

Pope Francis on What a Synodal Parish Looks Like

1. **It looks like early Church communities.** Synodality has been a way of life for the Church since the first Council of Jerusalem. There was a controversy over circumcision and following the Mosaic law for gentiles to be saved.

“But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law.’” (Acts 15:5)

The apostles and presbyters lifted up the concerns to God. After prayer and discernment, the apostles and presbyters wrote the following to the church in Antioch:

It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell. (Acts 15: 28-30)

2. **It recognizes that existing steeply hierarchical governance models are not effective.** After the Church began developing a hierarchy, synodality was lost and a vertical governmental model was adopted.
3. **It is in communion with the Pope and the universal Church.** With Synod 2021-2024, Pope Francis has embarked on a powerful movement in the Church with some challenging actions being required of ordained and laity. These include:
 - a. The ordained listening to “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age...these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (*Gaudium et spes*, 1).
 - b. Discernment in common, including all who will prepare, pray and participate.
 - c. Participation of all baptized Catholics and of all baptized Christians in discerning the Spirit’s direction and in asking for the courage to go as the Spirit directs.
 - d. Open and honest discussions between laity, lay leadership and ordained.
 - e. Trust between all groups of those serving the people of God.

This is a huge endeavor. But it’s not a project to be completed; it is an ongoing way of life. Speaking with leaders of the French Catholic Action movement Jan. 13, 2022, the pope said that synodality is “not a plan or a program to be implemented” but “a style to be adopted” *that listens to the spirit through the word of God, prayer and adoration.* (Italics mine). ([Pope: Synodality about listening to the Spirit, not a 'majority consensus' - Catholic Review](#))

Pope Francis defines 7 marks of Synodality (as seen in Bishop McElroy’s article in America). A synodal parish will figure out how to carry out its common life so that these marks are evident in mindset, governance, programming and expectation.

1. **A synodal parish does not operate from a mindset of complacency (what we've always done is good enough) or one that accentuates the differences among the baptized rather than our common mission.** Synodality points to the reality that the whole of the people of God are journeying together in the life of the church and in synodal action. Therefore a synodal parish asks and answers the question "How are those not connected to the Church being "gathered in?" Some potential areas to consider include:
 - Social
 - Works of charity and justice
 - Outreach to those who have drifted
 - Onramps for the curious
 - General absolution
 - Clarity around marriage and divorce, welcome for interfaith and ecumenical families
 - LGBTQ+ and BIPOC peoples are included
 - Ongoing seekers have a safe place to be curious, open and to belong without necessarily wanting to be initiated

A synodal parish EXPECTS participation. A synodal parish also asks the question, "How are those connected expected to conduct themselves?" Baptism has responsibilities attached to it. Jesus entrusted his followers with a mission. The baptized have said, "Yes to that mission." So how are expectations set and communicated?

- With a laser focus on the parish's vision and mission
 - Without expectation of privilege or power. Humble service, not pride of place or privilege.
 - With ears and hearts always attuned to the voice of the Spirit, which might be a single whisper rather than a widespread outcry.
 - With a deliberate pace that allows for listening to many "voices" before decisions are made.
 - With clarity, sensitivity to gifts, talents and emerging vocations, and with support for those building the Kingdom outside the parish.
2. **A synodal parish is deeply spiritual, learning together how to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit as individuals and as a community.** Synodality demands a constant stance of discernment, of seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the life of the community. It is all too easy for us in ecclesial life, at all levels, to become focused on the perspectives that we bring to dialogue and decision making instead of first pausing our own perspectives, interests and alignments and listening to the small whispering sound that Elijah recognized as the voice of God calling to him. A synodal parish asks and answers the question, "What are the practices that make up a "constant state of discernment"?"
 - Prayer, individual and communal, frequent and varied
 - Silence, pondering, contemplating
 - Familiarity with the Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium

- Awareness of the signs of the times
 - Curious about and learning from other knowledge streams
 - Intending conversion...change...and adept at embracing it personally and communally, and accompanying others in this conversion
 - Patient, being aware that “fast” may not be the Spirit’s pace, but then again, it might be!
 - Open to surprise
3. **A synodal parish is continually rooted in listening to the word of God and joyfully celebrating the Eucharist**, which is the source and summit of the Christian life. These elements are both constitutive realities that form the church and provide vital nourishment for the community as a whole. It asks and answers these kinds of questions:
- What are the practices that promote being rooted in the Word?
 - Expectation that all members of the community engage the Scriptures
 - Individual and small group ways to engage the Scriptures
 - Scripture as part of communication from the parish
 - Scripture and reflection is part of every gathering
 - Easy access to Bibles, Sunday readings, reflections, scholarship
 - Homilies that help the Scripture to become the way through which listeners interpret the times
 - Celebrations of the Word as part of blessings, anointings, anniversaries etc.
 - What are the practices that promote the joyful celebration of the Eucharist?
 - Carefully and elegantly carried out celebrations of the Eucharist and other liturgical prayer (Liturgy of the Hours, Penitential Services, the Rites of Christian Initiation etc.)
 - Liturgical catechesis
 - Ongoing learning about the structure, flow and meaning of the Eucharist
 - Ongoing formation of liturgical ministers
 - Solid celebrations of the Word
 - Mystagogical catechesis
 - Storytelling about encounters with Christ in the Eucharist
 - Uncovering the power of the symbols and rituals through reflection
 - Testimonies
4. **A synodal parish is one where both listening heart-to-heart and speaking truth in love, for the good of the Church are constitutive of parish interactions/communication.** Synodality demands a profound stance of authentic listening from every believer who seeks to participate in and contribute to the life of the church. Listening is the respect we owe to others

in recognition of their equal dignity. Listening flows from a recognition that we have so much to learn. Listening lies at the heart of true encounter with the other disciples we meet in the life of the church. Correspondingly, synodality demands that Catholics speak out honestly and forthrightly in our ecclesial lives, so that the voices of the people of God can be authentically heard. In this regard, a synodal parish asks and answers these types of questions:

- What practices enable and promote authentic listening from every believer who seeks to participate?
 - Skill-building in listening, especially for those involved in parish ministries
 - Times set aside to practice listening among the faithful
 - Learning opportunities to increase the understanding of the gift of listening
 - Feedback opportunities to share how well listening is practiced
 - Formation around listening for those who work in catechetical ministries
 - What needs to be in place for Catholics to be able to speak out honestly and forthrightly?
 - Work on increasing trust
 - Vulnerability and boundaries with leaders
 - Practice having difficult conversations
 - Times of repentance and forgiveness for broken trust
 - Rituals that build trust
5. **A synodal parish is humble, seeking always to heal wounds.** A synodal church is a humble and honest church. It acknowledges and seeks to atone for the wounds it has brought to others, particularly the sexual abuse of young people by priests. A synodal church genuinely seeks to discern its woundedness and embraces reform. Its holiness is exemplified by its humility, not by denial or the protection of its reputation. Therefore, it asks and answers questions like:
- What communicates humility and honesty from clergy to people, people to clergy and hierarchy in general to the people of God?
 - Repentance, over and over again, with restitution
 - Changes in systems and structures that promoted arrogance and dishonesty
 - Examinations of conscience and times of reflection to continue to surface what fosters distrust
 - Openness with difficulties and struggles-vulnerability
 - Self-awareness in clergy and among the people of God
 - Being present consistently in other people's pain
6. **A synodal parish respects its leaders, involves its people and discerns the will of God together.** A synodal church is a discerning church, not a parliamentary one. It must empower the voices of all, but its search for God's will cannot be reduced to building majorities or forming coalitions. It is

essential to recognize that synodality is more concerned with nurturing a culture within the life of the church rather than specific policy outcomes. It recognizes the important hierarchical dimensions of our ecclesial life and tradition and also finds its foundation in the equal dignity of all of the baptized. Therefore, it asks and answers questions such as:

- What practices help the people of God search for God's will?
 - Asking for God to reveal God's will constantly
 - Listening with the "ear of the heart" to Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium
 - Conversation that takes many forms deliberately: pros/cons, intuitions, debate, dialogue, discussion, and the synodal practice of Conversations in the Spirit
 - Silence, time and contemplation
 - History
 - Wisdom voices
 - Study

- 7. **A synodal parish recognizes and changes practices that have excluded participation, differing perspectives and denied the baptized their co-responsible place in the governance of the Church.** Finally, synodality demands a participative, inclusive and co-responsible church. If missionary discipleship is to become a reality, it must be rooted in an ecclesiology and pastoral culture that genuinely promotes these concepts in practice. Church structures that stifle full-bodied participation by Catholics in every facet of the life of the parish, diocese or universal church must be re-examined and reformed. Practices that effectively exclude individuals or groups from feeling welcome in the church must be rejected. (McElroy, Bishop Robert W. Bishop McElroy: Pope Francis and Vatican II give us a road map for the synodal process, America) Therefore, they ask and respond to question like:
 - What practices promote a participative church?
 - Expectation that each baptized person find a way to participate.
 - Define participation so that people know what that means:
 - Worship
 - Service/Ministry
 - Leadership
 - Finances
 - Gospel living
 - Intentional discipleship...we grow in commitment to following Christ on a shared journey with different levels
 - What practices promote an inclusive church?
 - Events that are deliberately geared to those who do not feel included: divorced and re-married, those married to people of other faiths, denominations or none at all, whole family units- no matter the composition.

- Confronting racism, misogyny, homophobia and hate crime head on with study, self-examination, repentance, and listening over and over again to the stories of those who experience this, seeking always to understand and to love
- Examining teachings and re-considering them in light of new understandings, of sin, of fear
- Ecumenical and inter-religious events and dialogues
- What practices promote a co-responsible church?
 - Expectations of commitment if you “join”
 - Baptism preparation that clearly delineates rights and responsibilities and then asks for commitments to carry them out in whatever ways each parish determines
 - Making adult baptism the norm so that responsibility can grow with age and maturity.
 - Transparency about and consequences surrounding finances.
 - Collaborative practices
 - Consultative decision-making
 - Clear understanding of what staff does and does not do

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/05/31/mcelroy-synodality-francis-continuity-243077>)

With all of the above in mind, what, practically speaking, does a synodal parish look like? What are the behaviors an outsider would see? How are decisions made? How are people treated?

We at the Pentecost Vigil Project, Inc. have prayed and developed the following characteristics of a synodal parish. Note that the last 6 are dependent on the first 4 – prayer and discernment are critical characteristics of a synodal parish. Without prayer undergirding your work, you may as well be a social club that does nice things.

1. Prayer will be at the core of all parish work, especially communal prayer. Why? Because the Holy Spirit reveals what we need among us working together. It’s how the Spirit works.
2. Prayer and discernment will be the daily activities of leadership, together and alone. Since the Holy Spirit is the protagonist, the leader of the Church, it falls to all those serving the Church to maintain a prayerful seeking of the Spirit’s will every day, as a constant disposition of seeking and humility.
3. The leaders will also look to the Holy Spirit for guidance. Not only is the Spirit present within and among us, the Spirit has a will and a way. Ecclesial leaders seek that will and that way in all decisions, desiring to put on the mind of Christ and to then have the courage to do the Spirit’s will, no matter the consequences.
4. Everyone agrees that the ability to hear the Holy Spirit is given to all the baptized, sealed in Confirmation. It is not just the privilege or responsibility of the ordained.
5. The Spirit will lead us to Truth/truth. But to discover that truth means that lay leadership and parishioners must feel safe speaking the truth (what they see,

experience, understand from their perspectives/expertise) without fear of repercussions.

6. Lay and ordained leadership will be transparent and explain how decisions were reached and the “why” behind them.
7. There will be opportunities for discussion, dialogue, debate and Conversations in the Spirit when significant commitments of the parish arise.
8. There will be no undue influence from special interest group, influencers or big givers. All will be expected to submit to the leadership of the Spirit.
9. The Holy Spirit is a creator and a giver of life. For the Spirit to work will mean change, and parishes will thus have to learn to be nimble with change, to embrace it as a sign of the Spirit’s work rather than to resist it.
10. The parish will be single-minded in adhering to the vision and mission of the parish so as not to allow the parish to spin in all different directions. The Spirit has entrusted a mission field and a collection of gifts, talents and resources to each parish for the purpose of building a bit of the Kingdom in that mission field. The Spirit expects the mission to be undertaken, and when accomplished for the parish leaders to discern the Spirit’s next mission. And the Spirit expects the mission to be carried out using these synodal principles, because how the Church does what she does is as important as what she does. Synodality is the how of the Church in the Third Millennium.

Suggested uses for this document:

1. A parish could use this as an initial assessment and then as a planning guide on its journey to becoming synodal.
2. A parish could use this as an annual reflection tool through which it listens to the Spirit and determines area(s) that need spiritual, intellectual or practical attention next; to set priorities.
3. A parish could use this to help the baptized understand the interplay between how and what the parish is doing.
4. A parish could use this to form its lay and ordained leaders in some practical understanding of synodality.
5. A parish could use this as a prayer guide, listening for where the Spirit is affirming their work and where the Spirit is asking for attention.

For non-parish based readers:

1. Use this document as a thought-starter for your own understandings of synodality.
2. Use this document as a lens through which to view your own need for increased understanding, growth in skills and changes in mindsets.
3. Use this document as a prayer guide, asking the Spirit to direct your gifts, talents and focus according to the needs in your ministerial climate.
4. Use this document as a way to filter other ideas, seeing where other thought partners’ perspectives align, add, or diverge.