



Participants pray in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall Oct. 10, 2023, at the beginning of a working session of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Weeks after the release of a synod study group report on controversial pastoral issues, experts have continued to express mixed opinions about the document's treatment of same-sex attraction.

"I think my overall summary of the synodal report, particularly in relation to persons with same-sex attraction, is that it's not very synodal," said Fr. James McTavish, a Verbum Dei missionary and author of multiple scholarly articles on ethics and spirituality.

In early May, the Vatican announced the publication of its "Final Report of Study Group No. 9," which focused on "theological criteria and synodal methodologies for shared discernment of emerging doctrinal, pastoral, and ethical issues."

Also published at the same time was the final report of the synod's Study Group 7, which examined the criteria for selecting bishops.

The two study groups were among the 14 total that had been convened as part of the 2021-2024 Synod of Bishops process, with 12 created by Pope Francis in 2024 and an additional two later formed by Pope Leo XIV. The synod process is now in a three-year implementation phase set to culminate in 2028 at the Vatican.

In its interim report, Study Group 9 had said it would ultimately address three main topics as part of the "controversial issues" it was tasked with examining: "homosexuality; conflicts and the nonviolent practice of the Gospel; and violence against women in situations of armed conflict."

The group's final report, which does not list its authors, said that "controversial issues" had been reframed as "emerging issues," in a move away from a "problem-solving approach" to the dialogue and qualities needed for "relational conversion."

In addition, the final report from Study Group 9 looked at two, rather than three, topics: "the experience of people of faith with same-sex attractions" and "the experience of active non-violence by individuals and associations in situations of war."

Cardinal Carlos Castillo Mattasoglio of Lima, Peru, and coordinator of Study Group 9, has not yet responded to two requests from OSV News for comment on the report.

But several individuals with whom OSV News spoke have pointed to gaps — and even errors — in the group's assessment of the former issue.

In particular, said McTavish — a former surgeon who has published work on same-sex attraction, chastity, gender ideology, prostitution and HIV — the report's inclusion of just two testimonies from same-sex attracted men and their experiences of faith "are not representative," since "the two persons are both male, and they're both living in same-sex relations which they call marriage."

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"Where is the voice of those persons with same-sex attraction who want to follow Christ and freely choose to live chastely?" asked McTavish. "They're excluded from the synodal report. That's my biggest critique. It's like, 'We'll speak about supporting American football teams, so we'll listen to the testimony of two supporters of the San Francisco 49ers.' The testimony is interesting in itself, but it's not representative of all."

In his June 24 homily at Georgetown University amid the Outreach 2026 conference for Catholics who identify as LGBTQ, Cardinal Robert McElroy of Washington, a synod delegate from the U.S., described the Study Group 9 report as one "important"

development that sparked "great hope," since the Catholic Church "has so frequently wounded the LGBT community through judgmentalism and exclusion."

In a May 5 tweet, Jesuit Fr. James Martin — founder of Outreach and a synod participant — said the men who shared testimonies "speak movingly about their relationships with God, Jesus and the church, as well as the pain that they have experienced in response to how they have sometimes been treated by the church.

He added, "Listening in this way to LGBTQ people is a major step forward for the Catholic Church."

But the study group document reflected "some serious problems, to say the very least," said Fr. Brian Gannon, a priest of the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut, and executive director of Courage International, a global apostolate of the Catholic Church ministering to those who experience same-sex attraction.

Speaking to OSV News in May following the report's release, Gannon said that the report was "erroneous" and "poor in its methodology, because it interviewed two people who have embraced same-sex relationship and said they could find happiness basically outside of God's teaching" — something "obviously in contradiction of 2,000 years of what the Catholic Church has always taught."

Equally disturbing, said Gannon, was that the report "was saying false things about Courage."

A testimony from a man in the U.S. included in the report stated the apostolate "engaged in reparative therapy, conversion therapy, which Courage never has," Gannon said.

"When people come to Courage, it's about living a life of holy chastity, living according to the teachings of the Church," said Gannon, whose organization hosted its annual conference July 13-21. "We've never engaged in any kind of conversion therapy whatsoever."

According to the unnamed man's testimony, he joined Courage "at the suggestion of a conversion therapist I met to deal with my 'condition,'" and added the "secretive and hidden" meetings "did little to help my spiritual and psychosexual development."

The report itself characterized the man's testimony as describing a "problematic membership in a Catholic group (Courage) which, by pushing for "reparative therapy," had the effect of separating faith and sexuality."

Courage issued a strongly worded statement shortly after the report was published, describing it as "both calumny and detraction against the organization and its members."

The organization said the study group unquestioningly accepted — with no verification from Courage — the document's claim that Courage practiced reparative therapy.

"The working group could have clarified this point by simply contacting Courage leadership," the organization's statement said.

As for the testimony's description of Courage meetings as "secretive and hidden," Courage's statement said members "understand those meetings to be confidential and secure — precisely so that they can speak candidly and vulnerably without fear of someone reporting about them."

The organization said the report "presents one person's experience and opinion as part of an official ecclesiastical document," adding that it was "a great sadness and an additional wound to our members to have this false and unjust depiction in a Vatican document."

Eve Tushnet, co-founder of Building Catholic Futures — a discipleship ministry for those seeking to "serve and share the Gospel with LGBT+ and same-sex attracted people," according to its website — acknowledged the report was limited in its inclusion of representative voices.

"The experience of LGBT and same-sex attracted people in the Church is really varied," she said, speaking to OSV News a few weeks after the report's release. "It would be very difficult to have any two voices really represent that whole range. If it were me, I would have, I think, sought out a wider range of experiences within the Church."

Still, she said, "the focus on hearing people in their own voice, describing their journeys" is "super important."

She pointed to Building Catholic Futures, which aims to "encounter witnesses, understand journeys, prepare for futures."

Tushnet explained that "as you hear the stories of LGBT and same-sex attracted practicing Catholics, you begin to see patterns in their experience."

"You begin to discern, 'Here are some things that we need to be doing differently. Here are some things that we're doing that are good,'" she said. "And that's the basis for shaping ministry going forward."

McTavish said he thought "the Church could improve" in "sharing its teaching" on same-sex attraction — one that balances moral clarity, pastoral care and an affirmation of God-given human dignity.

"There's a lot of misinformation; there are a lot of myths around," he said.

McTavish underscored the need for care and sensitivity in speaking of same-sex attraction, avoiding "dehumanizing," "disrespectful" and "discriminatory" language.

He also cautioned pastoral ministers from assuming that same-sex attraction is always "clear cut," and from "promoting coming out rather than going in" to a deeper relationship with Christ.