

Allison Beyer of South Bend, Indiana, leads a group of pilgrims as they sing a psalm Oct. 6, 2024, at Rome's Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin. Members of the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (known as CEAMA) and Discerning Deacons took part in a weeklong pilgrimage to share women's service to the church, to learn about deacons, and to call on the church to approve the diaconate for women as the last part of the Synod on Synodality began the first week of October at the Vatican. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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Rome — October 9, 2024
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A group of pilgrims left the Eternal City Oct. 7, saying they are returning home to continue the push for women to answer their spiritual call as deacons. One of them, a Franciscan sister, said the Spirit would settle the issue, not antiquated church structures.

Some expressed frustration following statements from a Vatican official that the church will not, for now, consider their ordination to the office. More than 50 women, and some men, many of them from the U.S., but also from Brazil, Bolivia and Australia involved with the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (known as CEAMA) and Discerning Deacons, ended their 2024 Synodal Pilgrimage to Rome Oct. 6, with some disappointment, but also a determination that the matter is not settled.

"Our purpose really has just been to witness, to be here, to pray for synodality, to pray for the church, to pray for the synod delegates and to be able to witness to the reality that Jesus is asking a lot more of women," said Ellie Hidalgo, the Miami-based co-director of Discerning Deacons.

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The groups took women to Rome who work with migrants in the U.S., with Aboriginal people in Australia and with those being persecuted and killed in places like Brazil for their defense of the environment. They participated in a feast of St. Francis panel, prayer services, reflection and outings to learn more about deacons. Among them, many feel they have a calling to the diaconate, Hidalgo said, yet are limited by the Catholic Church from the office because they are women.

"In a violent world with so many urgent pastoral needs that are going unmet, Jesus is calling more women into service. And we're just trying to witness to our own personal testimonies," Hidalgo told National Catholic Reporter in an Oct. 6 interview.

On Oct. 5, a day before their pilgrimage ended, the group visited Rome's Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin to learn about its ancient history as a center that tended to the needy, a building once referred to as a deaconry because of its service to the poor. It's a service many of the women in the group know well as they, too, tend to those on the margins in their respective parishes.

Pilgrimage participants included CEAMA's vice president Sr. Laura Vicuña Pereira Manso, a Franciscan catechist who lives in an Indigenous community in Porto Velho, Brazil, who spoke of her experience with women and men assassinated on a daily basis for protecting their ancestral homes; Mercy Sr. Elizabeth Young, who works with the Barkindji nation in Wilcannia, Australia; Rosa Bonilla, a Salvadoran immigrant to the U.S., and a pastoral assistant who shared stories of working with Latino immigrants in Los Angeles.

While women already do the work of deacons, the Vatican keeps saying the matter needs more study, and the pope's comments, relayed to the synod Oct. 2 by Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, saying that the matter was not yet "mature," is a lot to take in, said Casey Stanton, Discerning Deacon's co-director.

"I thought what we were doing here was furthering this question. And you're saying, 'Oh, no, we aren't going to further this question. We're going to ask a bunch of other questions.' It feels like a bait and switch," said Stanton. "There have been a lot of studies. The church has been studying this for 50 years. I think it actually is mature. It feels quite mature."



Jessica Morel, a U.S. military chaplain, offers a reflection Oct. 5, 2024, at the Basilica of Santa Maria in Cosmedin in Rome. Morell said the struggle for women and the diaconate has at times felt "abundant in hope, disappointment, rage, love, and connectedness," but she urged the group to continue. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

In a reflection during the visit to Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Jessica Morel*, a U.S. military chaplain and one of the pilgrims, said the struggle for women and the diaconate has at times felt "abundant in hope, disappointment, rage, love and connectedness." Even so, she reminded the group, their work is built on that of other women before them and encouraged them to keep planting seeds that one day "will bring change to our church."

Fighting tears, she said she thought of other women in the church's past.

"I'm moved by the struggles they must have gone through," she said.

CEAMA's Manso told NCR Oct. 4 she holds out hope because the Holy Spirit works in the midst of the people of God and not in antiquated church structures.

"That's why I believe in changes," she said.

Hidalgo said the group took part in various events in Rome the first week of the synod to "bear witness," and some members even met with Pope Francis. Some synod delegates also attended the pilgrims' events.

"We know that the church is studying the history and the theology. They want to understand what exactly did women deacons do in the past. Were they ordained? To what extent? … There's a lot of studying going on," she said. "But we also think it's important for the church to be talking with women, so not to only be talking about us, but with us, and to hear our stories, and to hear our stories of service."

She welcomed Fernández and others to continue dialogue with the pilgrims who are serving in different pastoral capacities, "on the ground, in *la realidad* [the reality], that really brings the urgency to this question," Hidalgo said.

"You could study forever, but it is the urgent current needs of the migrants, of the Indigenous people, of people affected by climate change, of the poor, of children, of the elderly, all these urgent pastoral needs that really brings urgency to make decisions about this question of women's participation and how much more can we open up women's participation to preach and also service, even diaconal service," she added.



Members of a pilgrim group learning about the diaconate and speaking in Rome on women's service to the church line up for Communion Oct. 5, 2024, at the Basilica of Santa Maria Cosmedin in Rome. The group, advocating for the women's diaconate, include women who work with migrants in the U.S., with Aboriginal people in Australia and with those being persecuted and killed in places like Brazil for their defense of the environment. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Stanton said she was ready to see more involvement of women, even as the issue of women deacons is being settled.

"Why is the church afraid to take this step forward? Our hope this month would be that rather than creating a document or a study that's working very hard to avoid the question of ordaining women as deacons and exploring every other possibility for how women's participation can be deepened and expanded in the life of the church, can't we have a both/and?" she asked.

She suggested that the church could "explore all the possibilities about how women's participation can advance in decision-making and governance and all these

different ministries and roles, and create a path where local churches could have a framework. … Have some guidance for how they can discern whether the ground is ready in their local church to receive women as deacons so that we could do this and stay in communion with each other."

Among the women, some, like Manso, said they didn't have a calling to the diaconate but were fighting so that those called by God can answer, acknowledging that it would take some time.

"This struggle we're in today is for future generations," Manso said. "I don't think I will reap from this harvest. But what I'm charged with is to sow. Some people [say]: 'Do you want to be a deacon?' No. But I know there are women, many women who have that vocation. That's whom we're speaking up for."

**This story has been updated to correct the misspelling of Jessica Morel's name.*

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