

# What is Synodality?

A Brief Look at the New Way for the  
Church in the Third Millennium



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# Synod Journey



## Introduction

Welcome to "What is Synodality?" ...a beginning look at what Pope Francis has said IS the way of the Roman Catholic Church in the third millennium. It's a culture change. It's an ancient but new style of governance. It's a spiritual process led by the Holy Spirit. It's...well, it has a lot of elements and this short book, based on a blog series, hopes to help those of you just starting to think about this.

What this is NOT is an exhaustive treatment of this dynamic, historic and as yet underdeveloped way of thinking and acting. But all along the way, you'll find resources to enhance our shared learning as together we take the synod journey!

And so we begin...

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## Chapter 1

### It's NOT a New "Pope Francis Thing!"

I have to admit that when I heard the Pope was going to convoke (that's a really weird word!) a synod on synodality, my first thought was, "That phrase doesn't communicate anything to me. I don't know what that means!" Turns out, I was not and am not alone. I didn't know what he meant. And I also fell prey to the notion that it is something he's creating, a Pope Francis invention. Turns out, I was wrong again...and I am not alone, again. So read on to get a sense of where this all came from...let's journey together into greater understanding.

Go back with me to about 50 years after Jesus is risen and ascended, to Antioch, the place where followers of Jesus were first called Christians.

**What was their problem?** Controversy. Get a group of people together and it won't take long until different points of view emerge. It's to be expected and it can threaten any group's existence. Such was the case with some of the Christians in Antioch where more and more Gentiles were following Jesus. Jesus' early Jewish followers assumed that meant the Gentiles had to become Jews: circumcision for the men, rituals and practices for everyone, and an embrace of the extensive system of law. But did it? Was it necessary for these Gentile believers to observe the Mosaic precepts? What would happen if they refused? Were they not Jesus' followers until all this was also in place? And so the controversy unfolded.

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## **Problem 2: Who's deciding?**

The Scriptures don't give a lot of details about the controversy other than one set of believers was teaching the necessity for obedience to the Mosaic Law and Paul and Barnabas were in sharp dispute and debate with them [1].

Finally, the local church appointed Paul and Barnabas, along with some other unnamed believers, to go to Jerusalem to solicit the wisdom of the apostles and elders. One thing it seems safe to infer is that no single person in Antioch felt empowered to make this important decision. So off the entourage went, landing in the company of some Pharisees who chose the side of obedience to the Mosaic law. Clearly, both sides had compelling arguments. How to proceed? Read Acts 15:1-30 to encounter the rest of the story.

## **What Can We Learn from Antioch about the Synodal Process?**

They sent a small group: Paul, Barnabas and some other believers, having been part of the original controversy, were chosen to go and share this question with other apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They were in search of that still small voice of God...of the Spirit's gift of WISDOM.

They journeyed together, telling God's story. They traveled together, continuing to share how Gentiles were coming to believe. In other words, they stayed true to their mission of sharing Jesus, despite the controversy.

They experienced welcome from the church in Jerusalem, the apostles and the elders, with whom they shared what God had done through them. They told the story and were listened to deeply.

They listened to other voices with differing viewpoints. They did not silence or ignore varying perspectives, on their way to discerning the Spirit.

They convened together to consider. The apostles and elders met to consider the question. Together they believed the Holy Spirit's guidance would surface...within the community gathered.

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There was “much discussion.”<sup>[ii]</sup> Again, they continued to welcome perspectives, some of which may have changed during the travel and earlier discussion, some of which were new, some of which came from other people. But they gave plenty of time to the listening.

They listened again to another perspective. Peter, who was in Jerusalem, then addressed the assembled group with another perspective: God chose them. God knows the heart and accepted them. God sent the Spirit upon them. God purified their hearts by faith. Peter was a voice known for his wisdom and first hand experience of listening to Jesus. They heard Peter share a fundamental faith tenet: salvation comes through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and it comes that way to everyone. Wisdom surfaced.

They heard more evidence/testimony. Paul and Barnabas shared signs and wonders to a silent assembly. And still the listening went on, as they sought the Spirit’s gift of right judgment.

They heard the voice of the prophet. James spoke and brought forth the voice of the prophets. Then James offered his point of view that they should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.<sup>[iii]</sup> He then offered a way to handle this. Along the way to a decision, they did not discount the lone voice.

They made a decision and then crafted it into a letter. They knew then what is still true now: it is always necessary to be able to communicate what the Spirit reveals in methods and message, tailored to the audience.

They returned to Antioch to share the decision. The apostles and elders, with the whole church, chose some of their own to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch: Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas. So the message came from those who had been present in the discernment in person as well as arriving in writing. Same message. Different messengers and medium.

They traveled to Antioch and delivered the letter. The point here is that there was time and a journey together for these messengers to work with the decision themselves, appropriating it and becoming ever more able to share it.

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They declared their trust in the Holy Spirit and their deliberations. Critical to the acceptance of this decision is the way in which it was made...in and with the Holy Spirit.

They encouraged and strengthened the believers after the letter was shared. Judas and Silas and the prophets remained for a time while the decision was embraced: present, answering questions, encouraging and leading the way to acceptance.

Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they continued to teach and preach. And they stayed focused on their mission, despite all the controversy and change.

This describes the early Church journeying together, assessing what God has done and is doing, hearing many sides, taking time, listening to the prophets and the Spirit, deciding, articulating, sharing and then accompanying the community as it embraced the Spirit's pathway. This is what Pope Francis is leading the Church to re-discover, today. This is synodality. It's not new.

[i]

Acts 15: 1-2

[ii] Acts 15:7

[iii] Acts 15: 19

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## CHAPTER TWO

### Learnings from the Council of Jerusalem for the Parish



In the first chapter of “What is Synodality?”, we took a look at characteristics of a synodal approach to being the church, based on Acts 15. So here’s the bonus, “So What?”

#### What can we learn about synodality from the Acts of the Apostles?

- It’s a “we” thing, for sure. No one person has all the wisdom, understanding, right judgment and Spirit insight.
- It takes time. Maybe a LOT of time, during which there will be continuing controversy.
- It will be uncomfortable. Debate, discussion, controversy, competing arguments that come from sound foundations and reasoning, sides and camps all make the in-between time uncomfortable.
- Sharing the decision is also a “we” endeavor. There’s courage, commitment and consistency in a small community who discerns, decides and then disseminates the decision.
- Confidence in the Holy Spirit is shared openly. The decision comes from the Spirit.
- Ongoing encouragement and presence is critical to acceptance of the decision.

#### How do we answer those who say this is just a Pope Francis thing?

So what can we understand and share about synodality so that others don’t make the same mistakes I did as I encountered the word: not knowing what it means and not knowing where it came from? Here are some suggestions:

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1. It's not new at all. Pope Francis is engaging in a Vatican II practice called *ressourcement*: reaching back and bringing a practice from another time into this time.<sup>[1]</sup> (And you'll get cool points for that great word *ressourcement*!)
2. It's part of the ongoing work to receive more fully the work of Vatican II. Pope Francis is the first fully Vatican II Pope. As such, he is familiar with the methods used by the Council, methods that are also part of synodality: wide and lengthy consultation, proposals, revisions, dialogue, debate, discernment, and decision, followed now by 50+ years of implementation.
3. The word does not roll off our tongues, but it's a precise word for a precise work, so we need to learn to pronounce it, use it correctly and embrace the culture change it demands.

These three ideas help ground synodality squarely in our theological understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, in communion with Christ and one another, journeying together, listening to the Spirit and so cooperating with God in the creation of the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, even as we also journey together toward eternal life with God. Onward!

Photo by Benjamin Grull on Unsplash

1. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray. *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*. Published to Oxford Scholarship Online. January 2012. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199552870.001.0001/acprof-9780199552870-chapter-25> Accessed 6-10-22 ↑



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Fight is On!

I expect I have your attention and that when you are done reading this, you will at least agree...the Church in the US is divided.

What exact fight am I talking about? The one made clear if you Google “The tension in the Church around Pope Francis.” Headlines look like this:

- Pope Struggles to Contain Conservative-Liberal Tensions in the Church
- Is Pope Francis Leading the Church to a Schism?
- Pope says church tensions must be resolved with discussion
- Opposition to Pope Francis is rooted in Vatican II
- Will Pope Francis break the Church?

In the midst of these tensions, the Pope has called the Church to internal reform, to listening, to speaking truth with love, and to discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit. He’s called for another step in embracing not just the teachings from Vatican II but the way in which those teachings came about: synodally. His vision is precisely stated: synodality is the way of the Church in the third millennium.

The bell has rung and the fighters are in their corners, taped and gloved, mouth guards in place. The fight is on. Who’s fighting?



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- The clergy-for a return to their more absolute power and sole decision-making opposing other clergy who know the medieval monarchical style is not working.
- The clergy with their Bishops- some enraged at having to participate in the synodal process, some refusing, some enraged that their Bishop chose not to participate.
- The Bishops with each other-sharply divided about priorities, pastoral and legal approaches, uses and abuses of power, and the role of the clergy as shepherds and/or as princes.
- The Bishops with their clergy: they move too slowly, they move too quickly, they don't move at all, they don't follow my directives, they don't trust me.
- The priests with their flock-those who desire to embrace the Jesus of the Gospels and the Church that reveals him and those who desire to embrace the practices of the Church and the comfort they give them.
- The flock with each other: who's a "real" Catholic and what defines that? Perspectives and experiences vary. Opinions fly. Camps are created. Wagons full of like-minded people circle and prepare to fight.

Rhetoric runs hot. Lines in the sand are drawn. The label "Catholic" is removed from a school.<sup>[1]</sup> Nancy Pelosi is barred from receiving communion in her home diocese and three others.<sup>[2]</sup> Bishops and theologians struggle to talk with one another.<sup>[3]</sup> Pope Francis is accused of "stacking" the College of Cardinals.<sup>[4]</sup> It doesn't take a lot of imagination to see the figurative blood and sweat on the floor of the ring.

And into this fray Pope Francis rings the bell, sends the fighters to their corners and calls for a different way...a reclamation of the way the early Church settled its disputes...and he's set it into motion. The Church is learning how to practice this new way, the synodal way.

Suffice it to say, in the Church in the United States, acceptance of the vision and participation in the process has been uneven at best.<sup>[5]</sup> Participants have sent their reports on. Many are skeptical that any of this goes anywhere significant. Some don't want it to. So the fight is still on.

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The Pentecost Vigil Project is in the fight...supporting Pope Francis' call for the Church to practice her own teaching that she is "at one and the same time holy and ever in need of purification."<sup>[6]</sup> The Pentecost Vigil Project is in the fight, supporting the conversion journey a synodal practice demands. The Pentecost Vigil Project exists to stand with those in the U.S. Church ready to step out on the #synodjourney.

Find us, join us, invite us to join you...let us walk together with Jesus and the Spirit!

- [www.pentecostvigilproject.org](http://www.pentecostvigilproject.org)
- On Facebook @ThePentecostVigilProject



**Let's form the #synodjourney community committed to leading the way!**

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1. Will McDuffie. "Bishop says school no longer Catholic after flying Black Lives Matter, Pride flags." Abcnews. June 16, 2022. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/bishop-school-longer-catholic-flying-black-lives-matter/story?id=85437806> Accessed 6-17-22. ↑
2. Jack Jenkins. "Pelosi now barred from Communion in at least four dioceses." TMay 27, 2022. he Washington Post online. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2022/05/27/pelosi-barred-dioceses-communion/> Accessed 6-17-22. ↑
3. Clemente Lisi. "Catholic Bishops Meet in Secret to Discuss 'Culture War' Issues: What Does It Mean for the Church?" April 7, 2022. Religion Unplugged. <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2022/4/7/catholic-bishops-gear-up-for-culture-war-while-trying-to-cement-pope-francis-legacy> Accessed 6-17-22 ↑
4. Thomas Reese. "Francis stacks the College of Cardinals." National Catholic Reporter Online. May 25, 2017. <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/francis-stacks-college-cardinals> Accessed 6-17-22 ↑
5. Colleen Dulle and Doug Girardot. "We contacted every diocese in the U.S. about their synod plans. Here's what we found." October 18, 2021. America. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/10/18/synod-bishops-us-diocese-plan-241671> Accessed 6-17-22 ↑
6. Gian Franco Svidercoschi. *In the New Millennium On the Path Indicated by the Council*. 1/1/1997. [https://www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/magazine/documents/ju\\_mag\\_01051997\\_p-49\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01051997_p-49_en.html) Accessed 6-17-22 ↑

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Don't go it alone...spirituality and synodality

“The Synod is a process of spiritual discernment, of ecclesial discernment, that unfolds in adoration, in prayer and in dialogue with the word of God... That word summons us to discernment and it brings light to that process. It guides the Synod, preventing it from becoming a Church convention, a study group or a political gathering, a parliament, but rather a grace-filled event, a process of healing guided by the Holy Spirit. (Pope Francis, 10 October 2021)”



The previous chapter describes a "fight" on in the Church. And I believe that is true at a lot of levels. For us to have wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, kindness, gentleness, patience and more, to fight the Jesus-inspired way, we will need to surrender our hearts and minds to the

guidance of the Holy Spirit. We can't go this alone and expect it to bear the fruit possible. We just can't. And this might very well be the first real conversion synodality calls for: to learn how to surrender to the Spirit and then to have the courage to go where the Spirit directs on this synod journey.

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One of the really wonderful gifts of Catholicism is our rich treasury of both prayer forms and spiritualities. Each offers us a way to remain open to the Spirit's wisdom, to more deeply surrender, to embrace the gifts of the Spirit and use them for the good of the entire Church...on the journey together.

One of the really wonderful gifts of those leading us on the synod journey is how they are giving us signposts, tools, and encouragement on this journey. Here's quick look at what's available and where you can find these wonderful resources:

- Icons of the Synod. They are crafted to create a meditation point. There are two: Jesus and the People and the Conversion of Cornelius. To see the icon and hear a short explanation, see the video here: <https://www.synod.va/en/what-is-the-synod-21-23/the-icons-of-the-synod.html>
- Biblical Resources for the Synod: Includes examples of *lectio divina*, along with a search of Old Testament and New Testament texts the illuminate aspects of synodality. Take a look here: <https://www.synod.va/en/news/biblical-resources-for-synodality.html>
- Synodal Spirituality. We are the fortunate recipients of many well-developed spiritualities, each of which offers a spotlight on an aspect of synodal practice: Augustinian, Benedictine, Dominican, the Community of Sant'Egidio, Franciscan, Ignatian, and Salesian. These spiritualities and their contribution to the synodal journey can be found here: <https://www.synod.va/en/resources/spiritual-and-liturgical-resources.html>
- Praying for the Synod. Because this is first and foremost a Spirit-guided work, it is imperative that we pray individually and communally, consistently and persistently. To support this work, the Vatican has set up an entire prayer website: <https://www.prayforthesynod.va/en/> Take a look to find a Monthly Day of Prayer for the Synod, prayer texts, imagery and inspiration.

I'm a bit of a Franciscan in my spirituality. I fell in love with Francis and Clare, and I felt his spirit when I visited Assisi. I actually never wanted to leave there, but both our tour guide and my best friend saw to it that I got back on the bus! So here's a bit of the content on Franciscan spirituality supporting the synod practice of discernment in common. The article says

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- The process of discernment never starts from abstract questions, but from the real life situations, from the thoughts that arise from our needs as they encounter our deep desire to be pleasing to God, to do God's will.
- Discernment requires a constant listening to the Church, even when the Church's teaching does not affirm personal preference. And this is the Church to be consulted according to Francis: the hierarchy/Magisterium, the voice of the men and women of God, and finally in the words and gestures of those on the margins. (Sound familiar? It should. Pope Francis got inspiration here.)
- Discernment, done repeatedly, will cause its practitioners to wish to be ever more closely aligned to Christ. So expect practices like detachment, retreating, Eucharist, and justice to shine forth as this unfolds.

There's so much more in the article on Franciscan spirituality's contributions to synodal practice. Take a read and read the others, too.

[https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/resources/spirituality/franciscan/EN\\_Spiri\\_CESAREO.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/resources/spirituality/franciscan/EN_Spiri_CESAREO.pdf)

Why? Inspiration. Practices. Grounding in the Tradition. Courage to continue to listen to the Lord and follow his ways. All of these will be necessary to embrace our #synodjourney as the way we are the Church in this millennium. Join us, will you?

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### Culture Clash!

Ever heard of a “culture clash?” If you’ve traveled outside of the United States, you’ve probably experienced it. Everything seems different, from the obvious things like language, food, money, and music to the subtler things like relationships, the importance of family, how respect is shown, what religious practices look like (yep, even inside the Catholic faith), and how the sexes relate to one another, to what’s expected in terms of social custom. The list can go on and on and even a quick trip across one of our borders helps us realize what we don’t really notice when we are at home. It’s different...the culture is different.



Why am I bringing this up, this idea of culture clash? Because we are in one right now within our Church. Pope Francis is calling us to create a different culture within the Church and that means the culture we currently have, in whatever form, will clash with the one we are to create. The Synod on Synodality is a call to learn how to live, move and have our being within the Church in very different ways than we do at present. How so?



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Here's my take on some of the elements of our current culture in the Catholic Church:

- Clericalism: the idea that the clergy are at the top of the pyramid in terms of education, experience, power and decision-making.
- Divisions: between rad-trads and progressives, between Pope Francis and Saint John Paul II Catholics/clergy, between those identifying with different political parties, between culture warriors and social justice Bishops/priests and people.
- Belief in the Church: the idea that the Church is somehow infallible, and her systems, structures and practices are above scrutiny, accountability and reform.
- Not enough Jesus and too much “Father” and “The Church.”
- Eurocentric Church perspectives
- Decision-making concentrated among clergy/Bishops
- Too little accountability, transparency, and integrity and therefore low trust
- The parish and the Eucharist as the draw
- Certainty in teachings and practices
- Comfort and low challenge
- Apathy and indifference creating nones, and dones who are ignored

Feel free (please!) to disagree with some of those cultural descriptors, and to add others. These are *representative* of the culture in the U.S. Catholic Church...not exhaustive. My point is, this is the “water” we are swimming in. Pope Francis is calling for us to change the water and that means we will be uncomfortable. It means some things we've liked will die. It means we will have to learn and we will have to embrace the journey into uncertainty. Culture change requires that.

Read on to see my take on what I imagine a synodal Church, in the United States, might be like!

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- No more clericalism. Instead, an embrace of the dignity of all the baptized and a re-discovery of the gift of each of the baptized understanding their rights and responsibilities, all serving under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.
- Divisions give way to an embrace of diversity. A synodal culture recognizes that the Spirit's gifts are given to all for the good of the Body. So instead of divisions creating camps and accusations, culture wars and gossip-fests, they are the very "stuff" with which the Spirit creates.
- Belief that all of creation is being made new by Christ, continuously, and that is true for the Church. She is not infallible, and her systems and structures are not set in concrete. She is the Body of Christ, being made into a new creation and that may mean letting go of stodgy, set-in-concrete perspectives.
- More Jesus. More Holy Spirit. More Scripture, prayer, sacraments, reflection, contemplation, faith sharing, witnessing. Less "Father says," less doctrine/dogma/rules and precepts disconnected from following Jesus. More healing, more spiritual practices, more works of charity and justice.
- Eurocentric perspectives give way to Christocentric perspectives as seen from many cultural lenses. This is a sign of unity in our diversity, a unity grounded in Jesus and animated by the Spirit.
- Consultative decision-making becomes the norm, grounded in the belief that the Spirit dwells within all the Baptized and so the Spirit must be allowed to speak through many.
- Recognition of low trust and work to earn trust, re-build trust, and be trustworthy. This means honest self-appraisals and acceptance of the larger culture's struggle with trusting institutions.
- The draw will be encountering Jesus. The mission field of ordinary life will be the first place we learn to encounter him. The Eucharist remains central *for those who have met the Lord in their ordinary lives and now want to meet him more deeply*. The parish sees itself as one location where seekers and wanna-be disciples both encounter Jesus through his people. But first, first...it's God-with-us, in ordinary life.
- Certainty, overbearing authority, and declarations that no change is possible give way to discerning the Spirit's call in this age...and holding open the possibility that change is possible, even necessary.
- Comfort and low challenge give way to curiosity, exploration, and discovery...a real journey into the joy of life in Christ!

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- Paying attention to all the baptized, seeking them out, listening to hopes, dreams, joys and sorrows, taking their criticisms and wounds to Jesus for healing, and remaining connected through listening becomes the work of even the apathetic...because they first reach out to listen to those they love.

The next chapter is a short primer on culture for those of you who'd like to think about this a little more. And after that, we will take a look at what we can expect in the in-between. The clash of two cultures will make a lot of noise, that's for sure!

Tired of reading and feeling like you'd like to DO something? Here's a suggestion: Have a listening session with staff and lay leaders around just this subject. Share this eBook Chapter and then one or more of the following questions:

1. What on this list rings true for you? What does not? Why?
2. Where do you feel most challenged? Why?
3. Where will we as a parish be most challenged? Why?
4. How do we prepare to lead the culture change?
5. What will we need more of and less of as we move forward?

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## CHAPTER SIX

### A Primer on Culture

#### What is culture?

- A shared set of values (what we care about)
- A shared set of beliefs (what we believe to be true)
- Norms of behavior (how we do things)

#### What does culture “do?”

- Aligns effort
- Engenders shared sense-making/meaning making
- Increases predictability
- Encodes organizational lessons about what does and does not work

An axiom: “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Peter Drucker

What does this mean? That culture is more influential on behavior than any kind of strategy, no matter how well thought out. If the strategy does not align with the culture, it will largely fail.



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### **What characteristics are part of a culture that can adapt, innovate and survive?**

- Focus on the people. Prioritize the needs of your people rather than on the needs of the organization.
- Focus on the parish's place within the larger Church. Make sure what you are saying and doing aligns with the larger "ecosystem" called the Roman Catholic Church.
- Collect and analyze data: Embrace data and analytics in decision-making rather than relying on just experience or judgment.
- Work collaboratively: No silos. Work in teams, across the parish, between parishes and beyond.
- Get moving. Try ideas fairly quickly. Value the movement and what you learn over perfectionism.
- Embrace learning. Experiment, get feedback, and reward ongoing learning.
- Enable others. This is the work of the leaders: remove obstacles, share authority, affirm, and follow others' leads all while holding them accountable for agreed upon outcomes.



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## How do you change culture?

- Recognize that this is the work of the leaders. It CANNOT be delegated. Leaders must align, balance, empower, articulate, communicate and demonstrate their own growth and development into the desired culture.
- Start with the “why.” Make the case for the change with the critical influencers/stakeholders. And make the case for all the elements within the organization (its culture) that will need to change in order to get to the larger outcome. Do it over and over again.
- Define the target cultural values and behaviors. What will it look like when the culture is changed. This is what it looks like and this is what has to happen in order to get there. For an example of some target cultural elements, see Nick Wagner’s article “What does a catechumenal culture look like?” [https://teamrcia.com/2022/06/what-does-a-catechumenal-culture-look-like/?vgo\\_ee=%2BK%2Bth%2FjkN22FBcMCGtoMi2QOP8ZXmRzMvz3Yw%2BcA7gl%3D](https://teamrcia.com/2022/06/what-does-a-catechumenal-culture-look-like/?vgo_ee=%2BK%2Bth%2FjkN22FBcMCGtoMi2QOP8ZXmRzMvz3Yw%2BcA7gl%3D) Then ask yourself about all the things that have to change to reach this description? And all that is already in place that may need prioritized, revitalized, affirmed and supported?
- Get input. Be synodal. Put these ideas out there and LISTEN, broadly and for as long as it takes to hear from a wide swath of the parish. Get “culture coalitions”, people who see where you are trying to go and are passionate about it, to host these listening sessions. Make sure to continue to pray and seek the Spirit’s wisdom as it flows from listening.
- Build pathways/bridges to the desired culture. Preserve and strengthen cultural elements that are aligned. Identify aspects of the existing culture that need to come to the forefront, making sure to honor the enduring legacy of what has been by weaving it into the culture of the future. These are the first bridges to the future. The Vatican II practice of *ressourcement* <sup>[1]</sup> does this.
- Reinforce the desired culture in all of the parish’s councils, committees, groups, clubs, activities and events. Attitudes and perspectives need to be accompanied by concrete behaviors. Those new behaviors need noticed, affirmed and amplified. Parish life needs assessed through the new cultural lens consistently.

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- Rapidly reward the emerging culture. When the new is on display, highlight it. Reward it. Affirm it. Keep telling the stories about it. And be consistent with this. People respond to affirmation and this affirms that the new culture is “real”. This helps short circuit “the way we’ve always done things.”

**How long does it take?** It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Early adopters will make it seem like it can be pretty quick. But they are usually few, and will need to be part of demonstrating the change concretely so that those on the “fence” about it all see that it is happening and come along. When that happens, you will have enough people in the new culture to see real movement. Some say this takes minimally 18 months of concerted effort. Others say up to 36. In the Church, I’d say it could take 5 years or more.

**My perspective...to get you started.** When I think about the culture in my parish, here are some of the cultural elements:

1. We value: nice, pretty, comfort, not asking too much (under the guise of respecting how busy everyone is), charity and justice, Vatican II liturgy and liturgical practice, intellectual pursuits, faith that does not challenge the other belief systems we hold, lots of years of belonging to the parish, children and youth, our award-winning building. We value having openly gay/Lesbian people among us. I'd love to hear from others what they think we care about as a parish and what evidence they have for that. Maybe you can have that conversation among some of your fellow parishioners!

2. We believe: Well, we have two credal statements, the Lord's Prayer, the Scriptures and the Tradition. We have the sacraments. But I could not say, with regard to any of that, the degree to which we share belief in what they articulate. Engagement with all of these is varied. Enthusiasm for them often not obvious. But I think it is fair to say we believe God and Jesus to be true, we believe Jesus to have really lived. I am uncertain about who believes what about the Holy Spirit. We believe sacraments should be more important than they are. We believe it should be ok that we not have shared beliefs, but we can still belong. We believe faith is private and individual. We believe our parish is really great. We believe it's ok to be baptized and not otherwise engage. We believe all people are created in God's image.

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3. Our norms: We do liturgy according to Vatican II principles first, and US and diocesan principles secondarily or not at all. We act as if the parish is still very small even though it is squarely a medium sized parish. This looks like
- a) The works of the parish are carried out by a few people, many of whom do multiple jobs consistently and have for a VERY long time.
  - b) Systems for communication, succession planning, onboarding with training and formation, saying hello and good-bye are all immature or non-existent.
  - c) Everything has to go through a small group of people. There are a lot of gatekeepers because of the amount of responsibility they have, left over from the small parish model.
  - d) Silos and secrets are more prevalent than collaborations and transparency.

So this is the kind of exercise that gets you started on culture change. Pope Francis is calling for a culture that is synodal. That's not been the way. In order to change the culture, it will require this kind of concrete, real work.

Want help? Contact us at [www.pentecostvigilproject.org](http://www.pentecostvigilproject.org) We can help you think about this, make a plan, lead conversations, visit and tell you what we experience as outsiders, and more. Our first conversation is free!

<https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/why-every-executive-should-be-focusing-on-culture-change-now/>

1. Eduardo Echeverria. "Ressourcement," "Aggiornamento," and Vatican II in Ecumenical Perspective." July 24, 2014. Homiletic and Pastoral Review. Accessed 6-23-22 ↑



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Are we there yet? I Hate the In-Between!**

Every parent has heard the whiny question repeated over and over again on a road trip with the kids: “Are we there yet?” Why is this almost a universal experience, even with adults, who may say it like this, “How much longer?” or “Where are we now?” Because we hate in-between time. We just hate it...we want to be where we are going. The work of in-between time is not nearly as attractive as what we are going to do when we get there, right?

Welcome to #synodjourney. We are in the in-between time. The Pentecost Vigil Project was created to support this part of the journey...the in-between where we've been and where we are going...between the culture of the current Church and the culture of a synodal church. So let's talk about this in-between time. What's going on? What should leaders be thinking about and doing?

Pope Francis called for all of the baptized, around the world, to participate in the first phase of the culture change. He asked us to ask ourselves hard questions, and sit down together to hear one another's responses. In that speaking truth with love and listening from the heart, the Pope assures us the voice of the Spirit will be heard. Where are we with that? Well, some people participated: some dioceses, some parishes, some parishioners, some nones and dones, some on the very edges of life. *Some*. In the United States, some 700,000 people out of 65 million Catholics are the some that participated. And most did not. Some see this as dangerous, as useless, as potentially playing with relativism and modernity and fire. That's one part of where we are. The first steps have been taken. But not by everyone...not by a long shot. So what now? Read on to see what change leader experts recommend.

## Synod Journey

Unfreezing the organization<sup>[1]</sup> is what change leaders call this first step in culture change. It involves improving readiness by fostering a realization of the need to move from an existing “comfort” zone. It involves making people aware of the need for change and improving motivation for participating/accepting/implementing the change. All the listening sessions are part of this work of unfreezing, of recognizing that the current culture is not conducive to following Jesus in the third millennium. And some participated, saw and are ready to go. Some participated, did not see, and are skeptical that it’s even possible to change. Some participated partially, and did not feel as if they have an influence over this. And most did not participate... on purpose, or because their pastors did not give them the opportunity or because they missed the memo to join in the great listen!

**Unfreezing is part of the in-between time. It’s uneven. Messy. Uncomfortable. And critical to creating fertile ground to accept change. Expect it. Embrace it. Above all else, KEEP LISTENING.**



## Synod Journey

What else is happening on this journey? Lots of uncertainty. Just like on a long road trip, especially before GPS, it's probable that there will be wrong turns, missed exits, horrible hotels, spilled soda, and terrible road food. What is certain? In-between time has a lot of uncertainty in it. News flash? Most people hate high degrees of uncertainty, and they really hate it at church.

**High degrees of uncertainty creates discomfort. Discomfort manifests in resistance, in longing to “go back”, in opting out, and in seeking more comfortable versions of the same activity. Expect it. Embrace it. But don't relent.**

In-between time also surfaces leadership inadequacies. When things are going along “as they always do,” not much is expected of leaders. Steer the ship in the same direction. But when the ship needs to turn, stop, engage in avoidance maneuvers, the captain's skill is visible. This is true not just of ship commanders, but of all leaders, including clergy, staff and lay parish leaders. Poor leadership is visible and that's painful for the ill-equipped leader. It's also painful to followers, who will reduce their pain by several different kinds of behaviors: calling out the inadequacies publicly and/or privately, refusing support (time, talent or treasure), looking for allies who see what they see, losing trust in both the leader and the organization, trying to take over, and leaving. And some organizations will have people equipped to lead, who will offer, who will lead from where they are, who will support and persist.

**Many leaders are not equipped to lead change. Find those who are. Learn how. Don't be afraid to ask for help. (It's ok to say you are lost and need directions, really!)**

There's this weird low tolerance for messy when it comes to church/Church. We want this organization to be orderly, pretty-even beautiful. We want it to be loving, comfortable, known...like favorite bedroom slippers. One thing we do not want, expect or tolerate well is messy. We don't want to break in new shoes when it comes to church/Church. So when it inevitably gets messy, especially when messy is the name of the game because the “new shoes” of a culture change is underway, many will just go home or go somewhere else to avoid the discomfort.

## Synod Journey

**People will leave. Expect it. Prepare for it. But reach out, stay connected, listen to them!**

Some people will see the culture change as LONG overdue, and they are elated that it is finally underway. They are enthusiastic, hopeful, energetic and willing to participate. In change theory language, they are “early adopters.” They are happy to lead the way, even if they 1) don’t know how to lead this; 2) don’t care whose toes they step on; 3) don’t have patience with those who are still figuring out if they are on board or not. AND, culture change needs their hopefulness, energy, and presence.

**Guide the early adopters so they can help lead in the in-between time. But care for those who are on the fence or laggard, as well. Don’t forget to take care of those whose leadership stops in the in-between time. They are not happy!**

What’s called for on this journey together? Patience, kindness, gentleness. Wisdom, understanding, right judgment. The benefit of the doubt. Accompaniment. Empathy. And to keep walking.

I remember my Dad, often impatient with our impatience on our long trips from central North Carolina to Western Pennsylvania. But the one thing that never happened during the in-between time was stopping to stay where we were, or turning around. Nope. We were going to Aunt Nona and Uncle Ralph’s. The destination was fixed and the anticipation worth all the struggle in between.

Pope Francis keeps telling us this is not an event or a program, but a way of being. It’s a culture change and so will take time. In-between, he is guiding us to seek intimacy with Jesus, to listen carefully for the voice of the Spirit, to stay together on the journey, to reach out and gather others in, to embrace the messy...and to stay the course. Don’t listen to “the way we’ve always done things”, the outcries for remaining at home rather than going on the trip, the people who decry the journey as dangerous. Embrace the journey, for Jesus tells us, “Look! I am making all things new.”<sup>[2]</sup>

And one more thing: learn to answer that question “Are we there yet?” with a resounding “Not yet, but we’re getting there!”

# Synod Journey

The Pentecost Vigil Project is here to support your early adopters, help with leadership, and walk along with you on this journey. Check out our freebies, our products and services, and our resources! [www.pentecostvigilproject.org](http://www.pentecostvigilproject.org)

And be sure to check out our website for a resource on leading change! It will help...promise!

Photo by Leio McLaren on Unsplash

1. Kurt Lewin's Change Management Model: The Planned Approach to Organizational Change. Management Study Guide.  
<https://www.managementstudyguide.com/kurt-lewins-change-management-model.htm> Accessed 6/22/22 ↑
2. Revelation 21 ↑

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### What Now?

So what is synodality? It's a mindset. It's a culture change. It's a way of being together once practiced in our Church, brought forward for the third millennium. It's Vatican II's theological principles in practice. It's Pope Francis' sense of what our Church needs now to continue to heal from her past, to renew trust, to more widely embrace the presence of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church.

And what now? For those who see the vision and are ready to go, let's go! Let's learn and grow together. Let's experiment. Let's pray...a LOT. Let's become Franciscan in our spirituality, starting with an honest look at what is, and then walking with the Spirit into the new creation that can be.

What now? Let's connect with others who are ready to get on the #synodjourney. The Pentecost Vigil Project is one organization dedicated to supporting synodality by connecting other early adopters with each other.

What now? Let's commit to praying consistently, to detaching from what has been, to truth-speaking and listening with courage, to seeking the Spirit's voice, no matter where it leads.

What now? Let's lay foundations for synodality to take root: building trustworthiness and learning to listen to the Spirit speaking from many sources.

What now? Let's create synodal leadership, synodal adult faith formation, synodal structures and systems...let's dream with God about what can be when the Spirit lights a new fire on the earth.

What now? Join us on the #synod journey. Subscribe, connect, share, experiment, dream and hope...with the Pentecost Vigil Project!