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Pope Francis attends the opening of the second session of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Oct. 2, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini)



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The study groups appointed by Pope Francis to deal with [controversial topics removed from the synod's agenda](#) made their interim reports to the synod on Oct. 3.

The decision of the pope last March to remove these topics from discussion at the synod was received with disappointment by many observers. He seemed to be cutting off open discussion, which is what people thought synodality was all about.

The pope, on the other hand, felt that there were too many topics to be dealt with adequately by the synod and that they would distract from his central topic: synodality. He also felt that these topics were complicated and needed further study.

As a result, the pope sent these topics to 10 study groups and two commissions that were to report back to him in June 2025. Their interim reports to the synod give us some indication of the progress or lack thereof made by the groups.

Many of the topics under study are not new to the church. We have been discussing seminary formation since the Council of Trent. Likewise, the relationship between bishops and religious orders has been debated for centuries. Nor is the relationship between the Eastern Catholic churches and the Roman church new. How to select bishops has been an issue since apostolic times. The relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches has come up since the Reformation, although relations have greatly improved since the Second Vatican Council.

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What is new is the cultural and historical context in which we live today. Great strides have been made in our understanding of physical and social sciences as well as human rights, which include women's rights. We live in a pluralistic world that is

interrelated and threatened by war, famine and global warming.

Today, Catholics have a greater understanding of Scripture, tradition and church history thanks to scholarship that began in the 20th century. Theology has broken out of its scholastic prison and developed new methods for approaching old and new issues. The church has gone through the revolutionary reforms of the Second Vatican Council, followed by the repressive regimes of John Paul and Benedict. Francis has once again opened the church to free discussion, although he makes clear the church is not a democracy and that he will make the final decisions.

In this context, how should we see the group reports?

Although the groups are about midway through their allotted time frame, many appear to have only established their agenda and goals. They plan to review church documents, input from the synodal consultations, and the theological and canonical literature relating to their topics. They are meeting in person and by Zoom. Because they must report back in June, it will be impossible to do any original research. They can only synthesize what is already known and make recommendations accordingly.

Of the reports, the one from the canonical commission was most concrete and practical. Here the commission made 10 specific recommendations on how to revise canon law to make it more synodal.

It recommends, for example, that parish, diocesan and episcopal councils be mandatory. Church law should make clear "the duty of the pastor to ask the Council for indications, addresses, observations, checks, suggestions, etc. ... but there is also the corresponding right-duty of each member of the body to offer his or her opinion on what is brought to attention and discernment."

Canon law should also ensure that "the majority of the members of the Pastoral Councils are lay people with an adequate presence of women, young people and people living in conditions of poverty or experiencing other forms of marginalization." Nor should anyone be excluded because they "live complex personal and/or marital situations." Ecumenical observers should also be allowed to participate, without a vote.

The commission also says it is important to "identify particular matters on which the request to express an opinion of such a Council is made mandatory, establishing the duty to consult the body."

Finally, the commission notes, "an adequate minimum number of annual meetings must be established in order to ensure effective functioning and its pastoral fruitfulness."



Participants attend a session of the 16th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, Oct. 7, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Francis preaches about synodality, but the canon lawyers are showing us how to make it more than a pious wish that can be ignored by pastors and bishops who prefer to stick to the old ways. Accountability and transparency don't just happen. Church law must change so that councils can demand accountability from church authorities.

In reviewing the report, Fr. John Beal, professor of canon law at the Catholic University of America, said some of the recommendations would be "helpful in promoting an atmosphere of openness and synodal deliberation." But he is not optimistic.

"The biggest obstacle to effective consultative governance is diocesan bureaucracy," explains Beal. "These bureaucracies marginalize consultative bodies." Too often, in his experience, recommendations from a consultative body "were given to the appropriate archdiocesan office which did with them what it thought best — which usually meant nothing."

The most revolutionary report comes from a group dealing with "synodal theological and methodological criteria for shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues," which was led by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The report calls for a new theological method "rooted in Tradition, but innovative and creative." It is less deductive and calls for a "conversion of thought and reform of practices in contextual fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus."

Quoting Vatican II, the report states, "the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others."

Preaching the truth of the Gospel "is not a matter of proclaiming and applying abstract doctrinal principles, but of vitally inhabiting the experience of faith in its personal and social relevance so that we will be open to the ever new promptings of the Holy Spirit."

In words that will send reactionaries up the wall, the report asserts, "Only a vital, fruitful, and reciprocal tension between doctrine and practice embodies the living Tradition and is able to counteract the temptation to rely on the barren scleroticism of verbal pronouncements."

"Regarding controversial ethical questions," the group says, "we will try to offer some concrete guidelines for discernment — to be carried out locally and with attention to specific contexts — on at least two of today's most relevant issues."

"On the social and political level," the report continues, "we will offer some guidelines regarding questions surrounding peace, fraternity and care for our common home in the face of the many forms of conflict, hatred and exploitation. Our guidelines will include the search for non-violent methods of reconciliation that are inspired by the Gospel from the very beginning."

And in what is sure to cause controversy, "On the personal and family level, we will offer some guidelines regarding the meaning of sexuality, marriage, the generation of children, and the promotion and care of life."

This report will provide much fodder for theological discussion and debate. It is clear that Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for Doctrine of the Faith, is not intimidated by the barrage of attacks aimed at him by conservatives. Like his predecessor Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he will not be deterred by [critics](#). It is full speed ahead for a new approach to theology.

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