

# st. Ignatius Parish

## **Introduction: The Synod on Synodality** *Responding to the Call of Francis for the Future of the Church*

**by Fr. John Whitney, S.J.**

*Baptism, the source of our life, gives rise to the equal dignity of the children of God, albeit in the diversity of ministries and charisms. Consequently, all the baptized are called to take part in the Church's life and mission. Without real participation by the People of God, talk about communion risks remaining a devout wish. . . .Enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty!*

**-Pope Francis-**

On October 10, 2021, Pope Francis opened the 16th Ordinary Synod of the modern Catholic era. Designated by the title *"For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,"* this Synod will conclude in 2023 with an international meeting of bishops, cardinals, patriarchs, and leaders of various religious communities. Yet, it begins not with the hierarchy, but with an extended period of listening to the whole People of God. Seeking to ground the Synod in the lives of those who are the Church, Francis has directed ecclesial leadership, at every level, to create opportunities by which the experience, reflection, and spirit of all the baptized might more effectively enter into the work of the Synod—shaping its discernment and inspiring its direction. Though *"the Synod is not a parliament or an opinion poll"* but an attempt to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, it can be fruitful only if those who are temples of that Spirit are able to be heard through real participation and concrete opportunities for inclusion.

In response to the call of the Pope, dioceses and other ecclesial communities around the world have sought to create opportunities for participation, according to their abilities and understanding. In the Archdiocese of San Francisco, for example, the primary response has been to engage the Catholic Leadership Institute, whose survey—the [Disciple Maker Index](#)—has been used to analyze the vigor of parishes and diocese throughout the US and Canada. At the same time, some communities have sought to move beyond statistical reactions, and to provide more experiential encounters for the baptized to hear one another and to be heard by the larger Church.

At St. Ignatius Parish, San Francisco, there is both the opportunity to take the Disciple Maker Index, and to engage in a more active and personal encounter with other people of faith through a three-step process of discernment, as suggested in the [Synod's Preparatory Document](#) (see especially paragraph 26). This process will involve three sessions, which all people—parishioners, former parishioners, on-line parishioners, and interested friends—may attend either on Sunday afternoons (1:30-3:00 pm) or Thursday evenings (6:30-8:00 pm).

- **Session One: *Experiences of Church***

**Sunday, 6 February, 1:30-3:00 pm or Thursday, 10 February, 6:30-8:00 pm**

Because the Spirit is revealed through our life more than our ideas, we begin our discernment with hearing and telling our stories of encountering the Church. What has been your personal experience of communion, participation, or mission? What experience has drawn you closer or pushed you from the Church?

While listening to others, you may want to note what you are feeling (sorrow, joy, compassion, resistance, etc.) and ask yourself the source of those feelings.

*NB: In all the sessions, participants will be asked to share in a small group—either organized at random or, for those who wish it and would find sharing easier, by affinity groups.*

- **Session Two: *Reflections on Our Experience***

**Thursday, 24 February, 6:30-8:00 pm or Sunday, 27 February, 1:30-3:00 pm**

Between sessions, the notes of the listeners will be redacted and distributed, maintaining anonymity, but providing a summary of stories for the large group.

Listening and reflecting on these stories, what joys do they provoke? What wounds and sorrows do they bring forth? Are there themes that emerge of ways in which grace is fostered or diminished? Specific actions or ideas, lights or darkness that we can name and recognize?

Once again, each person will be asked to share, but in this session, there will be more encouragement for interaction—though all will be given opportunities to speak. This is a part of our communal discernment: to hear one another's story with love and to try to find what those stories may reveal.

- **Session Three: *Actions Called Forth by the Spirit***

**Sunday, 13 March, 1:30-3:00 pm or Thursday, 17 March, 6:30-8:00 pm**

Once again, between sessions, the notes of the listeners will be synthesized and shared, with an opportunity to correct anything omitted.

As we listen together to the stories and to our reflections, what specific actions would ask of the Synod either to enhance graces or corrected faults in the Church? As a large group, we will try to come to a consensus (i.e., a significant plurality) on some key recommendations to be sent forward. Given the number of diocese, parishes, communities, etc. submitting data, we will seek to be succinct and find what—in the Spirit—the community believes should be sent.

### **The Synod: Dangers and Opportunities**

In calling this Synod, Francis makes note of three principal dangers and identifies three commensurate opportunities facing the Church. The first of these dangers is *formalism*, by which he means creating a nice facade, but failing to open our hearts to true conversion. To have just a nice process is to fail in the work of discernment: *“we need content, means and structures that can facilitate dialogue and interaction within the People of God.”* The second risk is *intellectualism*, in which we *“turn the Synod into a type of study group, offering learned by abstract approaches to the problems of the Church and the evils of the world.”* And the third danger is *complacency*, in which we are tempted to dismiss all talk of change or development by the idea that we have always done things this way. Such complacency, notes Francis, *“is poison for the life of the Church,”* since it denies that the Spirit still lives and acts among us. The synodal model, on the contrary, is a process of becoming which *“can forge a style of communion and participation directed to mission.”*

Contrasted to these dangers and temptations, Francis also notes three opportunities available when we take the work of the Synod seriously. First is the possibility of making not simply occasional or haphazard but structural changes to the Church, where others might feel the welcome and call of Christ. Further, the Synod offers us the opportunity *“to become a listening Church, to break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen.”* By listening to one another, we can more effectively hear the Spirit whose words become flesh our adoration and prayer, through the lives of every woman and man, and through the struggles and pain of our suffering world. Finally, the Synod offers us the opportunity to become a *Church of closeness*, a Church engaged in the life of the world, as Jesus was during his life on earth. The Synod is an opportunity for us to hear and hold one another, as God holds us. As Francis notes in his address opening the Synod, *“Let us not forget God’s style, which must help us: closeness, compassion, and tender love.”*