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Pope Francis smiles at Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, as the first assembly of the synod on synodality concludes Oct. 28 in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis' high-stakes summit on the future of the Catholic Church concluded on Oct. 28 by postponing action on the possibility of ordaining women as deacons and failing to acknowledge deep tensions that surfaced in a month of debates over how the global institution should care for its LGBTQ members.

A 41-page report, approved and published that evening, called for the results of earlier papal and theological commissions on women deacons to be presented for further consideration at the next assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to be held in October 2024.

The report, titled "A synodal church in mission," follows an intense month of debates at the Vatican among some 450 participants over a range of big issues, including the role of women in church ministries, clergy sexual abuse and better inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics.

While previous documents leading up to the closely watched meeting were marked by candor and openness, the synthesis report for the Oct. 4-29 assembly takes a much more cautious tone. Although it makes 81 proposals, they are often quite open-ended or general, and the text calls for further theological or canonical study, evaluation or consideration at least 20 times.

Francis officially launched his "synod on synodality," a multiyear, multi-phase process meant to examine how the church's ministries and structures might become more inclusive, in 2021. The newly released report outlines areas of convergence,

matters for consideration and proposals discussed during this month's assembly that are expected to set the stage for further debate throughout the year ahead of next year's assembly.

Participants voted on the final text paragraph by paragraph through the early evening of Oct. 28. The threshold for passage for each paragraph was a two-thirds majority of the voting members.

The paragraphs that received the most no votes were two of the primary paragraphs addressing the possibility of women deacons. One passed by a vote of 277-69; the other by a vote of 279-67. A paragraph addressing the question of clerical celibacy also received substantial no votes, but passed 291-55.

At a press briefing shortly after the text was published, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, one of the synod's lead organizers, said he was "full of wonder that so many people have voted in favor" of the paragraphs about women's leadership in the church. "That means that the resistance is not so great as people have thought," he said.

On the question of LGBTQ Catholics, Cardinal Mario Grech, who heads the Vatican's synod office, told the briefing that the assembly felt a need to "respect everyone's pace." He added: "It doesn't mean if your voice is stronger it will prevail."

Jesuit Fr. James Martin, a popular spiritual author and editor of the LGBTQ Catholic publication Outreach who took part in the synod as a voting member, told NCR he was "disappointed but not surprised" by the result for LGBTQ Catholics.

"There were widely diverging views on the topic," said Martin. "I wish, however, that some of those discussions, which were frank and open, had been captured in the final synthesis."

For the first time since the establishment of the church's Synod of Bishops in 1965, about 50 women were granted voting rights by Francis at this assembly. While the final report they helped approve did not call immediately for the ordination of women as deacons, and did not even mention calls for priestly ordination for women, it did offer some pointed language about the role of women in church leadership.



Members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops use tablets to vote on the gathering's synthesis document Oct. 28 in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In one example, the text says women in the assembly "spoke of a Church that wounds" through "clericalism, a chauvinist mentality and inappropriate expressions of authority continue to scar the face of the Church and damage its communion."

The text also states that there was a "clear request" from the assembly that women's contributions "would be recognized and valued, and that their pastoral leadership increase in all areas." It also asks how the church can include more women in existing ministries, and poses an open-ended question: "If new ministries are required, who should discern these, at what levels and in what ways?"

On the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate — an issue discussed at the 2019 synod on the nine-nation Amazon region, which, in its final text, proposed moving the idea forward — the new report takes a stark tone.

The possibility of ordaining women, it says, was considered "unacceptable" by some assembly members "because they consider it a discontinuity with Tradition."

"For others, however, opening access for women to the diaconate would restore the practice of the Early Church," it states. "Others still, discern it as an appropriate and necessary response to the signs of the times, faithful to the Tradition, and one that would find an echo in the hearts of many who seek new energy and vitality in the Church."

Francis has previously established two special commissions to examine the historical questions surrounding the ordination of women to the diaconate, though neither commissions' work has been made public. In 2002, the International Theological Commission also concluded a study of the diaconate that considered the question women deacons

"Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued, benefiting from consideration of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father, and from the theological, historical and exegetical research already undertaken," the report states. "If possible, the results of this research should be presented to the next session of the assembly."

The report goes on to state the need for the church to address employment injustices and unfair remuneration for women in the church, "especially for women in consecrated life, who are too often treated as cheap labor."

Proposals also include a review of liturgical texts and church documents so that language will be considerate to both men and women and to also include "a range of words, images and narratives that draw more widely on women's experience."



Pope Francis shares a laugh with some of the female members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops, at the assembly's session Oct. 6 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican.(CNS/Vatican Media)

LGBTQ Catholics, clergy sexual abuse

While emotional debate took place during the synod over the church's response to LGBTQ Catholics — including the testimonial of a bisexual woman who died by suicide after feeling rejected by the church — the report largely glosses over the tensions that emerged over how the church should respond to such persons.

Issues involving sexuality and identity, the report notes, raise "new questions." The report says that such individuals or couples must be "heard and accompanied" and that language or "simplistic judgements" that "hurt individuals and the Body of the Church" should be avoided.

"There was a deep sense of love, mercy and compassion felt in the assembly for those who are or feel hurt or neglected by the church, who want a place to call

'home' where they can feel safe, be heard and respected, without fear of feeling judged," it states.

The final report, however, did not use the acronym "LGBT" or the word "gay," despite the fact that Vatican documents have regularly used "LGBT" as a common acronym to refer to the gay community for at least five years, and the pope himself has regularly used the term "gay."

As NCR reported on Oct. 13, there was active debate during the synod discussions over whether the use of such language was appropriate.

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In confronting the ongoing crisis of clergy sexual abuse, the report proposes the creation of further structures to prevent abuse, including the possibility of establishing a new body to review abuse cases that does not rely on bishops.

"The sensitive issue of handling abuse places many bishops in the difficult situation of having to reconcile the role of father with that of judge," it states. "The appropriateness of assigning the judicial task to another body, to be specified canonically, should be explored."

In addition, the report recommends that women receive the necessary formation "to enable them to be judges in all canonical processes."

"Cases of abuse of various kinds experienced by those in religious life and members of lay associations, especially of women, signal a problem in the exercise of authority and demand decisive and appropriate interventions," the report states, adding that the "concrete gestures of penitence" are required to adequately respond the decades-long crisis.



Pope Francis joins leaders and members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops for a working session in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 23. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Role of lay people, clerical celibacy

On other issues, the report stresses the role of lay people in advising church leaders, makes some pointed recommendations for Vatican officials and briefly discusses the issue of clerical celibacy.

The section on the role of bishops says a bishop's ministry is synodal only "when governance is accompanied by co-responsibility, preaching by listening to the faithful People of God, and sanctification and celebration of the liturgy by humility and conversion."

One proposal in that section calls for episcopal councils, lay-led groups that advise bishops in the leadership of their dioceses, to be made mandatory. Bishops currently have the option of creating such groups, but are not required to do so.

That section also calls "for a review of the criteria" for how priests are selected to become bishops, and notes "requests to expand consultation with the faithful People of God, and to involve a greater number of lay people and consecrated persons in the consultation process."

The document also reflects specifically on the role of the pope and Vatican in governing the global church. It suggests that Vatican offices should "enhance" their consultation with local bishops. It also says the church needs to "carefully evaluate" whether curial officials, who typically are appointed by the pope as cardinals, need even to be bishops.

On social issues, the text mentions the ongoing impacts of climate change and praises Laudate Deum, Francis' recent apostolic exhortation on environmental issues. The text also highlights the church's relationships with Indigenous peoples, migrants and refugees, and those who are economically impoverished.

The text also addresses the issue of persistent racism and calls for "continued engagement in dialogue and discernment regarding racial justice."

"Systems within the Church that create or maintain racial injustice need to be identified and addressed," it says. "Processes for healing and reconciliation should be created, with the help of those harmed, to eradicate the sin of racism."

Among other proposals in the synod's final text:

- Creation of "new paradigms" in terms of pastoral engagement with Indigenous peoples, "along the lines of a journey together and not an action done to them or for them;"
- Establishment of a "permanent council" of the leaders of Eastern RIte Catholic Churches to advise the pope on issues facing their communities;
- Invitation of more delegates from other Christian denominations to the October 2024 assembly;
- Expression of "a keen desire" by the assembly for the Catholic and other Christian churches to set a common date to celebrate Easter.

On clerical celibacy, the text says that "different opinions" were expressed about the topic.

"Its value is appreciated by all as richly prophetic and a profound witness to Christ; some ask, however, whether its appropriateness, theologically, for priestly ministry should necessarily translate into a disciplinary obligation in the Latin Church," the text states. "This discussion is not new but requires further consideration."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 10-23, 2023** print issue under the headline: Synod ends without action on women deacons, mention of LGBTQ Catholics.