News



Angela Meyer, a Catholic woman priest (second from left), leads a Green Mass as Catholics for Choice protests the Supreme Court Red Mass outside St. Matthew's Cathedral in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 1. Jamie Manson, president of Catholics for Choice, is at left. (AP/Jose Luis Magana)



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The 41-page synthesis report for the Synod of Bishops on Synodality disappointed several progressive Catholics and others who advocate for the Catholic Church to rethink its approach to issues such as the clergy sex abuse crisis, LGBTQ ministry, women's roles in the church and the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate.

But while some of those Catholics said they were dismayed or angered at what the report glossed over or omitted, others said the document is just the latest milestone in a multiyear process that will continue with another Vatican assembly in October 2024 and a post-synodal apostolic exhortation sometime after that.

"We've come a long way, but we're still walking together. We've been acknowledged, we've been heard, and we will continue to be heard," said Stan "JR" Zerkowski, the executive director of Fortunate Families, a Lexington, Kentucky-based Catholic ministry for the LGBTQ community.

Related: Exclusive: On gay Catholics, synod ensured 'nothing is closed,' says African Jesuit

For months leading up to the Oct. 4-29 synodal assembly, when roughly 450 bishops, religious and lay delegates met to discuss how the church should live out its mission in the modern world, liberal Catholics and other observers hoped that the discussions would result in concrete new approaches to sensitive topics like LGBTQ rights. Encouraged by Pope Francis' telling the delegates to be honest and "bold" in their discussions, some held out hope that the synod would even pave the way for major doctrinal changes, including the possibility of women's priestly ordination.

But the document only made oblique references to LGBTQ ministry, and it sidestepped the question of women deacons.

"We join our partners in the women's ordination and LGBTQIA+ justice movements in expressing our deep concern about the synod's failure to take seriously the grave injustice of gender equality and its refusal to acknowledge the longings of LGBTQIA+

Catholics for a more inclusive church," said Jamie Manson, the president of Catholics for Choice, an organization that supports abortion rights.

In a prepared statement, Manson also critiqued the synod for its "continued silence on abortion," which she suggested "shows just how powerful and pervasive abortion stigma remains in our church."



Pope Francis poses for a photo with Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick, co-founder of New Ways Ministry, and three members of the staff of the ministry to and with LGBTQ+ Catholics Oct. 17 in the Domus Sanctae Marthae, the pope's Vatican residence. From the left are: Matthew Myers, staff associate; Francis DeBernardo, executive director; and Robert Shine, associate director. (CNS/New Ways Ministry)

New Ways Ministry and DignityUSA, groups that advocate for LGBTQ Catholics, released statements expressing their disappointment that the document omitted the

term "LGBTQ" while speaking in general terms about "matters of identity and sexuality."

"The final report of the Synod's first General Assembly disappoints by simply reaffirming the hierarchy's status quo," said New Ways Ministry executive director Francis DeBernardo, who suggested that two years of global consultations made it clear that Catholics "want a more inclusive church."

"Catholics who desire a renewed approach to gender and sexuality in the church will continue to pray, dialogue, and hope in the Synod's final year and beyond," DeBernardo said.

Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of DignityUSA, said the report "fails to live up to Pope Francis' charge" to synod delegates to "' be bold,' especially regarding the significant concerns of LGBTQIA+ Catholics."



Stan "JR" Zerkowski, executive director of Fortunate Families (Courtesy of Stan Zerkowski)

"This erasure of our presence in the church and the courageous participation of many LGBTQIA+ people, family members, and allies in the Synodal listening process is another example of the way our community is repeatedly marginalized within Catholicism," Burke said.

Zerkowski told NCR that the report's approach to LGBTQ ministry felt to him early on like "an incredible setback." But two days after its release, Zerkowski said he was reminded of his late mother's oft-repeated phrase that "actions speak louder than words."

"Synod deledagates heard the stories of LGBTQ persons in the general sessions of the synod. Reports from all over the world came into the synod regarding the need for LGBTQ outreach and accompaniment," said Zerkowski, who on Oct. 13 received a message from Pope Francis thanking him for his ministry.

Zerkowski also noted that the pope in recent weeks met with representatives from New Ways Ministry, and greeted leaders of an international association for LGBTQ Catholics in St. Peter's Square.

"If you take all of that in context, the stage is set for some meaningful change, regardless of the words we wanted to see or I wanted to see in this document," Zerkowski said.



Members of the Women's Ordination Conference protest in front of St. Peter's Basilica, in Rome, on Oct. 17, 2011. The working document for the October synodal meetings includes this question for the synodal assembly to consider: "How can the Church of our time better fulfill its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?" (AP/Andrew Medichini, file)

Also hoping that the stage is set for meaningful change are Catholics who desire for the church to ordain women to the diaconate and the priesthood. The Women's Ordination Conference, a group that supports ordaining women priests, said in a prepared statement that it was "dismayed by the failure of the synod to take seriously the overwhelming calls to open all ordained ministries" to women.

The Women's Ordination Conference added: "The indication that the conversation on women in ordained ministries should be limited to the permanent diaconate or undefined 'new ministries,' simply does not reflect the needs of the church today, nor the fullness of women's vocations."

On the question of women deacons, the synod report acknowledged differences of opinion among delegates. Two paragraphs that addressed the issue received the most no votes, though both passed with the necessary two-thirds majority. The report asked for more "theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate," including a review of two commissions Francis set up in 2016 and 2020 to study the issue.

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Phyllis Zagano, a scholar at Hofstra University who has studied the role of women deacons in the early church, told NCR that the synod report struck a positive tone toward increasing the involvement of lay men and women in church management and decision-making. However, the report did "not really move the question of women in ministry forward," said Zagano, who served on the 2016-2018 Pontifical Commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women.

"It seems an insurmountable task to get a general agreement on the facts of history, anthropology, and theology of the question such that the whole church would ask for

the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate," Zagano added. "Yet, if there is evidence that women cannot be restored to the ordained diaconate, the answer should be given clearly and without delay."

Throughout the report, the assembly members repeated calls for greater efforts to listen to clerical sex abuse survivors and "those who have suffered abuse and hurt in the Church." The report also calls for the church to address the "structural conditions that abetted such abuse," but some advocates for clergy abuse survivors are skeptical.



A man reacts while leaving a Mass at Santiago Cathedral in Bilbao, Spain, March 24, that was celebrated to recognize and apologize to victims of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church. (OSV News/Reuters/Vincent West)

"Church officials still haven't talked to the really disenfranchised survivors, those people who either have gone to other faith communities or who have left religion altogether," said Melanie Sakoda, survivor support director for the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests.

Sakoda chided church officials for what she described as a failure to seek out and speak with those fallen-away survivors before and during the synod assembly. She said those survivors "seemed to be totally invisible" in the synod.

"It's fine to talk about listening, but the problem really requires action," Sakoda said. "People are being hurt. They are having lifelong injuries as a result of this, and they're going to have to wait yet another year? I don't understand that."

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 24-Dec 7, 2023** print issue under the headline: ‘We will continue to be heard’: Progressive Catholics react to synod synthesis report.