

[Opinion](#)  
[Guest Voices](#)



Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the synod, delivers his homily during Mass with synod participants at the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, Oct. 21. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

## [Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Vatican City — November 7, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The Synod on Synodality, which has been a three-year process of worldwide consultation with two month-long meetings in Rome, has [concluded](#) with both disappointment and hope at a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on Sunday, Oct. 27.

The final document of the synod is organized around the Gospel stories of the risen Lord. For the delegates, the synod was an experience of meeting the risen Lord, but some in the church will only see an empty tomb.

The synod delegates, who are enthusiastic and joyful about their experience, are going to meet many doubting Thomases who have not had the same experience.

The synod is a disappointment to those who hoped it would support the priestly ordination of married men, the ordination of women deacons and greater outreach to LGBTQ Catholics around the world.

Although there was support for ordaining married men at the Amazon Synod, the topic was hardly discussed at this synod.

The issue of LGBTQ Catholics, which was referred to a study group by Pope Francis, continues to be controversial. Although the pope uses the terms LGBTQ and gay, the synod could not.

Sexual orientation is only obscurely mentioned in the 52-page final document, which decries the fact that some "continued to experience the pain of feeling excluded or judged because of their marital situation, identity or sexuality."

On the other hand, some see progress in the simple fact that for the first time the topic was openly discussed at a synod. The rest of the world is just not where the United States and Europe are on LGBTQ acceptance.

The topic of women deacons was also referred to a study group by Francis, who made clear that women deacons were not going to happen during his papacy.

However, the final document of the synod says that "the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue." This paragraph got the most negative votes (97 no out of 355 voting) but still passed by a two-thirds vote.

Although Francis said he will not approve women deacons, he leaves the issue open for further discernment by his successors and the church. Scholars can continue to research and write about the topic. No one is going to be silenced for advocating for women deacons.

Even if no progress was made on women deacons, the synod gives full support to greater involvement of women in the church, including in decision-making. "There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church," the final report states, "what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped."

"Inequality between men and women is not part of God's design," declares the synod. "The widely expressed pain and suffering on the part of many women from every region and continent, both lay and consecrated, during the synodal process, reveal how often we fail to live up to this vision."

The synod also notes that under certain circumstances canon law allows lay men and women in the absence of a priest to lead Sunday liturgies, to baptize and to witness marriages. The synod calls for extending and stabilizing these opportunities where needed.

It also calls for increased involvement of lay men and women in seminaries and as judges in church tribunals. Despite disappointments, the final document gives hope to those who want a more synodal church where those in authority listen to the faithful and are transparent and accountable for their actions.

The core message of the synod is a call for a new way of being church, of doing church, a new "modus vivendi et operandi."

One delegate opined that the final document could be summarized in one sentence: Be synodal.

For the delegates, the experience of the synod was one of "joy, awe and gratitude," but communicating that experience to the rest of the church is a challenge. It is like a person trying to communicate the experience of a spiritual retreat or the experience of falling in love. One must experience it to understand it.

The delegates spoke positively of meeting Catholics from different parts of the world and the trust and friendships formed during the two-month-long sessions.

For Francis, the synodal process was always more important than any decisions the synod made. Synodality requires a spiritual conversion in our attitudes where we have the humility to put aside our agendas and listen to the Spirit in one another.

"Decision-making processes need ecclesial discernment," says the synod, "which requires listening in a climate of trust that is supported by transparency and accountability." It also says, "The way to promote a synodal Church is to foster greater participation of all the People of God in decision-making processes."

## Advertisement

Citing the Fathers of the Church, the synod speaks of the communal nature of the People of God with a triple "nothing without": "nothing without the bishop," "nothing without the council of presbyters," and "nothing without the consent of the people."

The synod calls for transparency and accountability in the church and an end to clericalism.

"Clericalism is based on the implicit assumption that those who have authority in the Church are not to be held to account for their actions and decisions as if they were isolated from or above the rest of the People of God," says the synod report.

"Transparency and accountability should not only be invoked when it comes to sexual, financial and other forms of abuse," continues the report. "These practices also concern the lifestyle of pastors, pastoral planning, methods of evangelization, and the way in which the Church respects human dignity, for example, in regard to the working conditions within its institutions."

It also calls for "structures and methods for regularly evaluating the exercise of ministry," including that of bishops, priests and the Roman Curia.

The synod makes concrete recommendations that can make it easier to be synodal.

It calls for effective financial councils with competent members who would review budgets and audits.

It insists structures that are currently optional be made mandatory, such as diocesan synods, presbyteral councils, diocesan pastoral councils, parish pastoral councils, and diocesan and parish councils for economic affairs. For them to be effective, "the structure and operations of these bodies need to be addressed. It is necessary to start by adopting a synodal working method."

The synod also encourages "greater involvement by women, young people, and those living in poverty or on the margins" in these bodies, including ordinary faithful and "not only those engaged with organizing ecclesial life and services internally."

In order to have greater accountability in the church, the synod calls for diocesan synods to meet on a regular basis where "the bishop gives an account of pastoral activity in various areas: the implementation of a diocesan pastoral plan, reception of the synodal processes of the entire Church, initiatives in safeguarding and the administration of finances and temporal goods." The synod also desires "that the People of God have a greater voice in [choosing bishops](#)." It asks bishops during pastoral visits to spend time with the faithful to "listen to them as part of his own ongoing discernment of needs."

To some, all this may sound like rearranging chairs on the Titanic. But the synod makes clear, "Synodality is not an end in itself. Rather, it serves the mission that Christ entrusted to the Church in the Spirit."

The synodal mothers and fathers report that the experience of the risen Lord "opens our eyes to the suffering of those around us and penetrates us: the faces of war-stricken terrorized children, weeping mothers, the shattered dreams of so many young people, refugees who face terrible journeys, the victims of climate change and social injustice."

Ultimately, synodality will allow the church to walk "together with all humanity, strongly committed to justice and peace, human dignity and the common good."

At the end of the synod, the pope made the report his own and announced he would not issue an "apostolic exhortation" as is customary at the end of a synod. The

report is not just the synod's; it is backed with his authority.

This document will be fruitful reading for bishops, priests and lay people who participate in diocesan and parish councils. It is especially important that it be used in the formation of seminarians and in continuing education for priests.

The synod's job is over. Now it is up to the rest of the church to become synodal.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. [View the full series.](#)