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Bishops process toward the altar in St. Peter's Square during Mass with Pope Francis for the opening of the Synod of Bishops on synodality at the Vatican Oct. 2, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

by Staff and wire reports

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The Vatican's doctrinal czar on Oct. 2 closed the door — for now — on women deacons.

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández told synod members that the possibility of restoring the female diaconate remains an open question, but "rushing'" to a decision on it would short-circuit the necessary discernment on the question and the broader issues surrounding women's ministries in the Catholic Church.

"We know the public position of the pope, who does not consider the question [of women deacons] mature," Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, told members of the Synod of Bishops.

"The opportunity for a deepening remains open, but in the mind of the Holy Father, there are other issues still to be deepened and resolved before rushing to speak of a possible diaconate for some women," he said. "Otherwise, the diaconate becomes a kind of consolation for some women, and the most decisive question of the participation of women in the church remains unanswered."

After the first assembly of the synod on synodality in 2023, Pope Francis set up 10 study groups to reflect more deeply on some of the most controversial or complicated questions raised during the synod process. Opening the diaconate to women and ensuring they have decision-making roles in the church was one of those questions, as was ministry to LGBTQ people, how bishops are chosen, and improving seminary education.

Brief videos about each group's work were shown to the assembly; except for Fernández' group on women's ministry, each video included the names and photos of the group's members. The Vatican published written reports from each group, but leaders also spoke to the assembly about their progress.

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, relator general of the synod, introduced the group leaders to the assembly and told synod members that the groups were "companions on the journey" toward helping all Catholics listen to the Holy Spirit and each other, value each other's experiences and talents and collaborate in sharing the Gospel.

In his written report, Fernández said that at this point, his dicastery "judges that there is still no room for a positive decision by the magisterium regarding the access of women to the diaconate, understood as a degree of the sacrament of holy

orders."

But, he wrote, the dicastery thinks a "particularly interesting" way forward would be "to analyze in-depth the lives of some women who — in both the early and recent history of the church — have exercised genuine authority and power in support of the church's mission."

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Their "authority or power was not tied to sacramental consecration, as would be in the case, at least today, with diaconal ordination," the report said. "Yet, in some cases, one can perceive that it was an 'exercise' of power and authority that was of great value and was fruitful for the vitality of the people of God."

As examples, the report listed Sts. Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, Teresa of Ávila and Elizabeth Ann Seton, as well as Dorothy Day "with her prophetic drive for social issues."

Another study group was focused on elaborating "theological and methodological criteria for shared discernment of controversial doctrinal, pastoral and ethical issues." Its report said that it aims to help the church and its ministers respond to questions regarding peace and justice, care of creation, sexuality and life issues. It apparently is the group looking into ministry to and with Catholics who identify as LGBTQ.

The report said, "The Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. We are therefore called to a complete and challenging conversion; a conversion that takes concrete shape in the way we present and translate the truth of the Gospel as manifested and practiced in the agápe of God in Christ."

The group looking at how seminary formation could prepare priests to be more collaborative repeated the synod assembly's call for finding alternatives to the "seminary model as a prolonged experience disconnected from the people of God," particularly by ensuring lay men and women are on seminary staffs and that candidates for the priesthood study with and have pastoral experiences with laypeople.

Another group is examining the process for naming bishops and helping bishops learn to be more collaborative as they fulfill their leadership responsibilities.

Like the global listening sessions that began in 2021 and the synod assembly of 2023, working group members said, "The call emerges for greater transparency and accountability in the processes of selecting candidates for the episcopate, the confidentiality of which sometimes gives rise among the faithful to doubts regarding the honesty of the procedures implemented and, more generally, unease regarding methods deemed inconsistent with a synodal church model."

Catholic News Service and Christopher White contributed to this report.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.