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Archbishop Paul D. Etienne of Seattle, a member of the Synod of Bishops, speaks about the synod during an interview with Catholic News Service at the Pontifical North American College in Rome Oct. 24, 2024. (CNS)

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Change in the Catholic Church, including a commitment to recognizing women's leadership gifts and being more welcoming of all people, happens slowly and deliberately, which is a good thing in a rapidly changing world, said the archbishop of Seattle.

Archbishop Paul D. Etienne of Seattle, a papally-appointed member of the Synod of Bishops, said that as the second synod assembly nears its conclusion Oct. 27, people might not see what they hoped for in the synod's final document, but the gathering heard them and took their input seriously.

"The topic of the synod is synodality. That's the first step," the archbishop told Catholic News Service Oct. 24. "The very simple fact that people have been able to express their hurts, their frustrations (and) their desires to the highest level of the church, the broadest level of the church, that's the first step."

"And it is no secret that the church moves slowly when it comes to decision taking," he said.

After last year's synod assembly, Pope Francis established study groups to explore some of the more complicated and controversial issues raised at the synod, including women's ministry, inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics, seminary training, and the appointment and ministry of bishops.

Having specialized study groups focus on each subject "is not going to bring about rapid change," at least not as rapid as one sees in society, the archbishop said, "but that's a part of the beauty of the church."

"The synod operates within the guardrails of tradition and sacred Scripture," he said, and that ensures that decisions reflect the Catholic faith and not simply a given culture.

The prayer, discussion and discernment built into the synod's structure also acknowledge that "the church in different cultures and different parts of the world and on different topics moves at different paces," Etienne said. "And I've experienced that in the conversations I've had with people from around the world this month."

Catholics in the Seattle Archdiocese would like to see "the voices of women being heard," and some "even want to see women being ordained deacons," he said, and they "certainly want a greater receptivity of the LGBTQ community."

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Many people probably will be disappointed that concrete action is not being taken on those issues immediately, the archbishop said, but he hopes they also will understand that one goal of synodality is to help the church learn to move at "the pace of the Holy Spirit."

The key question, he said, is "how do we become a church that is living its faith in all of the different cultures and contexts of the world and doing it in a manner that invites all of the baptized into a deeper life in the risen Christ and into a deeper participation in his mission, which is the mission of the church?"

Synodality asks all baptized Catholics to live their faith deeply and actively in the world, breaking down barriers, recognizing their neighbors, "rebuilding torn relationships, bridging divisions and healing the wounds of humanity," he said. "So, it's very practical."

Etienne said he hopes synodality will be a clear feature of "Partners in the Gospel," an ongoing process in the Archdiocese of Seattle that superficially could be described as reducing the number of parishes by half. But it was a process that involved reflection and consultation with parishioners and calls for further consultation as the process continues.

In July, "the 136 parishes in the Archdiocese of Seattle became 60 parish families, with eight stand-alone parishes," the archdiocesan website explained.

"Is there anxiety? Is there fear? Is there frustration, even anger? All those emotions are a part of it," the archbishop said. "But I think deep down, people feel they are now being given the opportunity to shape their future."

Each "parish family" is being asked to spend the next three years looking at their available resources and developing a plan to advance their hopes for the life, activities and outreach of their parishes.

Etienne said he wants to ensure "the co-responsibility of all the baptized" is being taken seriously, including by mandating the formation of new pastoral councils that are truly representative of the parishioners.

"It's not just the pastor having an idea in his head about what needs to take place, coming in and saying, 'Well, here's what we need to do,'" the archbishop said, "but rather bringing people together and saying, 'OK, here are the challenges that we're facing. Here is the mission that we all share. How are we going to do this?'"

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. [View the full series.](#)