



An electronic voting device is used by a participant during the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East at the Vatican in 2010. (CNS/Catholic Press Photo/Alessia Giuliani)



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Pope Francis keeps repeating that the upcoming synod [is not a parliament](#). For him, the synod is not a forum for competing positions to debate each other with a goal of developing new policies or effecting structural changes in the church.

Similarly, when Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council in 1962, he did not envision that the council would deal with doctrinal matters or revamp church structures. Both popes centered their attention on identity and mission.

The question of identity means that we reclaim who we are as a people walking together with the Lord on the road of history. Then, drawing from that identity, we reclaim our mission or holy purpose, in the words of John XXIII, "of bringing the modern world into contact with the vivifying and perennial energies of the Gospel."

Both the Second Vatican Council and the synod on synodality are about learning to be the church that God wants us to be for the sake of the world that desperately needs healing and transformation.

The direction that Francis has set for the synod makes sense. It is a right direction and an exciting one as well. And it is definitely not a parliamentary process, as we would ordinarily understand that. But there is a problem, a big one in my estimation.

We ought to be on track not to debate but to discern.

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When the participants for the synod were announced recently, they were identified as [voting](#) or nonvoting, based on whether they will be part of the group that votes on the final document at the end of the process in October 2024. So, it appears that voting will be a part of the synod process and perhaps — even as many people anticipate the synod — an important one.

But be aware of what voting suggests. It almost inevitably means moving into a default mode of a parliamentary-like process. Different points of view will be represented and then debated and voted upon. Not everyone will get their way, but in democratic fashion the majority will hold sway.

All this leads us back to the nature of the synod process. If voting is an essential part of the synod gathering, it will shape that gathering as a parliamentary process.

The synod need not inevitably move to a parliamentary model. There is another way that I would suggest. First, however, let me explain why I think the parliamentary model with voting is such a bad idea.

We ought to take a cue from our ecumenical sisters and brothers. Recently, when other Christian churches and communities have come together to discuss and debate issues, especially hot-button ones like gender and sexuality, they have found themselves dramatically divided. These gatherings meant to foster unity and bridge divisions have led to even greater fissures.

I would suggest that this happened because these communities had missed a previous and essential step — learning how to be a synodal church, precisely the point of Francis' call for synods on synodality.

Once we have a deep sense of ourselves as the body of Christ prompted by the Spirit to carry on the Lord's mission in the world, then we can take up the issues that bedevil us. Our dialogue at that point is not about promoting our point of view — hoping to persuade and prevail — but rather creating an environment that is favorable to detecting what God wants of us in this moment. In other words, we ought to be on track not to debate but to discern.

Could there be a final document after the two-year process that reflects a consensus statement (what everyone can 'live with') of values and convictions?

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Permit me to illustrate another possible way — beyond the parliamentary model — for us to come together in the synod. I am drawing from a recent experience I had of social dialogue, as envisioned in "[Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home](#)" and [Fratelli Tutti](#), but in a predominantly secular context: a gathering with the theme "[The Future of Work in Chicago's Hospitality Industry](#)."

A press release for the event was titled "[Unlikely Allies Talk Future of Work in Chicago's Hospitality Industry](#)." The first paragraph gives a good sense of the

gathering as well as the diversity of the participants:

Local and international leaders from the faith community, labor, the hospitality and tourism industry, community-based organizations, academia, the hospitality workforce, and government gathered at Mercy Home for Boys and Girls to discuss the challenges facing Chicago's hospitality industry and develop a shared vision for the future on June 13.

It was an extraordinary assembly. As you read the list of participating groups and individuals, you can easily imagine them fiercely debating issues, especially surrounding questions of labor and management, compensation and safety, and the need for profits and value for stockholders.

In fact, there was no debate. It was a much different process. The dialogue and conversation centered on establishing basic and shared values. Participants drew on their experience to identify what they held as precious.

Of course, there were different values in play, but common elements also emerged that linked the humanity of the participants across their diverse situations. And those common elements could be a binding force as participants might step into a next dialogue around issues that involve policies and structures.

The tangible result of this daylong dialogue will be a statement of values that is under construction now and that can serve as a reference point for the future dialogue.

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Let me be clear. There was no voting in this social dialogue. If anything, there was an evolving sense of common values. And this experience of social dialogue prompts me to think that a similar, although obviously somewhat different, path for the synod would be beneficial.

Could there be a final document after the two-year process that reflects a consensus statement (what everyone can "live with") of values and convictions? These values and convictions would then be brought back to the local churches to be lived out in deliberate and intentional ways.

With time and continuing prayerful reflection, this process could lead to serene discernment and greater clarity and perhaps even to some specific structural and organizational directions.

If voting had been a part of the hospitality industry social dialogue, the results would have been much different. There would have been winners and losers. This idea or policy might hold sway, but there would have also been degrees of alienation and a felt lack of ownership. Finally, we would have lost a foundation for grappling positively and productively with the complex issues that remain and will need to be addressed.

Yes, the synod is not a parliament. And if that is true, then voting should be dropped from the process. When and if that happens, participants will sense a great freedom.

They will pay attention to their identity and mission and so learn how to be a synodal church. They will have a firm foundation for the future for dealing with the issues and concerns that matter to the church, not through the lens of their own positions but with spirits open to what the Lord has in mind for us.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. [View the full series.](#)