

Pope Francis launches 2-year synodal path with call to ‘encounter, listen, and discern’



Pope Francis formally launched the two-year global consultation process leading to the 2023 synod on synodality on Sunday with a call to “look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say.”

Preaching at a Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica on Oct. 10, the pope said that Catholics taking part in the synodal path should strive to “become experts in the art of encounter.”

“Not so much by organizing events or theorizing about problems, as in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another,” he said.

“Time to devote to prayer and adoration -- this prayer that we neglect so much: to adore, to make room for adoration -- listening to what the Spirit wants to say to the Church.”

“Time to look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say, to build rapport, to be sensitive to the questions of our sisters and brothers, to let ourselves be enriched by the variety of charisms, vocations, and ministries.”

The live-streamed Mass, attended by around 3,000 people, was the second of two weekend events officially opening the two-year global consultation process.

The first was a “moment of reflection” on Oct. 9 featuring speeches from the pope, Cardinal Mario Grech, the secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, SJ, the synod’s relator general, and others.

The Vatican announced in May that the synod on synodality would open with a diocesan phase lasting from October 2021 to April 2022.

A second, continental phase will take place from September 2022 to March 2023.

The third, universal phase will begin with the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, dedicated to the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission,” at the Vatican in October 2023.

In his homily, the pope reflected on the day’s Gospel reading, Mark 10:17-30, in which Jesus challenges the rich young man to “Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor ... then come, follow me.”

He said that the Gospels often showed Jesus in the midst of a journey, meeting people and listening to their deepest concerns.

“Today, as we begin this synodal process, let us begin by asking ourselves -- all of us, pope, bishops, priests, religious and laity -- whether we, the Christian community, embody this ‘style’ of God, who travels the paths of history and shares in the life of humanity,” he urged.

“Are we prepared for the adventure of this journey? Or are we fearful of the unknown, preferring to take refuge in the usual excuses: ‘It’s useless’ or ‘We’ve always done it this way’?”

“Celebrating a synod means walking on the same road, together. Let us look at Jesus, who encounters the rich man on the road; he then listens to his questions, and finally he helps him discern what he must do to inherit eternal life.”

The pope built his homily around three verbs -- “encounter, listen, and discern” -- that he hoped would mark the synodal path.

He noted that when Jesus encountered the young man, he was fully present to him and did not “keep looking at his watch to get the meeting over.”

“Everything changes once we are capable of genuine encounters with Him and with one another, without formalism or pretense, but simply as we are,” he observed.

Pope Francis said that Jesus’ meeting with the rich man showed that listening was an essential feature of true encounters.

He said: “Let us ask frankly during this synodal process: Are we good at listening? How good is the ‘hearing’ of our heart?”

“Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered, rejected, or judged?”

He continued: “Participating in a synod means placing ourselves on the same path as the Word made flesh. It means following in his footsteps, listening to his word along with the words of others. It means discovering with amazement that the Holy Spirit always surprises us, to suggest fresh paths and new ways of speaking.”

The pope acknowledged that learning to listen was “a slow and perhaps tiring exercise” for bishops, priests, religious, and laity.

“Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties. Certainties often close us off. Let us listen to one another,” he encouraged Catholics.

According to a Catholic News Agency report, the pope said that encounter and listening should lead to discernment.

“We see this in today’s Gospel,” he explained. “Jesus senses that the person before him is a good and religious man, obedient to the commandments, but he wants to lead him beyond the mere observance of precepts.”

“Through dialogue, he helps him to discern. Jesus encourages that man to look within, in the light of the love that the Lord himself had shown by his gaze, and to discern in that light what his heart truly treasures.”

“And in this way to discover that he cannot attain happiness by filling his life with more religious observances, but by emptying himself, selling whatever takes up space in his heart, in order to make room for God.”

The pope described the synod as “a journey of spiritual discernment” guided by God’s word.

“That word summons us to discernment and it brings light to that process. It guides the synod, preventing it from becoming a Church ‘convention,’ a study group or a political congress, because it is not a parliament, but rather a grace-filled event, a process of healing guided by the Holy Spirit,” he said.

“In these days, Jesus calls us, as he did the rich man in the Gospel, to empty ourselves, to free ourselves from all that is worldly, including our inward-looking and outworn pastoral models; and to ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time. And the direction in which he wants to lead us.”

The pope ended his homily by wishing participants in the synodal path a good journey together.

He said: “May we be pilgrims in love with the Gospel and open to the surprises of the Spirit. Let us not miss out on the grace-filled opportunities born of encounter, listening, and discernment. In the joyful conviction that, even as we seek the Lord, he always comes with his love to meet us first.”