

Pope Francis clears way for women and lay Catholics to vote in upcoming bishops' meeting

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April 27, 2023



Pope Francis arrives in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on April 22. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

In a series of changes to the upcoming Synod of Bishops on Synodality announced Wednesday, Pope Francis cleared the way for lay women and men to participate as voting members.

Five men and five women from religious orders will also be added to the assembly and will be given the power to vote on resolutions.

The new voting members will replace auditors, or nonvoting participants, of the synod, the Vatican announced. “Instead, an additional 70 non-bishop members have been added who represent various groupings of the faithful of the People of God (priests, consecrated women, deacons, lay faithful) and who come from the local churches,” the

Vatican said.

Francis will choose the 70 from a list of 140 people to be selected by the continental synodal meetings currently taking place around the world.

The Vatican requested that of the 140 candidates, “50% of them be women and that the presence of young people also be emphasized.”

Beyond gender and age, the Vatican set out standards for the candidates, saying, “In selecting them, account is taken not only of their general culture and prudence, but also of their knowledge, both theoretical and practical, as well as their participation in various capacities in the synod process. As members, they have the right to vote.”

The synod is already expected to break ground when it comes to giving women concrete roles: In 2021, Francis appointed Nathalie Becquart, a French nun, as one of two undersecretaries of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, making her the first woman in the history of the church with the right to vote with the bishops at a synod.

The Synod on Synodality, with the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” was motivated by Francis’ wish to include the voices of lay Catholics. It began nearly two years ago with an invitation to Catholic parishes and dioceses to hold listening sessions where congregations, it was hoped, would voice their concerns and visions for the future of the church, in person and online.

Summaries of these listening sessions were forwarded to Rome, and since February of this year, theologians, bishops and other church officials have been meeting in seven “[continental assemblies](#)” (excluding Antarctica but with one representing the Middle East) to discuss the issues raised during those conversations.

The listening sessions showed that Catholics nearly universally are concerned with the ordination of women, the need to adapt church doctrine on sexuality, and the fight against clergy sex abuse.

In October 2023, the bishops of the church are invited to meet at the Vatican in Rome to discuss these issues and pass resolutions based on the findings of the continental assemblies. A second session will be held a year later.

After Wednesday’s announcement, Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary general of the General Secretariat for the Synod, and Cardinal Jean Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, relator general of the synod, met with journalists at the Vatican press office.

The cardinals presented the inclusion of non-bishops in the synod as significant but played down notions that the new members represented a break with tradition. The addition of lay men and women as voting members is “not a revolution, but rather an important change,” Grech said.

The “space in the tent has expanded,” Grech told journalists, recalling the title of the synod’s working document: *Enlarge the space of your tent*. —Religion News Service