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Shala McKee's Experience with the Synodal Process: The Good and the Bad

Andru Zodrow, Managing Editor

Today is Ash Wednesday, a day when Catholics around the world begin a Lenten journey toward a renewal of their faith in preparation for Easter. As the faithful examine their inner-lives to discern whether they can take action to more fully live out the gospel, the Catholic Church itself is in a process of self-examination.

In October 2021, Pope Francis called for a new Synod on Synodality in the Church. America Media's Colleen Dulle summarized what a synod is well: "a meeting or assembly of church leaders."

The last major Church-wide synod was the 2015 Synod on the Family. Given the ongoing contentious political debates around homosexuality at the time, the synod was notably controversial and included an unprecedented amount of attacks against the Holy Father.

The Synod on Synodality will include conversations about how the Church encounters the surrounding culture and how it can greet the crises of the day while remaining true to its mission. Unlike the previous synod, which was centered around the often controversial topics of divorce, LGBTQ+ inclusion and parenting, the Synod on Synodality is about how the Church can consult those sitting in the pews.

When announcing the Synod in October, the Holy Father described the synod as a call to "look others in the eye and listen to what they have to say." In a Church which often takes a top-down approach to leadership, the synod offers a chance for all people to share their concerns with the Church.

Before bishops and cardinals meet with Pope Francis in October 2023, every Catholic diocese and major institution has been asked to conduct a dialogue with parishioners and community members, so that their concerns can be relayed back to Rome by the bishops.

One example of this consultation was the Building Bridges North-South event hosted by Loyola University Chicago and the Pontifical Commission for Latin America Feb. 24. The event, which was subtitled "a synodal encounter between Pope Francis and university students," gathered over 100 students from 21 countries to discuss potential solutions to global migration issues.

Cardinal Blase Cupich, who has been elevated to major positions of leadership in the Vatican since his ordination as a cardinal in 2016, offered the event's opening remarks.



Luca Del Carlo

“On Sept. 18, the Bishop of Rome Pope Francis offered a reflection on the synodal process that he had initiated as a means of renewing the Church in our time. The very word ‘synod’ says it all. It means journeying together. Everyone has a part to play, for we are gifted with the spirit of Christ,” Cupich said.

Shala McKee, a fourth-year cultural anthropology student who participated in the event, argued that the Church needs to take steps to open its doors to non-Catholics and historically marginalized communities.

“My experience was not all sunshine and rainbows. I think my positionality as a Black non-Catholic woman has a lot to do with it. I did not at times feel welcome in the space or like my insights were being valued,” McKee said.

Campus Ministry approached McKee to participate in the synodal event, and she participated in recurring two-hour prep meetings beginning in early February with other students in the region. The group’s conversations resulted in the formation of concrete questions for the Holy Father. On the day itself, McKee watched the conference online. No Seattle U students were selected to attend the call.

“While I commend their efforts, I think through better organization, there could have been more interaction and more engagement to try to actually connect with the students. Obviously that might not have been done individually because there were so many of us, but I think that if they are going to try to do more of these kinds of events, which I would obviously encourage, there’s definitely things that they can learn from the way this first one went,” McKee said.

McKee, who is the Student Campus Minister for Social Justice, has experience engaging in dialogue in Catholic contexts, but was surprised at how dissimilar the synodal event was to her campus ministry work.

“I knew nothing about this going into it and I will say my experience in Campus Ministry has been extraordinary while not being Catholic or religious in any sense, so I was very excited going into the experience, because I thought that it would be the same kind of space,” McKee said. “To be 100% transparent, it definitely wasn’t. I did feel a little isolated, as someone who is not Catholic.”

McKee underscored that those who were baptized were more equipped with the language that is hyper-specific to Catholic spaces. As a consequence, her experience as a non-Catholic Black woman was not highlighted.

“I was really excited to offer interfaith perspectives, because my migration is not just a religious event. I think there might have been maybe one or two other non-Catholics in the space, but a majority of my peers who were selected for this were Catholic, and I think that created a sort of environment that I wasn’t totally prepared for,” McKee said.

In the future, McKee hopes that the Church will become more open to the input of those outside the institution itself, and will consider how the history of colonialism and exclusion in the Church has led to marginalized voices going unheard by the Vatican.

“In sharing this, I hope to provide some solace to anyone who has entered a Catholic space and has not felt welcome, and to anyone who might be involved in the process going forward, because I know that they are going to try to continue working on this. I’m trying to make the most of a less-than-satisfactory experience,” McKee said.

As the Church reflects upon its capacity to remain open to all perspectives and the importance of synodality, the struggle to ensure that all voices are recognized continues. During this season of Lenten renewal and reflection, all laity, ordained religious and those outside of the Church will have the opportunity to consider the duty of the Church to carry a spirit of encounter to all peoples.