barron told Angelus.

Barron told Angelus that he feels it important to address what he calls “the culture of self-invention.”
That culture, he said, “celebrated almost constantly: that I decide what my life is about, I decide what I’m going to believe, how I’m going to act, and no one tells me what to do.”

While calling for a methodology intended to speak in the language of a fluid culture, Barron told Angelus that calls for doctrinal fluidity would be a mistake.

Saying the doctrine is “not ours to play with,” Barron added that “dumbed-down Catholicism has been a disaster.”

**Archbishop Jose Gomez**

Barron is not the only U.S. delegate from Los Angeles. His boss—L.A.’s Archbishop Jose Gomez, was also elected to the synod. Gomez, who is vice-president of the U.S. bishops’ conference, can be counted on for a perspective that differs significantly from that of his brother American bishops.

Gomez seems to very capably straddle notably different worlds. He is Mexican-born, and also the bishop of the largest diocese in the U.S. He is a member of an ecclesial movement, and has also spent decades in diocesan ministry. He is regarded as a doctrinal conservative, and has also become the most outspoken American bishop on immigration reform.

From that unique position in the Church, Gomez has appeal and credibility across a remarkably broad swath in the Church. His intervention will carry a great deal of weight among a number of bishops.

The archbishop is likely to discuss themes that reflect his Opus Dei formation—most especially, the universal call to holiness, and the importance of intentional sacramental and devotional formation for young people. Gomez’ intervention will likely be Christocentric, and call for a distinctive place for lay Catholics in the life of the Church.

To Angelus, Gomez said this week that “we need to change gears and say that the lay faithful are also called to holiness and to be leaders in the Church.”

“We need to understand that we all are called to holiness; that sometimes we are still in the process of understanding that the Church not only belongs to the pope and the bishops and the priests, but to everyone — the lay faithful,” he added. His intervention is likely to follow along similar lines.

Gomez is also likely to emphasize works of mercy, especially service to the poor.

“The young people of today, it seems to me, are trying to do something, to take action. It is difficult for them to stop and learn the teachings of the Church. The first encounter with Christ in serving other people is what I think is most important for us,” he said in an Oct. 2 interview.

**Cardinal Blase Cupich**

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago was appointed by the pope to participate in the synod, along with Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, who withdrew in response to fallout from the sexual abuse crisis in his diocese.
Cupich is reported to be a close collaborator of Pope Francis. He was appointed personally by Francis to this synod, rather than being elected by the U.S. bishops, and was similarly appointed by the pope to attend the 2015 synod.

After the synod, he became a vocal supporter of Pope Francis’ *Amoris laetitia*, hosting closed-door conferences on the document for bishops and theologians, and saying this February that the document “represents an enormous change of approach, a paradigm shift holistically rooted in Scripture, tradition and human experience.”

Cupich has been expected by observers to play a significant role in the 2018 synod. The cardinal, however, has had a difficult summer.

He became a central figure in the sexual crisis dubbed the “summer of hell,” especially because of an Aug. 27 interview in which he argued, or appeared to argue, that Pope Francis would focus on environmentalism and migration rather than going down the “rabbit hole” of an investigation into allegations of widespread corruption and misconduct leveled Aug. 25 by former Vatican diplomat Archbishop Carlo Vigano.

Cupich apologized for his remarks in a *Chicago Tribune* op-ed issued nearly a month after the interview.

“It was a mistake for me to even mention that the Church has a bigger agenda than responding to the charges in the letter by former Papal Nuncio Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano,” he wrote.

“What I should have said, because it has been my conviction throughout my ministry, is that nothing is more important for the Church than protecting young people. I apologize for the offense caused by my comments. It pains me deeply to think that my poor choice of words may have added to the suffering of victim-survivors.”

Those difficulties do not seem to have prevented Cupich from getting an early start to active participation in the synod. After Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia published Sept. 21 an anonymous theologian’s criticism of the synod’s working document in the journal First Things, Cupich sent the magazine a letter, saying that the “use of anonymous criticism in American society does not necessarily contribute to healthy public discourse, but in fact can erode it.”

Cupich wrote that the commentary published by Chaput “raises essential questions about the nature of theological dialogue in our Church,” before criticizing the text for “selectivity, condescension, and the deployment of partial truths” which served to “obfuscate the fullness of truth.”

“What is needed is the spirit of synodality that Pope Francis has made the very heart of the Church’s upcoming moment of dialogue and teaching in search of ways to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the next generations,” Cupich added.

Cupich, it seems, is likely to offer an intervention and points for discussion, in support of the synod’s working document, or *instrumentum laboris*. In recent months, he has discussed publicly the importance of listening to young adults, the gifts young people offer to the Church, and the importance of dialoguing with young people about sexuality and gender-topics which all receive considerable treatment in the *instrumentum laboris*. 
“Young people today are living in a whole different world than when I grew up. So they find their classmates, maybe even themselves, in situations where their family is broken and they're in blended families,” Cupich said in August interview with Rome Reports.

“The same thing too is with young people who have friends who have same-sex attraction, who are gay and lesbian. They treasure those friendships. So how can we speak to them in a way that challenges them -- no matter what their attraction is -- to live a life that's in-tune with the Gospel?”

**Archbishop Charles Chaput**

Archbishop Charles Chaput has not been hesitant to express his views on the synod’s instrumentum laboris. In addition to the theological commentary he published last month, the archbishop has published or cited comments from young Catholics critical of the synod’s preparatory documents on several occasions.

On Sept. 29, the archbishop published an op-ed in the prominent Italian newspaper *Il Foglio*, saying that “the synod’s instrumentum laboris or ‘working document,’ needs to be reviewed and revised. As it stands, the text is strong in the social sciences, but much less so in its call to belief, conversion, and mission.”

Citing the Sept. 21 theological reflection, Chaput lamented within the document “‘serious theological concerns…including: a false understanding of the conscience and its role in the moral life;’ a ‘false dichotomy proposed between truth and freedom,’ a ‘pervasive focus on socio-cultural elements, to the exclusion of deeper religious and moral issues,’ an ‘absence of the hope of the Gospel,’ and an ‘insufficient treatment of the abuse scandal.’”

“The synod’s success depends on a profound confidence in the Word of God and the mission of the Church, despite the sins of her leaders,” his commentary added.

Chaput’s commentary provoked criticism from Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the synod’s secretary general. Baldisseri told journalists Oct. 1 that because Chaput, whom he alluded to but did not name, is a member of the synod’s planning council, he could have raised objections to the *instrumentum laboris* early in the planning process.

In fact, sources tell CNA, the *instrumentum laboris* was given to members of the planning commission only days before they were asked to approve it, as is typical for the synod council. Sources also say it was likely available only in Italian. If those things are true, it seems improbable that Chaput, or any bishop, would have been able to adequately study the document and give meaningful feedback before it was released.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that Chaput will focus on the *instrumentum laboris* during his intervention.

Instead, Chaput, as a frequent observer of culture, is likely to comment on the way that family, public, and ecclesial culture impact the development of young people- and he will probably raise the sexual abuse crisis, since most of his recent public remarks have addressed the imprudence of holding a synod on young adults without recognizing that sexual abuse and misconduct will be rather significant elephants in the room.
Following the trajectory of his recent remarks, Chaput will likely call for a pastoral focus on forming young people from a genuinely Christian anthropology, and toward a Christocentric self-identity.

Whether the interventions of any American bishop will make a major difference in the synod’s final text remains to be seen. Indeed, whether the final text will have an impact on the church, or merely gather dust on chancery shelves, also remains to be seen. But the interventions and actions of the U.S. delegation can teach a lot about what kind of men lead the church in the U.S., and what kind of future that church might have.