

In Vatican summit's final document, delegates call for more lay and female church leaders

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Pope Francis, center, poses with participants to the second session of the 16th general assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican on October 26. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

After three years of discussions at every level of the Catholic Church, a summit of Catholic bishops and lay people at the Vatican ended Saturday, with the publication of a document laying out a vision for structural reform of the church and calling for the hierarchy to make more room for lay leaders, especially women.

The final document of Vatican Synod on Synodality presented pathways to a more inclusive and transparent church that gives all Catholics a say on the future of the institution. It proposed changes to canon law that would allow lay people to be better heard by their bishops, national bishops' conferences, and even the pope.

The 52-page document serves as the final statement on the summit, which brought nearly 400 people to Rome for the past month. Pope Francis announced that he will not publish an "apostolic exhortation" as is customary at the end of a synod. The pope signed Saturday's document instead, suggesting that it constitutes official church teaching.

At listening sessions that began with Francis's call for a synod in 2021, participants around the world raised issues relating to the role of women in the church, priestly celibacy, and welcoming to LGBTQ Catholics. But during the synod's first Vatican session last October, Francis assigned the most controversial topics to 10 study groups, removing them from the agenda at this year's summit, which focused on "How to become a synodal church in mission."

A wide diversity of views on these topics remains, as the votes by the delegates approving each section of Saturday's document, released separately, showed. Receiving the most no votes was paragraph 60, which addressed the importance of the role of women.

"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 document says.

The synodal assembly asked that opportunities for female leadership that already exist in canon law be fully implemented. "There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped," the document's authors wrote.

It also said that the question of the female diaconate, who would extend to women the power to preach at Mass, lead funeral services, and give last rites, "remains open."

In his address concluding the last session of the synod, Francis said more time was needed to discern whether women should be deacons. "Regarding some aspects of church life that are addressed in the document, as well as the themes entrusted to

the study groups, which must work freely to present me with proposals, more time is required to reach decisions that involve the entire church.”

“This is not the classic way of postponing decisions forever,” the pope said, adding that part of synodality includes listening and discerning before making decisions.

The final document is divided into five chapters, each addressing an aspect of synodality—which roughly translates to “dialogue”—and how to implement it. “In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary, so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ,” the document says.

The document makes clear that the synod does not represent the end of the synodal process, which will be followed by “an implementation phase.” The document declares the intention of synod participants, who came from around the world, “to promote it as synodal missionaries within the communities from which we come.”

The document asked for the creation of another study group charged with injecting synodality into liturgy, making it more reflective of the cultural and ethnical realities of local churches.

Throughout the document, participants asked for more lay involvement, either through the creation of lay ministries that don’t require ordination or by strengthening lay bodies and councils on which lay people advise diocesan bishops. They asked that lay people occupy more positions of authority in Catholic institutions, act as judges in canonical trials and be recognized and treated with respect when employed by the church.

“If the synodal Church wants to be welcoming, then the culture and praxis of accountability must shape its actions at all levels. However, those in positions of authority have greater responsibility in this regard and are called to account for it to God and to His People,” the document read.

The synod called for the creation of finance councils that would involve lay experts in fiscal management at the diocesan level, and asked that church institutions issue annual, and audited, financial reports. It also called for more reporting on protocols for safeguarding against clergy sexual abuse, and on the number of lay people, especially women, in positions of authority.

The role of bishops, another key theme of the synod, is a main focus of the document. It urges that bishops share their responsibilities with priests, deacons, and lay people in their dioceses.

The delegates also want to expand the power of bishops' conferences, including the novelty of continental episcopal gatherings that was introduced in the synod process in 2023. It suggested further study of which issues may be handled exclusively by the pope and which could instead be decided by local governing bodies and bishops.

As the possibility of a conclave to elect Francis's successor nears, participants at the synod asked that "members of the College of Cardinals become better acquainted with one another and that the bonds of communion among them be fostered."

Reformers in the church had high hopes for the synod to deliver significant change on matters from LGBTQ inclusion to better formation of priests to more power for women. They were mostly disappointed.

"For a second time, the Synod's General Assembly failed to include LGBTQ+ issues in its Final Document, despite the Catholic faithful persistently naming it a top priority," said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of the Catholic LGBTQ activist group New Ways Ministry, referring to the last year's synod meeting and the one just ended.

"But while the Final Document falls short, the synodal process has prepared fertile ground for change," DeBernardo said. —Religion News Service