Vatican
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Miriam Duignan Wijngaards prays at an event supporting women's ordination at Rome's Oratory of San Francesco Saverio del Caravita May 6, the evening before the conclave to elect a new pope begins. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)



by Rhina Guidos

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Rome — May 7, 2025

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Miriam Duignan Wijngaards said that while the late Pope Francis is remembered as a man of dialogue and encounter, the only group of marginalized Catholics he did not engage with are supporters of women's ordination like herself.

And so, she prayed with others at Rome's Oratory of San Francesco Saverio del Caravita May 6, the evening before the conclave, that the next pope to appear on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica will hear them out.

"Regardless of who the next pope is, the question of women in ministry will remain to be one of the largest and most pressing questions that they will have to face," said Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference. "The question won't go away no matter who the pope is."

They were part of thousands of organized worldwide groups of Catholics praying for cardinals who will begin voting today (May 7) in the conclave to elect the next pope. "Conclave" means "with key" in Latin, meaning the cardinals are locked in the Sistine Chapel until they elect a pope.

And like others watching the papal election process unfold, advocates for women's ordination expressed hopes and fears for what's to come. McElwee prayed that "in a meeting known best for its closed and locked doors, we say that the Spirit cannot be locked in, [it] breathes here among the people of God."

The women — and the issues they raised — were a rare and almost overlooked sight in a world focused squarely on the men at the Vatican. Only the National Catholic Reporter showed up to report on their prayer event.

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Much of the media continued to focus on attacks against papal contenders, such as Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines. His episcopal conference defended him from what they said was a smear campaign from a U.S. organization and others trying to prevent him becoming the next pope.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, in a May 7 statement, refuted all the accusations against Tagle, who is popular among young Catholics. The conference also had a terse message for those trying to bring down the cardinal.

"Let God take care of them," said Cardinal Pablo Virgilio David, the conference president.

Other cardinals sent their last messages to the world before turning over their cellphones ahead of the conclave.

Chilean Cardinal Fernando Chomali, archbishop of Santiago, posted his last message late on May 6.

"Today I enter the conclave without a cellphone, alone before God to vote for who will be the next pope," he wrote in a post on several social media platforms. "It is a responsibility that overwhelms me. In prayer, these words have come to mind: Lord, have mercy."

Cardinals at Mass before entering conclave

Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington, center, concelebrates the Mass "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice" ("for the election of the Roman pontiff") in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican May 7, 2025. (CNS/Pablo Esparza)

The cardinals, who have been meeting almost daily for two weeks to discuss the papal transition period, the challenges the church faces and to consider potential candidates for the papacy, attended Mass today as they entered the Sistine Chapel to begin the voting process. The special Mass is called "Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice" ("for the election of the Roman pontiff")'

In the homily, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, dean of the college, underlined the seriousness of the task before the 133 cardinal electors and stressed the qualities every pope — the successor of St. Peter — must embody.

"We are here to invoke the help of the Holy Spirit, to implore his light and strength," Re said, "so that the pope elected may be he whom the church and humanity need at this difficult and complex and tormented turning point in history."

Catholic News Service contributed to this report.

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This story appears in the **Who will be the next pope?** feature series. View the full series.