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Pope Francis gives his blessing to members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality after the synod's final working session Oct. 26 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. The synod assembly released its final report after meeting in sessions since Oct. 2. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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***Editor's note**: This story has been updated to include comments from Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich and from Pope Francis' homily for the Oct. 27 Mass closing the synod.*

Pope Francis' three-year consultation on the future of the Catholic Church concluded on Oct. 26, outlining the institution's challenges and proposing ways for all the baptized to be involved in charting a path forward.

Recommended changes include overhauling training for future priests, greater lay involvement in selecting bishops, expansion of women's ministries and a revision to church law to mandate greater transparency and accountability throughout the church.

The 51-page Final Document was approved and published after three years of tens of thousands of listening sessions, continental assemblies and two major summits in Rome. It stops short of proposing certain dramatic changes — such as the restoration of the female diaconate or greater recognition of LGBTQ Catholics — that many reform groups have sought during the multiyear project known as the synod on synodality.

But neither does it close the door on such possibilities. The synod's document notes that access to the diaconate for women "remains open" and calls for a church that does not exclude people because of their "marital situation, identity or sexuality."

The paragraph that received the most no votes was the primary paragraph addressing the possibility of women deacons. While all 151 paragraphs of the document received the two-thirds votes required for approval, the section on women deacons received 97 no votes from the 355 voting members present in the Vatican's synod hall.

The document, which was produced by some 400 delegates from around the world, caps a legacy initiative for Francis — inviting one of the world's oldest institutions to consider how it might become more inclusive and better capable of listening to all its members. How this process advances and how these proposals are implemented and enforced, however, remains more opaque.

In remarks following the document's approval by the synod body, the pope approved its publication.

Francis said that he hoped the document would be a "gift to the people of God." He said that he did not intend to publish an apostolic exhortation, a magisterial document typically published at the conclusion of the synod offering the pope's own reflections.

Instead, he said, the document already contains "highly concrete indications" to guide the church's mission.

The pope also noted the work of the special study groups on some of the most contentious issues that surfaced throughout the three-year process. Their work is expected to continue through June 2025.

The synodal church, the pope said, now needs its words "to be accompanied by action."



Pope Francis speaks to members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality after they approved their final document Oct. 26 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Seminary formation, women and episcopal authority

Looming large over the synod process since it began in 2021 has been women's ministerial and leadership roles in the church.

While the pope has said the proposal to restore the female diaconate is not yet "mature" and needs further consideration, the final document declares that the issue is an open question.

"This discernment needs to continue," it states.

At an Oct. 26 press conference following the synod's final vote, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich emphasized that the pope's immediate publication of the document means that Francis has made the synod's proposals "his own," including to keep open the

question of women deacons.

"The Holy Father has not said women will be ordained deacons. He has not said women will not be ordained deacons," said Hollerich, one of the synod's lead organizers. "This is not a decision for, it's not a decision against."

The final document goes on to note that "women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition…in all the various areas of the church's life." It requests full implementation of all leadership opportunities granted to women under canon law that are currently under-explored.

The synod calls for a complete update to the current guidelines on how priests are formed and trained, and the document calls for a "significant presence of women" in Catholic seminaries.

While a special group was established by the pope to examine specific questions related to women, the body has largely operated in secrecy since its inception in March. After a ruckus earlier this month involving the leadership of the group, the final document specifically requested that the Vatican's synod office "watch over the synodal quality of the working method of the study groups."

The text goes on to envision a broader reliance on lay-led ministries within the church and for a greater voice for the laity in choosing bishops.

In a synodal church, the document states, the ministries of bishops and priests are marked by broad collaboration and greater co-responsibility with their flock, included within seminary formation and serving as judges in canonical processes.

Despite a centuries-long practice of accountability to one's superiors in church life, the synod said that the dimension of authorities being held accountable to the community is "in need of restoration."



Pope Francis and members of the Synod of Bishops on synodality offer a prayer of thanks to God after the synod's final working session Oct. 26 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Transparency, accountability and evaluation

Over the last three years, revising the church's decision-making processes emerged as one of the synod's primary objectives.

The Final Document calls for a revision of the church's Code of Canon Law from a "synodal perspective," and in particular, a clarification of the distinctions between consultative and deliberative involvement in decision-making.

In addition, the synod recommends the "establishment everywhere" of finance councils, involvement of laity in pastoral and financial planning, preparation of an audited annual report for both financial matters and safeguarding policies and performance evaluations of all ministers and ministries.

The text also highlights the role of participatory bodies — such as diocesan synods, presbyteral, diocesan and parish pastoral councils. While many of the proposals are already mandated in U.S. and other Western dioceses, they have not been universally adopted by the global church.

"A synodal church is based upon the existence, efficiency and effective vitality of these participatory bodies, not merely the nominal existence of them," the document states.

"Without concrete changes in the short term, the vision of a synodal church will not be credible, and this will alienate those members of the People of God who have drawn strength and hope from the synodal journey," it continues.

On the role of episocal conferences, the synod declares that such bodies are fruitful in best identifying how to enculturate the faith and that local churches must have the ability to move at different paces.

While the text does not specifically mention it, one of the much-discussed topics of the Oct. 2-26 synodal assembly was the implementation of the December 2023 Vatican decree allowing for blessings for couples in same-sex unions. While the decision received widespread acceptance in many Western countries, some eastern European and African bishops' conferences have refused to enact the decree.

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According to the synod's final document, more study is needed to determine what matters of doctrinal authority should be reserved to the pope and what matters can be decided or enacted by episcopal conferences. The synod also encourages the further collaboration of continental groupings of episcopal conferences for a deepening of synodal practices and consultation.

Among other proposals in the synod's final text:

- Consultation from Roman dicasteries with bishops' conferences and other relevant parties prior to the publication of major documents;
- More collaboration among members of the College of Cardinals — the elite body responsible for advising the pope on church governance — in order for the diverse group to better know one another;

- Creation of a new synodal study group to examine how liturgical celebrations can offer a better expression of synodality;
- Establishment of a council of patriarchs, major archbishops and metropolitans of Eastern Catholic Churches to advise the pope; and
- More formation and training for those working with minors and vulnerable adults to improve the church's safeguarding efforts.

On Sunday, Oct. 27, the pope presided over a final Mass for the synod in St. Peter's Basilica.

Surrounded by the summit's global delegates, Francis encouraged the church to be attentive to "the challenges of our time, the urgency of evangelization and the many wounds that afflict humanity."

"A sedentary church, that inadvertently withdraws from life and confines itself to the margins of reality, is a church that risks remaining blind and becoming comfortable with its own unease," said the pope. "If we remain stuck in our blindness, we will continuously fail to grasp the urgency of giving a pastoral response to the many problems of our world."

As he officially brought the three-year synod process to its end, Francis declared that it is now time for the church to "get its hands dirty" and "carry the joy of the Gospel through the streets of the world."

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