News



Activists from the Women's Ordination Conference hold a witness on the opening day of the synod on synodality, Oct. 2, in sight of the Vatican with the message "Don't kick the can down the road." The final document did not call for movement on the issue of women deacons but it kept the issue open. (Courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference)



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When Lisa Amman went to Mass the day after the conclusion of the Vatican summit on the future of the Catholic Church, several parishioners offered condolences and words of encouragement. Some were even carrying printed copies of negative headlines about the synod's final document, which was released Oct. 26.

Their sympathy was not necessary.

"The synod is good news," said Amman, deputy director of engagement for Discerning Deacons, which advocates for restoring the female diaconate in the church.

Not only did the synod on synodality invite participation from Catholics all over the world, it was the first synod of bishops to include women as voting delegates, Amman said during an Oct. 30 online post-synod reflection event sponsored by Discerning Deacons.

What's more, the conversation about women's ordination to the diaconate that was once "fringe" is now "mainstream," she said.

Yet the synod delegates failed to move on hot-button issues such as women's leadership and LGBTQ outreach, leaving many progressive Catholics frustrated. The simultaneous U.S. presidential election and eventual results have likely added to disillusionment, especially among women. Many will be watching this week's U.S. bishops' meeting to see what, if anything, church leaders say about the synod and the election.

The final synod document stopped short of moving on female deacons but left the issue "open." The paragraph that mentioned expanding the diaconate received the most "no" votes, but it still passed. Pope Francis decided not to write the customary post-synodal apostolic exhortation, but instead ordered the publication of the document.

Although the pope previously had told journalist Norah O'Donnell that he was not open to women deacons, his approval of the synod document — which said that "this discernment needs to continue" — has Amman and others at Discerning Deacons concluding that the issue is not closed.

But not everyone sees that as a "win."



Women march to the Vatican Oct. 4 during the synod as part of a "Why Not Me?" protest organized by the Women's Ordination Conference. (Courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference)

The Women's Ordination Conference called the document "an insufficient and disappointing response to the multi-year process meant to respond to the needs of the church today" and that "its overtures to the equality of women and equal gifts bestowed upon all God's people through baptism ring hollow without clear steps for implementation."

In their statement, released the day the synod document was made public, the conference called for more urgency on the issue of women's leadership and roles in the church.

"Endless 'study' on the subject of women is a patriarchal stalling tactic by ordained men to maintain the status quo," the statement said. "Ordained men decide the parameters and pace of synodality, and when the time is 'ripe' for women's ministries. And they do so at an incalculable cost."

"The church has lost generations of women who endured the pain and humiliation of having to prove the validity of their calling," it said. "How long must women wait? Or more consequentially: Will women wait?"

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The final document did stress the importance of including the stories of biblical women in the lectionary — which made the church reform group FutureChurch happy.

Their "Mary Magdalene Goes to the Synod" project called for the including at Easter the full account of the Resurrection in John's Gospel, which includes Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene and the commissioning of her to proclaim the good news to the other disciples.

Yet executive director Russ Petrus senses frustration among FutureChurch folks about how the issue of women deacons was handled.

"People are rightly upset about the ways that Pope Francis and the curia tried to pre-emptively take it off the synodal table," Petrus told NCR in an email interview. "That it made it into the final document reflects the faithful persistence of delegates — particularly lay and women delegates — in representing the voices of the faithful who brought it up at every step in the synod process, refusing to let it be erased."

That the final document's paragraph on women got the most "no" votes is a "disappointment but not surprising," he said. "It's a sign of the clerical resistance women continue to face, even in this time of 'synodality.' "

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Yet Phyllis Zagano of Hofstra University in New York told NCR that "the fact that the primary paragraph addressing the possibility of women deacons received the most 'no' votes could indicate that the synod finds the time for 'more study' has ended and a decision must be made."

Zagano was a member of the first of two commissions Francis convened during his pontificate to study the possibility of women deacons. The first, established in 2016 at the urging of the global organization of Catholic sisters and nuns, was followed by one formed in the aftermath of the Amazon synod.

Findings from neither committee have been made public, despite a request from last year's synod on synodality members.

Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, recently announced that the second commission will soon resume its work. But he insisted that women's leadership in the 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," he told synod delegates in remarks later distributed to reporters.

Fernández made similar comments as the synod opened in early October, saying the pope did not "consider the question [of women deacons] mature."



A woman holds a sign in support of women deacons as Pope Francis leads his general audience in St. Peter's Square Nov. 6, 2019, at the Vatican. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The first assembly of the synod in 2023 described the issue as "urgent" in its final document. Francis later tried to take more controversial issues off the table by moving them to special study groups. The one considering questions of ministerial forms and the female diaconate has lacked transparency since it was formed in March. Concerns were compounded last month when Fernández failed to attend a meeting of the group arranged for synod delegates.

Those advocating for increased women's roles have called for increased transparency and accountability around the process of considering the issue.

"The takeaway from this is that conflict isn't a bad thing," said Discerning Deacons co-director Casey Stanton. "If we're going to create some change, we are going to create some friction."

During the group's online post-synod gathering, organizers urged the nearly 100 attendees to keep praying and gathering, but also to "get the word out" about what they consider good news from the synod.

Said Amman: "Not everyone's dream came true. But there's a lot to work with."

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