

# Deciding not to decide... for now

Why the pope has not ruled on married priests or women deacons

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In his new apostolic exhortation on the Church in the Amazonian region, Pope Francis has refused a request by bishops at last October's Synod assembly to formally approve the ordination of married priests and women deacons.

Pope Francis attends a meeting with indigenous people of the Amazon region in the Coliseo Regional Madre de Dios, Puerto Maldonado, Peru, Jan. 19, 2018.

(Photo by EPA/LUCA ZENNARO/MaxPPP)

In [Querida Amazonia](#) (Beloved Amazon) the pope pretty much ignores these two issues all together. And this, of course, has provoked predictable responses throughout the variegated world of Roman Catholicism.

Traditionalists and doctrinal conservatives, for the most part, are breathing a sigh of relief. Some are even jumping for joy.

They are satisfied the pope did not open the door to what, in their minds, would be a slippery slope towards the total unraveling of the Church as we know it.

Most progressives, reformers and Vatican II types – on the other hand – are deeply disappointed. Some, especially women, are extremely hurt and angry.

They believe Francis missed a golden opportunity to take a decisive step towards eradicating the misogynist and clericalist attitudes and practices that have conditioned the Church's internal life and structures for centuries.

And there is also that not so minor problem of people being deprived of the Eucharist, sometimes for several months at a time, just because there are not enough priests (i.e. men willing to remain celibate for life, according to the current discipline).

For opposite reasons, neither traditionalists nor progressives are happy about this.

## Missing the point completely

But if you've read some of the commentary on Pope Francis's decision not to change the discipline of priestly celibacy or approve women deacons, you probably have the impression that this is a "win" for old-time Catholicism and a "loss" for the Church's reformers.

Actually, it might be just the other way around.

And you don't have to look at the fine print or obscure footnotes at the bottom of the page to discover why. Francis tells us so right at the beginning of *Queried Amazonia*.

Remember, this is an apostolic exhortation.

And as such it is considered to be the pope's response to the final document of last year's Synod assembly, including the bishops' specific requests for concrete changes and new initiative.

But in the very first lines, Francis explains that this apostolic exhortation is going to be different.

"I will not go into all of the issues treated at length in the final document. Nor do I claim to replace that text or to duplicate it," he says.

Rather, he explains that his exhortation will be merely "a brief framework for reflection... that can help guide us to a harmonious, creative and fruitful reception of the entire synodal process."

In other words, the papal text is only *part of* the process. Francis is not pronouncing the final word or making final decisions with this exhortation.

That should have been clear to anyone who read even just the first page of *Querida Amazonia*.

And the pope goes further.

## I'm Pope Francis, and I approve this message

"At the same time, I would like to officially present the Final Document, which sets forth the conclusions of the Synod," he says.

What does *officially present* mean? The final document has been available to the public since the day it was presented to the pope at the Amazon Synod.

It sure sounds like the pope is giving his approval to the final document, especially when he then says this:

"May the pastors, consecrated men and women and lay faithful of the Amazon region strive to apply it, and may it inspire in some way every person of good will."

Would the pope urge Catholics to apply a document, or encourage them to draw inspiration from it, if it did not conform to sound teaching and right belief?

In the 2018 apostolic constitution to reform the Synod of Bishops, *Episcopalis communio*, the pope says:

"Once the approval of the members has been obtained, the Final Document of the Assembly is presented to the Roman Pontiff, who decides on its publication.

"If it is *expressly approved* (my emphasis) by the Roman Pontiff, the Final Document participates in the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter" (Art. 18 § 1).

Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the outgoing secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, split hairs over semantics when asked if this is what Francis had done in his exhortation concerning the final document of the Amazon Synod.

The 79-year-old cardinal said the phrase "officially present" was not the proper canonical language.

## The Amazon Synod has ended, but it's only just begun

But, in the end, that really doesn't matter. The pope has clearly not stopped discussion on any of the issues raised in the final document or the Synod process, which he sees as ongoing.

Not only is he encouraging further discussion. He is also encouraging a further and deeper development and experience of synodality.

Bishop Erwin Kräutler, an Austrian-born missionary in Brazil, remains convinced that [Francis is willing](#) to approve the ordination of married priests, something the pope told him back in 2014.

But Francis will not take the action on his own initiative, the now-retired bishop said.

However, if a national or regional conference of bishops comes to an overwhelming consensus on the need to ordain married priests, what would the pope do?

Kräutler and others believe he would say yes.

It may be only a matter of months before we find out if they're right.