

Gerard O'Connell - Synod Diary: What sets this synod apart? Prayer.

What strikes me most about the synod, now in its third day, is the climate of prayer that envelops it. I observed this as I watched the opening prayer at this morning's session in the Vatican's Paul VI audience hall, where the synod's 365 members (including Pope Francis) and the facilitators, seated at 35 round tables, joined in praying, singing and listening to the Gospel reading. The climate of prayer around this synod has marked it out as different to all previous ones; it is more intense and pervasive than at any of the 29 synods that have been held since Paul VI established the synod as a permanent institution in the church on Sept. 15, 1965. (I've reported on each one since 1985.)

The climate of prayer was developing even before Pope Francis presided at the opening Mass in St. Peter's Square on Oct. 4. He had helped to create it by insisting in his prayer intention for October 2022 that "without prayer there is no synod." Cardinal Mario Grech, the secretary general of the synod, has sought to promote a climate of prayer by asking monastic communities to pray for the synod, and in mid-September, he sent a letter to all the Catholic bishops and eparchs asking them to invite their faithful to pray for the synod.

At the pope's request an international ecumenical prayer vigil was held in St. Peter's Square on Sept. 30, organized by the Taizé Community and attended by leaders or representatives of 12 other Christian churches, including the ecumenical patriarch of the Orthodox churches, Bartholomew I; and the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.

Later that evening, the synod's members were taken 18 miles outside of Rome, to the Sacrofano religious centre, for a three-day retreat. One synod participant sent me a note at the end of the first day on the retreat that said: "*The Holy Spirit has already landed on our retreat. There is a joyful spirit.*" Several others have since confirmed that the retreat has helped enormously to create a climate of prayer and an openness to the Holy Spirit, who as Pope Francis has repeatedly said, "*is the protagonist of this synod.*"

This climate of prayer has been enhanced by moments of silence during the working sessions. They engage in "*conversations in the Spirit,*" where they pray, speak from their heart, then listen with respect to other persons at the same table and respond from their heart to what they have heard. Listening is a key element in the process, as they discuss specific questions from the working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*).

To ensure that the spiritual climate of the synod is maintained and respected as requested by Pope Francis, the regulations governing the synod ask its members to maintain "reserve and confidentiality" regarding what is said and not to reveal to the media either what they have said or what others in their group have said during these sessions. The importance of this climate of prayer was underlined by Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, S.J., who has the key role of general relator (chief rapporteur) of the synod, in his address to the synod's first plenary assembly on Oct. 4. He reminded them that the synod is not a parliament and that the task of its members is different; they are to engage in "a common task of discernment." But, he emphasized, "We cannot discern together without praying together."

Furthermore, he told them: "Round tables remind us that none of us is a star in this synod. The protagonist is the Holy Spirit, and only with a heart open to the Spirit's guidance will we be able to respond to the call we have received as synod members."

As Pope Francis has explained on several occasions, the whole aim of this discernment is to discover "*what the Spirit is saying to the church*" at this moment in history.

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