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Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference Communication Officer Sheila Pires poses for a portrait at The Vatican, Friday, Sept. 29, 2023. Pires has been invited to take part in the next synod of bishops starting Oct. 4. "I think the church has just come to a point of realization that the church belongs to all of us, to all the baptized," she says. Of the 365 voting members, only 54 are women and organizers insist the aim is to reach a consensus, not tally votes like a parliament. But the voting reform is nevertheless significant, tangible evidence of Francis' vision of the Catholic Church as being more about its flock than its shepherds. (AP Photo/Domenico Stinellis)

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Vatican City — October 2, 2023

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A few years ago, Pope Francis told the head of the main Vatican-backed Catholic women's organization to be "brave" in pushing for change for women in the Catholic Church.

Maria Lia Zervino took his advice and in 2021 wrote Francis a letter, then made it public, saying flat out that the Catholic Church owed a big debt to half of humanity and that women deserved to be at the table where church decisions are made, not as mere "ornaments" but as protagonists.

Francis appears to have taken note, and this week opens a global gathering of Catholic bishops and laypeople discussing the future of the church, where women — their voices and their votes — are taking center stage for the first time.

For Zervino, who worked alongside the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio when both held positions in the Argentine bishops' conference, the gathering is a watershed moment for the church and quite possibly the most consequential thing Francis will have undertaken as pope.

"Not only because of these events in October in Rome, but because the church has found a different way of being church," Zervino said in a recent interview in her Vatican offices. "And for women, this is an extraordinary step forward."

Women have long complained they are treated as second-class citizens in the church, barred from the priesthood and highest ranks of power yet responsible for the lion's share of church work — teaching in Catholic schools, running Catholic hospitals and passing the faith down to next generations.

They have long demanded a greater say in church governance, at the very least with voting rights at the periodic synods at the Vatican but also the right to preach at Mass and be ordained as priests. While they have secured some high-profile positions in the Vatican and local churches around the globe, the male hierarchy still runs the show.

This 3-week synod, which begins Oct. 4, is putting them more or less on an equal playing field to debate agenda items, including such hot-button issues as women in governance, LGBTQ+ Catholics and priestly celibacy. It's the culmination of an unprecedented two-year canvassing of rank-and-file Catholics about their hopes for the future of the institution.

The potential that this synod, and a second session next year, could lead to real change on previously taboo topics has given hope to many women and progressive Catholics. At the same time, it has sparked alarm from conservatives, some of whom have warned that the process risks opening a "Pandora's Box" that will split the church.

American Cardinal Raymond Burke, a frequent Francis critic, recently wrote that the synod and its new vision for the church "have become slogans behind which a revolution is at work to change radically the church's self-understanding in accord with a contemporary ideology which denies much of what the church has always taught and practiced."

The Vatican has hosted synods for decades to discuss particular issues such as the church in Africa or the Amazon, with bishops voting on proposals at the end for the pope to consider in a future document.

This edition is historic because its theme is so broad — it's essentially how to be a more inclusive and missionary church in the 21st century — and because Francis has allowed women and other laypeople to vote alongside bishops for the first time.

Of the 464 participants, 365 are voting members, and of them only 54 are women. While organizers insist the aim is to reach consensus, not tally votes like a

parliament, the voting reform is nevertheless significant, tangible evidence of Francis' vision of the Catholic Church as being more about its flock than its shepherds.

"I think the church has just come to a point of realization that the church belongs to all of us, to all the baptized," said Sheila Pires, who works for the South African bishops' conference and is a member of the synod's communications team.

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Women, she said, are leading the charge calling for change.

"I don't want to use the word revolution," Pires said in an interview in Johannesburg. But women "want their voices to be heard, not just towards decision-making, but also during decision-making. Women want to be part of that."

Francis took a first step in responding to those demands in 2021 when he appointed French Sr. Nathalie Becquart as undersecretary of the synod's organizing secretariat, a job which by its office entitled her to a vote but which had previously only been held by a man.

Becquart has in many ways become the face of the synod, traveling the globe during its preparatory phases to try to explain Francis' idea of a church that welcomes everyone and accompanies them.

"It's about how could we be men and women together in this society, in this church, with this vision of equality, of dignity, reciprocity, collaboration, partnership," Becquart said in a June interview.

At previous synods, women were only allowed more marginal roles of observers or experts, literally seated in the last row of the audience hall while the bishops and cardinals took the front rows and voted. This time around, all participants will be seated together at hierarchically neutral round tables to facilitate discussion.

Outside the synod hall, groups advocating for even more women's representation in the church are hosting a series of events, prayer vigils and marches to have their voices heard.

Discerning Deacons, a group pressing for the pope to approve female deacons, as there were in the early church, sent a small delegation and the issue of female deacons is formally on the synod agenda. Other groups pressing for women's ordination to the priesthood are also in Rome, even though the pope has taken the subject of women priests off the table.

"I'm hopeful that there is room in that space for these bold conversations, courageous conversations, and particularly that the voices and experiences of women called to the priesthood are brought to the synod," said Kate McElwee, director of the Women's Ordination Conference.

Zervino's group, the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, a Vatican-based umbrella organization of 100 Catholic associations, conducted a survey earlier this year of Catholics who participated in the synod consultations. While a few women in North America and Europe called for female priests, there was a broader demand for female deacons and the call is featured in the synod's working document.

Francis listens to Zervino, an Argentine consecrated woman. He recently named her as one of three women to sit on the membership board of the Dicastery for Bishops, the first time in history that women have had a say in vetting the successors of Christ's Apostles.

Zervino says such small steps like her nomination are crucial and offer the correct way of envisioning the changes that are under way for women in the church, especially given all the expectations that have been placed on the synod.

"For those who think that there's going to be a 'before the synod and after,' I bet they'll be disillusioned," she says. "But if women are smart enough to realize that we're headed in the right direction, and that these steps are fundamental for the next ones, then I bet we won't be disillusioned."