

US Catholics express hope, tempered expectations as synod begins

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Faithful gather in St. Peter's Basilica during a vigil prayer attended by Pope Francis, left, ahead of the start of the Synod of Bishops, October 1. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

Last year in September, it seemed to many US Catholics that the church might be on the precipice of profound transformation.

The Synod of Bishops was about to meet at the Vatican to discuss the results of a multiyear global listening effort. Termed synodality, the process gathered input from laypeople and clergy to promote dialogue and a renewed sense of mission and surfaced thorny topics, including women's ordination, LGBTQ relationships, clergy

sexual abuse, and priestly celibacy.

The assembly allowed groundbreaking, open conversation at the Vatican about LGBTQ people, and the meeting for the first time included laypeople, including women, as voting members alongside bishops. The shifts made US church reform advocates hopeful, and traditionalists fearful, that the synod would prompt significant changes in the church's approach to gender and sexuality.

But a year later, as the Vatican begins the final assembly meeting of this synod today, church reform advocates are watching with more measured expectations and working to manage disappointment among their constituencies.

After a major pastoral change in Vatican guidance allowing priests to bless gay and other couples not married in the church prompted significant blowback, Pope Francis in February [relegated](#) the most contentious issues from the first synod session to study groups that largely operate outside the assembly. He also told CBS News he was not open to the possibility of women deacons, one of many topics that was still expected to be under discussion.

Still, many theologians and ministry leaders say that this synod's agenda could lead to a more participatory, energized church.

Kate McElwee, the executive director of the US-based advocacy group Women's Ordination Conference, said that much of last year's "pregnant hope" had been "dashed" when it was announced that the question of women in ministerial roles would be relegated to a working group with "zero transparency around its membership."

"Many women are tired of empty words," McElwee said. Her organization is gearing up for an activist presence in Rome during the synod.

While she sees the Vatican as trying to lower expectations for conversations about women's ordination, McElwee is still hoping that the Holy Spirit will move the synod toward an "open, honest, and discerning conversation around this question infused with urgency."

Yunuen Trujillo, a lay minister from Los Angeles and author of *LGBTQ Catholics: A Guide to Inclusive Ministry*, said she has heard from many LGBTQ Catholics that they are feeling hopeless. However, Trujillo became more excited about the synod,

despite the fact that LGBTQ issues had been relegated to a working group, after reading the working document (*instrumentum laboris*) for October's meeting.

For Trujillo, the document's focus on discerning the gifts of women and laypeople, moving the church away from clericalism, having holistic and integral formation, and listening to the lived experiences of people all inspire hope.

"For the conversation on LGBTQ issues to move forward, we first have to have an honest conversation about" misogyny, Trujillo said.

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Carmen Ramos, who works in diaconate formation in the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, said that when she's led discussion groups in the synod's model of "conversations in the spirit," she has seen the shift produced by listening and praying together.

Ramos said she was most excited to see the *instrumentum laboris* mention the potential for lay men and women preaching, especially as she already witnesses deacons' wives receiving preaching formation. Deacons in the church can perform some pastoral duties, including preaching at mass, performing baptisms, and officiating at weddings, but cannot celebrate mass or hear confessions.

In September, Ramos's parish participated in St. Phoebe Day—named after a first-century female saint that advocates argue was a deacon—where women offer scriptural reflections during masses. The initiative is sponsored by Discerning Deacons, an organization advocating for women's ordination to the diaconate.

"It was so joyful. It was so diverse. People heard stories from women that they would not have heard before," Ramos said of the Los Angeles parishes that participated.

In a February opinion [poll](#) from Pew Research Center, a majority of US Catholics supported both ordaining women priests (64 percent) and recognizing the marriages of gay and lesbian couples in the church (54 percent), even though both proposals are more radical than the more incremental proposals of ordaining women deacons and adopting a more welcoming stance toward LGBTQ+ Catholics that had been discussed early in the synod.

Among Catholics who attend mass weekly, those numbers drop to 4 in 10 support for ordaining women as priests and 1 in 3 support for recognizing gay marriages. But

regardless of popular support for changes to the church's teaching around gender and sexuality, the synodal assembly, which is still mostly made up of bishops, only serves in a consultative role to Francis, who will ultimately guide church teaching himself.

Outside the US, those church reform proposals are met with both more support and more opposition in different countries, where the faithful are also wrestling with entirely different issues, including polygamous marriages, than what US advocates have raised.

"Concern for having the church move slowly here so that everyone continues to walk together as church is one of the pope's main jobs, but that's frustrating for people who are actively being hurt and unable to have a fuller relationship with God because of the way they're being treated by the Catholic Church," said Brian Flanagan, a senior fellow at New Ways Ministry, a Catholic LGBTQ+ advocacy organization.

Given that there seemed to be little consensus on LGBTQ+ issues at the synod, Flanagan said he would "much rather they say nothing than say something unfortunate or hurtful or harmful."

James Martin, a Jesuit and advocate for LGBTQ+ Catholics, [wrote](#) that as a synod delegate last year, he frequently heard the words "disgusting," "repulsive," "unnatural," and "sick" in relation to the community.

Conservative dissidents to Francis's leadership continue to portray the synod as threatening to bring sinister changes.

Bishop Joseph Strickland, who was [removed](#) from leadership of the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, warned that the upcoming synod session "looms as a planned attack on basic teachings of our beautiful Catholic faith." Strickland did not respond to a request for comment.

Twenty-one percent of US Catholics view Francis unfavorably, and slightly more than half of that group thinks that Francis represents a major change in direction to the church, according to [Pew](#).

Flanagan emphasized that the true measure for success in Francis's efforts on synodality is seeing how the teaching will be received and implemented over the

coming years. “If this is the last synodal process in the Catholic Church, then Pope Francis will have failed in what he’s trying to do,” the theologian said.

Maureen O’Connell, a professor of Christian ethics at La Salle University in Philadelphia, has taken a leave of absence to organize synodal initiatives in higher education, including a trip for about 150 students, educators and ministers to experience the synod in Rome.

O’Connell said her students have responded enthusiastically to synodality, especially the moments in the synod process where the church has acknowledged past harm.

“They appreciate the attempt of the church, the institutional church, to try to engage the people of God with integrity, and that resonates,” O’Connell said. “Young people are looking for genuineness, and they’re looking for integrity because they have come of age in an era of broad distrust of institutions writ large.”

Shannon Wimp Schmidt, who is the content director of the ecumenical youth ministry collaboration TENx10 and lives in the Chicago area, said in an interview that the theological concept of synodality and a relational approach to youth ministry go hand-in-hand.

As Schmidt and her co-workers face high rates of youth disaffiliation, “this idea of synodality, of walking together towards a common destination, of walking together along the way and listening together, is really a focus of what we do.”

Schmidt and Trujillo both called for the synod to produce concrete guidance for parishes and dioceses to implement. The pope would typically release a document after the synod concludes at the end of October.

“Sometimes when we get documents from the church, they tend to be beautiful theology, beautiful visions without necessarily helping all of us apply it to our daily lives,” said Schmidt, adding that Francis has recently been more specific in his guidance.

Schmidt, who is also co-host of the Plaid Skirts and Basic Black podcast, a Black Catholic culture podcast, said she knows that the average person in the pews may be only minimally aware of the synod. She believes the synod will begin to have an impact only when leaders begin to change their ministry. “That’s how ultimately the church will change,” she said.

O'Connell, who has also worked with Discerning Deacons, said that it can be hard for people who are not church insiders to grasp the significance of the procedural changes the synod is discussing.

The idea that “no bishop should be able to make a decision about something in his diocese without first consulting his people” is “a no-brainer for most of the world, but for Roman Catholicism, that is absolutely a seismic shift,” said O'Connell.
—Religion News Service