Opinion
Guest Voices



Pope Francis gives his blessing at the conclusion of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops' last working session Oct. 28 in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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For Pope Francis, the first session of the synod on synodality was never about resolving the controversial issues facing the church. Even so, there were those who hoped for forward motion on married priests, women deacons and LGBTQ issues. They will be disappointed by the final report issued by the synod on Oct. 28.

For Francis, it was not about the hot-button topics. It was always about the synodal process, which he hoped would overcome divisions in the church and recommit us to the mission of Jesus — of proclaiming the Gospel of the Father's love and compassion for all of humanity and the Earth.

If anything, movement on LGBTQ issues was reversed, as can be seen by the fact that the synod refused to even use the term LGBTQ in their report, even though the Vatican and the pope now use the term in their documents.

The 40-page report shows that power in the church, at least in the synod, has moved from the Global North (Europe and the United States) to the Global South (especially Africa).

Africans were able to insert into the report pastoral concern for those in polygamous marriages but fought tooth and nail to keep any reference to LGBTQ Catholics out of the report. They were joined by Polish bishops and others in opposition to what they termed "LGBTQ ideology." Many of their comments at the synod would be considered homophobic in the Global North.

The patriarch of Syria even stormed out of the synod rather than sit with someone who had opposing views on the matter. You wonder if they ever knowingly had a conversation with a gay person.

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The treatment of LGBTQ issues in the synod's working paper, or *instrumentum laboris*, was better than in the final report. The report did not even describe the debate in the synod.

On the other hand, the synod did not close discussion of LGBTQ issues or use language like "intrinsically disordered." Rather, it says, "Certain issues, such as those relating to matters of identity and sexuality ... are controversial not only in society, but also in the Church, because they raise new questions."

One gay advocate responded, "Have they been asleep for the last 50 years to think these are new questions?"

The report continues on a slightly open note:

> Sometimes the anthropological categories we have developed are not able to grasp the complexity of the elements emerging from experience or knowledge in the sciences and require greater precision and further study. It is important to take the time required for this reflection and to invest our best energies in it, without giving in to simplistic judgements that hurt individuals and the Body of the Church.

Although this leaves the question open for discussion, the general impression given is, "We have the right answers, we just don't know how to communicate them."

"I'm disappointed not only that LGBTQ were excised," Jesuit Fr. James Martin, who ministers to the LGBTQ+ community and was handpicked as a delegate by Francis, told The Washington Post, "but also that the discussions we had, which were passionate on both sides, were not reflected in the final document."

The discussion of women deacons neither advanced nor set back the issue. Rather the report describes the state of the question, which was not changed by the synod:

> Different positions have been expressed regarding women's access to the diaconal ministry. For some, this step would be unacceptable because they consider it a discontinuity with Tradition. For others, however, opening access for women to the diaconate would restore the practice of the Early Church. Others still, discern it as an appropriate and necessary response to the signs of the times, faithful to the Tradition, and one that would find an echo in the hearts of many who seek new energy and vitality in the Church. Some express concern that the request speaks of a worrying anthropological confusion, which, if granted, would marry the Church to the spirit of the age.

Again, the role of the African members was important here. While the synod on the Amazon favored women deacons, the African church does not have many deacons at all. Catechists play a much more important role in Africa. It is no wonder that there is little interest in women deacons in Africa where there are few male deacons. Women in Africa are dealing with patriarchy and clericalism on a larger scale.



Participants at the assembly of the Synod of Bishops gather for prayer and discussion Oct. 21 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Surprisingly, the possibility of having married priests got less attention at the synod than women deacons. One delegate told me that only three interventions discussed optional celibacy. Others said it never came up in their small groups.

Here, all the synod could say was:

> Different opinions have been expressed about priestly celibacy. Its value is appreciated by all as richly prophetic and a profound witness to Christ; some ask, however, whether its appropriateness, theologically, for priestly ministry should necessarily translate into a disciplinary obligation in the Latin Church, above all in ecclesial and cultural contexts that make it more difficult. This discussion is not new but requires further consideration.

If after a month that is all they can say, why did they bother?

This brings us back to Francis' view of the synod as a way of overcoming divisions and modeling how decisions should be made in the church.

For almost all the synod members, the experience was positive. The conversations in the Spirit at roundtables of about 10 members were especially good.

At first, some bishops were not used to being told by a laywoman that their four minutes were up and they had to stop talking. But most accepted the process and learned how to participate in a setting where bishops, priests, religious, and lay men and women were all listened to with respect.

The problem now is how to repeat that experience around the globe in the year of consultation prior to the next session of the synod in October 2024. Few people are going to read the 40-page document. Pastors need a simple set of instructions on how to continue the conversation in their parishes. Hopefully, the synod secretariat will come up with a simple road map for the interim discussions.

Related: Francis wants the synod in every parish. Here's how to bring it to yours.

In addition, there are lots of interesting and important items in the report about refugees, migrants, human trafficking and poor people. It recognized the need to foster peace and protect the Earth. It stressed the importance of ecumenism and interreligious cooperation. It argued for the church to be more synodal, and expressed a desire for better formation of clergy and laity, as well as the "need to make liturgical language more accessible to the faithful and more embodied in the diversity of cultures."

Every bishop and pastor should be able to find something in the 40 pages to discuss with his community.

Attempting to write a 40-page document in the last week of the synod was a mistake, especially when dealing with a multicultural international group of 364 members. More than a thousand amendments were offered to the first draft.

The official text was Italian with an interim English translation, which I used in this column. No other translation was available, which left Spanish speakers out in the cold. The solution was to read the entire 40 pages to the assembly with simultaneous translations before the report was voted on paragraph by paragraph. No one knows when the official translations will be published.

In his homily at the synod's concluding Mass, Francis acknowledged that the work of the synod is not done.

"Today, we do not see the full fruit of this process, but with farsightedness we look to the horizon opening up before us," he said. "The Lord will guide us and help us to be a more synodal and missional church, a church that adores God and serves the women and men of our time, going forth to bring to everyone the consoling joy of the Gospel."

Now that the first session of the synod is over, the ball is in everyone else's court. We are invited to continue the conversation in the Spirit. Those like me who are impatient for change need to remember the words of Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich who described the church as "the people of God, walking through history, with Christ in her midst."

"It is only normal that there is a group walking at his right, another at his left, while some run ahead and others lag behind," explained Hollerich. "When each of these

groups looks at Christ our Lord, together with him they cannot help but see the group that is doing the opposite: those walking on the right will see those walking on the left, those running ahead will see those lagging behind. In other words, the so-called progressive cannot look at Christ without seeing the so-called conservatives with him and vice versa. Nevertheless, the important thing is not the group to which we seem to belong but walking with Christ within his Church."

Let's keep walking toward the horizon.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.