

Cardinal Grech: Only the Holy Spirit Will ‘Hijack’ the Synod on Synodality

At a press conference on Friday, the second stage of the worldwide process that began in October 2021 was introduced. It will see the creation of a document summarizing the results of the listening sessions and surveys conducted in individual countries.



Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks at the press conference in the Vatican on Aug. 26. (photo: Vatican Media / YouTube Channel)

At a press conference at the Vatican on Friday, two cardinals introduced the “continental phase” of the Catholic Church’s Synod on Synodality — and assured journalists that the only one “hijacking” this synod will be the Holy Spirit.

The worldwide process that began in October 2021 has now entered its second stage and will see the creation of a document by late October or early November, summarizing the results of the listening sessions and surveys conducted in individual countries until this month.

Good Participation

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, relator general of the synod, gave an update on Aug. 26 on the participation in the first phase of the synod.

He said the office of the Synod of Bishops had thus far received just over 100 summaries total, including from individual bishops' conferences, of which there are 114.

“This incredible figure tells us that, yes, the Church is in synod,” the Luxembourg cardinal and Jesuit said, noting that 98% of the 114 bishops' conferences have also appointed a synod team or contact person for the synodal process.

The summaries sent to Rome from bishops' conferences “are the fruit of discernment from the syntheses received from the dioceses,” Cardinal Hollerich said, while the syntheses of the dioceses come from the “listening sessions” and surveys of parishes, associations, movements, religious congregations, Catholic schools and Catholic universities.

Vatican dicasteries, Eastern Catholic Churches, international unions of religious congregations, institutes of consecrated life, and societies of apostolic life have also submitted summarizing documents to the Vatican for consideration.

Hollerich also mentioned a social-media survey that was shared by 237 Catholic “influencers” and more than 100 institutions in seven languages.

The pilot project, “The Church Listens to You,” was the initiative of Red Informática de la Iglesia en América Latina (RIIAL) in collaboration with iMission.

The synod office said 110,000 people completed the survey, out of approximately 20 million people who were reached, which was estimated based on the number of social-media followers of the Catholic personalities who participated.

Cardinal Hollerich also noted that participation in the first phase of the synod included more than 1,000 contributions from individuals or groups not recognized by the Church.

He emphasized the importance of recognizing the quality of participation, not only quantity.

Listening to the Spirit

The data collected so far, Cardinal Hollerich said, convinces him “that we are facing an ecclesial dialogue without precedent in the history of the Church, not only for the quantity of responses received or the number of people involved (which to some who want to rely solely on numbers — which can only be approximate — may seem limited) but also for the quality of participation.”

At Friday’s press conference, Cardinal Hollerich and Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, emphasized the importance of listening and discernment.

“Precisely because no one in the Church has the exclusive right to the truth, the consultation of the People of God demands discernment,” Grech said.

“Not everything spoken is the voice of the Spirit: One must grasp within the sound of voices, the voice of the Spirit,” he added. “Therein lies the function of discernment, which is already operative in the process of listening, when the community converges on a point.”

Questioned by a journalist about whether the voices of Catholic priests and laypeople who love the Latin Mass would be listened to in this process, the head of the Synod of Bishops said the listening process means not only for bishops to listen to the people but “also the bishop has to be listened to.”

“Because sometimes there is a risk of it being a monologue, on one side or the other,” Cardinal Grech said.

“Listen to what the Spirit is telling the Church of today. This is the task, the goal of this synodal process. So the Church learns to put into practice this synodal style. But nobody must feel excluded, nobody must not suffer because his or her voice is not heard,” he said.

Hand-Picked Committee

The document for the continental phase of the synod, which can also be considered the first *instrumentum laboris*, or working document, will be drafted by a team of “experts,” Cardinal Grech said.

The 20-some people drafting the document include Catholic priests, university professors and one religious sister. A professor from the continent of Africa has not yet confirmed her participation.

Among those chosen are Jesuit Father David McCallum, executive director of the U.S.-based Discerning Leadership Program; Father Ormund Rush, associate professor of religion and theology at the Catholic University of Australia; Msgr. Philippe Bordeyne, president of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Rome; and Austen Ivereigh, a biographer of Pope Francis and coordinator of the U.K.-based project “The Road to a Synodal Church.”

The members of the synod’s ordinary council will also provide suggestions for amendments and give the document its final approval.

Hijacked Synod?

During the question-and-answer portion of the press conference, Cardinal Hollerich was asked about comments he made in an interview earlier this year, in which he appeared to imply he disagreed with the Church’s teaching on the immorality of homosexual acts and wanted it to change.

The cardinal was asked if he wanted the Synod on Synodality to bring about a change in Church teaching on this issue.

“I have no personal agenda for this synod,” the cardinal responded.

“I fully believe in the tradition of the Church, and what I think is important in this process is not changing doctrine,” he said.

He added that he thinks it is important to listen to people, including parents, and to have “a change in attitude,” so that everyone can feel at home in the Church.

“This welcome,” Cardinal Hollerich said, “does not mean there cannot be discussions. ... But if we close the door, we push people into despair, and that is something we do not want.”

He said his mission in the synod, from the Pope, is “to listen and to serve,” and he expressed a desire to be personally changed, to experience conversion, by the synodal process.

The cardinal also dismissed a question asking if he was afraid that political interests might hijack the synod.

“I’m not afraid,” he said, “because I believe in God, prayer, meditation; and listening to people gives me hope and strength. You have to walk, and when you walk in the desert like in the Book of Exodus, there are some temptations, but with the help of God, we can pass through these temptations.”

Cardinal Grech also responded to the question, commenting that “the synod will be hijacked by one, the Holy Spirit, if I can use this term.”

Cardinal Hollerich said the work of the synod “is not to create a ‘shock’ for the Church,” as one journalist had asked, “but to listen to what the People of God are saying.”

He continued: “It is a very complex thing that cannot be reduced to simple positions, and I think that the model of the synod is a model based on ecclesial consensus.”

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