



<https://www.synod.va/en.html>

## **What is different about this Synod on Synodality?**

The 2021-2024 Synod has features that are notably different from past meetings of bishops in Rome. These differences include the far-reaching consultations with Church members at all levels and a process basis on these consultations for identifying priorities for change involving key leaders of the Church in each region. Notable also is the absence of any input from the Roman curia in the production of the working documents provided as guides for the meetings.<sup>1</sup>

### **The extensive consultations are different**

The guide for the first assembly of the Synod in Rome, called the *Instrumentum Laboris* or Working Document, is based on the results of an extensive set of prior consultations based on the issues identified at each level in the Church. The extended time taken for the consultation process, the inputs from each organised level in the Church and the discernment of key issues from these sources has produced a very different context for the Synod in Rome.

The results of these exercises have been carefully summarised in the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies conducted in the Middle East, Europe, North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Madagascar, Asia, and Oceania.<sup>2</sup> The inputs for these continental assemblies are themselves the products of the earlier stages of the consultation process at the parish, diocesan and national levels. Each stage of the consultation process has started from the

---

<sup>1</sup> The following summary draws on the information provided by Fr Giacomo Costa SJ in his [article](#) on the preparation for the first assembly in Rome in October 2023. Costa is a consultant to the General Secretariat of the Synod and was a member of the drafting group for the Working Document for the first Assembly in Rome in October.

<sup>2</sup> Information on the final reports of the continental assemblies can be found [here](#).

results of the previous one and has presented them in a way that the next stage can recognize.

The link between steps means that the transition to the universal stage of the Synod in its first Assembly in Rome ‘continues to bear the mark of the contexts in which God’s people live, with their differences’([Costa 2023](#)). The consultations have revealed both a range of common issues of concern across regions as well as issues specific to each region.

### **The format for the meeting has changed from past synods**

The form of the synod has changed from being a meeting of bishops focused on producing a document on the topic under discussion. This Synod is no longer an event based on an assembly of bishops alone. It is now part of the extended listening process which has unfolded in stages involving a whole range of people. The discernment of the bishops is now taking place within a broader ecclesial process based on extensive reflection and dialogue at all levels, from the parish to the continental and universal level.

The form of the first assembly has also changed in terms of [its composition](#). The Pope has chosen the 364 voting delegates from a list submitted to him. He has appointed non-bishops with full voting rights, accounting for one in five of the delegates (78 people). These are lay members, religious, deacons and priests, with over 50 of whom are women. Oceania’s delegation has ten non-bishops, six of whom are women. Details of who these delegates are can be found [here](#). The two bishops going from Australia - Bishop Shane Mackinlay and Archbishop Patrick O’Regan - were chosen by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC). Additionally, Perth’s Archbishop Timothy Costelloe will serve as one of the nine delegated Synod presidents. Sydney’s Archbishop Anthony Fisher will take part in the Synod as a member of the Council of the Synod of Bishops.

### **Priorities for change reflect common issues of concern**

The Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies have identified a range of common issues of concern across regions. These common concerns will be hard for the bishops to ignore or merely provide a weak response. Cardinal Mario Grech, the head of the Vatican’s synod office has [stated](#):

‘The greatest concern of the Synod Secretariat and mine personally has been to always respect what emerged from the stages of the synod process’.

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, who is the President of the European Union’s Bishops Conferences, has been given a key role as Relator to initially set the Synod’s theme and provide a summary at the end of the first assembly. He has [said](#) of the Working Document:

‘What is written here is not what we all first believe must enter this document. This is what was said by people. And we have to be faithful to the mission we have received’

The Synod in Rome has changed from a traditional assembly of bishops to a listening process based on extensive reflection and dialogue that involves other participants. The discernment of the bishops will now take place within this much broader set of expectations and more fluid process. This theme is at the core of the letter sent on [26 January 2023](#) by Cardinal Grech and Hollerich to all Bishops about their role in the Synod process 2021-2024.

## **This preparation of the Working Document has been consistent with the earlier stages**

The Instrumentum Laboris (IL) or Working Document for the First Assembly has not been prepared by the Vatican Curia. It has been prepared through a drafting process that has drawn extensively on the prior consultations. The process has been described as follows:

*Briefly, a group of about 20 people drafted a series of preparatory materials, starting from reading and comparing, in a spirit of discernment, the Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies. These formed the basis for the drafting of a series of drafts, which were gradually submitted to a group of reviewers, whose feedback formed the basis for the preparation of the next version. At each step, the group of reviewers changed partially, with the entry of people not involved in the previous stages. In general, the reviewers are members of the different working groups active at the General Secretariat of the Synod: men and women, from all continents, from all parts of the People of God (lay and consecrated, deacons, priests, and bishops). This methodology, which is not always easy to coordinate, aims to ensure that the text is the fruit of authentically synodal work, capable of including a wide variety of perspectives and faithful to the process from which it arises, preventing anyone from “taking over” (Costa 2023).*

## **How will the synod produce its final conclusions?**

The Working Document or IL is primarily a guide for delegates attending the first Assembly session. It provides an initial understanding of the outcomes of the consultation process and raises questions for further in-depth study in a synodal way.

The outcomes of this initial synodal process will be used to discern the directions for the next assembly in October 2024. This includes commissioning theological and canonical studies in preparation for the second session of the synodal Assembly. Ultimately, the proposals for growing as a synodal Church will be presented to the Pope for his final decision.

## **What can we do while awaiting the Synod outcomes?**

The synod secretariat has made the IL public to encourage further engagement at the local and regional levels. This document provides additional material for local Churches to pray, reflect, act, and contribute through local parish and diocesan actions. It is important to note that not all these priority issues listed in the Working Document require the discernment of the universal church or changes to Canon law. Many of them require local-level changes and do not necessarily require intervention of the Pope or the bishops acting collectively.