

Introduction

Thank you. My name is Kim Daniels, and I am the Co-director of Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, where our mission is to **promote dialogue on Catholic social thought; build bridges** across political and ecclesial lines; and **encourage a new generation of Catholic lay leaders**. Our hope to **advance the Gospel mission of the Church** through the **leadership of Pope Francis**.

I would like to start by thanking Dr. Paolo Ruffini and the team at the Dicastery for Communication for their hard work in bringing us all together for this Plenary Assembly. We have worked together in different circumstances for a number of years now, and I am grateful for their dedicated service to the Church.

I also have a role as a member of the Communications Commission for Synod 2021-24, and want to draw on that experience in our discussion today:

- A brief **overview** of the range of responses to the Synod in the US;
- **Highlights of the U.S. National Synthesis** for the Diocesan Phase of the Synod;
- **Opportunities and challenges for communicating about the Synod** in the United States; and
- **Elements of a path forward** amid these communications opportunities and challenges.

Overview

American journalist Nicole Winfield of the Associated Press has called the Synod “an **unprecedented...consultation of rank-and-file Catholics** on making the church more attuned to the laity.” In the United States, that consultation is being shepherded by Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, the Chair of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Doctrine. Bishop Flores [sees](#) Pope Francis' “synodal focus” as an option for “**mission over maintenance & outward extension over inwardly turned complacency.**” Bishop Flores says that “Synodality...is a chance to render **our communion more real & less infected with the ideological**, more dialogical with Christ and each other, and more focused on our **common baptismal identity** than on **our partisan differences**. It is a **way forward**...”

At the same time, it will probably not surprise you that U.S. **attitudes and responses to the Synod** reflect some of the **strengths and divisions** within the Church in the United States. We are a **large, diverse, active, and challenged community of faith**. The divisions in our society and Church have shaped responses to the Synod, resulting in some enthusiasm, some skepticism, and a good deal of uncertainty.

Highlights of the U.S. National Synthesis

The U.S Church took an important step forward with the diocesan phase of the Synod, a more than 8-month-long listening process that included over **30,000 opportunities to participate**, concluding in a National Synthesis report reflecting contributions from **all 178 Latin dioceses in the United States** and **some 700,000 participants**.

Many expressed a **'great appreciation...for the opportunity to be heard and to listen**, and for the spirit of openness. The ability to sit around the table with strangers and share joys, concerns, hopes, and suggestions without intense debate or fear...."

The Synthesis began by focusing on certain **enduring wounds** for the U.S. Church, including the **clergy sex abuse crisis**, the **Covid-19 pandemic**, **polarization**, and **marginalization**. The Synthesis noted that these wounds have led to the **lack of trust** in the hierarchy, a **loss of a "sense of belonging and connectedness," isolation and loneliness, pain and anxiety** around **division** in the Church, and **suffering and scandal**. One source of "grave scandal" cited by "many regional syntheses" was "the perceived lack of unity among the bishops in the United States, and even of some individual bishops with the Holy Father...."

The report then **highlighted common longings for enhanced communion and participation**, including for an **enriched sacramental life centered on the Eucharist**; a desire for a **"more welcoming Church** where **all members** of the People of God can find **accompaniment on the journey**, including LGBTQ individuals, divorced persons, women, people with special needs, and those suffering from racism; and a **"deep ache in the wake of the departure of young people."** Another common hope was, in the report's words, a desire for **"ongoing formation for mission,"** especially for **families** and **seminarians**, as well as an increased understanding of Catholic social teaching.

Finally, the synthesis highlighted "a genuine appreciation for **the role of the laity** in the Church," and saw the process as a **"seed of renewal"** and a call to remember that **"we are on a pilgrimage together."**

Communicating about the Synod: Opportunities and Challenges

These themes suggest **some of the communications opportunities and challenges** posed by the Synod process.

On the one hand, we have some **tremendous opportunities** here, starting with **a great story to tell**: the world's **oldest institution, widely seen** in the secular world as **stuck in the past** and **beset with problems**, has **embarked on something new and bold and unprecedented**: a **global listening process** open to **everyone** and **aimed at renewing** our ability to live out **our mission** in our own **particular times and places**, a **mission centered** most of all on **humble service**, as Pope Francis reminds us, to **“those lying wounded by the roadside.”** This should set our **hearts afire**; it is an inspiring call to renewed **communion, participation, and mission.**

This call to **renew our social mission** – to witness to the **“field hospital” Church** we're called to be – is perhaps our **key communications opportunity.** As Professor Anna Rowlands said at the recent press conference introducing the Synod's Document for the Continental Stage, **advancing the Church's Gospel mission is central to the Synod**; we are working for “an **outward-looking Church** which is **healthy from the inside.**”

Another opportunity is the chance to highlight the remarkable **global reach of our Catholic faith.** As historian John McGreevy [notes](#), “Catholicism has become the **most multicultural and multilingual institution in the world.** In 1900 two-thirds of [the world's 250 million] Catholics lived in Europe. Now two-thirds of the 1.2 billion baptized Catholics live in the Global South.” We can hope that a **broader, more global perspective** may **help dilute the divisions that exist**, for example, among Catholics within the Church in the United States.

Now let me turn to some **challenges to communicating effectively about the Synod, which are numerous and sobering.** Pope Francis identified some of them at the opening of the Synod a year ago: the risk of **formalism**, or focusing on the process; **the risk of intellectualism**, or, in the Holy Father's words, seeing the Synod as “a sort of study group” where “the usual people say the usual things...ending up along familiar and unfruitful ideological and partisan divides”; **and the risk of complacency or indifference**, of “not taking seriously the times in which we are living.”

In the United States, the communications challenges seem to reflect three negative frames. First, the **framing among some more conservative Catholics** that the process is designed to **impose changes to doctrine**, and that this result has been **predetermined** from the outset. This

week, for instance, one prominent Catholic commentator [alleged](#) that “the Synod seems not so much to be raising up fresh voices “from the peripheries,” as [claimed], as to march in lockstep with the progressivism of the developed world.”

Second, the **framing among some more progressive Catholics** hat the Synod process is actually a way of **preventing real change** by offering a **safety valve of sorts** in which the disaffected faithful will have the opportunity to “talk the talk,” but in the end the Church won’t “walk the walk.” This raises important questions about managing expectations regarding the outcomes of the Synod.

And third, the fear that the Synod is turning the Church inward towards a focus on internal ecclesial issues, rather than outward towards proclamation of the Gospel to the peripheries and service to the voiceless and vulnerable.

Recognizing these frames is the first step in crafting effective responses to them. The next step is to **resist the urge to dismiss them out of hand**, or to **impute bad motives** to those who hold these views, who are after all **our brothers and sisters in Christ**. As Pope Francis [said](#) in his September 2021 Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome, “we need not be afraid” when there is a “clash of differing visions and expectations.”

Reframing conversations so as to **nurture the kind of listening and empathy** that results in real dialogue will help us become “**the Church of closeness**” we have the opportunity to foster here, and is key to effective communication. As Bishop Flores has [said](#), “Our witness of **actually loving one another**, which begins with **listening to one another**, is reflected into the wider social context as an **alternative to ideological conflict**. We hardly have much to offer a world of conflict if **conflicts dominate the inner life of the Church.**”

Elements of a Path Forward

The path forward amidst these communications opportunities and challenges starts with taking the long view; in Pope Francis’ [words](#), “**God sees into the distance; God is not in a hurry.**” We ought to reflect such patience, particularly regarding a process as complicated and distinctive as this one. Staying **comfortable in the tension and messiness** of what we are embarking upon will help us to resist the impulse to **overreact to the inevitable challenges ahead of us.**

Through this process we are praying together, **listening together**, learning together, and moving forward together in order to better **live our mission to love God and our neighbors**, especially those “**lying wounded by the roadside.**” Effective communication is at the heart of our work

together because it is at the heart of encounter, listening, and discernment. The Holy Father is our model here, and as he has said, the root of all credible, effective communication is not marketing and strategizing, **but a “clear and decisive focus” on our Gospel mission.**