

HOW THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY SERVES AS MODEL FOR MINISTRY FORMATION

This past October, more than 350 delegates from the Catholic faithful worldwide gathered in the Paul VI audience hall at the Vatican over the course of three weeks. The diversity of individuals included bishops, lay faithful, and women and men from all walks of life and every region across the globe. Together, they listened. They told and received stories from around the world, and each carried the joys and hopes and the griefs and anguish of the people of God. This Synod on Synodality reflected Pope Francis' vision for being Church.



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The word synod comes from the Greek word *syn*, meaning “with,” and *hodos*, meaning “way” or “journey.” Combined, the words mean “walking together.” It evokes the Road to Emmaus story, where Jesus approaches and accompanies two bereft disciples departing Jerusalem following Jesus’ crucifixion, death and the discovery of his unexplained empty tomb. (Luke 24:13-35) As their journey to Emmaus unfolds, luminosity and vibrancy emerge in their understanding of self and recent events. The disciples recognize the one in their midst as the risen Lord. They then change course with that notable line, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] ... ?” (Luke 24:32) CHA chose this very image of Jesus walking with the two disciples as the visual representation for its framework for ministry formation.¹

Beyond this shared symbolism, as the synod’s month-long process transpired, the similarities to ministry formation programs increased. I followed several Catholic media outlets and journalists reporting from Rome throughout the event. Although specifics of the synod’s discussions remained private, the methods used to facilitate the experience reflected leading practices employed in formation program pedagogy. I observed various familiar spiritual practices and liturgical rituals before, during and after the synod’s working days. Together, these portrayed

a model for ministry formation.

GATHERING AND BUILDING CONNECTION

When the Synod’s General Assembly convened in person this past fall, participants sat at 35 round tables. Their seating changed several times throughout the 26 days to enhance the listening of differing international perspectives and to give voice to varied experiences of being in the Church. Participants of ministry formation can unmistakably spot the importance of this simple, yet significant, design. Listening to others across a health system from different disciplines, regions and structural levels enriches our understanding and integration of mission across the organization.

The synod’s first stage, which began in local churches and dioceses, transpired with in-person and virtual gatherings from October 2021 to April 2022. This was followed by a continental phase from September 2022 to March 2023, when continental bishops’ conferences coordinated and evaluated the results of the diocesan consultations. The third, and culminating, two-part synod gathering in October unfolded in face-to-face gatherings, dialogues and rituals on Vatican grounds.

Because ministry formation goes beyond intellectual learning, in-person gatherings are indispensable and nonnegotiable. Just as formation serves to integrate a young woman or man into a religious community, it also serves to create a community of leaders in Catholic health



ministries. As Sr. Patricia Talone, RSM, a previous CHA vice president of mission services, frequently reminded, “ERD #1 states ‘Catholic health care is a community!’”

In-person gatherings become even more critical with enlarging health systems. Being in the same room allows leaders of local ministries and regional divisions to interact with system leaders. Finance, HR and IT hear firsthand from clinical leaders. Strategy and operations leaders connect with home and community health leaders. Beyond the utilitarian virtual meetings, where cameras and sound cut out with a click, the in-person gatherings linger and participants learn about strategy successes and operational obstacles not included on agendas, in addition to countless personal details about family, individual interests and more.

This discovery paints a truer and more holistic picture of people committed to our healing ministries. People who meet via virtual interest groups and sprout bonds of connection often discover a mutual desire to meet in person. The virtual does not satiate the human longing to be with one another. How can we empower the bold change needed to recreate health care systems for whole persons if ministry formation falls short of whole-person encounters among the leaders charged with implementing the strategies needed?

SPANNING SPACE AND TIME

The gathering in October initiated the first of two concluding components to the years-long synodal experience, with the final session to come in October 2024.

The three-stage synodal process shows that being a community, the Church — the living presence of Christ Jesus in the world today — requires space and time. Authentic communities defy postmodern obsessions with immediacy. Truly discovering more authentically who we are as a community of Church and what we might be called to become requires a spaciousness that technology doesn’t adequately provide.

The parallel takeaway for formation is that formation programs — especially executive and sponsor formation — require gatherings over time. Across the ministry, we frequently experience isolated formative moments, such as a reflection, an orientation to mission, a heritage day celebration, a blessing of the hands ritual or a new construction project. These are formation touch points. They serve to integrate and apply mission and values into daily work. They do not, however,

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replace the need for formation programs. Just like authentic development in the Church requires many systematic experiences of gathering over time — such as a synod — so, too, do formation programs. Authentic development of the healing ministry responsive to the complexities of the day requires leaders committed to a formation program that includes sequential and expansive experiences over time with a stable group of leaders.

LISTENING TO THE SPIRIT

Pope Francis insisted that the synod exemplify a climate of prayer. The prayerful environment marked this synodal experience as unique from all others since their start in 1965.²

Its prayerful environment enabled listening to

a broad range of people and issues with attentiveness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, which Francis identified as the synod's protagonist.³ Attuning to the Holy Spirit in the swirl of life and world events requires intimacy with scripture and prayer, and the synodal experience did not disappoint.

When framing the synodal process, Francis used the Greek word *parrhesia*, a word taken from the New Testament that can evoke boldness.⁴ He indicated that boldness authentically emerges from a climate of prayer. Thus, while media outlets waited with much anticipation for statements and official synodal documents, participants engaged in a range of prayer types: preparatory retreat; an opening mass and other daily liturgies; intentional sacred times and experiences, including pilgrimages to sacred sites in Rome; and a closing rosary in St. Peter's Basilica, just to name a few.

All of this is to say that boldness, within a Catholic theological and spiritual context, does not arise from one's own desires, individual or intellectual ideas, or egoic grasps. Boldness beyond our imagination is the fruit or virtue of uniting oneself with the source of divine love and goodness (however imperfect it may be in our human nature). The liturgical and spiritual tradition teaches that the *telos* — an ultimate end to rituals and sacred practices — is union with the Divine. It opens and connects the earthly with the eternal, and the former courageously reaches toward a more perfect union with its Creator.

Ministry formation commonly introduces participants to similar prayer experiences. It may explore meditative *lectio* or *visio divina*; a labyrinth meditation; visit a holy site of the founding congregation; or practice with contemplation or silence.⁵ And, more can be done. Part of being bold in our tradition must include prayer and an ongoing commitment to the inner or spiritual life.⁶

By evoking *parrhesia*, Francis also sought to communicate a boldness or courage to listen humbly with openness to others. No topic was off-limits. Disagreements were welcome, if not expected, and yet there would not be "winners" and "losers."⁷

Ministry formation programs bear similar characteristics. When the religious founders and foundresses of Catholic health ministry began formalizing ministry formation, they did so with

great boldness. Without it, the evolution of these ministries from religious congregations to lay leadership would have been impossible.

Ministry formation today must be marked with similar boldness. Formation leaders must exhibit the courage to meet the participants however they present. In ministry formation programs, this often means loosening a rigid adherence to finely timed agendas. Additionally, creating a sacred environment enables participants to holistically connect head, heart, and, ultimately, leadership. A facilitator's welcoming posture in a sacred space — and with a loosely held agenda — communicates that a range of topics can be broached, even challenging ones. Such a commitment to listening and receiving one another can boldly reflect steps toward healing misunderstandings or divisions, sometimes caused by communication methods that don't allow for listening and the exchange of ideas.

DISCERNMENT, ULTIMATELY

Pope Francis made one thing clear regarding the synod: that it would employ a consultative and listening process in service to discernment. Councils make decisions, and a synod is not a council.⁸ The discerning nature of the synod makes complete sense because of its charge. Discernment itself is a spiritual practice, and hence, gathering people and stories held in prayer creates the conditions for its practice.

The discerning quality of the synod gives context for why Francis dedicated no fewer than 14 teachings at his weekly Wednesday audiences from August 2022 to January 2023 to thoroughly reflect on discernment.⁹

A distinguishing characteristic of discernment is a united search for "a consensus that springs not from worldly logic, but from common obedience to [or listening to] the Spirit of Christ."¹⁰ It is the working of the Spirit and surpasses consultative votes.

I have long said and observed how ministry formation strengthens leaders to engage in discernment processes, whether formalized or integrated into strategies and decision-making. When I have led discernments in Catholic health care ministries, I noticed how leaders who had experienced an initial formation program entered the process with greater ease. They brought a fluency in the ethos of Catholic identity. With greater

facility they engaged and drew from principles and priorities of the Catholic social tradition, integrating and applying them to the range of possible scenarios under discernment. When it is richly experienced and individual leaders consciously open themselves to the Spirit, they may ponder a range of possibilities, even ones previously unconsidered or strategies heretofore dismissed. Leaders may find greater freedom and flexibility, or even the possibility of changing their minds.

At least one journalist noted that a litmus test of the success of this synod would be whether the participants could overcome the polarization plaguing the Church and society and accept discussion of topics, held in the Spirit, as sisters and brothers in faith.¹¹ Another suggested success would be measured by change in the delegates themselves.¹²

Similar words and descriptors could be said of ministry formation programs. Inevitably, participants in ministry formation attest that “they’re changed.” They enter with one mindset and leave with another. Their journey leads them to see it as far more than leadership development. Because of ministry formation, they discover greater meaning in their work and strength for their leadership in ways that evoke the founding congregations. And, ultimately, they experience empowerment as bold lay leaders of a ministry that enlivens the healing ministry of Jesus across our communities and country.

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NOTES

1. “The Road to Emmaus — A Formative Journey,” YouTube, March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ar1g-YsqNNs>.

2. Gerard O’Connell, “Synod Diary: What Sets This Synod Apart? Prayer,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/10/06/synod-diary-prayer-246220>.

3. Francesca Merlo, “Pope’s October Prayer Intention: A Church That Walks Together,” *Vatican News*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/>

[news/2022-10/pope-francis-prayer-intention-october-church-open-to-everyone.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/2022-10/pope-francis-prayer-intention-october-church-open-to-everyone.html).

4. The International Theological Commission notes *parrhesia* as the courage to enter the horizon of God. See: “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” International Theological Commission, March 2, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html. Pope Francis has referenced the term throughout his papal ministry and at previous synods, such as the one in 2014. See: Joshua J. McElwee, “Pope Calls Synod to Speak ‘Boldly’; Cardinal Defends Current Teachings,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 6, 2014, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-calls-synod-speak-boldly-cardinal-defends-current-teachings>.

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6. Diarmuid Rooney, “Cultivating Our Inner Environment: Three-Centered Knowing,” *Health Progress* 102, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 60-62.

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9. “Audiences 2022,” The Holy See, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022.index.2.html>.

10. Gerard O’Connell, “Synod Diary: A Synod Doesn’t Decide — It Discerns,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/10/10/synod-diary-discernment-246241>; Pope Francis, *Episcopalis Communio*, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html.

11. O’Connell, “Synod Diary.”

12. Sebastian Gomes, “Synod Diary: The Synod Will Be Successful If the Delegates Change,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/10/09/synod-diary-conversion-246234>.

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