

# What's next in the journey?

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*“How to be a Synodal Church in Mission? Five perspectives for theological exploration ahead of the Second Session” and “Study Groups on Issues Emerging from the First Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be Explored in Collaboration with the Dicastries of the Roman Curia” are the titles of two documents from the Synod’s General Secretariat, presented on March 14 in preparation for the second session of the Synod of Bishops Assembly, scheduled for October 2–27, 2024, at the Vatican.*

*The first document outlines the guidelines for the Assembly, involving dioceses by asking them to keep the synodal dynamic alive as they prepare contributions to be submitted by May 15, 2024, along with a brief testimony of the work done and “best practices” experienced. The second document introduces the ten topics selected by Pope Francis and outlined in his February 22, 2024 letter to Cardinal Grech, Secretary General of the Synod, which will be explored by corresponding study groups or commissions.*

## **Five Working Groups and a Permanent Forum**

The two documents reflect the findings of the summary report from the first session, which itself was based on consultations conducted by churches worldwide. The new material collected will be used to draft the *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document) for the October Assembly, alongside theological insights developed by five working groups formed by the General Secretariat of the Synod, consisting of experts from diverse geographical backgrounds.

The groups are addressing the following themes:

1. The synodal and missionary character of the local Church.
2. The synodal and missionary character of groupings of Churches.
3. The synodal and missionary character of the universal Church.
4. The synodal method.
5. The “place” of the synodal Church in mission.

Additionally, the Synod Secretariat has decided to establish a “permanent forum” to support the broader synodal process by examining theological, canonical, pastoral, spiritual, and communication aspects of synodality in the Church. This will involve contributions from the

International Theological Commission and a Canonical Commission. Progress on the work of this forum will be presented during the second session of the Synod Assembly.

## **The Church is Mission**

“Rather than saying the Church *has* a mission, we affirm that the Church *is* mission,” reads the introduction to the first document. The focus of the effort requested from local ecclesial communities will therefore center on the theme of participation by all—in the diversity of vocations, charisms, and ministries—in the singular mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ and His Gospel to the world today.

The primary question, “How to be a Synodal Church in Mission?” aims to identify ways and tools to “value the uniqueness of every baptized person and every Church.” This question will also be addressed in terms of relationships between particular Churches and their relationship with the Bishop of Rome, “to find a dynamic balance between the Church’s overall dimension and its local roots.”

## **Ten Study Groups**

The ten study groups, coordinated by relevant Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, will address issues that, as noted by Monsignor Piero Coda, Secretary General of the International Theological Commission, “cannot be directly and comprehensively addressed in the second session while remaining faithful to the commitment to answer the central question around which the Assembly has been convened.”

Here are the themes:

1. *Relations between Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Church* – promoting greater understanding and dialogue among their respective members, particularly in the context of increasing migration and diaspora.
2. *Listening to the cry of the poor* – including those marginalized, abused, and oppressed even within the Christian community.
3. *Mission in the digital environment* – examining theological, spiritual, and canonical implications of digital communication and the structural and organizational requirements for a digital mission.
4. *Revision of the Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* – in a synodal and missionary perspective. This 2016 document, published by the Dicastery for the Clergy, addresses priestly vocation and formation.
5. *Theological and canonical questions regarding specific forms of ministry* – reflecting on lay participation, recognizing and valuing women’s contributions, and exploring their increased pastoral responsibilities, including further theological and pastoral study on women’s access to the diaconate.
6. *Revision of documents governing relations among bishops, consecrated life, and ecclesial movements* – to better articulate their roles in service of communion and mission.

7. *Aspects of the bishop's role and ministry* – focusing on criteria for episcopal candidate selection, the judicial function of bishops, and the nature of *ad limina* visits, informed by Pope Francis's *Motu Proprio Vos estis lux mundi* on abuse cases.
8. *The role of papal representatives* – refining the service of Apostolic Nuncios and strengthening the bonds of communion between local Churches and the Pope.
9. *Theological criteria and synodal methodologies for shared discernment on controversial doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues* – clarifying the relationship between charity and truth, as well as doctrine and pastoral practice.
10. *Reception of ecumenical progress in Church practices* – to be explored at theological, canonical, and pastoral levels.

Pope Francis has determined that these study groups will provide an initial report of their activities at the October Assembly, with their mandate concluding by June 2025.