Blog
Religious Life



Pope Francis poses with a group of women before a session of the 16th general assembly of the synod of bishops in the Paul VI Hall at The Vatican, Oct. 28, 2023. The seventh from left is Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary in the Vatican's Synod of Bishops. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)



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Four religious — two women and two men — who participated in the recent synod on synodality and who spoke to their fellow religious during a Dec. 11 webinar, praised the synod as a milestone for the universal Catholic Church.

But they also stressed it will take time for the synod to bear fruit within the church's institutions.

"Synodality is an experience that requires time," said Sr. Leticia Salazar, a sister of the Company of Mary Our Lady who serves as chancellor at the Diocese of San Bernardino, California.

"I think it is a challenge, but it is a gift to be on this path," she said.

"We can't change everything," cautioned Br. Mark Hilton, superior general of the Brothers of the Sacred Heart during the two-hour webinar and in-person event, sponsored by the International Union of Superiors General, or UISG. "We can only change parts of it."

Hilton and other participants said they are hopeful overall about the synod's long-term impact, but also recognize that change is not easy. The Oct. 2-26 synodal assembly in Rome — the culmination of a three-year process — was not itself an easy event to pull off, participants said during the webinar, which was held in Rome and attracted about 200 participants, most online.

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One key challenge: trying to move toward a less hierarchical institution, with "a new way of making decisions," said Sr. Nathalie Becquart, a member of the Congregation of Xavières, who serves as undersecretary to the synod's general secretariat.

"A church that listens" — a more humble church that hears those on the margins, like migrants and LGBTQ Catholics — will have to find new ways of learning, Salazar said. "Unlearning bad habits takes longer."

Sr. Maria Cimperman, who moderated the webinar, wondered how we can "amplify participation" within church structures.

"What would that look like in a parish? In a diocese?" asked Cimperman, a member of the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and who heads UISG's synodal commitment initiative.

Becquart said the purpose of synodality is not to dismantle hierarchy but to change it so that new ways of wielding power within the church can help its mission. When a synodal process informs institutional decisions, she said, the decisions become more powerful.

Becquart acknowledged that a "change of mentality takes time" and urged her fellow religious to initiate dialogue within parishes, congregations and dioceses.



Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Vatican's General Secretariat of the Synod, told GSR in a March 28 interview at a Manhattan church that she will vote during the October Synod of Bishops on synodality. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

During a question and answer period, one Italian sister said she and other sisters are often frustrated dealing with priests and bishops who do seem to be open to dialogue. "It's difficult to be synodal," the sister said. "Can you 'percolate' that in our lives?"

Hilton and Becquart acknowledged the challenges many religious face but urged patience. Becquart said a simple gesture like inviting a priest to coffee to discuss the synod and synodality can begin to open doors and promote dialogue.

"The journey is the path," said Fr. Tesfaye Tadesse Gebresilasie, superior general of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, who was recently appointed by Pope Francis to be auxiliary bishop of the archeparchy of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

"We are called to continue consultation and discernment," he said, stressing two themes of the synod. "We should not be afraid of synodality," he added, saying it "means journeying together."

Gebresilasie and others noted that many religious are already living lives of synodality given an emphasis within congregational life on consensus, consultation and reflection.

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>
> — Sr. Leticia Salazar
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Salazar said she believes the synodal process is helping the wider church better appreciate the importance of religious within the church.

"We are a real gift to the church and to the wider world," she said.

Hilton evoked the image of Jesus casting a net and that synodality recognizes the "net of relationships" within the church and with the wider world. A net can be broken but it also can become too rigid, he said, "and that would serve little purpose."

Religious communities, Hilton added, are often the "net-weavers and tenders."

The next online post-synod event sponsored by UISG will be held Jan. 7 and focus on the spirituality of synodality and its practical applications.

Catholic Health Association condemns CEO's murder

In the wake of the Dec. 4 murder of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson in New York City, the Catholic Health Association of the United States, or CHA, released a statement condemning the killing.

"CHA and the Catholic health care community were shocked and grieved to learn of the tragic death of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson," Sr. of Mercy Mary Haddad, CHA's president and CEO, said in the Dec. 5 statement.



Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, Catholic Health Association president and chief executive officer, is pictured in an Oct. 10, 2016, photo. (CNS/courtesy CHA)

"We offer our prayers for healing and consolation for the loved ones of Mr. Thompson. We also extend our sympathy and condolences to the UnitedHealthcare community during this deeply troubling time."

She added: "As a Catholic health ministry, we affirm the sacredness of life and call on everyone to join us in condemning this and other senseless acts of violence."

Luigi Mangione, 26, has been charged in the murder.

Group urges Biden to commute federal death row sentences

The leading faith-based group advocating the end of the death penalty in the United States is urging President Joe Biden to commute the sentences of all 40 men currently on federal death row.

In a letter dated Nov. 20 and released Dec. 9, Catholic Mobilizing Network urged the president, who leaves office on Jan. 20, to "act in the spirit of mercy and the kind of

justice that upholds the dignity of all life, no matter the harm one has caused or suffered" and commute the sentences.

"As Catholics, we understand that every person is made in the image of God and that our Heavenly Father does not shut the door on anyone," Krisanne Vaillancourt Murphy, the network's executive director, and St. Joseph Sr. Rita Ann Teichman, who chairs the group's board of directors, wrote in the letter.

"By commuting these sentences, you could use your constitutional authority in a way that would mirror the spirit of reconciliation during this special Jubilee 2025 year," the two said.

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>
> — Letter to President Joe Biden from Catholic Mobilizing Network
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The letter by the Washington, D.C.-based network was made public after Francis made an appeal for sparing the lives of the inmates.

"Let us pray for their sentence to be commuted, changed," the pope said during his Dec. 8 Sunday Angelus in St. Peter's Square. "Let us think of these brothers and sisters of ours and ask the Lord to save them from death."

On Dec. 9, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released a nationwide advocacy action, saying that Biden "has an extraordinary opportunity to advance the cause of human dignity by commuting all federal death sentences to terms of imprisonment and sparing the lives of the 40 men currently on federal death row."

One reason prompting the various calls to Biden on the death penalty is that President-elect Donald Trump supports the death penalty.

"The president-elect has a sordid history of executions and has stated his intention to expand and expedite them when he returns to office, making this an urgent national moment," Vaillancourt Murphy said in a statement. "The clock is ticking for 40 lives. President Biden should exercise his constitutional authority now to offer

clemency to each person on federal death row."

In its statement, Catholic Mobilizing Network noted that Biden is the first president to oppose capital punishment publicly, and in 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice ordered a moratorium on federal executions. The group praised that action as a positive step, but also noted that that does not prevent future administrations from reversing the moratorium.