Opinion

Guest Voices



Outside the consistory of cardinals convened by Pope Francis at the Vatican in late August, women call for greater inclusion of women at all levels of the church. (Courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference)



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With the Vatican's Oct. 27 release of the document to guide the next phase of Pope Francis' innovative new process for the Synod of Bishops, the Catholic Church has shown it has the capacity to listen to its people.

The 45-page synthesis of national and local listening sessions from countries around the world — known as the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the synod — presents an embodied synodality that offers a "path of recognition" for those who have felt invisible or dismissed by their church. Not to overstate the matter, but recognition — being seen and heard — is a small revolution.

Often Vatican documents have a single "women's paragraph," one section that pays lip service to one of the most pressing issues in our church. This report, however, weaves narratives from around the world throughout the document, noting the tensions women experience within the church they love, their baptismal equality, and the reality of structures and systems that prevent their full participation in the life of the church.

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Of course, a couple of paragraphs are of particular interest. The document calls for further discernment on the near-universal calls for women in governance and decision-making, women's preaching and "a female diaconate." The next sentence acknowledges a "diversity of opinions" on women's priestly ordination, noting some national reports called for it, while others consider it a "closed issue."

The acknowledgment of global calls for women's priestly ordination is significant for many reasons.

To start, this is a stark contrast from Francis' 2013 comments on women's ordination: "The Church has spoken and says no … that door is closed."

Now, the church is speaking through the synodal process and saying: This is part of our discernment. The Vatican's admittance that the teaching on women's ordination is not a consistently held belief among Catholics reveals a spirit of openness and accountability to the people of God. The very fact that those challenging voices — many of which were filtered out at the local level — broke through means this call is strong and clear.

We at the Women's Ordination Conference engaged faithfully in the synod process, providing educational resources and spiritual tools, and hosting eight listening sessions ourselves, following the guidance of the synod preparatory documents. We submitted our report to the Vatican directly, and also registered as part of the so-called "Region XVI" with the U.S. bishops' conference so that our report, spanning voices beyond one diocese, could be included.

Just last week the Region XVI coordinators invited the participants of this special region to a debriefing conversation, where we met in small groups and then in a larger group with three bishops present to share our experiences of synodality. For the Women's Ordination Conference, the bar is low for what a relationship with the bishops' conference might look like, but I found this commitment to dialogue and modeling of synodality refreshing.

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What I especially appreciated about the conversation among Region XVI organizations was the recognition of the value of national and global organizations, which have a unique freedom or perspective that can go beyond the boundaries of a local diocese or parish. One of the most challenging parts of being a pilgrim on the synodal path is holding and tending to the experiences of those for whom synodality did not happen locally, or more often, for those whose heartbreak is too deep.

Recognition and welcome are the first steps on a journey of recovery from a church whose current structures and policies oppress, silence and punish women.

Just two months ago, I was detained at the Vatican alongside six other women as part of a prayerful witness calling for greater inclusion of women at all levels of the church. Outside the consistory of cardinals convened by Francis in late August, we held red paper parasols with messages including "Sexism is a cardinal sin" and

"Ordain women." We were not only moved out of sight of the prelates walking in, but later held at an Italian police station for some four hours, released pending a criminal investigation.

Now the Vatican is calling us to "enlarge our tent," as the document says — and naming the sins of sexism, clericalism and exclusion that we have long called the church to repent from. The contrast is jarring, yet filled with promise.

My hope is the church continues to listen to women, particularly those who have discerned calls to ordained ministry. May this "path of recognition" become the revolution of the Holy Spirit our church so desperately needs.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 11-24, 2022** print issue under the headline: Is Vatican's mention of women's ordination a sign of revolution?.