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Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, listens to Benedictine Mother Maria Ignazia Angelini's intervention during the morning synod session in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Oct. 15. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, coordinator of a secretive synod study group on women's ministries, did not attend an Oct. 18 special meeting that had been organized for delegates to offer their feedback on one of the synod's most closely watched issues for which he is responsible.

The cardinal's lack of participation was confirmed to the National Catholic Reporter by multiple attendees of the meeting. One delegate, who requested anonymity, citing the synod's communication guidelines, described his absence as a "disgrace." Another called the meeting a "disaster" for the synod.

"This was due not to any unwillingness, but to my objective inability to attend on the scheduled day and time," Fernandez wrote in statement released late Oct. 18. The cardinal said he would be available to meet with synod delegates on Oct. 24 to discuss concerns related to group five.

Synod delegates were invited to attend special forums on the afternoon of Friday, Oct. 18, for each of the 10 study groups Pope Francis established earlier this year to study some of the synod's most contentious issues. The work of the 10 groups is slated to continue until June 2025.

On the opening day of the synod, Oct. 2, delegates were given presentations from the coordinators of the groups, including Fernández, who is the head of the Vatican's doctrinal office and oversees study group five.

The scope of group five includes "theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms" and, in particular, "theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate."

During his presentation, the cardinal told synod members that the possibility of restoring the female diaconate remains an open question.

But, the cardinal cautioned that "rushing'" to a decision on it would short-circuit the necessary discernment on the question, as well as the broader issues surrounding women's ministries in the Catholic Church.

From the outset, however, study group five has been shrouded in mystery.

Unlike the other nine groups, its membership has still not been revealed. During special video presentations on the synod's opening day, photos were shown of the membership of each study group, with the exception of group five.

During the special Oct. 18 meetings, which had been added to the synod calendar to allow delegates an opportunity to engage the leadership of each study group, the session for study group five was led by two junior staffers from the Vatican's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.

According to multiple attendees, the staffers passed out slips of paper to synod delegates with information on how they could submit their feedback for group five.

One delegate reported that the meeting, which took place in the Vatican's old synod hall, was attended by approximately one-third of the synodal assembly, including multiple high-ranking cardinals and Vatican officials.

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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.

During the first session of the synod on synodality, in October 2023, 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. To date, Fernández has not complied with the synod's request.

***Editor's note**: This story has been updated to include reaction from Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández.*

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