Vatican

View from the Vatican



Belgian Deacon Geert De Cubber, a member of the Synod of Bishops on synodality, speaks during a news conference at the Vatican Oct. 9. He told reporters that delegates are discussing women deacons, even though the Vatican's doctrine chief has said that the time is not ripe to pursue women deacons. (CNS/Justin McLellan)



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Rome — October 10, 2024

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Editor's note: *This story has been updated to correct a caption the describes the rite of the Oct. 9 Mass delegates attended.*

An African bishop took to the microphone to make the case for greater pastoral accompaniment of polygamous couples. A day later, a priest took to the floor, giving an almost identical version of the prelate's remarks, but replacing the word polygamy with LGBTQ.

These were just two scenes from the opening days of Pope Francis' final Rome gathering of his yearslong synod on synodality project that officially comes to a conclusion here this month.

Several members confirmed these anecdotes but asked for anonymity. Delegates are officially barred from discussing specifics of the conversations that took place inside the Vatican's synod hall.

The members told the National Catholic Reporter that hot-button issues are being discussed both inside the room and on the sidelines, though the pope has directed that some of the synod's most contentious issues be sent to study groups for further studies. Among the issues are the role of women's ministries and LGBTQ inclusion in the church.

The Vatican's doctrine chief told synod delegates on Oct. 2 that the time is not ripe to pursue women deacons. But at a Vatican press conference on Oct. 9, Deacon Geert De Cubber of Belgium told reporters that the issue is still being discussed inside the assembly.

After spending a month together last year discussing the future of the Catholic Church, some 400 synod delegates have returned to the Eternal City. To a person, the assembly members I've interviewed attest to the fact that there's a deeper sense of trust this year among the body and participants are more at ease with the process and people that have been entrusted with steering the synod forward.



Synod delegates gather for Mass in the Maronite Rite at St. Peter's Basilica on Oct. 9. The second and final assembly of the synod on synodality runs through Oct. 27. (NCR photo/James V. Grimaldi)

While hopes are high that the synod will produce concrete results, organizers are emphasizing that the major focus of the month is to deepen the practice of synodality. The issues before them, they say, are to create better structures for the church to become more inclusive and better capable of listening to all its members.

Perhaps that's why — at least according to two accounts — there was a greater sense of convergence when two delegates from two different cultures relied on the same logic to make the case for something the other might find objectionable. The African bishop argued that while polygamous relationships may not live up to the Gospel ideal, there is still a need to accompany people in such relationships and include them in the life of the church. Another synod delegate made the same argument on behalf of LGBTQ people.

Even if questions about LGBTQ Catholics have been officially moved off the synod agenda, some delegates are still using the synod's convening power to consider how the church might be more welcoming.

A five-minute walk from the synod hall, inside the Jesuit's global headquarters, more than 70 synod delegates, Vatican officials and other church leaders gathered on Oct. 8 for a dialogue on LGBTQ inclusion in the church. The event, which was organized by the Jesuit ministry Outreach, was closed to the press, but according to an article on its website, it included five testimonials from gay, lesbian and bisexual Catholics from Africa, Europe and Latin America.

Multiple reports from attendees and panelists emphasized that the realities of LGBTQ Catholics are not simply a niche Western issue, but a concern for the universal church. One African panelist reportedly praised Francis' own support for decriminalization of homosexuality, while expressing dismay that Catholic bishops on the continent are not following suit.

The audience included both current cardinals and some of the men named Oct. 8 as cardinals and who will receive the red hat from Francis in December.

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According to Outreach's executive director, Michael O'Loughlin, one panelist explained that she became Catholic following welcoming words from Francis and said that like other LGBT people, she simply wants to be welcome to serve her parish. Another was asked what message she hoped synod delegates would hear. Her response was that "the message of Jesus was one of love and urged church leaders to see LGBTQ Catholics as human beings rather than as the summation of their sins."

And with Juan Carlos Cruz, an openly gay man who is a close confidant of Francis sitting on the dais as a panelist, it won't be just synod delegates that will hear this message or about this event, but almost certainly the pope himself.

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