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Pope Francis greets Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, an Australian Aboriginal elder, educator and artist, after his weekly general audience May 31, 2023, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. Looking on is Chiara Porro, Australian ambassador to the Holy See. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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The Catholic Church's global synodal process has made it easier for women to voice different opinions and share diverse experiences, including inside the Vatican, according to Australia's ambassador there.

"Women in the Catholic Church have very diverse views ... as they do across society, and I think that's something that has emerged through the synodal process," said Ambassador Chiara Porro.

"But one of the positives of the synod that I see in this regard is that people are more willing to put forward their views in a way that's not confrontational," she said. "And with the understanding that people will have different views, and that has changed during my time here."

"I felt that many women did not feel comfortable expressing their views," Porro told the National Catholic Reporter. "Whereas nowadays there is much more of an environment and an ability to exchange and accept different perspectives."

Porro's remarks came in an interview for NCR's "The Vatican Briefing" podcast on May 7, as she reflected on her experience representing Australia at the Holy See since 2020.

The Australian diplomat said that while she has witnessed progress on issues related to gender equality and women's empowerment during her four years in Rome,

"there's still a long way to go."

"I think the barriers are very much still there," Porro added.

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During the interview, she discussed the recent 50th anniversary of formal diplomatic relations between Australia and the Holy See, and her work at the Vatican on a number of issues, including promoting women's leadership, raising awareness of Indigenous peoples, and prioritizing safeguarding and child protection.

Australia has a particularly painful history when it comes to the clergy sexual abuse crisis, which led to a national governmental inquiry from 2013 to 2017. Among the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was that senior Catholic officials in Australia withheld information from police investigators and were complicit in both abuse and its cover-up.

"There's a lot of work that still needs to be done on this issue when it comes to accountability, transparency, ensuring that the victim is at the forefront of any response," said Porro.

Abuse, she noted, "happens everywhere, it happens across all institutions. And we have a responsibility and our duty to minors, but not only to women, to other vulnerable people, to stop sexual abuse or any form of abuse."

The episode of "The Vatican Briefing" also features a conversation between co-hosts Joshua McElwee and Christopher White about the continued reactions to the Vatican's controversial human dignity document, which condemned gender theory and gender-affirming surgery.

In addition, they discuss Pope Francis' plans to travel in September to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and Singapore.

While the pope will not be making a stopover in Australia while he is in the region, Porro said she expects many Catholics from her country will likely travel to see Francis. She said she expects the trip to be historic.

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