

The Synod on Synodality & the Dallas Diocesan Synod: What's the Difference?

By Gregory Caridi
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Bishop Edward J. Burns has recently embarked on a multiyear diocesan synod process for the Diocese of Dallas. At the same time, Pope Francis has announced a universal synod for the whole Church, which will draw on input from dioceses around the world. An important question to answer then is: what's the difference between these two synods?

First, it is best to begin with a definition of a synod in general. A synod is fundamentally just a meeting. More formally, it is a very large gathering of selected individuals in order to discuss and address issues, concepts or goals. These meetings are only advisory. That is, they serve to help the individual who called the synod (either the Pope or a diocesan bishop) make important decisions. Put another way, a synod is not a legislative body or a parliament, and while it does vote, its votes are not binding on the individual who called the synod. Following a synod, there is a document which articulates and analyzes the actions of the synod body.

Both that which was called by Pope Francis in 2020 and that which was called by Bishop Burns in 2021 are synods in this same general sense. They simply have different members, a different scope and address different topics. Namely, the synod called by Pope Francis will touch on issues that affect the universal Church around the whole world, while the synod called by Bishop Burns is focused on the local Church here in the Dallas area and will address issues that affect the Diocese of Dallas specifically.

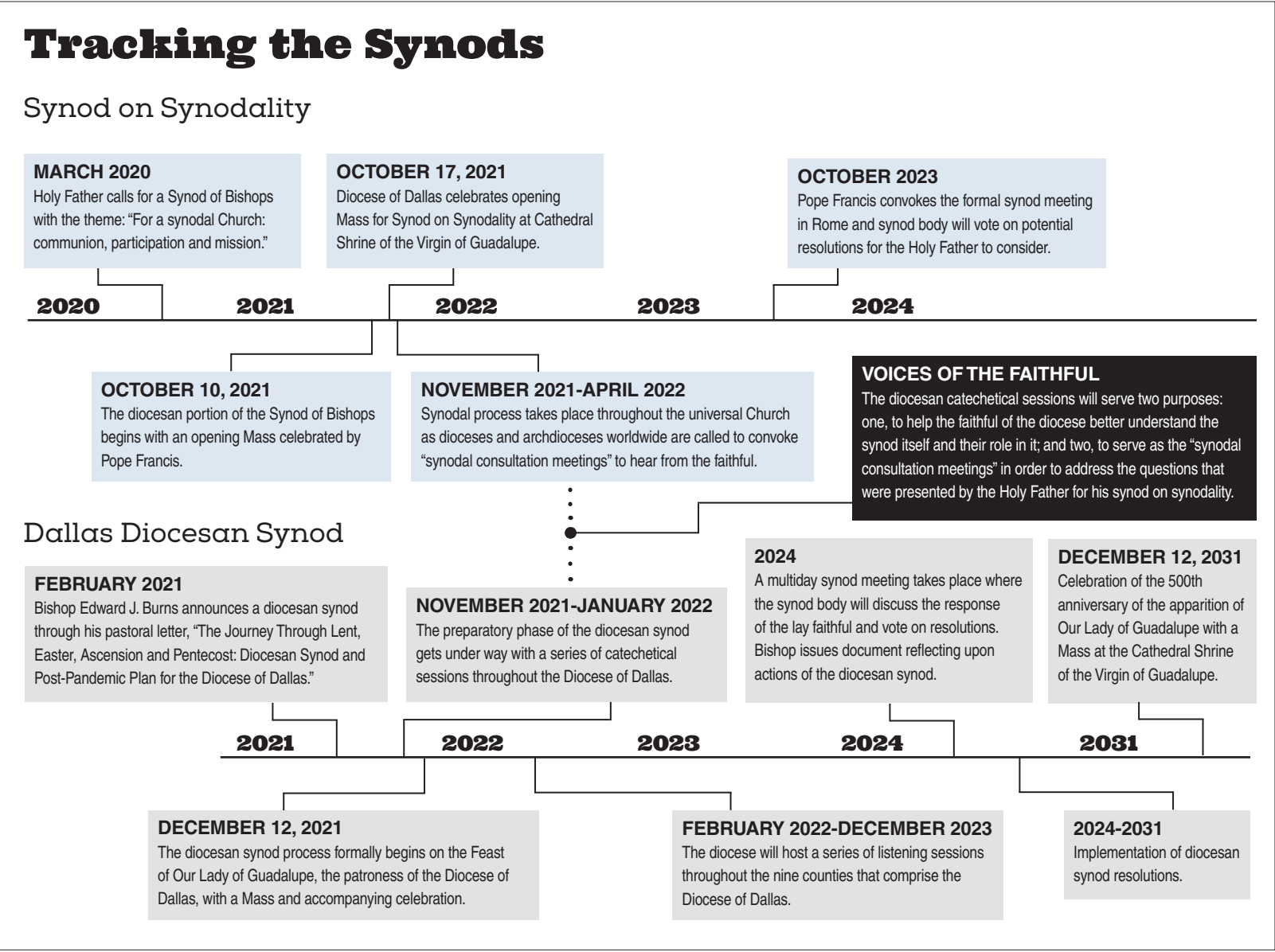
Synod on Synodality

In March of 2020, the Holy Father called a Synod of Bishops with the theme "For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission." Popes have regularly called synods, especially since Vatican Council II.

This new synod hopes to address the fundamentals of synodality itself. Synodality is a term that has taken on many meanings but it primarily refers to the overarching consultative process by which the faithful work alongside the bishops and the Pope, who lead the Church. A synod meeting is an expression of synodality in that it is a process wherein the head of a church gathers together the faithful, listens, considers and then leads from what he has learned.

For this process, the Holy Father has called on dioceses around the world to address certain questions. The "fundamental question" of this universal synod is expressed in the following way: "A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, 'journeys together.' How is this 'journeying together' happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our 'journeying together?'"

In order to answer this fundamental question, among others, dioceses around the world, including the Diocese of Dallas, will convoke



"synodal consultation meetings" to hear from members of the Diocese. This diocesan portion of the synod began with an opening Mass on Oct. 10, 2021 celebrated by Pope Francis and then with Masses around the world, which will take place on Oct. 17, 2021. The responses to these questions presented to dioceses will be due back to the Vatican in April of 2022.

Following the collection of these many responses, the Pope will convoke the formal synod meeting in October of 2023 in Rome, where these answers, along with other issues, will be discussed. The synod body will also vote on potential resolutions for the Holy Father to consider. From this meeting, the Pope will likely write an apostolic exhortation integrating all he has learned over this process.

While this synod process is entirely distinct from the diocesan synod called by Bishop Burns, since the timelines overlap between the two synods, Bishop Burns has decided to integrate the aforementioned "synodal consultation meetings" into the diocesan synod process. It is to that which we now turn.

Diocesan Synod

Bishop Burns announced a diocesan synod in February of 2021 through a pastoral letter entitled "The Journey Through Lent, Easter, Ascension and Pentecost: Diocesan Synod and Post-Pandemic Pastoral Plan for the Diocese of Dallas." You can find this letter at <https://www.cathdal.org/synod>.

In that document, Bishop Burns gave a summary of the state of the Diocese of Dallas and expressed his vision for the future of the Diocese, with a particular emphasis on the apostolic mission of the Church. He described this time as one of "tremendous opportunity" and "not a time for going back to business as usual, but rather forward with fresh initiatives and bold witness to the enduring love of Jesus."

In particular, he compares the Diocese to the early Church, where the faithful were left in the pagan culture of that day to "carry out the mission of Jesus after his Resurrection and Ascension." He went on to add that "It is time to recover the faith and trust of that original apostolic community: to implore the risen Lord as they did, to beg him to set our hearts on fire again with the zeal of the Holy Spirit which came upon them in the Upper Room at Pentecost, to ask for the strength to set out to the ends of the Earth, with a willingness to do and to suffer anything if only to preach Christ crucified and risen as the only hope for the world."

This synod was called specifically to discuss many concerns of the faithful in order to accomplish this renewal of the apostolic mission. The Bishop has appointed Lacy de la Garza as chairperson to run the synod preparatory process, the multiyear phase which precedes the actual synod meeting itself. He has also appointed a preparatory commission that will help manage this preparatory phase. This phase will formally begin on

Dec. 12, 2021, the Feast of the Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of the Diocese of Dallas, with a Mass and accompanying celebration. Following this, over many months, the preparatory commission will hold "catechetical sessions" which will serve two purposes: one, to help the faithful of the Diocese better understand the synod itself and their role in it; and two, to serve as the "synodal consultation meetings" in order to address the questions that were presented by the Holy Father for his synod on synodality. These catechetical sessions are likely to conclude by February of 2022.

After the conclusion of the catechetical sessions, the Diocese will hold listening sessions all throughout the Diocese at parishes, schools and other locations. These listening sessions will not address issues of doctrine or Church teaching. Instead they will be focused on how to properly live and grow the life of the Church in the Diocese of Dallas. From these listening sessions, the preparatory commission will consolidate the feedback into formal resolutions that will be voted upon at the synod meeting itself. These listening sessions will take place over many months, and it is anticipated that ten to fifteen sessions will take place in total. These sessions are likely to conclude by December of 2023.

Following these listening sessions, the multiday synod meeting itself will take place some time in 2024. At the synod meeting, the synod body, which includes clerics,

lay people and guests selected according to canon law and by the Bishop personally, will discuss the responses of the lay faithful and vote on the resolutions that were compiled by the synod preparatory commission.

The Bishop will hold a large Mass and celebration at the conclusion of the synod meeting. This is properly speaking when the synod has formally concluded. He will then review all of the discussions of the synod body. As noted, a synod is purely advisory. The Bishop is not bound to implement any suggestion voted on by the synod body. Instead, he will prayerfully consider the conclusions and requests in making decisions about the future of the Diocese. The Bishop will also issue a document reflecting upon the actions of the diocesan synod.

Implementation of synod resolutions is likely to take place over many years in the Diocese, but it is hoped that all proposals are completed by December 12, 2031, with the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Both Pope Francis and Bishop Burns' goals are ambitious, but they are distinct, important projects aimed forward at the renewal and expansion of the Church in the world. The Diocese is calling on all the faithful for their active participation in both of these processes.

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