

CHURCH

Synod's end opens door to New Synodal Order for a new Church

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This Synod is also over. Yesterday 27 October marked the end of the second session of the Synod on Synodality initiated on the 2nd of the same month. The first session had taken place also in the month of October last year. The synods approved a [Final Document](#)

. All articles received more than two-thirds of the votes, although in some cases there were more negative opinions than in others. Many had thought that the new synodality would find in this synod its topical and epic moment, that in this event it would be manifested and its repercussions in the life of the Church revealed.

This is why progressives expected highly innovative decisions, while conservatives hoped for a significant slowdown that would bring the new synodality back into the fold of traditional synodality. Many have observed that the synod's work has basically been scaled down. Pope Francis removed the main hot topics from the synodal discussion by entrusting them to armoured study groups, then declared that the time was not yet ripe for women deacons and thus stopped any decision on this issue. Cardinal Fernández had to apologise for his absence at an important discussion on the female diaconate. The 'novelty' of the penitential liturgy in which forgiveness was asked for sins against a new Decalogue had been held before the synod began and therefore outside its procedures. All this led many to believe that expectations about the synod had been deliberately cooled and its 'prophetic courage' silenced.

We do not agree with these interpretations; however, neither do we agree with the one that sees the Synod as a strong and central moment of synodality by virtue of its rupturing decisions, nor with the one according to which the Synod's work was cooled down, slowing down and damaging the new synod. Both theses fail to see that the Synod is to be considered, after all, only as a moment of the new synodality, a simple passage that is neither decisive nor determining.

Hence the 'interlocutory' character of its Final Document, which does not make clear choices of rupture and at the same time keeps all doors open for the future, in the awareness that the Synod closes but synodality does not. It is precisely this that Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father James Martin, for example, made clear in their speeches after the Synod had concluded. A [statement](#) by *New Ways Ministry*, Gramick's pro-LGBT association, did indeed show dutiful disappointment that the document did not make decisive choices in this area, but then acknowledged that the synod process 'prepared fertile ground for change'.

Father Martin, who had been indisposed, then changed his mind, arguing that having taken the hot topics out of the synod was useful because it allowed for more dialogue on the very nature of synodality rather than getting lost in the details.

What interests the proponents of the new is not so much a synod that starts and ends immediately, but the process of synodality that continues well beyond these

appointments. The 'interlocutory' nature of the Final Document is not a bad thing but a good thing for those who direct the synod process. Those who care so much about the documents, including this latest one, are out of focus. Synodality wants a new Church. However, it cannot declare its character too quickly, before, as Francis said for women deacons, the time is ripe.

The synodal process will proceed not through synodal documents but through concrete acts. Father Martin himself lists some: annual synods in the dioceses, new ministries in the parishes, experiences of 'conversation in the Spirit' between families or groups. Our impression is that the synod's toning down benefits the new synodality and not the other way around.

The Final Document does not say yes to women deacons, but keeps the topic of women in the Church open (n. 60); it does not specifically indicate new ministries, but maintains this possibility by pointing to the possibility of a ministry 'of listening and accompanying' (n. 78); it does not deny the decision-making competence of the bishops or the pope (n. 92) but adds that 'an orientation that emerges in the consultative process as the outcome of correct discernment, especially if carried out by participatory bodies, cannot be ignored' and calls for a revision of canon law in this regard; it does not explicitly recognise the Bishops' Conferences as having doctrinal competence (nos. 120-129) but says that 'their theological and canonical status, as well as that of continental groupings of Bishops' Conferences, will need to be better clarified in order to be able to exploit their potential for the further development of a synodal Church'; and proposes to deepen "decentralisation" theologically and canonically by distinguishing the issues reserved to the Pope from those that could be granted to the Bishops' Conferences.

One post-synodal piece of news cannot be overlooked: Francis has declared that this time he will not write any post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. A few years ago, in my [book](#) on the 2014/2015 Synod on the family, I predicted that *Amoris laetitia* would be the last postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation. This prediction - after the interludes of the exhortations following the Synod on Young People and the one on the Amazon - is now confirmed by Pope Francis. In communicating this decision, he also said that the final document of the Synod has 'magisterial' value, albeit in a non normative sense.

This decision, like the new Decalogue of the Penitential Liturgy of 1 October [[Read here](#)**],** takes the new synod a giant step forward. Let the synods chat so as to assimilate the new conceptual and linguistic apparatus, let them produce final interlocutory documents that do not get in the way of the long journey... what counts is the new Church of the new synodality that proceeds by acts such as these.