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Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, speaks with Xavière Missionary Sr. Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, before the start of a morning session of the synod in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican Oct. 21. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



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The Vatican's doctrinal czar announced on Oct. 21 that the 2020 commission to study the female diaconate will resume its work, but insisted that questions related to women's leadership in the Catholic Church should not be linked to ordination.

"Rushing to ask for the ordination of deaconesses is not the most important response to promote women today," said Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández in remarks delivered to the ongoing Vatican synod on Oct. 21 and later distributed to reporters.

The cardinal's remarks come just days after he sparked outrage among synod delegates on Oct. 18 by not attending a much-anticipated meeting for a special study group established to consider questions related to ministerial forms and the female diaconate.

Fernández's absence from that meeting, which was first reported by the National Catholic Reporter, contributed to longstanding suspicion over the group. The body has operated in secrecy since it was announced in March and has faced ongoing criticism for not disclosing its membership or plans.

In his Oct. 21 address to the synod, Fernández clarified that the group is being led by his deputy, Msgr. Armando Matteo. The cardinal said that he will hold a meeting with synod delegates on Oct. 24, where he will provide a full list of the study group's membership and operating procedures.

> 'Thinking about the diaconate for some women does not solve the issue of the millions of women in the church.'
>
> —Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández
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Since the start of Pope Francis' synod on synodality in 2021, women's leadership has been a top concern that has continued to surface throughout the globe.

The final document from the Oct. 2023 Rome synod assembly described the issue as "urgent." But most of the particular questions related to women have been officially taken off the table of this year's synodal assembly for further review by the special study group.

"The Holy Father is very concerned about the role of women in the church," Fernández told the room of nearly 400 synod delegates and organizers.

The cardinal said that even prior to the synod, his office had been tasked by the pope with exploring possibilities for women's ministries that are not linked to ordination.

"Thinking about the diaconate for some women does not solve the issue of the millions of women in the church," he said.

The cardinal went on to note that the ministries of catechist and lector, which are available to women and do not require ordination, are currently underutilized.

He also told the synod body that his office would like to receive testimonials of women "who are truly leading communities or playing important roles of authority. ... Not because they have been imposed on communities, or as a result of a study, but because they have acquired this authority under the impulse of the Spirit in the face of a need of the people."

The cardinal also invited delegates to submit materials to the 2020 commission on women deacons, which was established by Francis following the 2019 Amazon synod . The commission, which Fernández said will soon resume its work, will continue to be chaired by Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, the archbishop of L'Aquila, Italy.

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The 2020 commission replaced an earlier commission that had been established in 2016 at the urging of the global umbrella organization of Catholic sisters and nuns throughout the world.

To date, the findings from neither committee have been made public, despite a request from last year's synod members.

The special study groups were established by Francis to steer this year's synod discussions toward focusing on the practice of synodality rather than particular issues. Last week's incident over Fernández's handling of questions related to women's ministries has managed to put hot-button issues at the forefront as the synod heads into its final week.

At an Oct. 21 Vatican press conference, Xavière Sr. Nathalie Becquart told reporters that the practice of synodality — where the Catholic Church becomes better capable of listening to all of its members — is still a work in progress.

"In synodality we are all learning," said Becquart, an undersecretary at the Vatican's office for the Synod of Bishops. "Even the Roman Curia, step by step, is trying to learn synodality."

"What was expressed this morning," she said of Fernández's remarks, "I think, is already highlighting how synodality is in action through the different groups and how we move forward."

The synod on synodality began its final week of deliberations Oct. 21. Over the course of this week, delegates will review and revise the synod's final document, which they will vote on during the synod's final session on Oct. 26.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series. A version of this story appeared in the **Nov. 8-21, 2024** print issue under the headline: Cardinal says women deacons commission will resume work.