

### **Preparation**

A mini-synod aims to encourage mutual, respectful sharing of perspectives, needs, and information pertinent to the topic. Each discussion should be limited to a maximum of 12-15 people, including the two responsible for guiding each discussion. You can break larger groups into smaller sets, if necessary. Generally, groups with fewer than five or six people will not provide the range of perspectives and experiences desired.

**First task for everyone** is to read the Preparatory Document and, most importantly, the *Vademecum* issued by the Vatican early in September.

Next, organize a committee to handle the following tasks:

- ❖ Obtain and set up the venue(s).

If conducting a session by Zoom, ensure that the account has sufficient capacity for the number of people you expect to attend, make sure you can use breakout sessions, and schedule practice time for you and your team to handle the transitions smoothly. You also will need:

- An emcee and facilitators and a scribe for each breakout room.
- A gatekeeper who monitors the incoming participants and allows them to enter the Zoom room (this person should be available to monitor the entries throughout the session)
- A “help person” who can field technical questions and help those having trouble using the Zoom. It can be the same person as the gatekeeper.

If planning to conduct in-person sessions, obtain a space that feels comfortable for about a dozen people or ones where you can close off space, so the attendees are not tiny dots in a cavernous hall. If you expect to break into multiple groups, find a space where the conversation in one group will not interfere with others in the space. You also will need:

- An emcee to provide continuity during the synod.
- Facilitators and a scribe for each breakout session.
- Tables and chairs arranged in clusters of 12-15 per group.

## Conducting a Mini-Synod

- ❖ Line up an opening speaker, emcee, facilitators, and scribes—and refreshments if appropriate.
- ❖ Prepare the topics to be discussed, using the guide (*Vademecum*; see Section 5) distributed by the Vatican for the 2023 Synod process. Also prepare an opening prayer and introductory remarks.
- ❖ Plan to collate all responses from the session(s) and prepare a report to send to the appropriate contacts.
- ❖ Distribute invitations. In your outreach, remember especially this instruction from the *Vademecum* for the Synod:

By convoking this Synod, Pope Francis is inviting all the baptized to participate in this Synodal Process that begins at the diocesan level. Dioceses are called to keep in mind that the main subjects of this synodal experience are all the baptized. Special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith, etc. Creative means should also be found to involve children and youth. (*Section 2.1: Who Can Participate?*)

- ❖ Contact each person who will participate to be sure they understand the expectations for the sessions.
  - A synodal discussion does not use speakers and a standard Q and A format. Instead, it is like a book group where each person expresses their own feelings and thoughts about the material.
  - During sessions, no one seeks to “answer” another’s thoughts or ideas, but rather to talk about what “I think” and “I feel” and “I had an experience”—the “I” statements must prevail. It matters less what a rule or fact or event is than what I think or feel about the rule or experience or event.
  - Be sure participants understand this format AND are prepared to share their thoughts and feelings.

***Preparations should begin at least three weeks, preferably longer, before the sessions. You need sufficient time to invite and prepare participants.***

## Conducting a Mini-Synod

### ***Running the Meeting***

For in-person meetings, set up tables and chairs at the physical venue. Arrange chairs in a large circle so that each person can see the one speaking or set up sufficient circles for each group of 8 to 12 persons. Consider using a “talking stick” as an aid so that people speak one at a time. Anything can serve as this “stick”: a rock, a medal, a three-minute timepiece, a hat, a baton, even an actual stick. The idea is that only the person holding the talisman may speak (except the facilitator, who may need to remind the speaker that it is another’s turn). When one person finishes, they hand the talisman to the person on their right. This person may speak or may decline to speak at that time by handing the talisman to the next person. Those who decline should be invited after one cycle to speak before others speak a second time.

For Zoom sessions, send out instructions and the link for participating; follow up with reminders a few days prior to the session and then a few hours before startup.

***During the meeting***, your goals are to involve as many attendees as possible in the discussion, to encourage respectful attention to different views, and to prevent one or two voices from dominating a session. This does not mean cutting off a persistent voice. In any such setting, some people will speak more than others. But you can encourage those who have not yet contributed by inviting them to speak before others have a second chance to speak.

Have an introductory speaker who will provide an overview of the synod, the synodal process, and the presumed timetable for this first phase of the synod.

After the introductory speaker, open the general session: identify the facilitator and scribe at each table or, for Zoom sessions, have the facilitator prepared to immediately introduce themselves and the scribe for that session.

For the discussion, you may find the following format a helpful guide:

### ***Greeting and Introductions***

Introduce yourselves, ask each person to introduce themselves and, depending on the size of the group, perhaps say what they hope will happen during the session. The goal is not necessarily to obtain answers to these questions but rather to “lubricate the voices” (get everyone talking from the start).

*Note:* You can begin with the Prayer instead (next step) or you can move the prayer to the first stage, prior to introducing the opening speaker.

## Conducting a Mini-Synod

### Opening Prayer

Use a multi-stanza prayer and go around the room having each person say a few lines of the prayer. Again, your goal is to lubricate the voices and let everyone participate from the beginning.

### Ground Rules (remind attendees of these at each session)

1. Everyone is invited to contribute. Make sure everyone has a chance to speak by not talking more than three or four minutes each time you speak.
2. Try not to speak twice until everyone has had a chance to speak once—but don't feel compelled to speak until you are ready. (If you are using a talking stick, where each person hands the “stick” to the right, advise everyone that they may pass the stick if they are not yet ready to speak—be sure to return to them later to ask if they are ready.)
3. Respect each other's opinions and contributions.

### Discussion Session

1. Use the topics and questions prepared beforehand by the committee—read one and open the discussion on that issue.
2. Proceed around the room until each person has spoken. If you are using a talking stick, have each person hand it to the person on their right. On Zoom sessions, just call on each person by name.
3. When you feel that a consensus has been expressed on the question, summarize the group viewpoint for the scribe to write down—or have the scribe do this step. Be sure to include “minority views.” Even with consensus, there may be a sizable number of those with a different view; be sure you capture those thoughts along with the general opinion. (For example, “The group thinks x and y, but almost about one-quarter of us see z as the more important actions.”)
4. Continue with the next question until your group covers all of them.
5. Return to the main session and present the group's thoughts to the full group.

*Given the number of questions and topics presented in the Vademecum, it is unlikely that a single session will suffice to cover all topics. Decide how many sessions will be best—half a dozen short ones or one to two lengthy ones, for example—and divide the questions among the anticipated number of sessions.*

## Conducting a Mini-Synod

### *Setting the Next Meeting*

Unless you have run an all-day session and covered all the questions and topics proposed in the *Vademecum*, be sure all attendees know when the next meeting will occur. Note that all attendees may not be able to meet the next time, and there also may be new attendees for the next meeting.

### *Tips and Potential Problems*

It is rare, but no matter how prepared you are, no matter how long you spent “vetting” and preparing everyone, someone may disrupt the session. Perhaps by speaking too long. Perhaps by veering wildly off-topic. Perhaps by directing personal comments at another participant. Plan beforehand for how you will handle any such issues. Because there are two of you running the session, one of you is always available to guide a disruptive person away from the group. Do not worry though—disruption rarely happens; you just want to be prepared in case it does.

### *Possible Ways to Defuse a Situation*

- ❖ Take advantage of the slightest pause in the offending speaker’s monologue to thank them and ask them to hand the talking piece to the person on the right. Be quick!
- ❖ If the offending speaker’s monologue ends, remind everyone of the ground rules before the next person speaks. However, if the offender is making a personal attack on someone else, please interrupt immediately to remind them of the ground rules and that we are here to listen to each other’s thoughts, not to critique them: “We want to hear what you yourself think.”
- ❖ Even though you, as a facilitator, do not direct the conversation, you should speak up if someone jumps to an entirely different topic. Gently interrupt and thank them for their observations, but “for this evening, perhaps we can return to the topic of X.”
- ❖ If a disruptive person will not cooperate, move to their side and ask if you can discuss his/her “very interesting idea” with them elsewhere while the others continue with their own discussion. (On Zoom, press the Mute button on that person and say their idea will be discussed at another time, but for now let’s return to tonight’s question.”)