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Role of women must be tackled 'urgently' in Catholic Church

by Christopher Lamb



Women out of the picture: cardinals and bishops attend the closing Mass of a recent Synod of Bishops.

CNS photo/Claudio Peri, pool via Reuters

Catholics want the role and vocation of women to be tackled urgently, according to a new report that has come out of the synodal listening process.

The landmark synod report says that Catholics repeatedly express the desire for a more welcoming, inclusive Church that eradicates the misuse of power.

The findings are contained [in a 45-page document](#) released by the Holy See's synod office that summarises the results of the unprecedented listening and dialogue process as part of the global synod.

"Women remain the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities, men a minority; yet most decision-making and governance roles are held by men," the report states.

"From all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptised and equal members of the People of God. There is almost unanimous affirmation that women love the Church deeply, but many feel sadness because their lives are often not well understood, and their contributions and charisms not always valued," the document states.

The role and vocation of women are described as a “critical and urgent area”, with the document calling for further discernment is needed on how to include women in governance roles, the possibility of preaching and the female diaconate.

On the ordination of women to the priesthood, which Francis, following John Paul II, has ruled out, the report says a diversity of opinion was expressed, with some in favour and others considering it closed. Where there is a consensus, however, on the need to value the contribution of women to the Church.

The report cites a submission from the International Union of Superiors General, the body representing female religious sisters, which said “sexism in decision-making and Church language is prevalent in the Church” and that women religious were sometimes undervalued or viewed as “cheap labour”.

Just over twelve months ago, Pope Francis launched the first part of the synod for “a synodal Church” that took place in Catholic communities worldwide and was the largest consultation exercise to have been conducted in human history. The document, published on Thursday, 27 October, offers a snapshot into the views of ordinary Catholics and provides a framework for the next phase of the synod process. It reflects back what has been said so far while the text will be discussed in forthcoming [“continental assemblies” in early 2023.](#)

Titled the “Working Document for the Continental Stage” of the synod, it is an unusual text as it does not offer any rulings on contested topics inside the Church, nor does it have teaching authority. Instead, it is a theological document aimed at furthering the synod process as it expresses a “listening to the voice of the Spirit” through the People of God. It was drawn up by a group of around 30 theologians, lay workers and bishops who met for several days in Frascati, near Rome, in September to synthesise reports from 112 bishops' conferences, different religious orders and around 150 lay groups. In the United States, 700,000 Catholics participated in the local synod listening exercises; in Spain, it was around 200,000; in France, 150,000; in England and Wales, 30,000. The numbers are without any obvious precedent in a Catholic context.

Taking a passage from Isaiah, “Enlarge the Space of your Tent”, the new document uses the biblical image of a tent for the Church as the guiding image for its core reflections.

“This is how many reports envision the Church: an expansive, but not homogeneous dwelling, capable of sheltering all, but open, letting in and out,” the report says.

The tent is held together by its pegs, “the fundamentals of faith that do not change but can be moved and planted in ever new ground,” while the tent's structure “must keep in balance the different forces and tensions to which it is subjected.” Finally, “enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity,” and is about “moving toward embracing the Father and all of humanity.” This “big tent” approach includes everyone and is prepared to change its attitudes and structures. The report references a range of groups that feel excluded, such as “remarried divorcees, single parents, people living in a polygamous marriage, LGBTQ people.”

One of the barriers to a more synodal Church is clericalism, a phenomenon which sees power concentrated in the hands of an elite group – lay or ordained. Catholics, the synod document says, “signal the importance of ridding the Church of clericalism so that all its members, including priests and laity, can fulfil a common mission.” As a remedy to clericalism, the reports “express a deep and energetic desire for renewed forms of

leadership – priestly, episcopal, religious and lay – that are relational and collaborative, and forms of authority capable of generating solidarity and co-responsibility.”

The report also suggests the synod faces a major hurdle in getting members of the church hierarchy to engage in the process. The “fears and resistance” of the clergy to the synod were frequently cited by the reports sent to Rome, while some of the “least evident voices” in the synod process were bishops and priests. The synod has faced no shortage of challenges, including a failure to organise gatherings in some places, a “meagre presence of the voice of young people”, and those who rejected the process altogether.

But taking the steps to a more synodal church is still in its infancy. Francis, who will be 86 in December, [recently extended the process to ensure it continues until October 2024 so as not to rush the exercise](#). The latest document strongly focuses on the process of becoming synodal, where listening and collective discernment become part of church culture and structures. The report says the key challenge is finding ways for bishops, priests and laity to jointly take responsibility for the mission of the Church but in their own distinct ways. Many local churches call for decision-making in the Church to be taken based on “processes of communal discernment” which include the lay and ordained working together. The report describes pastoral councils as “indispensable” while greater transparency, particularly in light of the abuse crisis, is seen as a pre-requisite for a more synodal Church.

“Careful and painful reflection on the legacy of abuse has led many synod groups to call for a cultural change in the Church with a view to greater transparency, accountability and co-responsibility,” it states.

“All Church institutions, as fully participatory bodies, are called to consider how they might integrate the call to synodality into the ways in which they exercise their functions and their mission, renewing their structures and procedures.”

Furthermore, there are calls for a stronger emphasis in the Church on ecumenical and inter-faith engagement with a “more united witness among Christians and between faith communities” described as “an ardent desire.” It is all part of the call for a more outward-looking, missionary Church.

The synod experience is described as “novelty and freshness”, with many in the Church saying that this was the first time they had been asked for an opinion. At the same time, theologians have repeatedly pointed out that synodal processes are rooted in scripture and tradition and are an attempt to rediscover something from Catholic tradition. The document explains that moving towards a synodal church is likened to family members reuniting after a period apart.

“One could say that the synodal journey marked the first steps of the return from an experience of collective exile, the consequences of which affect the entire People of God: if the Church is not synodal, no one can really feel fully at home,” the report says.

The liturgy is also cited as a key concern. Many Catholics want a more participatory form of worship while “a particular source of suffering are those situations in which access to the Eucharist and to the other Sacraments is hindered or prevented.” The quality of homilies during Mass is “is almost unanimously reported as a problem”, while the way celebrations take place risks making the congregation passive observers in what is taking place. A desire is expressed for greater “diversity in forms of prayer and celebration”, which makes worship more accessible.

When it comes to the Old Rite of the Mass, the document cites “knots of conflict” which need to be “addressed in a synodal manner” and that a number in the Church still feel ill at ease “following the liturgical developments” which came after the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council. Last year, [the Pope restricted the use of the pre-Vatican II liturgy](#) in a move that upset liturgical traditionalists. The synod document quotes the report from the United States, which says the restrictions on the Old Rite were “lamented” and that “people on each side of the issue reported feeling judged by those who differ from them.”

The next stage of the synod process will take place in a series of assemblies in various continents from January to March 2023, which must include representatives from the whole Church. The European assembly will take place in the Czech Republic on 5-12 February 2023, while the African gathering will occur in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 1-7 March 2023. The Central and Latin American Church is planning five different events in El Salvador (13-17 February 2023), the Dominican Republic (20-24 February 2023), Ecuador (27 February - 3 March 2023) and Brazil (6-10 March 2023).

But before these take place, every diocesan bishop is to “arrange an ecclesial process of discernment” on the new document, which will then be submitted to individual bishops’ conferences. The conferences will then submit a report to each continental assembly, which needs to draft a document of “a maximum of about twenty pages.” These documents must be sent to the Holy See’s synod office and form the working document for a summit of bishops from 4-29 October 2023.

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