Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Francis speaks with staff members of the Vatican newspaper's monthly insert dedicated to women during an audience March 4 at the Vatican. The supplement, "Women, church, world," was launched in May in 2012. The pope praised and encouraged them in their work, saying "it is not a kind of clerical feminism of the pope, no! It is opening the door to a reality, a reflection that goes deeper." (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis is a synodal pope. It may have taken the church 10 years to recognize that, but his papacy has been a constellation of synods leading the church both into and out of darkness. Synods, by their nature, are hierarchy-driven, they're murky in terms of "progress," and you guessed it, they're messy, and leave a lot of people unsatisfied. Perhaps these are also trademarks of Francis' papacy.



But within that murkiness is a very human evolution. Francis is a man who has changed his mind. Call it dialogue, encounter, accompaniment or whatever buzzword you like; Francis has modeled leadership that listens. While not the fireworks of change that many pray for, nor the revolution that women need, it is movement. Particularly after decades of spiritual stagnation and silencing endured under previous papacies, Francis is equally on the journey he calls the church to embark on through synodality.

There are so many hot takes about Francis and women, and you've probably read most of them. My not-so-hot take is that he is human, he listens and is seemingly open to change. When it comes to the broad topic of women, many "Francis Catholics" are able to accept his so-called "blind spot," because in other ways he models the Vatican II values they long to see. For others, it is not merely a weakness but a misogynistic betrayal of the Gospel that deprives the church, causes great spiritual harm and furthers the oppression of women globally.

So with that balance, I propose looking at Francis' movement (or lack thereof) in terms of management, ministry and Marian metaphor to shine some light on this journey we are on.



Pope Francis greets Sr. Raffaella Petrini, an Italian member of the U.S.-based Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, Dec. 3, 2015, at the Vatican. The pope named Petrini to be secretary-general of the office governing Vatican City State. (CNS/Vatican Media)

First, in management, we are witnessing an expanding enthusiasm from Francis on women in decision-making and leadership roles within the church's administration.

Early in his papacy he expressed reluctance to appoint women to positions that might promote the "functionalism" of women, saying more than once that he would not appoint women to lead a dicastery. Yet today the Vatican operates under an updated constitution in which the criteria for top leadership within the Roman Curia is "canonical mission," rather than gender or rank within the hierarchy. Just recently Francis said, "Here in the Vatican, the places where we have put women are functioning better."

I believe this runs parallel to his increasingly emboldened statements about women's rights around the world, and a shifting perspective on feminism, a movement he once called "over" and akin to "chauvinism in skirts" but now he says must continue.

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More women are in leadership positions at the Vatican than ever before, and we may see at least one woman vote alongside bishops at upcoming synods, but Francis' approach to appointing women has been piecemeal. Women are still a novelty, and need to be "put," selectively, in specific places. In the lack of appointments of women in the daily *Bolletino* since, Francis communicates that truly mainstreaming women into Vatican posts is a job for the next guy.

In the realm of ministry, Francis has made canonical changes to bring the church in better alignment with the pastoral realities around the world. In 2021, he changed canon law to allow for the installation of all laypeople into the ministries of acolyte and lector, and formalized the ministry of catechist, opening it to all laypeople. In both instances Francis articulates a rich understanding of vocation, and at the very least has the language to express the ways in which the Spirit calls women to

ministry.

Perhaps more celebrated, in 2016, he listened to the women religious of the International Union of Superiors General, or UISG, who asked him to further study the possibility of women deacons. He has since convened two papal commissions to take up this question, and while the process is clear as mud, the ordination of women is a question under review at the Vatican.



Pope Francis arrives for an audience with the heads of women's religious orders in the Paul VI hall May 12, 2016, at the Vatican. During a question-and-answer session with members of the International Union of Superiors General, the pope said he was willing to establish a commission to study whether women could serve as deacons. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

However, a devastating departure from Francis' pastoral and "listening" nature is his treatment of the question of women's ordination to the priesthood. While there may be some progress to be tracked parsing slight shifts in language from year to year, he has remarkably stayed the course set by John Paul II. The inadequacy of his responses have prompted journalists to ask nearly the same question in papal press conferences or interviews in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2020 and 2022. When speaking briefly, Francis simply says, "The church has spoken and said, 'No.' " When given more time, such as in a recent interview in 2022, he reveals a worrying confidence in the Marian and Petrine principles to explain the complexity of our relationship to God.

How can such a pastoral man not hear the cries of women in his own church? What encounter informed him to characterize women's ordination advocates as operating from a "spirit of the isolated conscience," as he wrote in *Let Us Dream*? How can he call for women's rights in society and not scrutinize his own role as the supreme leader of the largest patriarchy in the world?

These questions haunt me, but the most generous explanation I can think of is that Francis does not believe the church is ready to answer this question. Admittedly, that is hard to reconcile with what we know of the global calls for women's ordination in the synodal process, the consistency, visibility, and "noisiness" of the women's ordination movement, and decades of theological thought challenging church teaching, but the less generous interpretation is far worse. I will let you fill in the blank.

Lastly, one cannot consider Pope Francis without examining his understanding of Marian theology, and by extension the metaphors he uses to elevate women right out of structures of power. Often repeating himself word for word, Francis reminds us: "Our Lady is more important than the Apostles!" This "more important" and vague references by Francis to an underdeveloped "theology of women," is an attempt to add mystery to the metaphor that reduces women to not just mother and spouse, but church and "something more!" Mysterious indeed.



Pope Francis listens during an audience with participants in the plenary assembly of the women's International Union of Superiors General May 5, 2022, at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Abstract, distant and put on a pedestal, women are projections, not protagonists, in the papal imagination. Francis' disconnect from women in their full humanity leads to "strawberries on the cake" moments, portraits of "gossiping" caricatures of women, and worse, the sanctification of oppression. When women are a metaphor, even a valued one, they are denied voice, moral agency and a capacity to listen to, discern and claim God's call.

In 2013 I didn't have the language to say something or someone might be "synodal." In fact, I remember the first time a priest mentioned the word "synodality" over a dinner in Rome and to be honest, I didn't understand why the bishops needed a fancy concept for collegiality behind closed doors. But Francis has imbued meaning into that word for me by modeling it.

Now, synodality can feel like justice deferred for those most in need. And for women, it can feel like a dressed up way of saying *slow down with all that equality business, ladies*.

But today women are appointed to Vatican positions without a headline, cardinals and bishops are openly discussing the question of women's ordination to the diaconate and priesthood, and at the very least, there are increasing opportunities for the voices of women to be heard. And if there are opportunities for women's voices to be heard, at least we have a pope who has shown he knows how to listen every now and again.

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.