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Pope Francis attends the final session of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican Oct. 26, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Pope Francis on April 26 dramatically expanded participation in the Vatican's upcoming Synod of Bishops to include lay men and women, for the first time granting them a right to be appointed as full voting members of the Catholic Church's primary consultative body.

In addition to the standard participation of bishops selected by the pope and episcopal conferences from around the world, the new changes allow for the participation of 70 non-bishop members at the upcoming October gathering — 10 from each of the seven global regional bishops' conferences — with the request that young people be included and that 50% of those named be women.

The changes were announced April 26 by the Vatican's synod office, and were discussed at a press briefing at the Vatican with Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod, and Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, relator general of the 2023 and 2024 Synod of Bishops.

The first of the two-part synod gathering will take place in Rome this Oct. 4-29 and is expected to address church governance and a number of hot-button issues in the church, among them the role of women in the church and LGBTQ relationships.

Among the newly announced changes is an altered composition of participants to provide greater gender parity among the members of Catholic religious orders invited to take part in the synod. While historically 10 members of men's religious orders have been elected to participate, they will be replaced by five religious women and five religious men.

During the 2019 special synod for the nine-nation Amazon region, the last synod, there were 185 voting members, most of whom were bishops or priests. In addition, there were 14 religious-order priests and one religious brother who had been selected by the men’s Union of Superiors General. While the women's International Union of Superiors General were allowed to elect 10 observers who could participate in the synod discussions, they were not full members and not granted a right to vote.

For years, lay Catholics have lobbied for such a reform. In 2018, a petition circulated by church reform groups gained nearly 10,000 signatures requesting that women religious be granted the right to vote at the synod.

An article that same year in the Vatican's daily newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, labeled it "a clamorous injustice" that the Vatican had made a distinction not between priests and laypeople in deciding who would receive the right to vote, but between women and men.

The April 26 changes will now eliminate the role of "auditors" — participants who observed the synod proceedings but were not granted a vote.

As is customary, fraternal delegates from other Christian churches and communities will be invited to participate, along with outside experts. In addition, the October 2023 synod will introduce the role of "facilitators," who will be relied on to moderate various proceedings during the monthlong gathering. The Vatican has yet to release a list of invited outside participants.

In an interview last month with Argentine newspaper La Nación, Francis had indicated that he intended to grant a right to all synod participants.

"Everyone who participates in the synod will vote. Those who are guests or observers will not vote," he told the daily. "Whether male or female. Everyone, everyone. That word *everyone* for me is key."

For the 70 non-bishop members of the October gathering, the Vatican synod office has asked each region to put forward a total of 20 possible persons with appropriate pastoral experience and past participation in the synod process, half of whom will eventually be selected to participate in the October 2023 and October 2024 gatherings in Rome.

The Vatican synod office bulletin said that participation of non-bishop members will make concrete "an expression of episcopal collegiality within an entirely synodal Church" and serve as a continuation of the three-phase synodal consultation process that began in 2021 with global listening sessions, followed by continental assemblies, ahead of the Rome meetings.

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In total, non-bishop members are expected to represent less than 25% of the total members, which the synod office bulletin said would ensure that the "episcopal nature" of the synodal assembly is "confirmed."

The bulletin updates the 2018 Vatican constitution, *Episcopalis Communio,* with which Francis reformed the structure of the synod. The bulletin said non-bishop members are not elected by a body whose membership they are expected to represent, but rather are appointed directly by the pope as a sign of the collegiality experienced at the continental ecclesial assemblies earlier this year.

In addition to the changes regarding voting, the synod office announced that dioceses around the world that are not members of any episcopal conference may elect among themselves a representative for the synod. Among the countries that do not belong to an episcopal conference is Ukraine.

While Pope Paul VI established the synod at the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, "synodality" — a Greek term that literally means "walking together" — has emerged as a key leitmotif of Francis' pontificate.

In October 2022, the theme "Enlarge the space of your tent" was chosen as the title of the synod's working document. That document, known in Latin as an *instrumentum laboris*, is currently being drafted.

With the addition of new members, Grech told reporters, the "space in the tent has expanded."