

Building synodal bridges: theological projects at the intersection of theory and practice

BY PRESTON CARMACK

Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University (JST-SCU) recently launched Synodal Journey—a theological project to promote the practice of synodality and the emergence of a synodal Church in the United States. It includes a slate of programming that facilitates conversations about important themes within the life of the church, bringing people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences to the table to learn from one another and grow together.



Programming for Synodal Journey began with a webinar series of monthly “synodal moments” that featured discussions about LGBTQ Catholics and the Synod, women in ministry, and how to be a church that welcomes the vocations and ministries of all its members. Each synodal moment webinar featured a delegate to the Synod and offered space to engage in conversation and to share best practices. In addition, community partnership events were held throughout February and March.

The Synodal Journey initiative also includes large-scale in-person programming. The upcoming “Women and Synodality: Where Can We Go from Here” is a two-day conference with keynote speakers and interactive break-out sessions that will focus on imagining the role of women in

the future of the global Church. An international convening on synodality is being planned for spring 2025.

After Pope Francis had convened clergy and lay people in Rome for the historic “Synod on Synodality” in October 2023 and in anticipation of the next session in the fall of 2024, the Catholic Church as a whole has continued to foster dialogue and conversations in the spirit of synodality at the local, regional, and national levels. This emphasis on synodality comes at a time when JST-SCU and Santa Clara University are increasingly stepping into a role as a facilitator of projects like the Synodal Journey and convener of global conversations at the intersection of theory and practice, academia, and the important issues of our day.

Although synods have long been part of the Catholic Church, often regarding doctrinal or administrative issues, the fall 2023 meeting was significant because of the makeup of the voting members, the themes and topics being discussed, and—perhaps, most importantly—the structure and format of the gathering itself.

Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, dean of JST-SCU and a voting member of the Synod, described the month-long gathering as a “moment of prayer” and listening. Rather than the proceedings being held in the usual venue—a huge hall with stadium-style seating and a stage at the front—the Synod on Synodality was held in a large open space with round tables that each sat up to 12 people. Participants consisting of lay women and men as well as bishops, Religious, and clergy from all over the world gathered for each session to discuss topics, share from real life experiences, and listen to one another.

Orobator called the moment “deeply Ignatian” in the way that it prioritized dialogue and collective discernment. Because this process of synodality—which will have a second gathering in Rome this fall—brings a diverse set of

perspectives to the table, there is an element of risk that necessitates a posture hospitable to difference.

“Opposition and dissent aren’t necessarily bad, for the simple reason that synodality is not the preserve or prerogative of a few,” said Orobator. “Authentic synodality is an inclusive experience of what it means to be a diverse community where even those voices of dissent and disaffection should be heard.”

Some were disappointed that the first meeting of the Synod did not result in concrete action or changes, but Professor of Christian Social Ethics and Associate Dean of JST-SCU Julie Rubio found hope in the process itself.

“...It is at the table (referring to the ongoing synodal process)—where lay and Religious, women and men, theologians and bishops, and Catholics of every point of view from every culture will have a seat—that discernment will have to happen,” said Rubio. In addition to the themes being discussed and the composition of the delegates, the process of synodality itself is part of what makes this journey unique.

“A synodal church can only move forward by walking together,” added Rubio.

Orobator returned to Rome last month, joined this time by a delegation of leaders from Santa Clara University (SCU) and Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, to meet with senior Vatican leaders and leaders of the Society of Jesus. They discussed a wide range of topics including global Jesuit higher education, the ethical use of artificial intelligence, advancing a synodal church, and meeting the needs of

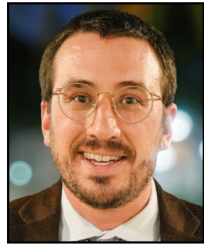


(from left) Father Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, Julie Sullivan, Father Tom Smolich, Agnieszka Winkler, Father Luis Calero, Ashley Sonsini, and Larry Sonsini met with senior Vatican leaders in Rome last month.

the changing Catholic Church through theological education and formation. The visit culminated with a private audience between SCU President Julie Sullivan and Pope Francis.

theological projects like the Synodal Journey that respond to our current moment by building bridges between theory and practice.

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