

Father James Martin: The hopes and stories I'm bringing to the Synod on Synodality



Jesuit Father James Martin, author and editor at large at America Media, chats with a woman after celebrating a Mass at St. Paul the Apostle Church in New York City June 25, 2022, for participants of the Outreach LGBTQ Catholic Ministry Conference. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Over the past few weeks, I have fielded the same two questions, more or less, from journalists from around the world about the upcoming Synod on Synodality: “What are your hopes?” and “What do you see as your role?” My hopes are simple: I hope that the synod will be guided by the Holy Spirit and the participants will be able to listen to the voices of Catholics from around the world.

Synods, as most Catholics know by now, are ancient forms of gathering that reach as far back as the Council of Jerusalem, in which the church asked itself whether Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians were obliged to keep Jewish dietary laws, among other questions raised. (The answer, they decided, was no.) It took place around 48 to 50 A.D. and is recorded in the 15th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles.

And even though the word “*council*” is used for the early church gatherings that focused primarily on theological issues - the Council of Nicaea, from 325 A.D. (whence the Nicene Creed, which we say every Sunday Mass) and the Council of Chalcedon (which was largely concerned with Jesus’s two “natures,” human and divine), which was convened in 451 A.D. - these were also synods.

“Synod,” by the way, comes from the Greek words for “together,” *syn* (as in the *Synoptic Gospels*: seen with one eye) and the word for “road” or “way,” *hodos* (as in *exodus*: a way or road out.) So, a synod means to walk along a road together, or the road that we walk along.

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Thus, what will be happening in Rome for the next few weeks, and which I'm honoured to participate in, has deep roots in our church. (You can't get much deeper than something that happened in the Acts of the Apostles!) Synods were revived by St. Pope Paul VI in 1965 and used often by St. Pope John Paul II. Pope Francis's innovation in this latest synod is to include non-bishops (including lay men and lay women) as voting members.

Obviously, this synod will not be discussing issues like Jesus' two natures or whether the Holy Spirit "proceeds" from the Father and Son! These matters have already been settled. But there are other less weighty but still important issues that were raised during the consultations among Catholics from around the world, which are contained in the working document (or *Instrumentum Laboris*). The overall topic is how the church can be more "synodal," more consultative and reflective of the experiences of the people of God.

As far as I know, the working document will be a starting point, or background, for our discussions. Also, as far as I know, most of the conversation will be in "small circles" (*circoli minori*) of ten or people in various language groups around roughly 35 tables, rather than a large conference with people making speeches (though I think there may be a few of those).

So, my main hope is that all of us can "*walk together*" with open minds and hearts. This will take a great deal of prayer and trust, since so many of us will come from different cultures and viewpoints. Yet we will all be on the same page, since we will all be guided not only by the Holy Spirit, but also by the traditions that we all share - for example, the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, not to mention the Second Vatican Council and, most importantly, the Gospels. Jesuits often say that when you meet another Jesuit from any country, even if you don't speak the same language, there is an instant bond. because you know the other person has done the Spiritual Exercises. At the synod, we know, more basically, that everyone is a follower of Jesus and trusts in the Holy Spirit.

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So, my hope? That we all listen to the Spirit, even when it challenges or disturbs us. My role? Again, an easy question: To listen to the Holy Spirit as it is active and alive in the other person, and active and alive in the discernment that has been going on for the last few years and gathered in the working document. I also hope to share some stories from the communities I know and minister with. Of course, that includes the L.G.B.T.Q. community, but also, more broadly, various communities in the U.S. church. In the last few weeks, I've met with several groups and heard from many individuals who have shared their "*joys and hopes and griefs and anxieties*" to quote Vatican II. But of course, having been a Catholic for 62 years, a Jesuit for 35 and a priest for 24, I've been listening to all sorts of people express their dreams for the church for many years. I hope to take all these dreams with me.

But I'll need your prayers, as will we all. May I ask for them, especially for what you might call the "*non-synodal*" logistics: health, travel, safety, etc.? And I ask for your prayers for the synod overall. One of my favourite prayers was used at every editorial meeting by our former editor in chief at **America**, the late Drew Christiansen, S.J.

Drew used it so often that I'm embarrassed to say that I thought he had made it up! But it's a traditional invocation of the Holy Spirit. Let's pray it together over the next few weeks:

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created. And You shall renew the face of the earth.
O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations, Through Christ Our Lord.
Amen.*