

REVIEW

## Pope's Synod starts process for LGBT rights and female diaconate

ECCLESIA

01\_11\_2023



**Stefano  
Fontana**



The **Final Report** of the Synod session on Synodality held in October was released on Saturday. Cardinal Hollerich, general rapporteur of the Synod, and Cardinal Grech, general secretary, presented the text at a **press conference**, where they felt obliged to

point out that "it had not been prepared in advance". As is well known, this Synod is being held in two phases, the one just celebrated and now concluded and the one scheduled for October 2024. The first, after the listening phase of the previous two years, was to find a convergence of the synods on the main aspects of the life of the Church, to indicate the issues still open and to be studied in depth and, finally, to make proposals. From here, and from what will develop during the coming year, the second session will begin.

**The text of the Report is very long** and each point is set out in the three moments of "convergences", "issues to be addressed" and "proposals". The results of the voting for each of these points were also made known. Despite its breadth, it is possible to make an initial summary assessment.

**First of all, there was confirmation that dealing with the Church as synodality** involves reconsidering all aspects of the nature and life of the Church. The topics covered have the same breadth and depth as those on the agenda of a Council such as Vatican II. Reading the Report justifies the concerns of those who feared that the logic of this Synod would lead to radical changes that are not only pastoral but also doctrinal.

**Now, have these changes taken place? Certainly some expected them.** They were expected by the radical progressives, according to whom the Synod had already failed from the start because it was too indecisive and timorous. From the opposite front, some opponents of the Synod also expected disruptive statements. Instead, those who, like us, predicted that this synod session would be a process within the process, guided so as not to obstruct the way forward and to lay the groundwork for it to mature, were right. This does not mean that the revolutionary process has been abandoned, but only that it is understood as a dialectical, long, and articulated process that must be patiently managed in stages.

**Reading the Report, one can see very well that it keeps all the doors open**, and not only because the task of this transitional phase was not to close them, but because there are new acquisitions on which to grow the "sharing" both within the Synod participants and outside and then, only then, will some doors possibly be closed.

**Regarding the female diaconate, for example**, the Report says neither that it cannot be granted nor that it can be done. It says that "canon law needs to be adapted" to "ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministries". It then states that more creativity in the establishment of ministries is desirable, for example the "ministry of the Word of God"

could be established with the possibility of preaching also for women. It then calls for a new reflection on the diaconate "in itself" and not only as the first phase of the priesthood, arguing that "a deeper reflection in this regard will also illuminate the question of women's access to the diaconate". Finally, it expressly calls for "theological and pastoral research on women's access to the diaconate to continue". It is not said, but it lays the groundwork for it to be said in the future, thus pushing praxis to prepare the ground.

**The need to examine the canonical implications of the proposed changes,** a need that is repeatedly pointed out by the Report, tells us that the intention is to give the Church a new structure and not merely to suggest some new pastoral attitude. One theme that the Report considers necessary to deepen is the theological and canonical status of the Bishops' Conferences: "We consider it necessary to further deepen the doctrinal and juridical nature of the Bishops' Conferences, recognising the possibility of collegial action also with respect to questions of doctrine that emerge in the local sphere, thus reopening reflection on the *motu proprio Apostolos suos*". The Report, in fact, considers that the new synodality must promote forms of decentralisation and intermediate instances. Here, too, the ground is prepared for fundamental structural changes.

**With their vote, the synodalists overwhelmingly approved all the points of the Report.** A few were against only in sensitive areas such as the female diaconate. This can be explained by recalling that the work of the synod was 'guided' directly and indirectly, from the appointments to the role of the 'facilitators', and that the texts to be approved did indeed prepare the ground but did not expressly state so. Moreover, no critical remarks about the conciliar and post-conciliar Church ever emerged throughout the synod discussion, so that everyone felt reassured that they were on the right track and in continuity with tradition.

**This should not be taken to mean that the function of this synod was merely to say or not to say certain things.** It has served to throw stones into the pond, as Francis has often expressed it, to stir the waters, to mix up the cards on the table, to sharpen contrasts without making them explode, and then to exercise a power of moderation and direction over them. Taking advantage of the synodal phase, Francis met with Sister Jannine Gramik and Marianne Duddy-Burke, pro-transgender director of *DignityUSA*. He also said no to the female diaconate, but without blocking a possible new configuration of the diaconate in the future. Cardinal Schönborn also took advantage of the synodal atmosphere to affirm the possibility of changing the Catechism on homosexuality in the same way as was done for the death penalty. On the opposite

front, other bishops besides Schneider and Strickland took the opportunity to make their voices heard, such as the Dutchman Rob Mutsaerts ("the Holy Spirit has nothing to do with this") or the Australian Anthony Fisher ("If a proposal is radically at odds with the Gospel, then it does not come from the Holy Spirit"). Without the Synod these positions would not have emerged. The new synodality is a dialectical process, the Synod also serves to bring out tensions and contradictions, and for a Hegelian pontiff it is in this praxis that one must work to bring forth a synthesis, even if it is always open.