



The Vatican's Test Through Women, Gender, and Sexual Abuse in the Context of the Synod on Synodality

Sinodalite Sinodu Bağlamında Vatikan'ın Kadın, Cinsiyet ve Cinsel İstismar ile İmtihani

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Abstract

The Roman Catholic Church faces a number of contemporary problems that are also partly global issues. The place of women in the Church, cases of sexual abuse, and the LGBTQ+ movement are some of these current issues for which the Vatican is trying to find a basis for agreement. The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was initiated by Pope Francis in 2021 under the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission." This Synod is addressing within its scope a number of issues related to synodality, as well as solutions to the aforementioned pressing challenges. The Synod on Synodality is defined as a four-year process that ensures the participation of all the People of God. The Synod is placing particular emphasis on listening to women and those who feel excluded by the Church, and during the Synod a number of issues have stood. As anticipated, some of these issues involve women more actively participating in decision-making processes within the Church, establishing a diaconate for women, addressing the problem of sexual abuse, and welcoming LGBTQ+ individuals into the Church. This study aims to assess the issues raised in the Synod documents and to present the Vatican's perspective and direction regarding these sensitive challenges.

Keywords: Synod on Synodality, women deaconesses, LGBTQ+ and the Catholic Church, sexual abuse and the Catholic Church

Öz

Roma Katolik Kilisesi çağdaş toplumun da gündeminde olan birtakım güncel problemler ile karşı karşıyadır. Kadınların Kilisedeki yeri, cinsel istismar vakaları ve LGBTQ+ hareketi Vatikan'ın bir anlaşma zemini bulmaya çalıştığı konulardan bazılarıdır. II. Vatikan Konsili sonrasında kurulan Piskoposlar Sinodu'nun 16. Olağan Genel Kurulu "Sinodal bir Kilise İçin: Komünyon, Katılım ve Misyon" teması ile 2021 yılında Papa Francis tarafından başlatılmıştır. Bu süreç çerçevesinde sinodalliğe yönelik konuların yanı sıra bu sorunlara da çözümler aranmaktadır. Sinodalite Sinodu dört yıllık bir süreç olarak tanımlanmış ve tüm inananların sürece katılması sağlanmaya çalışılmıştır. Kadınların ve kendini dışlanmış hissedenlerin dinlenmesine vurgu yapılan Sinod sürecinde kadınların Kilise içinde karar alma süreçlerine aktif bir şekilde katılması, kadınlara diyakozluk yolunun açılması, Kiliseyi zor durumda bırakan cinsel istismar sorununun ele alınması ve LGBTQ+ bireylerin Kilisede hoş karşılanmasına yönelik birtakım hususlar ön plana çıkmıştır. Bu çalışma, Sinodalite Sinodu çerçevesinde üretilen materyallerde bu konular ile ilgili hususları değerlendirerek Vatikan'ın bu hassas konular ile ilgili tutumunu ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sinodalite Sinodu, Kadın Diyakozlar, LGBTQ+ ve Katolik Kilisesi, Cinsel İstismar ve Katolik Kilisesi

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Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church has undergone many structural and theological changes as well as transformations in its almost 2000-year history. The early Christian community, which was born within Judaism, decided in its early years to accept the uncircumcised at the Council of Jerusalem.¹ The Christological debates that marked the first centuries were relatively calmed with the acceptance of the Nicene Creed, but a number of other issues have continued to be debated since then. Although some divisions occurred in this process, the Roman Catholic Church had managed to become the most powerful actor of Christianity at the end of the 5th century. The political events of the time also created opportunities for the Roman Church and allowed it to build its current position.

The Church has been challenged by innovations, scientific advances, and sociocultural movements throughout history. Humanism, the Renaissance, wars, the Reformation, the French Revolution, positivism, modernism, and secularization are some of the challenges with which the Church has had to deal. Nonetheless, the Roman Catholic Church has managed to survive as one of the oldest institutions of today.

In the 16th century, humanism, indulgences, the printing press, and the translation of the Bible were some of the contemporary challenges confronting the Church. These challenges paved the way for Martin Luther and the Reformation schism to take place.² At the Council of Trent, the Church clarified its position on some of the issues the Reformers questioned, such as the sacraments, justification, and grace.³ At the First Vatican Council (1869), the Church confronted the challenges of the 19th century and accepted papal infallibility⁴ as a dogma, a decision that from today's perspective can be considered a very conservative and even dangerous step. In 1907, Pope Pius X condemned modernism as "the synthesis of all heresies,"⁵ but after World War II, the Church became increasingly irrelevant in the life of

1 Acts, 15.

2 Hakan Olgun, *Sekülerliğin Teolojik Kurgusu Protestanlık* (İstanbul: Milet Nihal, 2019).

3 Theodore Alois Buckley (Ed.), *Canons and Decrees of Council of Trent* (London: George Routledge and Co., 1851).

4 Bekir Zakir Çoban, *Geçmişten Günümüze Papalık* (İstanbul: İnsan, 2020), 174-178; Mürsel Özalp, "Papanın Yanılmazlığı Doktrini ve I. Vatikan Konsili: Taraflar, Tartışmalar ve Ultramontanizmin Zaferi," *KTÜİFD* 1.2 (2014): 115-145.

5 Pius X, «Pascendi Dominici Gregis,» 8 September 1907. *The Holy See*, Accessed 15 October 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_19070908_pascendi-dominici-gregis.html; Anne Fremantle, *The Papal Encyclicals in Their Historical Context* (New York, 1956), 196-214.

modern society. As such, the Church aimed to keep pace with the modern world through “*aggiornamento*”⁶ at the Second Vatican Council,⁷ which among many other things, opened the door to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue⁸ and gave the Church a dynamism more appropriate to the needs of the age.

Today, a number of issues are found challenging the Church, such as the role of women in the Church,⁹ abortion,¹⁰ the ordination of women, and the like.¹¹ The Roman Catholic Church does not ordain women, alluding to Jesus’ choosing apostles only among men. The Church even recently evaluated this issue in various contexts, but to no avail. A document in 1976 stated the ordination of women to the priesthood to be impossible.¹² In an apostolic letter in 1994,¹³ Pope John Paul II declared ordination to be for men only. Pope Francis has recently also stated that holy orders are only for men.¹⁴

In the Catholic Church, the hierarchy of the three offices of deacon, priest, and bishop had developed over time. Women’s diaconate is under discussion these days because the Second Vatican Council had established a permanent diaconate for men, independent of the diaconate leading to priesthood. Now that a permanent diaconate had been established for men, one that does not lead to the priesthood, the same can

- 6 *Aggiornamento* is defined by Pope John XXIII as “appropriate adaptation of Church discipline to the needs and conditions of our times.” Pope John XXIII, “Ad Petri Cathedram”, 29 June 1959. *The Holy See*, Accessed 11 February 2024, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_29061959_ad-petri.html.
- 7 Çoban, *Geçmişten Günümüze Papalık*, 197; Matthew L. Lamb, and Matthew Levering, *Vatican II: Renewal within Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 8 Ali İsra Güngör, *Vatikan Misyon ve Diyalog* (İstanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat, 2016); Mahmut Aydın, *Monologdan Diyaloga: Çağdaş Hrsitiyan Düşüncesinde Hristiyan-Müslüman İlişkileri* (Ankara: Ankara Okulu Yayınları, 2001).
- 9 Andrew P. Lynch, *Global Catholicism in the Twenty-first Century* (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 71-80.
- 10 George Dennis O’Brien, *The Church and Abortion: A Catholic Dissent* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010).
- 11 Lavinia Byrne, *Woman at the Altar: The Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Continuum, 1999).
- 12 Susan Rakoczy, “The ordination of Catholic women as deacons: The state of the question,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 76.2 (2020): 2.
- 13 John Paul II, “Ordinatio Sacerdotalis,” 22 May 1994, *The Holy See*, Accessed 15 October 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html.
- 14 Hannah Brockhaus, “Pope Francis on women deacons: Holy orders is reserved for men,” 25 October 2023, *Catholic News Agency*, Accessed 15 November 2023, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/255804/pope-francis-on-women-deacons-holy-orders-is-reserved-for-men>.

be done for women. According to those in favor of a women's deaconate, biblical evidence also exists. For example, Paul in Romans¹⁵ calls Phoebe a deaconess.¹⁶ Some other churches have accepted the ordination of women even as bishops.¹⁷ This and feminist awareness have put additional pressure on the Catholic Church.

Another current issue is the LGBTQ+ polemic various circles promote and that is presented as an agenda issue on almost every occasion.¹⁸ Some churches have already agreed to bless same-sex marriages.¹⁹ The Catholic Church is also under pressure to do the same. In addition, sexual abuse within the Church²⁰ is another major problem undermining trust in the Church.

This study evaluates the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops as an effort of the hierarchically masculine Roman Catholic Church to respond to the challenges related to gender and sexuality. The study aims to reveal how the Catholic Church is trying to respond to these challenges regarding the place of women in the Church, sexual abuse, and gender by analyzing the materials produced throughout the Synod.

Through this synodal process, the Church aims to bring about a number of new discernments, especially on these three issues. Aware of the difficulty of imposing any innovations on these topics, the Papacy is preparing the groundwork for these by constantly and actively directing the synod process and by attributing a divine quality to the products of the process through certain discourses such as "listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through the whole community of believers." The issue of women's ordination has been brought back to the agenda despite recent negative attempts. The Catholic Church has not been able to open up to LGBTQ+

15 Romans 16:1-2.

16 Rakoczy, "The ordination of Catholic women," 3.

17 For example, the Anglican Church of Australia approved the ordination of women to the priesthood in 1992. "Law of the Church of England Clarification Canon 1992," 1992, *Anglican Church of Australia*, Accessed 15 November 2023. https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Law_of_the_Church_of_England_Clarification_Canon_1992.pdf. The American Episcopal Church Ordained its first Female Bishop in 2001. "Katharine Jefferts Schori," 22 March 2023, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed 15 October 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Katharine-Jefferts-Schori>.

18 Elżbieta Kuźelewska and Marta Michalczuk-Wliziło, "Same-sex Marriage and the Catholic Church in Europa: Any Chance for Understanding?" *Studies in Logic, Grammar and Rhetoric* 66.79 (2021): 267-281.

19 Harry Farley, *Church of England backs services for gay couples*. 17 November 2023, BBC News, Accessed 19 November 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-67432854>.

20 Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

individuals and same-sex marriages as some other churches have, and so it is using this synod as a tool for that purpose. The Church also aims to repair its reputation by trying to show itself to be taking the issue of sexual abuse seriously, an issue that has negatively affected the Church's reputation. In order to achieve these goals, the Church is including the whole Church in the synod process and trying to portray the process of adapting to the spirit of the age as a demand coming from the people, similar to modern democracies.

The study first gives information about the Synod of Bishops and the Synod of Synodality and introduces the materials produced for and by the Synod. The study then goes on to continue showing how the Church has created such an atmosphere to bring about the results it wants from the process by evaluating preparatory documents. Finally, the reports of the Synod are shown to be a moment of victory for the Catholic Church, one in which all these issues are being addressed by the attendees.

1. Synod of Bishops and Its Synod on Synodality

1.1. Synod of Bishops

The word *synod* is derived from the Greek *synodos* meaning “assembly, meeting”. As a term, synod refers to meetings of bishops and other church officials at the local level to discuss matters of discipline and administration. In the Church's history, many synods have taken place since the 2nd century.²¹ However, the Synod of Bishops is different from these and is a rather new institution. Pope Paul VI proclaimed the establishment of the Synod of Bishops at the opening of the final session of the Second Vatican Council on September 15, 1965.²²

Pope Paul VI justified the establishment of this body as follows: “The Apostolic concern leading us to carefully survey the signs of the times and to make every effort to adapt the means and methods of the holy apostolate to the changing circumstances and need of our day, impels us to establish even closer ties with the bishops in order to strengthen our union with them.” Pope Paul VI stated that this idea was a product of the Second Vatican Council and that the synod would allow all bishops to participate effectively in the affairs of the Papacy.²³

21 “Synod,” 4 Oct. 2023, Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 5 October 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/synod>.

22 David Grumett, “Synods and Conferences,” *Ecclesiology* 18 (2022): 153-158; 153.

23 Pope Paul VI, “Establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church,” 15 September 1965, *The Holy See*, accessed 5 October 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19650915_apostolica-sollicitudo.html.

The Synod of Bishops is directly subject to the authority of the pope. The pope convenes the Synod, ratifies the election of members, communicates relevant materials to bishops, sets the agenda, and presides over the Synod in person or through another person. The Synod may meet in *general sessions* on matters of concern to the whole Church, in *extraordinary sessions* on matters of urgent concern to the Church, and in *special sessions* on matters of concern to a particular region.²⁴

The Synod of Bishops is a central, ecclesiastic institution representative of all Catholic dioceses. It is permanent in nature, structurally convenes on call, and fulfills its mandate within a set period of time. The Synod's task is to inform and advise. It can make decisions with the authorization of the pope, but the pope is the one who approves these decisions.²⁵

The general purposes of the Synod of Bishops are to promote cooperation between the pope and bishops, to obtain information on Church matters, to provide information for action on these matters appropriate to the contemporary world, and to facilitate agreement on matters of Church life and doctrine. The specific purpose is to discuss the specific business for which it is called to meet.²⁶

The first *Ordo Synodi Episcoporum*²⁷ of the Synod was published in 1966 and defined the authority of the pope in all the councils of the Synod, participants of the council, and all other matters relating to the functioning of the council. The provisions of Pope Paul VI's apostolic letter "*Motu Proprio Apostolica Sollicitudo*" are included in Canon Law as Canons 342-348.²⁸ The *Ordo Synodi Episcoporum* was updated for a third time by Pope Benedict XVI on September 29, 2006, establishing the General Secretariat of the Synod. Pope Francis abolished the *Ordo Synodi Episcoporum* in 2018 in his Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*.²⁹

24 Pope Paul VI, "Instruction on the Celebration of Synodal Assemblies and on the Activity of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops", 1 October 2018, *General Secretariat of the Synod*, accessed 06 October 2023, <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/en/the-synod/instruction-on-the-celebration-of-synodal-assemblies-and-on-the-.html>.

25 Paul VI, "Establishing the Synod".

26 Paul VI, "Establishing the Synod".

27 "Synod of Bishops: Synodal Information," *The Holy See*, accessed October 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_20050309_documentation-profile_en.html.

28 "Canonical Codes Concerning The Synod," *General Secretariat of the Synod*, accessed 06 October 2023, <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/en/the-synod/canonical-codes-concerning-the-synod.html>.

29 Franciscus "Episcopalis Communio on the Synod of Bishops," 15 September 2018, The Holy See, accessed 23 October 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html.

1.1.1. The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Francis

Episcopalis Communio, promulgated by Pope Francis on September 15, 2018, introduced some changes to the structure and functioning of the Synod of Bishops. It states that Christ and the Holy Spirit speak “through all the faithful,” and therefore bishops should walk with the faithful and listen to them in order to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying. Following this emphasis on listening, Pope Francis asked the bishops to consider the questions for the Synods together with the priests, pastoral councils, and laity. Thus, Pope Francis stated, “A synodal Church can emerge.”³⁰

The apostolic constitution states that non-bishops may also be called to the council, with their role to be defined by the pope.³¹ In addition to members, some non-voting experts, auditors, delegates from Churches not in full communion with the Catholic Church, and special guests may also be invited.³² This innovation by Pope Francis has opened the way for participation outside the Church and has brought the structure of the Synod of Bishops closer to a parliament, although not all invitees have the right to vote. It also did not include any statement saying that women would not be among the invitees. The lack of such a statement is particularly important, as it implies the inclusion of women in the Synod.

1.2. “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission”

To date, the Synod of Bishops has held 15 ordinary general, three extraordinary, and 11 special assemblies.³³ The 16th Ordinary General Assembly began in 2021 under the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” and will conclude in 2024. It has been planned as a synodal process spanning four years and so is referred to as Synod 2021-2024. Initially, it was intended to end in 2023.³⁴ Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) for the October 2023 Assembly states that a second assembly will occur in October 2024. It also states that the October 2023 and October 2024 assemblies are the discernment phases

30 Franciscus “*Episcopalis Communio*”, Introduction Article 7.

31 Franciscus “*Episcopalis Communio*”, Article 2.2.

32 Franciscus “*Episcopalis Communio*”, Article 12

33 “Synod Assemblies: Ordinary General - General Extraordinary – Special,” *General Secretariat of the Synod*, accessed 6 October 2023, http://secretariat.synod.va/content/synod/en/synodal_assemblies.html.

34 “Preparatory Document” September 2021, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 9 October 2023, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-desktop/en_prepa_desktop.pdf; “Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality,” September 2021, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 9 October 2023, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en_vade.pdf.

of the Synod following the previous “listening phase” in 2021-2022.³⁵ The Synod has a special web page, with detailed information, documents, and media about the process shared on this page.³⁶

1.2.1. Themes of the Synod

Synodality, which gives the Synod its name, is defined as follows:³⁷

Synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel... Synodality, in this perspective, is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops' assemblies, ... it is the specific modus vivendi et operandi of the Church, the People of God...

Synod 2021-2024 has been planned as a synodal process, with the listening phase beginning at the local level in 2021, with the discernment phase still ongoing. The main question of the Synod is as follows: “How does this journeying together allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her, and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?”³⁸

The Synod’s themes and definitions do not explicitly address issues such as women’s ordination and their decision-making roles in the Church, LGBTQ+ people and their rights, or issues of sexual abuse. However, some phrases are found in the definitions on the web page such as “everyone has a role to play,” “all the baptized are qualified to participate,” and “witnessing the Gospel together with those living on the existential peripheries.”³⁹ These have implications for the role of women in the Church and the problems related to gender and sexuality that the Church faces today.

1.2.2. The Phases of the Synod

The Synod on Synodality has been planned as a process, and a road map was created in accordance with this plan. Because the aim is to involve the whole Church in the process, the phases of the Synod have been shaped accordingly, with an active

35 “Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly,” 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 9 October 2023, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf.

36 *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 6 October 2023, <https://www.synod.va/en.html>.

37 “What is the Synod 21-24,” *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 6 October 2023, <https://www.synod.va/en/what-is-the-synod-21-24/about.html>.

38 “What is the Synod 21-24”.

39 “What is the Synod 21-24”.

procedure having been defined starting from the smallest parishes and working up to the general assemblies to be held in Rome. Four phases were defined: the (1) diocesan, (2) Episcopal Conferences, (3) continental, and (4) universal phases.⁴⁰

The first and second phases of the Synod can be considered as a whole. In the diocesan phase, which began in October 2021, the dioceses and regional churches were asked to produce a synthesis report following the procedures set out in the Preparatory Document⁴¹ and the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality.⁴²

Priests and parishes submitted their synthesis reports to their bishops. In the second phase of the synodal process, dioceses and other institutions prepared and submitted their own synthesis reports to the Synod Secretariat. This stage ended in April 2022. Based on these reports, of which there were over 150, the Synod Secretariat prepared a Working Document for the continental phase of the Synod in October 2022 and forwarded it to the continental and regional church assemblies.⁴³

Seven continental assemblies as well as a digital assembly prepared eight final reports as a result of the continental phase of the Synod.⁴⁴ Based on the continental reports, the Synod Secretariat prepared a second Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*)⁴⁵ for the universal phase, also known as the discernment phase. The first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly was held in the Vatican in October 2023. Bishops, male and female Church members, and other invitees participated in small work groups and plenary sessions. On October 28, the synthesis report⁴⁶ of the first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly was published.

1.2.3. Documents from the Synod on Synodality

Many documents were published during the Synod from 2021 to November 2023. However, this study focuses on the documents the Synod Secretariat prepared for

40 “Synodal Process,” *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 9 October 2023, <https://www.synod.va/en/synodal-process.html>.

41 “Preparatory Document”.

42 “Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality”.

43 “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” 24 October 2022, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 10 October 2023, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/20221025-ENG-DTC-FINAL-OK.pdf>.

44 “Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies,” 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 9 October 2023, https://www.synod.va/en/synodal-process/the-continental-stage/final_document.html.

45 “Instrumentum Laboris”.

46 “XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthetis Report,” 28 October 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 10 November 2023, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>.

guiding the process, the final reports from the continental phase, and the synthesis report from the first session of the assembly. The other documents are independent of the Synod but have been requested for use in the study. The Synod Secretariat prepared (1) a Preparatory Document⁴⁷ and (2) a *Vademecum*⁴⁸ in 2021. Building upon the results of the local phase, the Secretariat prepared (3) a Working Document for the Continental Phase.⁴⁹ A final document, (4) the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session,⁵⁰ was published in May 2023 based on the outcomes of the final reports from the continental phase.

The fruits of the synodal process are eight final reports from the continental phase⁵¹ and the synthesis report from the first session.⁵² The materials the Secretariat produced involve the documents that define the Synod, explain how the process is to work, and guide the whole process. The final reports from the continental phase and the synthesis report from the first session involve the answers the participants gave in the process as their contribution to the Synod. How the process was guided in order to achieve the desired goals is clearly seen in the documents prepared by the Church. The reports that emerge as the products of the Synod reveal that the Church has achieved its objectives. Within this context, the study firstly analyzes the documents the Synod Secretariat prepared to show how the process had been guided.

2. Women, Gender, and Sexual Abuse in the Documents Prepared by the Secretariat

2.1. Preparatory Document

The Preparatory Document published in September 2021 can be considered as a roadmap for the first phase of the Synod. The document consists of 25 pages and 32 articles, and the first article states that the “renewal” proposal of the Second Vatican Council is a task and the journey of the “synodal Church” is a work in this regard.⁵³ This reference to the Second Vatican Council and its emphasis on *aggiornamento* links the Synod to the authority of that council.

47 “Preparatory Document”.

48 “Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality”.

49 “Working Document for the Continental Stage”.

50 “Instrumentum Laboris”.

51 “Final Documents of the Continental Assemblies”.

52 “XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthetis Report”.

53 “Preparatory Document,” 1.

The second article of the document emphasizes “listening to the Holy Spirit” and “embracing the surprises it might bring,” with stress on people on the margins and listening to them. Article 4 emphasizes studying “the signs of the times” and the epochal “changes in society.” “People on the margins” and “changes in society” should be considered in the context of recent agendas such as LGBTQ+ issues, same-sex marriages, feminist movements, and women rights. From this point of view, by being “open to surprises,” the Holy Spirit might raise hopes for positive change in the Church’s attitude toward these issues. Article 6 refers to sexual abuse within the Church and states that the Church must confront the corruption within.⁵⁴ To state that a culture of abuse exists in the clericalism inherited from the past is a bold admission by the Church. These statements also pave the way for some innovations in the clerical system, or at least for discussions on it.

The place of women in the Church is a recurring theme. Article 7 of the document praises the contribution of young people and women in ecclesial life and confirms that a demand exists for women to participate in the mission of the Church.⁵⁵ However, no direct mention of the much-discussed “ordination” of women into Church ministry is to be found in the text.

Articles 17 and 18 state that Jesus impartially listened to the marginalized and sinful people, referring to parables of the Canaanite⁵⁶ and the Samaritan⁵⁷ women,⁵⁸ and asked for the faith of the blind man⁵⁹ whom the official religion (Judaism) considered outside of grace.⁶⁰ These were outcasts in Jewish society, but Christ had accepted them. A parallel exists between them and LGBTQ+ people, whom the Church has been confronting for many years and characterizing as sinners.

54 “Preparatory Document,” 1-5.

55 “Preparatory Document,” 5.

56 Matthew, 15:21-27.

57 Samaritans are a heterodox Jewish community that emphasizes Samaria over Jerusalem and claims to represent the true religion of Moses. Şinasi Gündüz, *Hıristiyanlık* (Ankara: İSAM Yayınları, 2019), 17.

58 John, 4: 1-42: The fact that the Jews had “nothing to do” with the Samaritans and yet Jesus Christ addressed them is the point of the passage.

59 John, 9: The blind man is seen by the Jews as someone “born in sin”. Being born blind points to his sinfulness. Jesus Christ helping the blind man, who was seen as a sinner by the Jewish scribes, is a good example of the Church welcoming sinners.

60 “Preparatory Document,” 11-12.

The Assembly in Jerusalem⁶¹ and the parable of the centurion Cornelius⁶² mentioned in articles 21-24 are about inclusivity. The Council of Jerusalem (circa 50 CE) decided that the Christian community of Antioch did not need to be circumcised.⁶³ In that council, the tension between liberals and conservatives ended in favor of liberals. This council is referred to within the framework of the Synod and links the problems facing the Church today with the problem of circumcision. A similar tension can easily be said to be present between conservatives and liberals today in the Church, especially regarding ordaining women and welcoming the LGBT+ community.

In the second story, Peter goes to the house of Cornelius, the Roman soldier who'd summoned him, and says, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean... I came."⁶⁴ In both stories, one central theme is God's acceptance of people whom believers had previously considered unclean. As important references for the Synod, these stories relate to the Church's embrace of marginalized and sinful people, as well as of LGBTQ+ people. The Preparatory Document appears to signal that the time has come for the Church to open up in this direction.

In the Preparation Document, the word "women" appears only 5 times, excluding the references to the Bible. These include statements about "listening to women, their participation in the life of the Church, and appointing women as lectors and acolytes." No words related to LGBTQ+ individuals or gender preference are mentioned. Only the word "sexual" appears in two contexts related to cases of abuse. Given the minimal recurrence of these words and the contexts in which they appear, the arguments of this study may be considered exaggerated. In fact, the claim that this Synod is the Vatican's attempt at considering any issue related to gender and women may seem absurd or exaggerated. However, this avoidance in itself indicates one of the most important points this study wants to emphasize.

The inclusion of these words (e.g., women's diaconate, LGBTQ+) and their contexts in this document the Synod Secretariat prepared under the supervision of the Vatican and directly commissioned by the Holy See could have labelled the Synod on Synodality as an event dedicated only to these issues. As such, the document gives the impression that it really is about synodality. However, the emphasis on listening, inclusiveness, and marginalized people, the signs of the times, and listening to the Holy Spirit, as well as other similar phrases, is very directive.

61 Acts, 15:1-41.

62 Acts, 10: 1-48.

63 Shailer Mathews, "The Council at Jerusalem," *The Biblical World* 33.5 (1909): 337-342.

64 Acts 10: 28-29.

Without mentioning these words and contexts, the Synod Secretariat has skillfully signaled moderation toward the diaconate of women and the Church's acceptance of LGBTQ+ people. Alongside the unblameable wordplay the Secretariat uses in this document, the directive is made clearer by the statements in the following documents.

2.2. The Vademecum: The Handbook of the Synod

The Vademecum⁶⁵ is the handbook of the Synod and was published by the Synod Secretariat in September 2021 for use as a guide alongside the Preparatory Document. It contains the principles of the synodal process, the stages of the Synod, the roles of bishops and priests in the dioceses, roadmaps with sample steps, and some technical information such as the methodology to be used. The Vademecum also has an immediate reference to the Second Vatican Council. Before its introduction, a short version of *Adsumus Sancte Spiritus* is proposed as the prayer of the Synod, the same prayer that was used before each session of the Second Vatican Council. This prayer emphasizes the Holy Spirit and asks for His guidance. The Holy Spirit, who is always and everywhere at work, is asked to show the way to go. Clearly, the choice of this prayer is important. The Preparatory Document also emphasized the words “steps the Holy Spirit wants us to take” and the readiness to accept them. Apparently, the Church is expected to take a new path and make some new decisions with the Synod, which is why the guidance of the Holy Spirit has been mentioned. This emphasis on the Holy Spirit builds the ideas that prospective decisions are to be taken with His guidance and that the Synod has a divine dimension. Thus, the Synod's decisions and recommendations can be based on the authority of the Holy Spirit.

The entire handbook is pervaded with such statements as “dialogue with other denominations and religions; listening to all; recognizing the signs of the times; reaching the people on existential margins; and respecting the opinions, dignity, and rights of each participant, including their ideas even if they are a small minority.” The handbook emphasizes that no one is excluded in God's plan of salvation, that Christ calls everyone, and that all the baptized, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, should be included.⁶⁶ These statements relate to the Synod's themes of participation, mission, and inclusion. However, they are also statements that would necessitate the Synod's agenda to include the current debates on women's rights and LGBTQ+ issues, as highlighted in this study.

65 “Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality,” 3. * The document is not paginated. In citations, the corresponding page number of the document including the cover page, is used.

66 “Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality,” 19-20.

The points emphasized in the Preparatory Document are also emphasized in the Vademecum. Its recurring themes are that God speaks through the voices of those who are often easily excluded or ignored, that dialogue with people who have different ideas can produce beneficial results, and that prejudices and stereotypes need to be set aside. The Synod attendees are expected to be inclusive, open-minded, and receptive with an innovative perspective.⁶⁷

The words woman and women appear 14 times in the Vademecum and relate to “the participation of women in the process and listening to what they have to say.” Sexual abuse is only mentioned once. No mention of LGBTQ+ people or women’s diaconate occurs. As in the Preparatory Document, the Synod Secretariat uses language in the Vademecum that is very directive but that at the same time does not put the Vatican in a difficult position. In a “listening” activity as described in this document, these issues couldn’t possibly have not been discussed and made it onto the synthesis report.

2.3. Working Document 1

In September 2022, the General Secretariat of the Synod evaluated the answers from the first phase, and a Working Document was prepared for the continental phase.⁶⁸ The document consists of four sections and 44 pages and shares the biblical passage “enlarge the space of your tent”⁶⁹ in its introduction.

The introduction summarizes the first phase of consultations that had contributed to the preparation of this document. This document is stated to not be an exposition of a theological vision but to only be theological in the sense that it allows the “*sensus fidei*”⁷⁰ to emerge.⁷¹ This indicates that the statements in the document have a theological dimension and that the decisions of the Synod will be free from error as they are rooted in the “*sensus fidei*”.

The following section summarizing the synodal experience so far emphasizes a number of conclusions as the fruits of the first phase. Some criticized the Synod,

67 “Vademecum For the Synod on Synodality,” 21-22.

68 “Working Document for the Continental Stage”.

69 Isaiah 54:2.

70 “Sensus fidei” simply means “sense/understanding of faith”. However, the term is used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church in the following context: “All the faithful... cannot err in matters of faith. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, from the bishops to the latest believers, when they give universal consent in matters of faith and morals”. “Catechism of the Catholic Church, Article 92,” *The Holy See*, accessed 15 October 2023, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_PM.HTM#:~:text=92%20.

71 “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” 5.

stating that they did not trust it, that its purpose was to change the Church's teaching, and that the outcome of the Synod had been predetermined.⁷² Although the Working Document does not specify what the predetermined outcomes are, various media outlets have pointed to some of them. For example, one of the Synod's critics, theology professor Michael Hanby, stated that the Synod was "about LGBTQ affirmation and inclusion."⁷³ Fr. Souza is also skeptical about the Synod. According to him, the Synod will bring a moderate approach to LGBTQ+ people.⁷⁴

The Working Document also states that abuse scandals have damaged the Church and that the Church has not managed these cases properly and recommends that the Church should be transparent, accountable, and responsible.⁷⁵

Some of the demands are noted to be reflected in the local reports. One of these is about welcoming LGBTQ+ people in the Church. They are listed among those who feel a tension between belonging to the Church and their private lives.⁷⁶ Same sex marriage and LGBTQ+ are mentioned for the first time in the documents the Synod Secretariat published and are presented as a result of the reports. In any case, the direct inclusion of these statements in the Synod documents is instructive. LGBTQ+ people and their situation, which previous documents had referred to as minorities, marginalized, and excluded, are directly addressed. This in itself is a big step for the Church.

The report also highlights that the statements about those who experience such feelings of marginalization had not been made by these individuals themselves but rather by the Church community. "Participants expressed their inability to reach these people, including among them people with different sexual orientations."⁷⁷ That the distance of these individuals and groups from the Church is identified as a problem not by them but by the people within the Church is important, as well as having the calls for tolerance and inclusion be expressed from within the Church and be reflected in the working document by the Synod Secretariat. This can be seen as a strong message and a guiding text for the continental phase.

72 "Working Document for the Continental Stage," 8-9.

73 Michael Hanby, "Synodality and the Spirit of Truth," August 2023, *First Things*, accessed 25 October 2023, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2023/08/synodality-and-the-spirit-of-truth>.

74 Father Raymond J. de Souza, "The Holy Spirit and the Synod on Synodality," 14 September 2023, *National Catholic Register*, accessed 25 October 2023, <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/the-holy-spirit-and-the-synod-on-synodality>.

75 "Working Document for the Continental Stage," 10.

76 "Working Document for the Continental Stage," 18, 23.

77 "Working Document for the Continental Stage," 19.

The community of believers are the ones who call the Church to open up to the inclusion of excluded peoples and groups. Considering that “Holy Spirit speaks through the community of believers” and that the community is infallible in the context of “*sensus fidei*,” the Church can be said to likely look favorably on such moderation. In fact, one could even say that, through the Synod of Bishops, the Roman Catholic Church is trying to make the kind of decision that would normally be made by the Pope or a general council.

The call for a more effective inclusion of women in the life and work of the Church was reflected in the reports from almost every region. Especially in countries where women’s rights are widely recognized, the Church’s exclusion of women is at odds with the culture of the time. Among the solutions proposed in the reports is the ordination of women as deaconesses and priests.⁷⁸

That the synodal process generates a number of tensions, that these tensions should be used as a source of power to renew the Church, and that canonical arrangements should accompany it are recognized in the Working Document.⁷⁹ These statements raise the possibility that some new canons may be promulgated at the end of the Synod. The message these statements give to the continental assemblies is quite clear and directive: These statements allow for the discussion of structural and canonical arrangements.

The request has been made that the continental phase committees should not be composed exclusively of clergy but should also include deacons, consecrated men and women, and lay men and women. These committees should also include women and young people, poor and marginalized groups, and people who are in contact with them.⁸⁰

The words women and LGBTQ+ recur frequently in the Working Document. Women is mentioned 49 times and is used in the context of sensitive issues ranging from abortion to women’s diaconate. Words related to LGBTQ+ and sexuality are mentioned around 10 times, all in the contexts of Church inclusivity and abuse. That so much repetition of these phrases and contexts in this document occur compared to previous documents published by the Synod Secretariat is significant. This allows and even encourages later phases to discuss these issues in a more relaxed manner and to develop bolder discourses.

78 “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” 27-29.

79 “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” 31.

80 “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” 40-44

2.4. Working Document 2

A second Working Document (*Instrumentum Laboris*)⁸¹ was prepared based on the materials produced in the first three phases of the Synod. This document was published by the Synod Secretariat as the material the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops used for its first session in October 2023.

Instrumentum Laboris is the fruit of the Synod's listening phase. It emphasizes the Holy Spirit as the propagandist of the Synod. This relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Synod establishes the idea that the possible results of the Synod have a divine character, as mentioned earlier. Listening to the "signs of the times," recognizing them, and hearing the voices of "marginalized and voiceless groups" are themes that also recur in this document.⁸²

Women are mentioned 45 times in the context of women's participation in governance and decision-making. No mention of a women's diaconate occurs, though. Almost all continental reports include a request to consider and evaluate the diaconate of women. *Instrumentum Laboris* is supposedly based on these reports, and the fact that it does not include a women's diaconate and only mentions women's participation in management and decision-making is interesting to note. Governance and decision-making may include the diaconate and even the higher offices of priesthood and episcopacy. However, having the words "woman" and "deaconess" appear in the same sentence would have met a more realistic expectation. While such statements are made freely and boldly in the continental reports, the more general and therefore ambiguous wording of the issue in this document the Secretariat prepared may have some implications.

The word "abuse" appears 20 times in the document and is mostly used in the context of sexual abuse of women and children. The sexual abuse scandals in the Church are stated to have shaken confidence in the clergy. The document also points out that cases of abuse have not been properly addressed and that this is part of the problem. The document also contains calls for transparency and accountability.⁸³

The term LGBTQ+ appears only twice in this document. This issue is noted to have been mentioned in the continental reports. LGBTQ+ people are listed among the groups who feel excluded from the Church. The document does ask what concrete steps could be taken to welcome them into the Church.⁸⁴ The LGBTQ+

81 "Instrumentum Laboris.

82 "Instrumentum Laboris," 20, 27.

83 "Instrumentum Laboris," 43-54.

84 "Instrumentum Laboris," 29-30.

issue is more meaningful than the issue of a women's diaconate, despite being a much less recurrent expression. However, the problem is directly addressed, and the question of how they could be received into the Church is raised.

3. Women, Gender and Sexual Abuse in Synod Reports

The final documents of the continental phase and the Synthesis Report of the First Session are considered the fruits of the Synod. The final documents from the continent phase are approximately 20-page long reports from the continental assemblies held in February and March 2023. The clergy and laity, including women, came together in the continental assemblies, evaluated the synodal process in their respective regions, and included important issues, tensions, and repercussions in their reports.

The Synthesis Report of the First Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly, which started on October 4, 2023 in Vatican City, was published on October 28, 2023. The report of the assembly, in which women participated and voted in meetings for the first time ever,⁸⁵ is 42 pages long. This report is not the final product of the Synod. In October 2024, the Second Session will present a set of proposals to the Pope.⁸⁶ However, the issues expressed and emphasized in this report can be stated to perhaps already point to the final outcomes of the Synod.

3.1. Women's Role in the Church

All continental reports indicate that women were among the participants. For example, the Middle East Continental Assembly was attended by 125 people, including 40 lay men and 40 women.⁸⁷ The North American Assembly was conducted online and had a greater total number of women.⁸⁸ The inclusion of women was a demand of the Synod, and the reports show that this request was met, often with numbers provided.

85 "Letter of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to the People of God," 25 October 2023, *Synod 2021-2024*, accessed 15 November 2023, <https://www.synod.va/en/news/letter-of-the-xvi-ordinary-general-assembly-of-the-synod-of-bishops-to-the-people-of-god.html>.

86 "Instrumentum Laboris," 25.

87 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Middle East," February 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 25 October 2023, 1, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/EN_Catholic-Churches.pdf.

88 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: North America," January 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 25 October 2023, 4, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/North-American-Final-Document_EN.pdf.

The European report emphasized the importance of women's active participation in the Church.⁸⁹ Insufficient inclusion of women in governance and decision-making processes was stated as a problem in the Asian report. The reports also identified the need to renew governance structures that would enable women to participate meaningfully in all areas of the Church.⁹⁰ Women's participation in decision-making was an important topic in the North American report, too. Women's role in the Church was appreciated, and their non-inclusion in decision-making processes was criticized.⁹¹

The Latin American report recognized the need to create space and provide tools for women's effective participation in the decision-making bodies of the Church. Criticisms of how women are seen as cheap labor in the Church and how they are not involved in decision-making processes are reflected in the report. Opening some positions in the Church to women is highlighted as one of the issues to be considered at the October 2023 general session.⁹²

Women cannot be priests or bishops in the Catholic Church. However, the establishment of a women's diaconate has often been discussed. This is also reflected in the continental reports, all of which discussed the ordination of women to the diaconate. However, none discussed the ordination of women to the priesthood or episcopate, as is the case in some other churches. The Middle Eastern report called on the Church to take clear and explicit initiatives on this issue and stated that the ordination of women to religious ministry requires prophetic courage.⁹³

The European report stated that the issue of a women's diaconate needs to be studied in depth.⁹⁴ The North American report requested an examination of

89 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Europe," February 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 25 October 2023, 61, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/Europa_IT_ENG.pdf.

90 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Asia," 16 March 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 25 October 2023, 8, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/ACAS-Final-Document-16-Mar-2023.pdf.

91 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: North America," 9.

92 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Latin America," March 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 25 October 2023, 18-19, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/es-doc/07.-AM-LAT_CELAM_230104_SP_DTC_Originale.pdf.

93 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Middle East," 12.

94 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Europe," 60.

leadership and ordination for women in the Church.⁹⁵ The Latin American⁹⁶ and Oceanian reports⁹⁷ also emphasized how their participants had voiced the proposal to establish a women's diaconate.

The African report mentioned giving women the opportunity to do more in the Church,⁹⁸ however, it made no mention of a women's diaconate.

The word "women" is repeated 50 times in the synthesis report of the First Assembly. The report states how Jesus accepted women as his interlocutors: He spoke to them about the Kingdom of God and accepted them as his disciples, as in the case of Mary of Bethany. These women are quoted from the bible as having traveled with Him.⁹⁹ On Easter morning, the Resurrection was stated to have been announced by Mary Magdalene.¹⁰⁰

The report emphasizes a demand for a women's diaconate to be found, with different views being present on this issue. For some, this would be unacceptable as it would break with tradition. If accepted, this request would be a worrying development that would marry the Church to the spirit of the age. For others, however, a diaconate of women is in accordance with Tradition and would reestablish the practice of the Early Church. This is an appropriate and necessary response to the signs of the times, and such a step would resonate in the hearts of many who are looking for new energy and vitality in the Church.¹⁰¹

The report recommends the continuation of theological and pastoral research on women's access to the diaconate, on giving women a role in seminaries, on giving women more roles in the life of the Church, and on making the necessary changes in Canon Law for this purpose.¹⁰² The report also emphasizes that the diaconate had been reestablished as a separate and permanent hierarchical ministry since the Second Vatican Council and, as such, uncertainties exist surrounding the theology of the diaconate. A deeper study would shed light on women's access to

95 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: North America," 9.

96 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Latin America," 18.

97 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Oceania," 9, 13.

98 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Africa," 12.

99 Luca 8:1-3.

100 "XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthetis Report," 21. (The document is not paginated. In citations, the corresponding page number of the document including the cover page, is used.)

101 "XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthetis Report," 22.

102 "XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthetis Report," 22-23.

the diaconate.¹⁰³ Based on these proposals, a women's diaconate clearly has not yet been given the green light, nor has it been rejected outright. The October 2024 assembly may come to a different conclusion on this issue. In fact, the statements here are promising for a women's diaconate.

3.2. Sexual Abuse in the Church

Sexual abuse by priests and bishops is acknowledged regrettably in all reports. The Middle Eastern report stated these incidents to be driving people away from the church.¹⁰⁴ The digital synod stated the cases of abuse to be an obstacle for the Church.¹⁰⁵ The European report addressed the issue of sexual abuse within the Church and stated the need to reevaluate the way the Church manages it.¹⁰⁶ The Asia¹⁰⁷ and Oceania¹⁰⁸ reports reiterated the abuse within the Church to have tarnished its image and caused people to leave the Church.

The Oceanian report noted the sexual abuse crisis to have not received sufficient attention in the Synod. Even after the synodal journey began, revelations were still appearing about the mishandling of sexual abuse cases within the Church.¹⁰⁹

The sexual abuse crisis was identified as one of the most significant areas of tension in the North American report. "Victims of abuse still carry the wound, and these incidents undermine trust in the institution of the Church. To this must be added historical wrongs, including the various abuses that took place in the residential schools for indigenous people. Therefore, a cultural transformation is needed that includes the principles of transparency, accountability, and shared responsibility."¹¹⁰

The word abuse is repeated 11 times in the synthesis report, mostly in the context of abuse within the Church. The need to develop more structures for the prevention of abuse within the Church is pointed out. The report notes that the bishop has to

103 "XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthesis Report," 26.

104 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Middle East," 7.

105 "Report of the Digital Synod for the Continental Stage" 30 March 2023, *Synod 2021-2024*, accessed 11 October 2023, 7, <https://www.sinododigital.com/english-continental>.

106 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Europe," 43.

107 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Asia," 8.

108 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Oceania," February 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 25 October 2023, 7, 8, 11, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/Oceania-EN.pdf.

109 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Oceania," 17.

110 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: North America," 11, 19.

reconcile the role of the father with that of the judge and suggests that, instead, the judicial role be given to another canonically designated body.¹¹¹

3.3. Gender Issues

Different sexual orientations have previously been considered an “objective disorder” in many documents¹¹² published by the Holy See. However, no such negative expression was used in the continental reports. As the most negative statements, the Middle East report pointed to the spread of LGBTQ+ content on social media and its impact on young people. However, the same report noted the presence of demands for the Catholic Church to define the concept of sexuality and other related moral issues.¹¹³

The European report expressed the need to start dialog with contemporary culture and thought on issues such as gender identity. The report also stated that the voice of the LGBTQ+ community should be heard more. The report presented the tension regarding the status of marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ individuals and remarried divorcees and emphasized that this tension should be addressed with a spiritual depth and responsibility removed from ideological attitudes. The report also asked how the Church can change the doctrines and practices on this issue.¹¹⁴

The Asian report acknowledged that people who identify themselves as LGBTQ+ feel excluded from the Church and that they are not provided with adequate pastoral care.¹¹⁵ The North American report pointed out how LGBTQ+ groups feel excluded from the Church and that the Church needs to be more inclusive. The North American report also referred to LGBTQ+ individuals as “brothers and sisters,” stating that they should be welcomed.¹¹⁶

The Latin American report counted LGBTQ+ communities among the groups

111 XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthesis Report,” 27.

112 “Some Considerations Concerning the Response to Legislative Proposals on the Non-Discrimination of Homosexual Persons,” 24 July 1992, *The Holy See*, accessed 15 November 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19920724_homosexual-persons_en.html; Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” 1 October 1986, *The Holy See*, accessed 15 October 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

113 “Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Middle East,” 11.

114 “Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Europe,” 44, 56.

115 “Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Asia,” 8.

116 “Final Documents of the Continental Stage: North America,” 12.

that are often forgotten or neglected in the Church and emphasized the need for courage to raise issues and reach decisions in the synodal process regarding these groups.¹¹⁷ The Oceanian report pointed out that the Church's teaching on LGBTQ+ and other aspects of sexuality is a major obstacle for many young people in maintaining their commitment to the Church.¹¹⁸

The African report made no mention of LGBTQ+ and sexual orientation. However, it noted that certain worldly forces, ideologies, and political policies are influencing Church leaders and pressuring theologians to dilute the faith. The report emphasized the need to be vigilant against these influences and to focus on tradition. These statements are highly likely to be related to LGBTQ+ movements. Considering the emphasis on "family" throughout the report, the African board is understood to not look favorably on the LGBTQ+ phenomenon as the other continental assemblies do.¹¹⁹

The synthesis report does not include the term LGBTQ+. Instead, it states that certain issues such as "identity and sexuality" are controversial issues both in society and in the Church, that the anthropological categories may fail to grasp the complexity and require greater sensitivity and further study, and that one must not give in hastily to simplistic judgments that harm individuals and the Church. An opportunity for dialogue should be provided, including philosophical and theological reflection, as well as the social sciences and humanities.¹²⁰ The anthropological categories and elements revealed by science in these statements indicate that the Church wants to refer the LGBTQ+ issue to the authority of the sciences. Meanwhile it expects the public to be welcoming, or at least to not outright reject LGBTQ+ people.

Conclusion

The Synod of Bishops is not a general council in the strict sense of the word but has a very similar structure and can make important decisions with the approval of the Pope. The Synod on Synodality, which mimics councils such as the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), is quite different than the previous synods. The caveat that "the Holy Spirit speaks through the community of believers and even more

117 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Latin America," 13-14.

118 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Oceania," 9, 14.

119 "Final Documents of the Continental Stage: Africa," March 2023, *Synod 2021 2024*, accessed 25 October 2023, 7, 8, https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/final_document/en-newdoc/Africa-EN.pdf.

120 "XVI Ordinary General Assembly First Session Synthesis Report," 32.

so through those whose voices are least heard,” which was often expressed in the documents that had been prepared for the Synod, makes a very important point. Until the Synod has been concluded, what new revelation the Holy Spirit will bring to the synodal process, in which the voiceless and marginalized minorities are to be especially included, will remain unclear. However, the phrases that recurred and were emphasized in the preparatory documents, the emphasis on recognizing the signs of the times, and the advice to listen to those who are different and to make decisions with an open heart and mind free from prejudice point to issues related to women’s ordination and LGBTQ+ awareness.

The synod is endowed with a kind of divinity, following the idea that the Holy Spirit speaks through the community of believers, a phrase that is repeated several times in most of the documents. This ensures that the ideas generated by the Synod will be unobjectionable. The reports make statements encouraging the inclusion of everyone, with emphasis on those in the margins, to ensure that issues such as LGBTQ+ and sexual abuse are included. Including women in the assemblies alongside the previously mentioned encouragements ensures that the ordination of women, at least as a women’s diaconate, will also be highlighted in the final reports, and these expectations of the Church have been abundantly met in the final reports.

The documents published by the Synod Secretariat emphasize women’s participation in decision-making processes but makes no mention of a women’s diaconate. However, a diaconate for women was a prominent issue in the assembly reports. In any case, women participating more actively in decision making in the Church and their ordination as deacons have been recurrent themes in the Synod documents. A more courageous wording can be anticipated in the final assembly in October 2024 with regard to ordaining women.

The LGBTQ+ controversy is one of the most challenging issues for the Church, and this has been reflected in the reports. However, none of the reports mentioned blessing same-sex marriages, which has been the most pressing demand from LGBTQ+ people. This may be an early statement for some groups within the Church. However, suggestions to recognize and welcome different sexual orientations were frequently repeated in the documents. This encourages public opinion to be more moderate.

Abuse is a sensitive issue that has brought shame to the Church, and this has also been reflected in the reports. People are extremely uncomfortable with the Church being associated with cases of abuse. The Church has created an opportunity through the Synod to reprimand those involved and to save the day in front of the whole world.

The Synod will conclude with a general assembly in October 2024. At the end of this assembly, a number of proposals will be presented to the Pope. These may include encouraging advice regarding a women's diaconate, a more welcoming attitude toward LGBTQ+ people, and even the blessing of same-sex marriages. The documents published during the Synod are preparing the public for such moderation, and the Synod of Bishops in its role as Rome's new-found evangelist can present new revelations from its protagonist, the Holy Spirit.

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