

International Meeting for Priests Report

The International Meeting 'Parish Priests for the Synod' was held in Rome from April 28 to May 02, bringing together approximately 200 priests from 100 countries. This event was particularly significant as it symbolized the Church's dedication to actively listen to the voices of parish priests, who are positioned at the forefront of the Church, deeply immersed in the daily lives of the parish communities, and intimately connected with the challenges, needs, and blessings of the people. In the words of the Pope, parish priests are those who "know from within the life of God's people their joys and hardships, their resources and their needs." He further emphasizes, "A synodal Church needs its parish priests," highlighting the essential role of parish priests in this synodal journey.

This worldwide meeting of listening, prayer, and discernment, promoted by the General Secretariat of the Synod and the Dicastery for the Clergy, along with the Dicastery for Evangelization and the Dicastery for the Oriental Churches, was authentically representative of varied realities within the Church. Among the participating priests were individuals like Father Paul from Australia, who serves as the pastor of a rural community of indigenous people with 30 attendees on Sundays at their underground church — an underground church that was literally dug into the ground. Working alongside him was Father Pham from Hanoi, Vietnam, where 4000 people attend Sunday masses. This diversity was also evident through the presence of priests from South Korea, Croatia, Kenya, Nigeria, Malta, the Philippines, India, as well as Australia and Vietnam, in our roundtable discussions.

The daily schedule of the event was structured from 8 am to 9 pm. Sessions commenced with introductions to the day's theme, followed by dedicated time for meditation and personal prayer. Throughout the day, there were fostered synodal conversations within 18 language-divided working groups, each comprising about 12 priests. These groups engaged in deep discussions and discernment, sharing their insights and perspectives. The activities culminated in plenary presentations where groups shared their collaborative insights and discussions. Moreover, there were also the celebrations of the eucharist, along with dialogues focusing on the Synod and Synodality. This structure provided us with a meaningful opportunity to engage and share enriching moments together, particularly through the 'conversation in the Spirit' methodology.

This method of conversation transformed the dialogues on the rounded table from mere debates into a genuine experience of communal discernment, facilitating deep discussions on the three themes proposed for the parish priests. The first theme, 'The Face of the Synodal Church,' delved into the experiences and understanding of synodality in the life of parishes and dioceses. Shifting to the second theme, 'All Disciples All Missionaries,' we explored the participation of different charisms, vocations, and ministries in the life of local churches. Finally, on the third theme, 'Teaching Ties, Building Communities,' we focused on discernment dynamics for mission and the participation of various groups within parishes and dioceses.

The synodal meeting for priests concluded with a private audience and a moment of dialogue with the Holy Father in the Paul VI Hall, during which he gave three recommendations to the parish priests. Firstly, Pope Francis urged us to embrace our specific ministerial charism in ever greater service to the varied gifts that the Spirit bestows upon the People of God. Secondly, he encouraged

the practice of communal discernment, using the method of 'conversation in the Spirit' for this purpose. Lastly, the Pope emphasized the importance of fraternity and collaboration among priests and with bishops. In his closing remarks, before personally greeting each priest, Pope Francis commissioned us to be missionaries of synodality in our parishes and dioceses.

The International Meeting for Parish Priests was truly unique experience. While the Church typically invites bishops, theologians, and experts to such events, this time the focus was on listening to parish priests, representing a remarkable shift. As Cardinal Mario Grech, Secretary General of the General Secretariat of the Synod, highlighted, “I normally underline that there is no synod without the bishop, but allow me to say today that there is no synod without the parish priest”. Building on this sentiment, Cardinal Lazarus You, Prefect of the Dicastery for the Clergy, also emphasized that “this meeting does not involve many speeches but rather a lot of listening: mutual listening and shared listening to the Holy Spirit. This is the methodology of the Synod”. This change authentically reflects the spirit of synodality, providing a consistent path for engagement and meaningful exchanges, particularly through the Spirit-guided conversational approach.

This encounter allowed the parish priests, the frontline leaders who directly engage with all members of the People of God, to witness how each local experience contributes as a gift to the universal Church. Many participants expressed enthusiasm for the proposed synodal process, viewing it as an opportunity for growth and renewal in the Church. Clergy members from around the world emphasized the importance of actively participating in and promoting synodality within their communities. While challenges such as fear, skepticism, and reluctance to change hindering the acceptance of the synodal process were highlighted, there was also a clear sense of joy and appreciation for this global gathering, as well as for the recognition of the essential role played by parish priests in a synodal church, inviting pastors to embrace their calling as missionaries of synodality.

Fr. Fabio DeSouza
Diocese of Calgary



The Holy See

LETTER OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS TO PARISH PRIESTS

Dear Brother Priests,

The International Meeting “Parish Priests for the Synod”, and the dialogue with all of you who have taken part, provide me with the opportunity to pray for the parish priests the world over. To all of you, I address these words with great affection.

It is so obvious as to sound almost banal, but that does not make it less true: the Church could not go on without your dedication and your pastoral service. So before all else, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for the generous work that you do each day, sowing seeds of the Gospel in every kind of soil (cf. *Mk 4:1-25*).

As you have experienced in these days of sharing, the parishes in which you carry out your ministry vary widely, from those on the outskirts of great cities – as I know personally from Buenos Aires – to those in sparsely populated areas that are the size of vast provinces. They range from those in town centres in many European countries, where ancient basilicas house dwindling and aging communities, to those where celebrations are held beneath the branches of great trees and the songs of birds mix with the voices of small children.

Parish priests are well aware of this, since they know from within the life of God’s People their joys and hardships, their resources and their needs. For this reason, a synodal Church needs its parish priests. Without priests, we will never be able to learn how to walk together and to set out on the path of synodality, “the path which God expects of the Church of the third millennium”. [\[1\]](#)

We will never become a synodal and missionary Church unless parish communities are distinguished by the sharing of all the baptized in the one mission of proclaiming the Gospel. If parishes are not synodal and missionary, neither will the Church be. The Synthesis Report of the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops is very clear in this regard. Parishes, beginning with their structures and the organization of parish life, are called to think of themselves “primarily as being of service to the mission that the faithful carry out in

society, in family life and the workplace, without concentrating exclusively on their own activities and their organizational needs” (8.1). Parish communities increasingly need to become places from which the baptized set out as missionary disciples and to which they return, full of joy, in order to share the wonders worked by the Lord through their witness (cf. *Lk* 10:17).

As pastors, we are called to accompany in this process the communities that we serve, and at the same time to commit ourselves with prayer, discernment and apostolic zeal in ensuring that our ministry is suited to the needs of a synodal and missionary Church. This challenge is set before the Pope, the bishops and the Roman Curia, and it is also set before you, as parish priests. The Lord who has called us and consecrated us asks us today to listen to the voice of his Spirit and to advance in the direction that he points out to us. Of one thing we can be sure: he will never leave us without his grace. Along the way, we will discover how to set our ministry free from the things that wear us down and rediscover its most authentic core, the proclamation of God’s word and the gathering of the community for the breaking of bread.

I encourage you, then, to accept this, the Lord’s call to be, as parish priests, builders of a synodal and missionary Church and to devote yourselves enthusiastically to achieving this goal. To this end, I would like to offer three suggestions that can help to inspire your lifestyle and activity as pastors.

1. I ask you first to *live out your specific ministerial charism in ever greater service to the varied gifts that the Spirit sows in the People of God*. It is urgent to “discover with faith, the many and varied charismatic gifts of the laity, be they of a humble or more exalted form” (Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9), which are indispensable for evangelizing any number of human situations and contexts. I am convinced that in this way you will bring to light many hidden treasures and feel less alone in the demanding task of evangelization. You will experience the joy of being true fathers, who do not dominate others but rather bring out in them, men and women alike, great and precious possibilities.

2. With all my heart, I suggest that you *learn to practise the art of communal discernment*, employing for this purpose the method of “conversation in the Spirit”, which has proved so helpful in the synodal journey and in the proceedings of the synodal Assembly itself. I am certain that you will reap from it many good fruits, not only in structures of communion such as parish councils, but in many other fields as well. As the Synthesis Report makes clear, discernment is a key element in the pastoral activity of a synodal Church: “It is important that the practice of discernment be exercised also in pastoral settings, in a way adapted to differing contexts, in order to illumine the concreteness of ecclesial life. This will help to recognize better the charisms present within the community, to distribute wisely different responsibilities and ministries, and to plan in the light of the Spirit pastoral projects that go beyond the mere programming of activities” (2.1).

3. Finally, I would like to urge you to *base everything you do in a spirit of sharing and fraternity*

among yourselves and with your bishops. This is something that emerged forcefully from the International Conference for the Permanent Formation of Priests, on the theme, “Fan into Flame the Gift of God that You Possess” (2 Tim 1:6), which took place last February here in Rome, with over 800 bishops, priests, lay and consecrated men and women, engaged in this area and representing some 18 countries. We cannot be authentic fathers unless we are first sons and brothers. And we cannot foster communion and participation in the communities entrusted to our care unless, before all else, we live out those realities among ourselves. I am quite aware that, amid the constant call of our pastoral responsibilities, this commitment may seem burdensome, even a waste of time, but the opposite is true: indeed, only in this way will we be credible and our activity not end up scattering what others have already gathered.

It is not only the synodal and missionary Church that needs parish priests, but also the ongoing process of the 2021-2024 Synod, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission”, as we look forward to the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place in the coming month of October. In order to prepare for it, we need to hear your voice.

For this reason, I invite those who have taken part in the International Meeting “Parish Priests for the Synod” to be missionaries of synodality, among yourselves and, once you return home, with your fellow parish priests. I ask you to encourage reflection, with a synodal and missionary mindset, on the renewal of the ministry of parish priests, and enable the General Secretariat of the Synod to gather your distinctive contributions in view of the preparation of the *Instrumentum Laboris*. The purpose of the present International Meeting was to listen to parish priests, but that cannot finish today: we need to continue to hear from you.

Dear brothers, I am at your side in this process, in which I myself am taking part. I bless all of you from the heart, and in turn, I need to feel your closeness and the support of your prayers. Let us entrust ourselves to the Blessed Virgin Mary *Hodegetria*, Our Lady of the Way. She shows us the way; she leads us to Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Rome, Saint John Lateran, 2 May 2024

FRANCIS

[1] *Address for the Commemoration of the Fifteth Anniversary of the Establishment of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.



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Wednesday 08.05.2024

**Mandate of the Holy Father Francis to Parish Priests on the occasion of the International Meeting
“Parish Priests for the Synod” (2 May 2024)**

Mandate to Parish Priests

I have something to ask of you, who have come here representing parish priests the world over: we need your help to continue to listen to the voice of parish priests in view of the Second Session of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This meeting has been very important, but it is not enough: we must do more if we want to make a larger number of parish priests enter into the synodal dynamism. And this cannot be done only by the General Secretariat of the Synod and the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia who have organized this meeting.

Therefore, I ask you today to become missionaries of synodality with your brother parish priests, once you return home: inspiring reflection on the renewal of the ministry of the parish priest in a synodal and missionary light, promoting moments of conversation in the Spirit among parish priests, in person or online, making the most of the opportunity of meetings that are already organized, or organizing one for the purpose. And then, I ask you to inform the Secretariat of the Synod of the fruits of these meetings, following the directions that will be given to you. As you return home, speak about this idea with your bishops and with the episcopal Conferences, and tell them too that it is a task given to you by the Pope.

For my part, I have written a letter to all parish priests throughout the world to inform them of this initiative, and to present you as missionaries of synodality among them. Now I will sign it, and then a copy will be consigned to each one of you, so that you can distribute it once you return home.

Thank you for your collaboration. I will accompany you with my prayer, and you too, please do not forget to pray for me.

FRANCIS