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A woman holds a sign in support of women deacons as Pope Francis leads his general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Nov. 6, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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One of the clarion calls included on the agenda for October's Synod of Bishops is for the church to consider how to build a greater culture of transparency and accountability. But when it comes to women deacons, a number of leading theologians, scholars and activists believe the Vatican's doctrinal office is failing to practice what the synod is trying to preach.

Earlier this year, Pope Francis established 10 study groups to examine some of the most contentious issues that surfaced at the first session of the synod on synodality in October 2023, including one to consider the question of women deacons.

The membership of the study groups had been kept secret for over three months, but at the conclusion of the July 9 press conference to present the agenda for the Oct. 2-27 synod assembly, when reporters could no longer ask questions, the Vatican published the names of the individuals participating in each group — with one critical exception.

Under "group five" — which has been tasked with considering "some theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms" and, in particular, "theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate," no individual members were listed.

Instead, a note explained that "the in-depth study of the issues at hand-particularly the question of the necessary participation of women in the life and leadership of the church has been entrusted to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, under the coordination of the Secretary for the Doctrinal Section, Msgr. Armando Matteo."



Catherine Clifford, professor of theology at St. Paul University in Ottawa, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 26, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The memo also announced a forthcoming document on the role of women in the church would be published. An official from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith said that Matteo was unavailable to respond to NCR's request for comment.

According to Casey Stanton, co-director of Discerning Deacons, a project dedicated to engaging Catholics in conversations about the role of women and the diaconate, "the lack of transparency with this particular study group does not inspire trust or confidence in the institutional church's commitment to be synodal."

"Synodality requires us to risk being vulnerable, to engage theologically in light of pastoral realities, and to hold difficult questions with openness," she told NCR.

Frustration over the lack of transparency on how the doctrinal office is handling the topic of women deacons is nothing new and dates back over two decades.

In 2002, the International Theological Commission concluded a study of the diaconate that considered the question of women deacons, which was followed by two different commissions Francis established in 2016 and 2020. The work of the two commissions has never been made public.

Catholic scholar and author Phyllis Zagano is flanked by Dominican Sr. Donna Ciangio and Jes

Catholic scholar and author Phyllis Zagano is flanked by Dominican Sr. Donna Ciangio and Jesuit Fr. Bernard Pottier as she speaks with journalists prior to a Jan. 15, 2019, symposium on the history and future of women deacons in the Catholic Church. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

"Three quinquennia of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have considered the question of restoring women to the ordained diaconate," said Phyllis Zagano, who was appointed by Francis to serve on the original 2016 Vatican commission to study women deacons and is one of the world's leading scholars on the female diaconate.

"One would hope that their findings would be considered along with whatever was presented on behalf of the two more recent commissions," she told NCR via email. "Despite the existence of ordination liturgies used for both male and female deacons, since the time of the Council of Trent there has never been any agreement on the history of ordained women."

"If, as has been reported, the two recent commissions presented an historical analysis, then their reports, like the 2002 statement of the International Theological Commission, would have been inconclusive," she continued.

During the first session of the synod on synodality, the question of women deacons surfaced throughout the monthlong assembly. A final synthesis report specifically called for the results of earlier papal and theological commissions to be presented at the 2024 synod.

While the study groups are expected to present preliminary findings this October, it remains unclear what the Vatican's doctrinal office plans to make public.

> 'It's hard not to conclude that these commissions are placebos.'
> —Tina Beattie

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In an NCR interview earlier this year, Canadian theologian and synod delegate Catherine Clifford said she believed the creation of the study groups to study some of the synod's hot button issues means their work must be "open, transparent and accountable so that we have more insight into how these decisions are being made."

"I have a responsibility as a delegate to say, 'look all these secret studies have gone on and we don't know what the upshot has been,' " Clifford said at the time. "The way these issues have been dealt with over the last 50 years has undermined the confidence of the baptized faithful."

British theologian Tina Beattie expressed dismay at the fact that the work of the commission's has yet to be made public — and at the prospect that it may remain secret.

"It's hard not to conclude that both reports included evidence in favor of a female diaconate, but that the magisterium's mind is made up so this is just a window-dressing exercise," she told NCR. "I think it shows arrogance and contempt for those of us who have a genuine interest in these theological issues and debates."

"It's hard not to conclude that these commissions are placebos," Beattie added.

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Compounding the frustration for Beattie and others are remarks Francis made in a May CBS interview where he explicitly voiced his opposition to women deacons, if it is linked to Holy Orders. At the time, the pope's words caught many by surprise as they came amid the ongoing work of the synod where the topic remained an open conversation.

During a July 16 lecture at John XXIII College in Perth, Australia, Jesuit Fr. Frank Brennan expressed "fatigue and frustration" following the pope's interview and the decision to relegate the question of women deacons to the Vatican's doctrinal office, rather than the full work of the synod assembly.

"I now more readily understand why so many women in the church are frustrated or angry or both," Brennan said. "The question about women deacons deserves an

answer now."

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"Is not the October session of the Synod the appropriate time to think about it?" Brennan said. "And would not the October session be the appropriate time to release the findings of the two commissions held by the pope to consider the question of women deacons?" he asked.

"Is this not the bare minimum required for a transparent and inclusive, synodal church?" Brennan continued. "We need to demand better process from the top if we are to be a synodal church."

Stanton, who has spent the last four years hosting hundreds of synodal listening sessions with thousands of Catholics, said she still has high hopes for the synod but believes it will be "defeating" if the synod process addresses this topic in an "insular and closed" manner.

"I hope the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith can lean into this invitation to greater vulnerability, even as they stand as the authority on matters of church teaching," she said.

"Can they model for us the humble conversion towards becoming a more synodal church?" she asked.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 16-29, 2024** print issue under the headline: The Vatican synod agenda calls for transparency. But on women deacons, it's lacking.