

THE SECOND PHASE OF THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY BEGAN IN ROME THIS WEEK

In the article below, Gerard O'Connell describes its main focus

The Synod's Call To Conversion

The final session of the Synod on Synodality is underway at the Vatican and will conclude with a vote on the final document on Oct. 26, and Mass the following day. It started on Monday with a two-day retreat that culminated in [a powerful penitential service](#) in St. Peter's Basilica presided over by Pope Francis. The service included personal testimonies relating to war, the migration crisis and the sexual abuse of minors by clergy, followed by requests for forgiveness made by seven cardinals.

Laurence Gien, a South African survivor, shared his terrible experience of being sexually abused by a priest as an 11-year-old, the first time such testimony has been given in this basilica. It was a stark reminder of "*the long dark night*" of the church and, together with the other testimonies, constituted a powerful "*call to conversion*" to all members of the Catholic Church, starting with its leadership.

Pope Francis emphasized the need for conversion in his homilies at the penitential service and at the synod's opening Mass. Indeed, the call for conversion is central to the whole synodal process. It involves a change of heart, a change of mentality, a change in the way we live and act as followers of Jesus Christ in the church and in the world. Conversion is a fundamental part of the listening process and "[the conversations in the spirit](#)" that are the synod's core methodology. A change of structure without conversion, without a change of heart and mentality, will not produce the desired fruit.

[Timothy Radcliffe, O.P.](#), the former master of the Dominicans, also underlined the need for conversion in his second talk to the 368 synod participants at the retreat.

He reminded them that "*our fierce love of the church can also, paradoxically, make us narrow-minded: the fear that it will be harmed by destructive reforms which undermine the traditions that we love. Or the fear that the church will not become the wide-open home for which we long.*" He remarked, "*It is deeply sad that often the church is wounded by those who love the church, but differently!*"

"This synod is not a place for negotiations about structural change," he said, "but for choosing life, for conversion and forgiveness."

Conversion is never easy, but participants from all continents must undergo conversion if the synod is to successfully carry out its task: discerning what is concretely required to be a synodal church in mission at the local, national and international levels. In this context, I was struck by what Father Radcliffe said in his third talk during the retreat:

When I came to the synod last year, I thought the great challenge was to overcome the poisonous opposition between traditionalists and progressives.

How can we heal that polarization that is so alien to Catholicism? But as I listened, there seemed to be an even more fundamental challenge: How can the church embrace all of the diverse cultures of our world? How can we haul in the net with its fish from every culture of the world? How can the net not be broken?

This appears to be an issue of much greater significance than providing immediate answers to the hot-button issues—like ordaining women to the diaconate and responding to L.G.B.T. issues—that surfaced at the first session. Pope Francis recognizes the importance of those issues, but he has also, wisely I believe, [assigned them to 10 study groups](#), which are asked to complete their work by June 2025.

As Father Radcliffe said: *“Profound questions do not seek information. They invite us to be alive in a new way, and to speak in a new language.”* In other words, they call for conversion. He invited synod participants to *“recognize that we need each other if we are to be Catholic. The diverse cultures gathered in this assembly offer healing to each other, challenge each other’s prejudices and summon each other to a deeper understanding of love.”*

Here’s the latest news from in and around the synod hall:

During his homily at the synod’s opening Mass, Pope Francis [called](#) on all people to observe a day of prayer and fasting for peace on Oct. 7—the one-year anniversary of Hamas’ brutal attack on Israel that sparked the ongoing regional conflict.

In his opening address to the synod, Pope Francis [defended](#) his decision to give lay women and men the right to vote at the synod. *“It is certainly not a matter of replacing one with the other, rallying to the cry: ‘Now it is our turn!’”* the pope said.

The synod’s 10 study groups, created by Pope Francis in February 2024 to dig deeper into some of the more complex and controversial issues raised in the first session of the synod, presented their preliminary reports on Day 1 of the assembly, Oct. 2.

Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, the Vatican’s doctrine chief who heads up the study group looking into *“theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms,”* said that based on the group’s work so far, *“there is still no room for a positive decision”* on ordaining women deacons. Read Colleen Dulle’s report on his comments [here](#).

At the synod’s first press conference on Oct. 3, Bishop Daniel E. Flores of Brownsville, Tex., said that in order to tackle the biggest challenges facing the church, Catholics must listen to those from different countries and cultures and with different life experiences. *“Perspective is not the enemy of the truth. It’s the normal way of the church. That’s why we have four Gospels,”* Bishop Flores said.