

Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (Synod on Synodality) Press Guide October 4-29, Rome and Vatican City

Synod Background

Pope Francis has invited more than 400 Catholics from around the world to the Vatican for the first session of the Synod on Synodality, a groundbreaking convocation of lay and ordained people that has the potential to reshape the life and future of the church in ways unseen since Vatican II. The gathering will take place from October 4-29, 2023, and is expected to draw in even larger crowds of synod-watchers from across the Catholic theological spectrum.

The assembly is expected to cover a wide range of issues, including some previously unaddressed in such a large-scale, institutional setting, with participation from lay people, people in religious life, and the church hierarchy. The sessions will address church power structures, the need for greater inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people, ordination of women to the diaconate, and how to combat sexual abuse. And while the synod will be historic – including the voting participation of a group of more than 70 non-bishop delegates, of whom at least half are women – much remains to be seen about how seriously these issues are considered; whether other critical issues like the use of artificial contraception and abortion access will come up; and what changes the church might implement after the second session of the synod concludes in October 2024.

A host of U.S. and international church reform groups, including the coalition [Catholic Organizations for Renewal \(COR\)](#), will be present in Rome throughout the month of October. COR works collaboratively to provide an authentic Catholic moral voice on church reform and social justice issues. COR members are organizing a series of satellite events, and representatives are available for comment from Vatican City/Rome as well as from the United States.

In this guide:

Press Contacts and Social Media

Schedule of Satellite Events in Rome with Specific Contacts

FAQs about the Synod

Key Points

Bios of participants from Catholic Organizations for Renewal

Please reach out to John Becker (jbecker@catholicsforchoice.org; 202-203-0931) for any synod-related media inquiries, or coordinate with contacts directly — their contact information is below.

Press Contacts and Social Media

Vatican City/Rome

- **Catholics for Choice:** Jamie L. Manson, M.Div.; President
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(Spanish-language interviews also available from **Catholics for Choice:** Manuela Tironi, International Associate: mtironi@catholicsforchoice.org | +1 202-855-4854)
- **DignityUSA:** Marianne Duddy-Burke; Executive Director
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- **FutureChurch:** Deborah Rose; Co-Director
debrose@futurechurch.org | +1 513-673-1401
- **New Ways Ministry:** Francis DeBernardo; Executive Director
director@newwaysministry.org | +1 240-432-2489
- **Women's Ordination Conference:** Kate McElwee; Executive Director
kmcelwee@womensordination.org | +1 607-725-1364 or +39 393 692 2100
- **Women's Ordination Worldwide:** Miriam Duignan; Leadership Team
m_duignan@hotmail.com | +44 7970 926910 (Miriam also serves as Communications Director for the **Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research.**)

United States

- **Call To Action:** Lauren Barbato, lauren@cta-usa.org | 732-995-9394
- **Catholics for Choice:** John Becker, jbecker@catholicsforchoice.org | 202-203-0931
- **DignityUSA:** Darby DeJarnette, operations@dignityusa.org | 781-309-7686
- **FutureChurch:** Russ Petrus, russ@futurechurch.org | 216-228-0869 ext. 2

Social Media

- **Call To Action:** [Facebook](#), [Twitter/X](#), [Instagram](#)
- **Catholics for Choice:** [Facebook](#), [Twitter/X](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#)
- **DignityUSA:** [Facebook](#), [Twitter/X](#), [Instagram](#)
- **FutureChurch:** [Facebook](#), [Twitter/X](#)
- **Women's Ordination Conference:** [Facebook](#), [Twitter/X](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#)
- **Hashtags:** #synod, #synodality, #Synod23, #Synod2023, #LetHerVoiceCarry

Photos: Photos of all events will be available on Flickr. **Credit:** PHOTOGRAPHER NAME/Catholic Organizations for Renewal

Schedule of Satellite Events Featuring Progressive Church Organizations
(Note: Local times listed below; CEST/Rome time is 6 hours ahead of EDT/Eastern Time)

October 3, 2023

Prayer Vigil

- **Who:** Women's Ordination Conference/Women's Ordination Worldwide
- **Where/When:** 4:30pm (venue to be communicated closer to the time)
- **What/Why:** On the eve of the opening of the synod, WOW will hold a prayer vigil with the theme 'Let her voice carry.' We will hear testimonies from women all over the world, including some of the women participants of the synod. Our aim is to pray for the success of the synod and to remind the bishops that women's voices, experiences, stories, and vocations cannot be silenced in the synodal process.
- **Contact:** Kate McElwee at kmcelwee@womensordination.org or Miriam Duignan, miriam.duignan@wijngaardsinstitute.com, +44 7970 926910

October 4, 2023

Widen the Space of Your Tent Action

- **Who:** Women's Ordination Conference/Women's Ordination Worldwide
- **Where/When:** (location embargoed)
- **What/Why:** Holding our own model of an expanding tent that includes women, we will process to the synodal office to deliver testimonies from women called to serve in ordained ministries. We see our presence as an extension of the synodal tent where we can model synodal authenticity, amplify the voices most silenced by the institutional church, and creatively and boldly ensure that there is no synod about us without us.
- **Contact:** Kate McElwee at kmcelwee@womensordination.org or Miriam Duignan, miriam.duignan@wijngaardsinstitute.com, +44 7970 926910

October 5, 2023

Procession to the synod office with abortion stories

- **Who:** Catholics for Choice
- **Where/When:** 10am delivery to the synod office
- **What/Why:** Church leaders kept abortion off the agenda at the synod, so we're bringing the abortion stories of faithful Catholics to the synod's doorstep instead. CFC President Jamie Manson will attempt to ceremonially present a booklet of stories of Catholics who've had abortions to the synod office in Vatican City.
- **Contact:** John Becker, jbecker@catholicsforchoice.org; 202-203-0931

October 6, 2023

"Walk with Women," a procession through Rome

- **Who:** Women's Ordination Conference/Women's Ordination Worldwide

- **Where/When:** Assemble at 2.30pm, San Giovanni dei Fiorentini (Via Acciaiuoli, 2, 00186 Roma); process to St. Peter's Square, Vatican City
- **What/Why:** Women's Ordination Worldwide is organizing a 'Walk With Women' and will be joined by many other women's groups present in Rome for the synod. This procession will start at the church containing a relic of Saint Mary Magdalene – officially recognized as the Apostle to the Apostles – and will end at Saint Peter's Square where the current leaders refuse to admit that women too were the Apostles of Jesus. We aim to encourage the church to walk alongside women as equals throughout the synodal path.
- **Contact:** Kate McElwee at kmcelwee@womensordination.org or Miriam Duignan, miriam.duignan@wijngaardsinstitute.com, +44 7970 926910

October 13, 2023

[Spirit Unbounded Conference](#): Human Rights in the Emerging Catholic Church — panel on LGBTIQ+ issues and Catholicism

- **Who:** Marianne Duddy-Burke, Executive Director of DignityUSA
Mark Guevarra, member of Dignity Canada Dignité
Miki Herrlein, representative of Germany's Out-in-Church movement
Mara Klein, nonbinary young adult delegate to Germany's Synodal Way
Jamie Manson, Catholics for Choice, moderator
- **Where/When:** Casa Bonus Pastor; Via Aurelia, 208, 00165 Rome; 3:10pm-3:15pm
- **What/Why:** A discussion of the synod's meaning for LGBTIQ+ and ally Catholics.
- **Contact:** Miriam Duignan, miriam.duignan@wijngaardsinstitute.com, +44 7970 926910

October 14, 2023

[Spirit Unbounded Conference](#): Talk by Catholics for Choice President Jamie Manson

- **Where/When:** Casa Bonus Pastor; Via Aurelia, 208, 00165 Rome; 12:25pm-12:50pm
- **What/Why:** "What and Who are Missing from the Synod... And Why"
- **Contact:** Miriam Duignan, miriam.duignan@wijngaardsinstitute.com, +44 7970 926910

October 15, 2023

LGBTIQ+ Catholic Forum:

- **Who:** DignityUSA, Global Network of Rainbow Catholics
- **Where/When:** Caffè Letterario, (tentative) 11:00am - 7:00pm (detailed agenda TBA)
- **What:** Opportunity for LGBTIQ+ Catholics to reflect on synod process and proceedings; meeting with synod Delegates and Advisors; press conference
- **Why:** Without any openly LGBTIQ+ delegates, this is an opportunity to hear from community members and advocates about their concerns, hopes, and evaluation of the synod process

Frequently-Asked Questions

Q: What is the “Synod on Synodality”?

A: The Synod of Bishops is the primary consultative body of the Roman Catholic Church, consisting of bishops from every region of the world. The purpose of the Synod of Bishops is, through its collective wisdom, to advise the pope on major issues and thereby assist in governing the church. The Synod meets periodically in gatherings convened by the pope and known as assemblies.

Synodality is the belief that the Holy Spirit acts through the People of God as they journey together, listen and share and learn from each other, and grow in wisdom together. It is a process through which the Catholic church – lay people, people in religious life (nuns, deacons, etc.), priests, and bishops – undergoes collective discernment to guide the church in attending to the important issues of our time.

To that end, in March 2020 Pope Francis announced that the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops would gather in Rome with the theme “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” – colloquially known as the “Synod on Synodality.”

Q: What has the information-gathering process of the synod looked like?

A: In what some have [called](#) “the biggest consultation exercise in human history,” every Catholic diocese in the world was charged with preparing for the synod by gathering thoughts from lay Catholics, non-Catholics, and non-Christians – particularly from people on the margins of society. Preparatory materials were made available to inspire reflection, and listening sessions were held in parishes, classrooms, diocesan offices, and even via Zoom meetings. Numerous organizations across the globe also sponsored listening sessions and submitted reports to the synod office. Dioceses led by bishops who favor Pope Francis’s church reform efforts solicited dialogue enthusiastically, while those led by more conservative, reactionary bishops did little to promote the synod.

The findings of these local listening sessions were compiled together and synthesized at the national level – for example, by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States – and then at the continental level. Issues of interest and concern included church power structures, the need for greater inclusion of women and LGBTIQ+ people, and combating sexual abuse. The October 2023 General Assembly kicks off the universal phase of the Synod on Synodality – and by order of Pope Francis, a significant group of more than 70 non-bishop delegates, including women, will be voting participants in the synod for the first time.

Q: Why is the Synod on Synodality so important?

A: The Synod on Synodality is the biggest opportunity for substantive reform to the Catholic church that we've seen in decades, since the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. It reflects a deep sense that the church needs to examine who is in power and making decisions, and to broaden its structures in a way that is more reflective of the world in which we live and inclusive of the wide variety of people and identities that exist in the church and the world. In a sense, it can be looked at as an extension of Vatican II, or the next logical step following it.

Q: What questions were asked of synod participants in diocesan listening sessions?

A: [Question prompts](#) provided by the Vatican included "To whom does our particular church 'need to listen to'" and "how are the laity, especially young people and women, listened to? How do we integrate the contribution of consecrated men and women? What space is there for the voice of minorities, the discarded, and the excluded? Do we identify prejudices and stereotypes that hinder our listening? How do we listen to the social and cultural context in which we live?"

Q: How broad was participation in the listening session phase?

A: According to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, [112 out of the world's 114](#) Catholic bishops' conferences participated in the initial diocesan listening phase. Additionally, many independent Catholic groups and organizations hosted their own listening sessions and submitted their findings to their bishops and the Vatican. In the U.S., approximately [700,000 Catholics](#) took part in listening sessions all across the country.

Q: What issues of interest and concern were raised by U.S. Catholics?

A: A [synthesis document](#) released in September 2022 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops summarizing the results of diocesan listening sessions identifies a host of common themes, including:

- Enduring wounds inflicted by the sexual abuse crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and political polarization within the church
- The wound of marginalization within the church experienced by disempowered groups like women, LGBTIQ+ people, immigrants, incarcerated people, etc.
- The desire to be a more welcoming church, especially to LGBTIQ+ people, women, divorced and remarried people, and people with disabilities
- Concerns about racism inside and outside of the church, and the exodus of young people from parish life

Conspicuously missing is any mention whatsoever of contraception and abortion.

Q: Why does the Synod on Synodality still refuse to address the abortion issue?

A: With Catholics using contraception and receiving abortion care at rates comparable to the general population (in the U.S., [1 in 4 abortion patients is Catholic](#) and [98% of Catholic women report having used birth control](#)) – and lay Catholics raising every other major church reform issue in local listening sessions, from women’s ordination to LGBTIQ+ inclusion to divorce and remarriage – it defies credulity that the topics of contraception and abortion were not brought up as well. However, they are conspicuously omitted from the synod agenda because the Catholic hierarchy has decided that abortion and contraception are taboo topics – and that conversations about them are not just highly stigmatized, but completely disallowed inside the walls of the church. And as primary architects and funders of the anti-choice movement, they’ve waged a decades-long unholy crusade against the bodies of women and pregnant people. It’s no wonder that they still refuse to engage in prayerful reconsideration of their position on abortion and contraception, but this continued refusal is vastly out of step with the wisdom and lived experiences of the people in their own pews.

Q: How do the U.S. bishops feel about the synod and its potential to change the church?

A: It very much depends on whom you ask. While there are some among the U.S. Catholic hierarchy who seem to embrace Pope Francis’s reform-minded approach, there is a very large contingent – most of whom were appointed by arch-conservative Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI – who are at best unenthusiastic about the upcoming synod and at worst, downright apoplectic about the possibility of reform. In part, this faction is led by far-right Wisconsin-born Cardinal Raymond Burke, who went so far as to warn that the synod could lead to a [schism in the church](#). Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas called it a “[travesty](#)” that issues like women deacons, LGBTIQ+ outreach, and a greater role for the people in church decision-making are even up for discussion. Perhaps the greatest sign of the U.S. bishops’ lack of enthusiasm for the synod is that in their last meeting before the synod’s first session, it initially [didn’t make it on to the agenda](#) – despite the fact that U.S. Catholics who participated in the listening sessions resoundingly reported that the church needs to *better* listen to and heed the voices of the people, especially the marginalized. Pope Francis recently [blasted](#) this “strong reactionary attitude” present in the U.S. Catholic hierarchy, calling the reactionaries “backward-looking people” whose unwillingness to listen and evolve on matters of faith and morality can have a “devastating” effect.

Q: How were the non-bishop synod participants selected?

A: Each continental region was asked to put forward 20 candidates with appropriate pastoral and synodal experience and was specifically asked to include young people and women. The resultant list of 140 laypeople, priests, consecrated people, and deacons was narrowed down by Pope Francis to [70 participants](#), 50% of whom are women. Additionally, Pope Francis invited additional participants, both including priests and

bishops, as well as lay people. For the first time ever, women will be able to vote as full participants of the synod.

Q: Will the Synod on Synodality lead to as many changes as Vatican II did (i.e. bringing the church into greater dialogue with the world), or lead to a “Vatican III?”

A: The Synod of Bishops is a consultative body that makes recommendations to the Pope at the conclusion of its sessions, so that depends on the final document or documents that come out of the synod in 2023 and 2024, and their implementation across the global church. In rare instances, the synod can issue its own document that could be considered official and binding church teaching, but more common is for the pope to write a teaching document, such as an apostolic exhortation, in the months to follow the synod.

Q: What happens next?

A: The Synod of Bishops, including the non-bishop delegates, will meet for a second session in October 2024 – the final meeting of the Synod on Synodality. The October 2023 and October 2024 sessions are expected to result in a document to counsel the pope, from which he may choose to write an apostolic exhortation. Once the church receives the pope’s document, bishops will be in charge of their implementation at the local level across the global Catholic church.

Key Points

- This synod is a powerful extension of the “call to encounter” (meaning: drawing on our human commonalities and engaging across lines of difference with kindness, patience, and humility) that Pope Francis has made a hallmark of his papacy. While we’re grateful to the Pope for answering that call, we encourage him to continue to go further — to widen the path and *truly* encounter and walk with those who have felt marginalized by, or excluded from, the synod process. For many Catholics, especially those who have been harmed by its politics or feel the church has lost its moral credibility, the synodal process was insufficient. Groups including openly queer people and their family members, gender-expansive people and supporters of women’s ordination to the priesthood, and advocates for abortion rights found their voices and participation unwelcome at the local level.
- Catholics look to the example set by the life and teachings of Jesus in the formation of our social justice values. The very people whom Jesus called us to serve first – the poor, the marginalized, immigrants, people of color affected by the sinful structures of racism – are those whose experiences will likely still be least represented at the synod. The institutional church must make room for the diversity of its members to truly attend to the needs of its people in the 21st century. Without fully encountering all of God's people, the synod will be incomplete and not fully open to the Holy Spirit’s message for the church.
- The synod process opens up a wide range of previously-taboo topics up for discussion – everything from women’s ordination to LGBTIQ+ inclusion – but the topic of abortion is still conspicuously absent.
- We call on the synod to stop stigmatizing and start listening. Statistically, some of the people the Pope hand-picked for this synod will have had abortions and/or are on birth control. In the U.S., for example, we know that 1 in 4 abortion patients identifies as Catholic. It is the hierarchy, not the Catholic laity, who oppose abortion access and contraception.
- God created all people in God’s image and likeness. The demand that LGBTIQ+ people choose between their spirituality and the expression of their innate sexual orientations and gender identities is a false choice. LGBTIQ+ folks can absolutely be their full, authentic selves in a way that is consonant with Christ’s teachings.

- Women were Christ's first and most loyal disciples, and women served as ordained ministerial leaders for centuries in the early church. It defies credulity to suggest that the Holy Spirit would authentically call women to ordained ministry then, but not now.
- We know that God calls not only men, but also women and people of all genders to the priesthood. *All* of these calls are equally powerful, authentic, and real.
- The synod gathering has a real opportunity to address the growing divide in national bishops' conferences in the U.S. and around the world between believers in Pope Francis's justice-oriented, reform-minded vision and the rigid, reactionary, doctrinaire approach of theological conservatives. We hope that all who gather at the synod eschew polarizing culture-war politics and instead heed the call to encounter, listen to the lived experiences of all people, and engage in thoughtful dialogue with attention to the spirit of change.

Who's Who

Catholic Organizations for Renewal (COR) is a leadership forum of U.S. church reform organizations. The purpose is to further reform and renewal in the Roman Catholic church, to build an inclusive church, to bring about a world of justice and peace and to reflect the sacredness of all creation. COR works collaboratively to provide an authentic Catholic moral voice on these issues and coordinates projects that further these goals. Member organizations include Call To Action, Catholics for Choice, CORPUS, DignityUSA, FutureChurch, New Ways Ministry, and Women's Ordination Conference.

Catholics for Choice uplifts and amplifies the voices of the majority of Catholics who believe in reproductive freedom. Since 1973, CFC has worked to dismantle religiously-based obstructions to abortion care, contraceptive access and comprehensive health care in the United States and across the world, and to ensure that all people – especially those at the margins, whom Jesus compels us to serve first – have access to safe and affordable reproductive health care services. CFC's president is **Jamie L. Manson, M.Div.**, a trailblazing thought leader and advocate in the fields of women's equality, reproductive rights, and LGBTIQ+ equality in the Catholic church and the public square.

DignityUSA works for justice, respect, and full inclusion for people of all sexual orientations, genders, and gender identities—especially gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, and intersex persons—in the Catholic church and the world through education, advocacy, and support. Founded in 1969, DignityUSA represents the majority of U.S. Catholics who support full inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people and has long worked for equal access for all to the church's sacraments. **Marianne Duddy-Burke** has held national leadership roles in DignityUSA since 1985, served as the group's first female elected president from 1993-1997, and has been executive director since 2007.

FutureChurch seeks changes that will provide all Roman Catholics the opportunity to participate fully in the life, ministry, and governance of the Catholic Church. Among its many projects, FutureChurch hosts www.catholicwomenpreach.org, a popular website presenting video and text of women preaching on the weekly scriptures. Co-director **Deborah Rose** has reported from Rome for the last several synods and will once again represent the organization this year.

Women's Ordination Conference, founded in 1975, is the oldest and largest organization working to ordain women as priests, deacons, and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic church. WOC is a grassroots-driven movement that promotes activism, dialogue and prayerful witness. The group's executive director, **Kate McElwee**, is a respected activist and advocate for gender equity in the Catholic church and her work is frequently featured in national and international media outlets.