Vatican

Vatican News



Pink smoke rises in front of St. Peter's Basilica during a protest by the Women's Ordination Conference calling for full equality for women in the Catholic Church on the first day of the conclave to elect the 267th pope in Rome on Wednesday, May 7, 2025. (AP/Bernat Armangue, File)

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Before becoming Pope Leo XIV, Cardinal Robert Prevost presided over one of the most revolutionary reforms of Pope Francis' pontificate by having women serve on the Vatican board that vets nominations for bishops.

But he also has said decisively that women cannot be ordained as priests, and despite having worked for years in Peru where women often lead church communities, seems noncommittal on whether women could ever serve in any ministerial capacity.

Nevertheless, the women who have worked closely with Prevost in recent years have praised his leadership style, ability to listen and respect for their opinions. In interviews with The Associated Press, they say they expect that as pope, Leo will continue to promote women in church governance positions, albeit with limits.

Maria Lia Zervino was among the three women Francis appointed to the Dicastery for Bishops in 2022 to review possible appointments. It was a job previously held by cardinals and bishops, an old boy's club that has jealously guarded the secret process behind the appointment of bishops.

Zervino rejoiced when Prevost was elected pope, saying the respect he showed for her and other women on the board and their opinions gave them faith in him as a leader.

"I'm convinced that he doesn't need to learn how to work (with women), how to let them speak, to listen to them, to have them participate in decisions, because that's what he does anyway," said Zervino, the Argentine former head of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations.

Zervino said she expected Leo would continue Francis' reform processes, albeit in his own style.

"He's a simple man, serene, always with that smile that we saw that seems to come from an interior peace," she said in an interview. "So when you see someone who is balanced, peaceful and respectful and who welcomes what you say and is always ready to hear the other, you have faith in him."

A 2023 comment on women as priests

At a 2023 gathering of bishops on the future of the Catholic Church, Prevost was asked at a news conference about women in church leadership positions. He said it was "a work in progress" and that there would be a "continuing recognition of the fact that women can add a great deal to the life of the church on many different levels."

But he drew some very clear lines.

"I think we're all familiar with the very significant and long tradition of the church, and that the apostolic tradition is something that has been spelled out very clearly, especially if you want to talk about the question of women's ordination to the priesthood," he said in the Oct. 25, 2023, briefing.

Catholic women do much of the church's work in schools and hospitals and are usually responsible for passing the faith to the next generation. But they have long complained of second-class status in an institution that reserves the priesthood for men.

Prevost acknowledged Francis had created two commissions to study whether women could be made deacons, who perform many of the same functions as priests. While he said the issue was still open, he warned that turning women into clerics "doesn't necessarily solve a problem, it might make a new problem."

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Just because a woman in society can be president doesn't mean there's an "immediate parallel" in the church, he argued.

"It isn't as simple as saying that at this stage we're going to change, if you will, the tradition of the church after 2,000 years on any one of those points," he said.

Deacons are ordained ministers who preside at weddings, baptisms and funerals. They can preach but cannot celebrate Mass. Married men can be ordained as deacons while women cannot, although historians say women served as deacons in the early Christian church.

A prudent and private listener

Karlijn Demasure, emeritus professor of practical theology at St. Paul University in Ottawa, served on a Vatican commission with Prevost proposing reforms to the authority of bishops and how they are selected. She said Prevost was absolutely convinced of the need to involve lay people and nuns in the selection of bishops, at least at an initial level.

"He listens well," Demasure said. "He hears what has been said, and if he doesn't agree, he says it but in a nice way: 'I wouldn't say it like this, or I wouldn't do it like that.'"

She said Prevost was quiet, "prudent and private." She wonders, though, what will happen with the work of the commission, one of 10 groups that are studying particularly thorny questions, such as the role of women, and were due to report back to the pope by July.

Sr Nathalie Becquart, one of the highest-ranking women at the Vatican, worked with Prevost during Francis' meeting, known as a synod, on the future of the church. She also happens to be his neighbor, living in the same Palazzo Sant'Uffizio inside the Vatican gates, and was among the well-wishers who greeted Leo when he came home the night of his May 8 election.

Becquart posted a joyous selfie with the pope in the courtyard in one of the first private moments after his election. "I had time to greet him, not just as a neighbor," she said.

The women's diaconate

Becquart recalled that she had been at a conference of the 900 nuns who run the world's female religious orders when the white smoke came out of the Sistine Chapel chimney. It didn't bother her that the nuns had no vote in the conclave, since the cardinals "could see that the church is the people of God."

"Synodality is about feeling we are from the same body, we are interdependent, we have a deep inner connection, and for me that was a deep spiritual experience I could never imagine before," she said.

Also during the conclave, advocates for women's ordination set off pink smoke flares over the Vatican to protest their exclusion from the priesthood and the election process.

"The discrimination and exclusion of women is a sin, and we're here to say the next pope will inherit this question and needs to work quickly to correct it," said Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference.

Hofstra University researcher Phyllis Zagano, who was on Francis' first Vatican commission on women deacons, remains optimistic. She pointed to Prevost's acknowledgement that the deacon issue was still open and that he ministered in Peru, a region that has pushed for years for the church to recognize women as ministerial deacons to help offset the priest shortage.

In a column for Religion News Service, Zagano noted that a recent proposal for a new Amazonian liturgical rite, published last month by the Amazonian bishops conference, contained explicit recommendations for women to be ordained as deacons. When Francis in 2020 considered official requests from Amazonian bishops for female deacons, he dodged the issue.

"Women deserve the ordained diaconal ministry of women," she said in an interview.

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