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Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich and San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy arrive for a session of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 17. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Two U.S. cardinals said one of the immediate results of Pope Francis' major summit on the future of the Catholic Church is that it should now be "impossible" to return to an era where lay men and women are not given both a voice and vote in major Vatican meetings.

"It would seem to me impossible to go back now," said San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy on Oct. 29. "It would be wrenching to go back if you just had bishops there or just bishops voting."

Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich concurred. He said that Catholics' common experience of baptism means: "We all have authority, and that means that we all have something to say."

The two cardinals spoke in an exclusive joint interview with National Catholic Reporter on Oct. 29, just hours after Francis' celebrated the concluding Mass for the four-week Synod of Bishops.

The assembly, which discussed an enormous range of issues facing the global church, including the possibility of women serving in ordained ministry and better inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics, was the first in history where women were granted rights of full membership and voting.

The synod assembly's closing marked the end of only the first part of discussions. A second assembly is due to take place in October 2024. Both Vatican meetings follow a multi-phase consultation process with Catholics across the globe.

The 45-minute interview with Cupich and McElroy took place at the Pontifical North American College, the primary residence for U.S. seminarians studying in Rome, and where the majority of the U.S. delegation participating in the synod stayed during the month.

During the wide-ranging interview, the two cardinals reflected on the synod's newly published final report, which postponed action on the possibility of ordaining women as deacons and largely glossed over concerns about better inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics. They also shared their respective experiences of the assembly, and offered thoughts about what comes next for both the global synod process and the U.S. church.

Women deacons, 'urgent' need for women's leadership

In the lead-up to this month's Rome meeting, expectations were high that the synod might offer concrete proposals about the possibility of ordaining women as deacons — something that the Vatican's 2019 synod for the nine-nation Amazon region had previously proposed.

In the end, the 2023 synod largely punted on the issue, calling for the results of earlier papal and theological commissions on women deacons to be presented for further consideration at next year's assembly. Moreover, the vote counts for proposals expressing forward movement on the issue received the highest level of "no" votes of any of the document's 81 proposals.

But McElroy said that, of those propositions, "There's only one that's called urgent. And that is bringing women into greater roles of leadership at all levels of the church. Not a single one has the word urgent or any equivalent word except for that one."

In a new format for the synod, the more than 450 delegates participating in the gathering sat at roundtables together, and primarily discussed the issues at hand in small group settings.

"There was really at our tables, a very broad sense that we need to have a sea change in our removal of barriers, our invitation and embrace of women in these new roles," said McElroy.

On the question of women deacons, both Cupich and McElroy said that what emerged during this session of the synod was a question of whether the diaconate needed to be "reimagined" as a whole.

Cupich recalled Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 decision to revise church law to make a clear distinction between the purposes for ordination to the priesthood and episcopacy, versus the purposes for ordination to the diaconate.

Referring to the current practice of ordaining seminarians studying for the priesthood first as deacons, the Chicago cardinal said Benedict's change specifying the difference between priestly and diaconal ministry "opens the door to reimagining what the diaconate should be."

"Does it uncomplicate some of the theological questions that some people have?" Cupich asked. "It's valid to ask, if that's the case … why are we ordaining candidates for the priesthood to the diaconate? It's a legitimate question to ask. And if, if you start with that, then maybe you can begin reimagining what the diaconate is about."

As questions were raised at the roundtables about the permanent diaconate as a whole, San Diego's McElroy — who has previously expressed his support for the

ordination of women to the diaconate — said the issue took on a "wider focus" at the synod.

"I think there was a lot of feeling that [the diaconate] should be focused not on liturgical things, as much as on serving the poor and the marginalized," he said, asking: "So do we need to reimagine the diaconate as a whole?"

McElroy continued: "As a result of those sets of issues coming up, the question looked much different to a lot of us after. Now, I'm in favor of having women as deacons as it is presently, but there may be a pathway here that would be very promising that would, I think, invigorate in many important ways the diaconate as a whole and perhaps provide a pathway."

Pope Francis and leaders of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops applaud at the conclusion o

Pope Francis and leaders of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops applaud at the conclusion of the gathering's last working session Oct. 28, in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

LGBTQ Catholics, synod confidentiality

Although the synod assembly is known to have spoken at length about how the church can better include LGBTQ Catholics — with one testimony even focusing on a bisexual woman who died by suicide after feeling rejected by the church — the final document largely overlooked those discussions.

It also did not refer to LGBTQ or gay Catholics by name, instead referring generally to issues involving sexuality that raise "new questions" for the church.

Cupich said the decision not to use the term LGBTQ was informed by some synod members from the global south, who spoke about having negative experiences in dealing with conditions on foreign aid from western countries that use that terminology.

The cardinal also pointed to the text's affirmation that "Christians must always show respect for the dignity of every person," calling that a "major contribution."

"There was no intention of wanting to hurt anybody" by not using the terms LGBTQ or gay, said Cupich.

"I do think we have to go back to the question: Do we call people the way they want to be called?" he said. "And I think that … that's a sign of respect; that also has to be a part of the discussion going forward in the future."

McElroy pointed to the final document's 15th and 16th chapters, which focus on issues of discernment and accompaniment.

"Jesus meets people in the uniqueness of their personal story and situation," the text states at one point. "He never begins from the perspective of prejudices or labels, but from the authenticity of relationship to which he commits himself wholeheartedly."

Said McElroy: "We need to adopt the pastoral message of Jesus Christ: Christ, who encounters people, who embraces them, who meets the problems that are going on, and then calls them to conversion."

"It is not that doctrine comes first," he said. "Doctrine stands in service to the pastoral mission of the church."

Reflecting on those same chapters, Cupich said "there are aspects about human life in which our anthropological view does not have the power to fully grasp the situation."

"We have to look at that," he said. "There is a real humility there in terms of what we should decide on and take for granted, realizing that there … are some things that we don't know very well."

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On other subjects, both Cupich and McElroy largely defended the synod's unexpected request that assembly members refrain from giving media interviews during the four weeks of discussions, and keep confidentiality about the individual speeches, even after the assembly is over.

McElroy said he was initially "very skeptical" about the request but "came to the conclusion that it was very helpful to our process." Cupich said he found the rules "very liberating" because "there was no discussion at any time that I came across about what people outside the room were saying about us."

"If, in fact, there was a lot of coverage about information or misinformation going on, it could have invaded the freedom of people to begin to talk," said Cupich. "There wasn't any of that that invaded the room."

As for the synod assembly as a whole, Cupich said he would leave Rome "with a sense of hope, joy that I was a part of this [and] more enthused about my ministry than I have been in a long time."

"We had actual lay people there talking with bishops about the issues, and that gave it a new energy and a freshness that we've not had before," he said, comparing this synod to earlier assemblies. "I think the document tried to convey that very much that freshness, that there was no issue that was left off the table."

McElroy likewise expressed positivity about the experience. "I would be very positive about the method of discernment that was utilized," he said. "It's demanding but it yielded tremendous fruits of engagement."

With regard to the presence of lay voting members, McElroy said: "The presence of non-bishops in active roles became very natural, very early on."

"Within the first few days, it seemed axiomatic that non-bishops should be there, that laypeople should be there, that consecrated religious should be there as voting members and not just priests and deacons," said the cardinal.

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: Cardinals Cupich, McElroy say synod without lay voters ‘impossible’.