

Pope Francis and the Round Table Revolution: What Synodal Seating in the Roman Catholic Church Means for Religious Leaders and Catholics Worldwide

Tomasz Włodarczyk

2026-01-22

Analyzing how Pope Francis moved the Catholic Church from lecture hall rows to round tables at the 2023-2024 Synod on Synodality reflects deeper changes in religious leadership, Catholic leadership approaches, and how Catholics participate in the Catholic community—particularly through online presence and use of digital communication.

Table of contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| <i>Executive Summary</i> | 2 |
| 1 The Spatial Revolution in the Roman Catholic Church: What Pope Francis Changed and Why It Matters | 3 |
| 1.1 The Traditional Synod Hall: Reinforcing Hierarchy in the Catholic Church | 3 |
| 1.2 The 2023-2024 Innovation: Round Tables and Immediate Controversy Under Pope Francis | 4 |
| 2 Theoretical Frameworks: How Space Functions as Power in Papal Leadership | 4 |
| 2.1 The Double-Edged Nature of Spatial Arrangements in Papal Governance | 4 |
| 2.2 Sociopetal Arrangements: Enabling or Constraining the Pope's Vision? | 5 |
| 2.3 Power Dynamics: Visible Versus Hidden Control in Catholic Church Leadership | 5 |
| 3 The Cardinal Zen Critique: Manipulation or Method in Pope Francis's Synod? | 6 |
| 3.1 Understanding the Concerns: Conflicts of Interest and Procedural Questions | 6 |
| 3.2 The Counter-Perspective: Enabling Authentic Participation Among Catholics . . | 7 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 3.3 The Analytical Middle Ground: Research Questions About Papal Reform Techniques | 7 |
| 4 Organizational Research: Lessons on Spatial Power and Conflicts of Interest | 8 |
| 4.1 Corporate Meeting Room Dynamics and Control | 8 |
| 4.2 Educational Spaces: Liberation or Subtle Control? | 9 |
| 4.3 Power Seats and Strategic Positioning | 9 |
| 5 Ecclesial Implications: Competing Interpretations Within the Catholic Church | 10 |
| 5.1 Synodality as Authentic Reform in the Catholic Church | 10 |
| 5.2 Critics Respond: Synodality as Sophisticated Control | 11 |
| 5.3 The Theological Tension: Hierarchy and Participation Under Papal Leadership | 11 |
| 6 Critical Analysis: Measuring the Power of Arrangement - Research Questions | 12 |
| 6.1 What Can Spatial Change Accomplish? | 12 |
| 6.2 Mechanisms of Accountability in the Catholic Church | 13 |
| 6.3 Spatial Arrangements as Contested Terrain in the Catholic Church | 13 |
| 7 Broader Implications: The Politics of Space for a Religious Leader | 14 |
| 7.1 Spatial Arrangements as Contested Terrain in the Catholic Church | 14 |
| 7.2 Implications for Any Organization: Lessons from Pope Francis | 14 |
| 8 Future Trajectories for Catholics: The Long-Term Stakes for Pope Francis's Vision | 15 |
| 8.1 From Event to Culture: Implementing Pope Francis's Vision | 15 |
| 8.2 The Accountability Question: Research Questions for Future Catholic Church Reform | 15 |
| 8.3 New Digital Dimensions: Pope Francis and the Catholic Church in the Digital Age | 16 |
| 9 Conclusions: The Ambiguous Power of Spatial Arrangement | 17 |
| 10 References | 18 |
| <i>About this Analysis</i> | 20 |

Executive Summary

When the Vatican moved its 2023-2024 Synod on Synodality from the traditional synod hall with theater-style seating to the larger Paul VI Audience Hall configured with round tables, the change represented far more than logistical accommodation. This spatial transformation became itself a contested issue within the Catholic Church, with critics like Cardinal Joseph Zen, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong, alleging that organizers employed strategic process design including seating arrangements to channel outcomes within acceptable parameters. Whether one views

the round table format as genuine reform or subtle control mechanism, the controversy itself reveals a fundamental truth: spatial arrangements powerfully shape who speaks, who listens, and what conclusions emerge. Drawing on research from educational psychology, organizational behavior, and communication studies, this analysis examines how physical seating configurations function as instruments of power—capable of either democratizing dialogue or channeling it toward predetermined outcomes, depending on how they are deployed and what accompanies them.

1 The Spatial Revolution in the Roman Catholic Church: What Pope Francis Changed and Why It Matters

1.1 The Traditional Synod Hall: Reinforcing Hierarchy in the Catholic Church

For decades, Vatican synods convened in the synod hall within Vatican City, where participants sat in rows facing forward toward a presiding authority. This arrangement, common in lecture halls and traditional classrooms, creates specific communication dynamics. Research demonstrates that theater-style seating minimizes participant-to-participant communication while maximizing information flow from authority to audience (Fernandes, Huang & Rinaldo, 2011). Students in back rows perform substantially worse than those in front—between thirteen and twenty-two percent in large lecture environments—and attend less frequently (Wasendorf et al., 2023).

The traditional synod hall seating communicated clear messages about ecclesial authority within the structure of the Catholic Church. The presiding cardinal or the Holy Father occupied the central seat with unobstructed sightlines to all participants. Bishops sat in assigned hierarchical order. Discussion flowed primarily through the chair, with individuals requesting permission to speak, addressing remarks to the presiding authority rather than to fellow participants. This spatial arrangement could be accused of reinforcing the Catholic Church's hierarchical structure, where authority flows downward from the apex of ecclesial power through the Holy See.

Defenders of traditional arrangements argue this format provided clarity, efficiency, formalized communication protocols aligned with institutional authority structures. Speakers addressed the full assembly rather than fragmenting into table conversations. The presiding authority could manage discussion flow, preventing tangential debates. Visual hierarchy matched theological hierarchy—a spatial embodiment of the Roman Catholic Church's divinely instituted structure.

1.2 The 2023-2024 Innovation: Round Tables and Immediate Controversy Under Pope Francis

For the October 2023 and 2024 synod assemblies, Vatican organizers moved proceedings to the significantly larger Paul VI Audience Hall, seating 364 participants—including, for the first time, women with voting rights—at round tables (USCCB, 2023). This represented an unprecedented format change for a gathering of this magnitude and ecclesial significance.

The innovation immediately sparked controversy among Catholics. Cardinal Joseph Zen dispatched a lengthy letter voicing concerns about synod procedures, alleging that organizers were skilled in the art of manipulation. His concerns, shared among traditional Catholics, suggested that the round table format represented not neutral facilitation but strategic control—a way to guide discussions toward predetermined progressive conclusions while implementing facilitated dialogue with predetermined decision boundaries.

Zen's critique raises crucial questions applicable beyond ecclesial contexts: Can seating arrangements themselves constitute manipulation? Do round tables genuinely democratize discussion or do they merely disguise top-down control behind collaborative aesthetics? When religious organizations change spatial configurations, are they empowering participants or deploying sophisticated techniques to channel outcomes?

2 Theoretical Frameworks: How Space Functions as Power in Papal Leadership

2.1 The Double-Edged Nature of Spatial Arrangements in Papal Governance

Research confirms that seating configurations profoundly influence communication patterns, but this influence can serve multiple agendas. Round table arrangements fundamentally alter power dynamics compared to theater-style rows—the question is whether this alteration empowers participants or provides facilitators with subtler control mechanisms.

Educational studies show that circular seating promotes equal participation and active engagement from all students, creating an atmosphere where everyone faces one another and can contribute to dialogue (Xihamontessori, 2025). Unlike row seating where front positions dominate participation, round tables distribute speaking opportunities more equitably. However, research also reveals that skilled facilitators can manipulate round table discussions through agenda control, selective recognition, strategic grouping, and summary framing that emphasizes certain contributions while marginalizing others.

The King Arthur table—as round configurations are sometimes called—eliminates visible hierarchical positions, but this does not eliminate hierarchy itself (Psychology Today, 2012). Authority at distribution round tables shifts from positional to performative and procedural mechanisms: rhetorical skill, recognized expertise, facilitator authority, and the subtle dynamics

of who speaks after whom. An experienced facilitator can guide round table discussions toward specific conclusions while participants believe they arrived there through free deliberation.

2.2 Sociopetal Arrangements: Enabling or Constraining the Pope's Vision?

Environmental psychology distinguishes between sociopetal spaces that encourage interaction and sociofugal spaces that discourage it. Theater-style rows constitute sociofugal arrangements—participants face the same direction, making eye contact with fellow attendees difficult and creating communication barriers. Round tables exemplify sociopetal design, facilitating face-to-face interaction and reducing interpersonal distance (Hayashi, Mochizuki & Yamauchi, 2022).

However, sociopetal arrangements carry ambiguous implications. By encouraging interaction, they can either unleash genuine dialogue or channel it through carefully structured processes. Small group discussions at round tables can generate authentic participant insights—or they can break larger assemblies into manageable units where facilitators at each table guide conversations toward predetermined themes, which are then synthesized in plenary sessions that reflect organizer agendas.

Studies comparing crescent-shaped and round-shaped small group arrangements found that configurations promoting eye contact and reducing planning time enhanced discussion efficiency, with groups spending less time on procedural matters and more on substantive exchange (Hayashi, Mochizuki & Yamauchi, 2022). But efficiency itself is neutral—efficient movement toward participant-generated conclusions differs fundamentally from efficient channeling toward facilitator-desired outcomes.

2.3 Power Dynamics: Visible Versus Hidden Control in Catholic Church Leadership

Traditional hierarchical seating makes power visible. Everyone knows who holds authority, who can speak, and through what channels ecclesial communication flows. This transparency has advantages: participants understand the rules, can strategize accordingly, and know when authority is being exercised.

Round tables potentially obscure power dynamics in religious institutions. Research on conference room seating identifies how power operates even in ostensibly egalitarian configurations (Kemp, 2024):

Facilitator Control: At round tables lacking clear authority figures, the facilitator or discussion leader wields enormous influence through question framing, turn-taking management, and summary statements that interpret what the group said.

Agenda Power: Those who set discussion questions, determine time allocations, and frame issues control outcomes regardless of seating arrangement. Round tables cannot overcome agenda manipulation.

Strategic Grouping: Organizers who assign seating can strategically distribute participants to prevent coalition formation, isolate dissenting voices, or ensure each table has appropriate representation of desired viewpoints.

Synthesis Authority: When table discussions feed into plenary sessions, whoever synthesizes and presents table conclusions shapes what the full assembly hears, emphasizing certain themes while downplaying others.

Cardinal Zen's concerns about manipulation implicitly reference these mechanisms. He suggested that synod organizers used round tables not to democratize discussion but to create the appearance of broad consultation while actually channeling dialogue toward progressive conclusions through careful facilitation, strategic grouping, and selective synthesis.

3 The Cardinal Zen Critique: Manipulation or Method in Pope Francis's Synod?

3.1 Understanding the Concerns: Conflicts of Interest and Procedural Questions

Cardinal Zen's allegations of manipulation reflect broader anxieties among Catholics about how procedural choices shape substantive outcomes. His concerns encompass several dimensions:

Process as Predetermination: The complaint that organizers approached the synod with predetermined conclusions, using round table discussions to manufacture consent rather than genuinely discern the Holy Spirit's guidance. From this perspective, spatial arrangements function as theater—creating the appearance of consultation while actually controlling outcomes.

Breaking Assembly Unity: Traditional synod formats kept all bishops together in one deliberative body. Round tables fragment the assembly into separate conversations, preventing participants from hearing all contributions and assessing the full range of opinion. This fragmentation potentially enables organizers to synthesize diverse table discussions selectively, emphasizing points supporting their agenda while minimizing contrary views.

Facilitation as Direction: Each round table required facilitators to manage discussion. Critics worried these facilitators—selected by organizers—would steer conversations subtly toward approved themes, discourage problematic lines of inquiry, and frame questions to elicit desired responses.

Procedural Opacity: Traditional formats provide transparency—everyone witnesses who speaks and what they say. Round table discussions occur simultaneously in partially private

contexts. Participants cannot verify whether synthesis reports accurately represent what tables discussed, creating opportunities for distortion.

These concerns are not paranoid fantasies but recognize real possibilities inherent in any participatory process. Organizational research confirms that facilitators substantially influence outcomes through question framing, turn allocation, and summarization choices (Edutopia, 2025). The question is whether synod organizers deployed these techniques manipulatively or used them to enable genuine dialogue.

3.2 The Counter-Perspective: Enabling Authentic Participation Among Catholics

Defenders of the round table format argue it addressed real limitations in traditional synod procedures within the Catholic Church:

Breaking Hierarchical Intimidation: In theater-style settings, junior bishops or lay participants may face psychological barriers to challenging cardinals or contradicting prevailing views. Speaking requires standing before the entire assembly, approaching a microphone, and addressing hundreds of participants including ecclesial superiors. Round tables reduce this intimidation, enabling quieter voices to contribute at the table level before speaking to the plenary.

Facilitating Actual Dialogue: Traditional formats feature sequential monologues rather than genuine dialogue. Speakers present prepared interventions, but rarely respond directly to previous speakers or develop ideas through exchange. Round tables enable real conversation where participants build on each other's contributions, challenge assumptions, and collaboratively refine thinking.

Including Non-Clerical Wisdom: The 2023-2024 synod included voting members who were not bishops for the first time in the Catholic Church. These participants brought expertise in theology, pastoral work, and lived experience but lacked formation in formal ecclesial deliberation. Round tables provided a less intimidating environment for their contributions than traditional formats designed for catholic leaders.

Practical Necessity: With 364 participants, traditional formats would require impossibly long sessions for everyone to speak. Round tables enabled more total participation in limited time.

3.3 The Analytical Middle Ground: Research Questions About Papal Reform Techniques

The truth likely resides between these positions. Round table arrangements are neither inherently manipulative nor inherently liberating—they are powerful techniques whose effects depend on how they are deployed and what accompanies them.

Research on classroom seating demonstrates this ambiguity. Teachers can use round tables to genuinely facilitate student-driven inquiry, helping learners construct knowledge through collaborative dialogue. Or they can use round tables to guide students toward predetermined conclusions more efficiently than lecture formats, creating the appearance of discovery learning while actually controlling outcomes through careful questioning and selective reinforcement (Edutopia, 2025).

The same ambiguity applies to synodal round tables. The format could have enabled authentic discernment where the Holy Spirit spoke through diverse voices in genuine dialogue. Or it could have channeled discussion toward organizer-preferred outcomes while creating the appearance of broad consultation. Determining which occurred requires examining not just spatial arrangements but accompanying procedures: How were tables assigned? Who facilitated discussions? How were table reports synthesized? What transparency mechanisms ensured accurate representation of discussions?

Without access to detailed procedural documents and participant testimony, external observers cannot definitively judge whether the synod's round tables constituted manipulation or genuine participation. But the controversy itself illuminates a crucial insight: spatial arrangements are never neutral. They powerfully influence who speaks, who listens, and what conclusions emerge—which is precisely why they become contested terrain when stakes are high within the Church.

4 Organizational Research: Lessons on Spatial Power and Conflicts of Interest

4.1 Corporate Meeting Room Dynamics and Control

Business research on meeting effectiveness reveals how spatial arrangements function as power instruments. Studies demonstrate that those who control seating assignments, meeting room configuration, and facilitation processes substantially influence outcomes regardless of apparent egalitarianism (Livingston, cited in Experteer, 2024).

The Pixar Animation Studios case illustrates spatial influence on organizational culture. For a decade, West One conference room featured a long rectangular table where executives sat at one end and creative staff at the other, creating adversarial dynamics that stifled creativity. When a scheduling accident moved a meeting to a room with a square table, the entire production team's energy shifted—ideas flowed freely and everyone contributed on equal footing. Pixar's president immediately replaced the rectangular table, recognizing that spatial arrangements directly impacted outcomes (Wrike, 2018).

However, corporate research also documents how round table meetings can be manipulated. Experienced managers strategically assign seating to prevent coalition formation, place allies in positions flanking their own seats, and isolate potential dissenters. Facilitators guide discussions

through framing questions, selectively recognizing speakers, and summarizing in ways that emphasize certain points while minimizing others. The round table format provides cover for these techniques—participants feel they participated in open dialogue even when outcomes were substantially predetermined.

4.2 Educational Spaces: Liberation or Subtle Control?

Educational research shows that classroom seating significantly affects learning outcomes, but pedagogy scholars debate whether progressive seating arrangements genuinely empower students or constitute more sophisticated control mechanisms.

Critical pedagogy theorists argue that round table discussions can perpetuate power imbalances through hidden curriculum—the implicit lessons taught through classroom structure rather than explicit content. A teacher who arranges desks in a circle while maintaining complete control over discussion topics, turn-taking, and assessment reproduces hierarchy through subtler means than traditional lecture formats. Students experience the illusion of participation while the teacher retains substantive authority (Edutopia, 2025).

Conversely, progressive educators document how collaborative seating arrangements genuinely transform power relations when accompanied by appropriate pedagogical practices. Students seated in circles or small groups who jointly determine discussion topics, evaluate each other's contributions, and collectively construct knowledge experience authentic empowerment. The round table enables rather than merely symbolizes democratic learning.

The distinguishing factor is not spatial arrangement itself but accompanying practices. Round tables combined with teacher-controlled agendas, predetermined learning outcomes, and traditional assessment reproduce hierarchy. Round tables combined with student co-governance, emergent curriculum, and collaborative evaluation potentially democratize education.

The parallel to synodal processes is direct: round tables combined with organizer-controlled agendas, predetermined themes, and hierarchical synthesis constitute sophisticated control. Round tables combined with participant-generated questions, emergent discernment, and transparent reporting potentially flatten ecclesial deliberation and religious communication.

4.3 Power Seats and Strategic Positioning

Even at round tables, power dynamics persist through strategic positioning. Research identifies how individuals create power seats in ostensibly egalitarian configurations (Kemp, 2024; Psychology Today, 2012):

Spatial Distinction: Power players push chairs slightly back from the table, creating visual separation that signals authority. They remove adjacent seats to expand personal space. They position themselves facing doors to maintain environmental control.

Facilitator Position: The designated facilitator or discussion leader wields authority through procedural control—recognizing speakers, framing questions, managing time, and summarizing contributions.

Coalition Building: Strategic actors arrive early to claim advantageous positions and encourage allies to sit nearby, creating micro-coalitions that can dominate table discussions.

Rhetorical Dominance: Skilled speakers leverage round table formats to establish authority through persuasive contributions, setting discussion frames that subsequent speakers must address.

These mechanisms operate in any round table setting including synodal assemblies. Cardinal Zen's manipulation concerns implicitly reference these dynamics—the possibility that organizers used table assignments, facilitator selection, and procedural control to shape outcomes while maintaining the appearance of egalitarian dialogue.

5 Ecclesial Implications: Competing Interpretations Within the Catholic Church

5.1 Synodality as Authentic Reform in the Catholic Church

Proponents interpret the round table innovation as embodying genuine commitment to synodal principles. The concept of synodality—walking together as the People of God—requires communication structures enabling genuine dialogue rather than mere information transmission. Pope Francis launched the 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality to examine how the Catholic Church can better live communion, achieve participation, and open itself to mission (Vatican Synod, 2021).

From this perspective, spatial arrangements embody ecclesiological commitments. Theater-style seating reflects a hierarchical transmission model where teaching authority resides at the apex and flows downward. Round tables embody a dialogical, communal model where the solution emerges through mutual listening and exchange.

According to this point of view the decision to use round tables for this particular synod was strategic but not manipulative. The synod's very theme—how to become a more synodal Church—required demonstrating synodal practices in assembly procedures. Using traditional hierarchical seating to discuss participatory governance would have undermined the message through performative contradiction. Round tables enabled the Holy Spirit to speak through diverse voices in genuine dialogue, producing insights that would not have emerged through traditional formats.

Sister María de los Dolores Palencia Gómez becoming the first woman to preside over any Catholic Synod of Bishops on October 13, 2023 (CNA, 2024) exemplifies this interpretation.

Her historic leadership occurred within the spatial context of round tables rather than hierarchical rows—an arrangement that made female leadership less structurally anomalous and more naturally integrated into synodal processes.

5.2 Critics Respond: Synodality as Sophisticated Control

Critics interpret the same innovations as sophisticated manipulation. From this perspective, round tables did not democratize authority but obscured it, creating the appearance of broad consultation while organizers retained substantive control through facilitation, agenda-setting, and synthesis.

The concern is that synodality rhetoric provides cover for progressive agenda implementation. By fragmenting the assembly into round table discussions, organizers prevented traditional bishops from witnessing the full range of opinion, coordinating opposition, or understanding how their contributions were being synthesized. Facilitators guided discussions toward approved themes. Synthesis reports emphasized progressive contributions while minimizing traditional voices. The final document reflected organizer preferences presented as the fruit of Spirit-led discernment.

This interpretation views spatial participation amplitude increase as theater masking unchanged power relations. The magisterium retained final authority—Pope Francis ratified the final document, giving it magisterial weight through a papal apostolic exhortation. But the synodal process created progressive momentum difficult for traditional bishops to resist without appearing to reject the Holy Spirit's guidance as discerned through the People of God. According to this point of view round tables functioned as a technique for manufacturing consent.

5.3 The Theological Tension: Hierarchy and Participation Under Papal Leadership

Both interpretations grapple with genuine theological tensions within the Catholic Church. Catholic ecclesiology maintains that bishops possess teaching authority through apostolic succession, and that the magisterium—the teaching office of the Church—resides in the college of bishops in communion with the Pope. Yet Vatican II also affirmed the sensus fidei—the supernatural appreciation of faith belonging to the whole People of God (“from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful”), who cannot err in matters of belief.¹

¹The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One,(111) cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” (8*) they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God.(112) Through it, the people of God adheres unwaveringly to the faith given once and for all to the saints,(113) penetrates it more deeply with right thinking, and applies it more fully in its life. *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

How does the Catholic Church honor both magisterial authority and the sensus fidei of the “last of the lay faithful”? Synodal processes attempt to honor both by creating space for diverse voices while maintaining magisterial discernment authority. But this requires procedural mechanisms for gathering input without relativizing teaching authority.

Round tables potentially serve this function—enabling broad consultation while preserving hierarchical decision-making. Or they potentially obscure power relations, creating the appearance of participatory deliberation while actual authority remains unchanged. The theological viability of synodality depends partly on whether spatial and procedural innovations genuinely enable the sensus fidei to inform magisterial discernment, or merely provide progressive cover for predetermined conclusions.

6 Critical Analysis: Measuring the Power of Arrangement - Research Questions

6.1 What Can Spatial Change Accomplish?

Research provides clear answers about what seating arrangements can and cannot accomplish:

What Round Tables Can Do:

- Increase total participation by enabling table-level discussion before plenary contributions
- Reduce intimidation factors that silence junior or non-clerical participants
- Facilitate genuine dialogue where participants respond to each other rather than delivering monologues
- Create psychological equality that may enable marginalized voices
- Distribute visual attention more evenly than theater-style rows

What Round Tables Cannot Do:

- Eliminate power differentials rooted in institutional role, expertise, or rhetorical skill
- Prevent manipulation by facilitators, agenda-setters, or those controlling synthesis
- Guarantee that spatial equality translates into conversational equality
- Ensure that diverse contributions receive equal weight in final decisions
- Replace the procedural transparency

The Zen critique has merit: round tables alone cannot prevent manipulation and may enable more sophisticated control mechanisms than traditional formats. But the reform perspective also has merit: round tables can enable participation that traditional formats prevent, if accompanied by appropriate procedures and genuine leadership commitment to dialogue.

6.2 Mechanisms of Accountability in the Catholic Church

The distinguishing factor between manipulative and liberating spatial arrangements lies in accompanying accountability mechanisms:

Transparency Requirements:

- Public documentation of how tables were assigned
- Clear criteria for facilitator selection
- Recording or note-taking at table discussions
- Participant validation that synthesis reports accurately represent discussions
- Accessible archives enabling verification of process integrity as open access resources

Participant Safeguards:

- Opportunities to challenge synthesis reports
- Minority report mechanisms for views not adequately represented
- Multiple synthesis methods to prevent single-perspective distortion
- Direct participant access to final drafting processes

External Oversight:

- Independent observers monitoring process integrity
- Participant surveys assessing whether procedures felt manipulative or genuine
- Academic content analysis of process effectiveness

6.3 Spatial Arrangements as Contested Terrain in the Catholic Church

Assessing whether round tables influenced synodal outcomes requires comparing actual results to counterfactuals: What would have emerged from traditional theater-style proceedings? This comparison is inherently speculative, but some observations are possible based on the number of participants and topics addressed:

The final synod document addresses topics—women’s participation, lay involvement in governance, LGBTQ inclusion (though carefully)—that might have received less attention in traditional formats. Whether this reflects round tables enabling marginalized voices or facilitators guiding discussions toward progressive themes remains contested among Catholic leadership.

Participant testimonies described the October 2023 session as intensive, with substantial table-level discussion informing plenary sessions (Wikipedia, 2024). Multiple participants reported that table discussions felt genuine rather than scripted. However, without systematic participant surveys and comparison to traditional synod experiences, these testimonies provide limited evidence for future research.

The fact that Vatican organizers retained round tables for the October 2024 session suggests they judged the format successful. Had it proven unworkable or manipulatively counterproductive, organizers could have reverted to traditional arrangements. The decision to continue with round tables indicates that—from the organizers' perspective—spatial configuration served synodal purposes. Whether this reflects genuine dialogue or successful manipulation depends on one's interpretation of organizer intentions.

7 Broader Implications: The Politics of Space for a Religious Leader

7.1 Spatial Arrangements as Contested Terrain in the Catholic Church

The synod seating controversy reveals a broader truth: spatial arrangements become contested precisely when they matter. Religious organizations fight over meeting room configurations, Church services layouts, and assembly seating because these seemingly mundane choices profoundly influence who speaks, who listens, and what conclusions emerge.

Every spatial arrangement distributes power, creates communication channels, and shapes social dynamics. Traditional hierarchical formats distribute power clearly and visibly—everyone knows who holds authority and through what mechanisms it operates. Progressive participatory formats distribute power less visibly through facilitation, agenda control, and synthesis authority—creating ambiguity about who actually controls processes.

Neither arrangement is neutral. The question is not whether spatial configurations influence outcomes—research demonstrates they do—but whether that influence operates transparently or covertly, whether it empowers previously marginalized voices or channels them toward predetermined conclusions, whether it genuinely redistributes authority or merely obscures unchanged power relations.

7.2 Implications for Any Organization: Lessons from Pope Francis

The seating controversy carries lessons for any organization wrestling with authority and participation:

Spatial Change Alone Is Insufficient: Moving from hierarchical rows to round tables signals commitment to participation but does not guarantee genuine participation amplitude increase. Without accompanying cultural change, procedural transparency, and leadership willingness to be influenced, new spatial arrangements merely disguise unchanged power relations i.e redistribute authority indicators from visible to operational levels.

Procedural Design Matters Enormously: The effects of round tables depend entirely on accompanying procedures—how tables are assigned, who facilitates, how discussions are

synthesized, what accountability mechanisms ensure integrity. Organizations must attend to these procedural details with the same care they give to spatial configuration.

Transparency Builds Legitimacy: Even well-intentioned participatory processes face manipulation allegations if they lack transparency. Public documentation of procedural choices, participant validation of synthesis accuracy, and accessible archives enable observers to judge process integrity.

Skillful Facilitation Is Essential But Dangerous: Round table success requires skilled facilitators who enable dialogue without dominating it. But skilled facilitation can also manipulate subtly. Organizations need both facilitator training and accountability mechanisms preventing facilitation from becoming direction.

8 Future Trajectories for Catholics: The Long-Term Stakes for Pope Francis's Vision

8.1 From Event to Culture: Implementing Pope Francis's Vision

The Synod on Synodality concluded in October 2024, but Pope Francis—and now his successor Pope Leo XIV—launched a three-year implementation phase running through October 2028 (Catholic Saskatoon News, 2025). This phase will reveal whether the round table innovation influences broader ecclesial culture or remains confined to singular high-level assemblies.

If dioceses, parishes, and Catholic organizations adopt round table formats for deliberations, the spatial innovation signals cultural transformation within the Catholic community. If traditional hierarchical arrangements persist at local levels, the round table experiment becomes a limited Vatican innovation with minimal cascading effects on those who attend Church regularly.

The same dynamic applies to secular organizations. Conference room redesigns and participatory meeting formats matter only if they reflect deeper cultural rearrangement. Spatial arrangements divorced from cultural transformation constitute expensive theater.

8.2 The Accountability Question: Research Questions for Future Catholic Church Reform

Long-term credibility of participatory spatial innovations depends on accountability mechanisms that enable participants and observers to distinguish between genuine participation amplitude increase and sophisticated manipulation. Organizations should develop:

Process Documentation Standards: Clear public records of how participatory processes were designed, who made key decisions, and what alternatives were considered—ideally published as open access articles.

Participant Validation Protocols: Systematic mechanisms for participants to confirm that synthesis reports accurately represent their contributions, with minority report options for inadequately represented views.

Independent Assessment: External evaluation of whether participatory processes achieved stated goals or served hidden agendas.

Iterative Refinement: Willingness to modify procedures based on participant feedback and external assessment, rather than defending initial designs regardless of implementation problems.

The Vatican's implementation phase should include these accountability mechanisms to address Zen-style concerns. Dioceses experimenting with synodal processes should document how round tables and other innovations function in practice, gather participant assessments, and refine based on evidence. This transparency would distinguish genuine commitment to synodal governance from progressive agenda implementation masked by consultative procedures.

8.3 New Digital Dimensions: Pope Francis and the Catholic Church in the Digital Age

Future synodal and organizational processes will increasingly occur through digital platforms and social networks, raising new questions about spatial arrangement equivalents in virtual environments. Video conferencing platforms typically display participants in grids or spotlight individual speakers, neither replicating round table dynamics in the digital world. Organizations must develop digital spatial practices—virtual breakout rooms, asynchronous discussion forums, collaborative document editing—that enable genuine dialogue among geographically dispersed participants.

Digital platforms introduce new manipulation possibilities alongside new participation amplitude increase opportunities. Organizers control breakout room assignments, discussion prompts, and synthesis mechanisms. But digital platforms also enable documentation, transparency, and participant verification more easily than physical meetings. The use of digital media and new communication technologies can create open access to deliberations while protecting against fake news and misinformation in news coverage.

The challenge is designing digital synodal processes that leverage technology's accountability advantages while mitigating its control possibilities. This requires attention to the online presence and new media strategies that maintain human dignity while enabling broader participation than traditional Church services allow.

9 Conclusions: The Ambiguous Power of Spatial Arrangement

The Vatican's decision to move the 2023-2024 Synod on Synodality from theater-style rows to round tables demonstrates how spatial arrangements function as power instruments—capable of democratizing participation or enabling sophisticated control depending on how they are deployed. Cardinal Joseph Zen's allegations that organizers practiced skilled manipulation and defenders' claims that round tables enabled authentic dialogue both contain truth. The format created possibilities for both genuine discernment and subtle channeling; determining which occurred requires examining not just seating but accompanying procedures, facilitator practices, synthesis methods, and accountability mechanisms.

Research from educational psychology, organizational behavior, and communication studies consistently demonstrates that spatial arrangements significantly impact who speaks, who listens, and how ideas circulate. Round tables promote more equitable participation, facilitate face-to-face dialogue, and reduce hierarchical power differentials embedded in theater-style configurations. But round tables also enable facilitators to guide discussions subtly, organizers to control outcomes through agenda-setting and synthesis authority, and power players to dominate through rhetorical skill rather than positional authority.

The seating controversy reveals that spatial arrangements are never neutral within the Catholic Church or any institution. Theater-style rows make power visible—everyone sees who holds authority and through what channels it operates. Round tables potentially obscure power through facilitation, agenda control, and synthesis mechanisms that operate less visibly. Each arrangement distributes power differently with different accountability requirements.

For the Catholic Church specifically, the round table innovation embodies tensions between hierarchical authority and participatory governance that synodality attempts to navigate. The format could enable genuine consultation while preserving magisterial discernment authority. Or it could provide progressive cover for predetermined conclusions while creating the appearance of broad deliberation. The theological and practical viability of synodality depends partly on developing accountability mechanisms that enable participants and observers to distinguish between these possibilities.

For secular organizations, this experiment offers cautionary lessons. Spatial lateral communication enablement signals commitment to participation but guarantees nothing. Round table meetings can empower previously marginalized voices or channel them toward predetermined outcomes. The difference lies not in furniture arrangement but in procedural design, facilitator practices, synthesis methods, and accountability mechanisms.

Looking forward, key questions remain: Will round table formats cascade through ecclesial structures or remain confined to Vatican assemblies? How will accountability mechanisms evolve to address legitimate manipulation concerns? Can digital platforms replicate round table dynamics while enhancing transparency? Most fundamentally: Can institutions committed to hierarchical authority genuinely embrace participatory governance, or does spatial lateral

communication enablement necessarily constitute either ineffective theater or covert agenda implementation?

Cardinal Zen's critique and defenders' responses both illuminate truth: spatial arrangements powerfully influence outcomes in religion and politics, which is precisely why they become contested when stakes are high. Organizations claiming to democratize through participatory formats bear responsibility for implementing accountability mechanisms that enable verification of genuine participation rather than sophisticated manipulation. Without such mechanisms, skepticism about round table reforms—whether in Church and political contexts or corporate settings—remains rationally warranted rather than cynically obstructionist.

The kind of leadership that Pope Francis demonstrated in implementing round tables at the synod represents a different leadership style from traditional papal approaches. Whether this pastoral approach to types of leadership within the Catholic faith proves effective depends substantially on how implementation proceeds at local levels—among Catholics in parishes, within Catholic diocesan structures, and across the Catholic clergy who will ultimately determine whether spatial innovations translate into cultural transformation.

10 References

Vatican and Synod Sources:

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). (2023). Inside, outside: Synod to focus on the church and its role in the world. Retrieved from <https://www.usccb.org/news/2023/inside-outside-synod-focus-church-and-its-role-world>

Vatican. (2024). XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops - Final Document. Retrieved from <https://www.synod.va>

Wikipedia. (2024). Synod on Synodality. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sixteenth_Ordinary_Ge

Catholic Saskatoon News. (2025). Vatican publishes document on Synod's final phase. Retrieved from <https://news.rcdos.ca/2025/07/08/synods-final-phase/>

Catholic News Agency (CNA). (2023). Synod 'setting the stages for future changes' on role of women; first woman presides over assembly, <https://www.ewtnnews.com/vatican/synod-setting-the-stages-for-future-changes-on-role-of-women-first-woman-presides-over-assembly?redirectedfrom=cna>

Educational and Organizational Research:

Edutopia. (2025). Research-Based Tips for Optimal Seating Arrangements. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/article/research-based-tips-for-optimal-seating-arrangements/>

Fernandes, A. C., Huang, J., & Rinaldo, V. (2011). Does where a student sits really matter? The impact of seating locations on student classroom learning. *International Journal of Applied Educational Studies*, 10(1), 66-77.

Hayashi, K., Mochizuki, T., & Yamauchi, Y. (2022). A case study of process performances during a small-group activity: comparison between a round-shaped and a crescent-shaped seating arrangements in studio-style learning spaces. *Learning Environments Research*, 25(3), 805-824.

Kemp, F. (2024). The 4 Power Positions and How to Use Them in Meetings. Retrieved from <https://frankiekemp.com/the-4-power-positions-and-how-to-use-them-in-meetings/>

Marx, A., Fuhrer, U., & Hartig, T. (2000). Effects of classroom seating arrangements on children's question-asking. *Learning Environments Research*, 2(3), 249-263.

Psychology Today. (2012). The Power Seat: Where You Sit Matters. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/digital-leaders/201210/the-power-seat-where-you-sit-matters>

Wasendorf, A. et al. (2023). Do seating arrangements have an impact on student learning? *Professional Learning Board Research Review*.

Xihamontessori. (2025). Effective Classroom Seating Arrangements: How To Improve Learning Spaces For Students? Retrieved from <https://xihamontessori.com/classroom-seating-arrangements/>

Organizational and Meeting Dynamics:

Experter Magazine. (2024). Power Dynamics – Sitting Strategically at the Conference Table. Retrieved from <https://us.experter.com/magazine/power-dynamics-the-best-seating-strategies-for-the-conference-table/>

The Events Calendar. (2025). 7 Types of Seating Arrangements for Better Interaction. Retrieved from <https://theeventscalendar.com/blog/types-of-seating-arrangement/>

Wrike. (2018). Is Your Career Riding On Where You Sit? Retrieved from <https://www.wrike.com/blog/conference-room-seating-dynamics/>

Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning. Classroom Seating Arrangements. Retrieved from <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/teaching/teaching-resource-library/classroom-seating-arrangements>

Additional Research:

Benedict, M. E., & Hoag, J. (2004). Seating location in large lectures: Are seating preferences or location related to course performance? *Journal of Economic Education*, 35(3), 215-231.

Gifford, R. (2002). *Environmental Psychology: Principles and Practice* (3rd ed.). Colville, WA: Optimal Books.

- Sommer, R. (2002). *Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design*. Bristol: Bosko Books.
- Zhu, R., & Argo, J. J. (2013). Exploring the impact of various shaped seating arrangements on persuasion. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 40(2), 336-349.
-

Exemplary URLs for Further Research:

1. **Vatican Synod Official Site:** <https://www.synod.va/en.html>
 2. **USCCB Synod Resources:** <https://www.usccb.org/synod>
 3. **Yale Center on Classroom Seating:** <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/teaching/teaching-resource-library/classroom-seating-arrangements>
 4. **Edutopia Seating Research:** <https://www.edutopia.org/article/research-based-tips-for-optimal-seating-arrangements/>
 5. **Power Positions in Meetings:** <https://frankiekemp.com/the-4-power-positions-and-how-to-use-them-in-meetings/>
 6. **Wrike Conference Room Dynamics:** <https://www.wrike.com/blog/conference-room-seating-dynamics/>
 7. **Learning Environments Research Journal:** <https://link.springer.com/journal/10984>
-

About this Analysis

This article examines the Holy See's architectural and spatial choices through the lens of organizational communication research, treating seating arrangements as strategic decisions that shape institutional culture and power dynamics. The analysis maintains analytical neutrality, presenting both critical and supportive perspectives on round table innovations without endorsing specific theological or ecclesiological positions. The goal is to illuminate how spatial practices influence communication and power, enabling readers to form their own judgments about whether specific implementations constitute genuine participation amplitude increase or sophisticated control.

Methodological Note: This analysis was developed with AI assistance as an intentional research tool, as a means to rapidly process multiple theoretical frameworks and synthesize complex institutional dynamics. I view this approach as appropriate for exploratory analytical work that aims to generate discussion rather than establish definitive conclusions. I welcome feedback on any factual inaccuracies, inconsistent references, or logical gaps you identify. More importantly, I invite your theoretical insights, alternative interpretations, and new frameworks for understanding these phenomena. The goal is rigorous dialogue, not finished argument.

[More](#)

About [Fr. Tomasz Włodarczyk](#)

© 2026 Fr. Tomasz Włodarczyk. All rights reserved.

Thumbnail: “Council of Trent” — Burkhard Mücke / Pimpinellus. Source: [wikipedia](#) —
Licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).