



#overcomingsilence

Coming together – Synodal assemblies and communal decision-making in the Catholic Church

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CAMPAIGN GOAL: WOMEN HAVE VOTING RIGHTS IN FUTURE SYNODS_

This document aims to give our readers an overview of the process of the Synod of Bishops, that determine major decisions affecting the global Church. Women do not have the right to vote on these decisions that will ultimately affect them and their community. The Synod of Bishops is one form of decision making within the global structure that we hope to affect change and allow women, the right to vote.

History of decision making

The Catholic Church has a rich, ancient tradition of making decisions communally. Over the centuries, important theological questions have been resolved by Councils with a wide representation of different groups of people. The start of this tradition goes back to the Bible and the so-called Council of Jerusalem which is reported in the Acts of Apostles, chapter 15.



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Since the Second Vatican Council, a communal body called a “Synod of Bishops” exists and is called together periodically to discuss current issues in the Church and counsel the Pope. The word synod comes from Greek and means “coming together.” There are currently three types of synodal assemblies:

- 1 Ordinary general session (every three years, for example; *Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*)
- 2 Extraordinary general session (on issues that are urgent and time-sensitive, so far called only three times in history, most recently the first part of the *Synod on Family* in 2014)
- 3 Special session (geographically limited, for example the upcoming 2019 Pan-Amazonia Synod)¹



¹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_20050309_documentation-profile_en.html#II_OFFICIAL_DOCUMENTS

SYNODALITY_

Prominent historian and theologian Massimo Faggioli shows us that **synodality** is a “fundamental dimension of the church involving the whole people of God at all levels (universal, continental, national, diocesan, parochial)”. Bishops’ synods until recently have been an expression of collegiality among bishops, not true synodality. This is changing with Pope Francis. “The role of the Bishops’ Synod has changed, and synodality at all levels of the church has been encouraged as never before.”²

² Massimo Faggioli <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/collegiality-synodality>

³ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/exclusive-cupich-sciocluna-say-vatican-should-give-reasons-when-bishop-sacked>

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Asked about that possibility (of women religious as voting members of synods), **Cardinal Blase Cupich responded: “I think that there’s no reason why we shouldn’t do that. I’d be all for that.”**³



THE CHANGING NATURE OF DECISION MAKING



In 2018, Pope Francis released a document called *Episcopalis Communio*, which updates the regulations of the Synod of Bishops. It says that the synod “must increasingly become a privileged instrument for listening to the People of God” (*Episcopalis Communio*, 6).

Pope Francis has begun a tradition of extensive global consultation processes with the faithful ahead of Synodal assemblies. Unfortunately, in the past synods on the family and on young people, we have seen that many of the topics important to women and men around the world disappeared from the official documents on which the bishops voted at the end of the synod. The process has shown the tragic limitations of allowing lay participants only as non-voting “auditors” and observers.

Additionally, since Pope Francis wrote this document, the global sexual abuse and cover up crises have shown us that we cannot simply rely on bishops speaking for others. We must go a step further and include diverse representatives of all the faithful directly and on an equal footing by the virtue of our equal baptism.

THE PATH TOWARD A MORE INCLUSIVE SYNOD_

Art. 2 §2 *Episcopalis Communio*: According to the theme and the circumstances, certain others who are not Bishops may be summoned to the Synod Assembly; their role is determined in each case by the Roman Pontiff.

A more promising way of true participation was opened by Pope Francis when he named lay religious brothers as voting members of the 2015 Synod on Family and the 2018 Synod on Youth. Thus, voting in the Synod is no longer bound to the ordination to priesthood. The superiors of religious sisters have exactly the same standing according to Canon Law as the superiors of religious brothers – the only difference is their gender. Yet no religious sister has ever been given the same voting right.

Is this fair considering:

In 2015, there
were more than
670,320
women religious
in the world
compared to
54,229
male religious ⁴

The number of women religious
ALSO EXCEEDS BY
61%
THE NUMBER OF
PRIESTS GLOBALLY ⁵

These women have dedicated their whole lives to service in the footsteps of Jesus. They operate hospitals, schools, and social services for those in our world who are most marginalised. Surely, their voices must also be heard in the processes that determine the direction of our Church in these critical times.

⁴ <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/04/06/170406e.html>

⁵ <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/04/06/170406e.html>

VOTES FOR CATHOLIC WOMEN



Sr. Carmen Sammut, President of the UISG (the global umbrella organization of religious sisters): “We see that there’s a development in the right way, so we do hope that one day, we will get there, that we can be equal members with the men religious ... who have voting rights,” Sammut said. “We don’t know when this will happen, but we really think that it will happen.”⁶

In 2018, a coalition of groups calling for religious sisters to be able to vote at the Synod on Youth gathered over 9,500 signatures in just two weeks. As a result, the voting rights of women religious became a big topic during the synod (see media links, page 11).

The Overcoming Silence campaign continues this effort.

In October 2019, the Synod on Pan-Amazonia is planned. We want to make sure that representatives of religious sisters are able to vote.

We firmly believe that this example can and must be extended also to lay women and men participating in future Synodal assemblies. They should no longer be just observers, they should become full members with voting rights. Transparent procedures need to be developed to facilitate the selection of lay synod members. *Episcopalis Communio*, the document which regulates how synods work, says that “like every human institution, the synod can be improved with passage of time.” Including women as voting members is a great chance for the Catholic Church to develop a mechanism that will make its decision-making more inclusive, more diverse and more responsive to the real needs of the faithful.

⁶ <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/equality/sisters-abuse-summit-hope-standard-set-more-women-vatican-meetings-55909>

HOW DOES A SYNODAL ASSEMBLY CURRENTLY WORK?_

The synodal processes of the Church have been developing since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. We can look at the Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment from 2018 for a concrete example of the process in its most recent form:

1 The Pope chooses a topic relevant to the current affairs of the Church.

2 Global preparatory consultations are done

- a questionnaire is shared with Bishops' Conferences around the world,
- an online questionnaire that any young person could fill out,
- a pre-synod meeting of about 300 youth and experts in Rome 6 months before the official meeting.

3 Input is gathered and an official preparatory document is compiled, with the goal to help the participants study the issues ahead of the meeting in Rome.

4 Participants are chosen – they include:

- Bishops from around the world **with the right to vote,**
- Leaders of the Roman Curia (until now always bishops or cardinals) **with the right to vote,**
- Priests who are considered specialist in the topic **with the right to vote,**

- Representatives of male religious orders (including both priests and non-ordained brothers) **with the right to vote,**
- Representatives of leaders of women's religious orders **without the right to vote,**
- Auditors – other participants including women who are experts or can share life experience about the topic discussed, **without the right to vote.**

All in all, in the last synod, about 10% of all participants were women and none of them were allowed to vote.

HOW DOES A SYNODAL ASSEMBLY CURRENTLY WORK?_

5 The participants meet in Rome, typically for about one month. The meeting is closed to the public and includes plenary speeches as well as work in small discussion groups.

6 Towards the end of the meeting, a final document is drafted and the delegates vote on this document, paragraph by paragraph.

7 The approved final document is submitted to Pope Francis. In the past, the Pope would then draft his own teaching document based on this input. Since 2018, the final document of the Synod can become directly a part of the official teaching of the Church once signed by the Pope (*Episcopalis Communio*, Art. 18). This potentially gives the synod more authority than in the past.

8 The teachings of the above-mentioned document are implemented into the way the Catholic Church lives and teaches faith in the local circumstances of each diocese.



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Sister Sally Hodgdon, Superior General of the Sisters of St. John of Chambery and auditor at the Synod on Youth: “I am a superior general. I am a sister. And so in theory, logically, you would think I would have the right to vote....So we will raise the point in the future and we will hopefully move forward. And we may see women voting in synods.”⁷



WHAT CAN YOU DO



Share this information about women voting in synods on your social media.



Write a message at www.overcomingsilence.com – it only takes a minute to upload a picture and tell the world why women need to be part of the decision-making of the Catholic Church.



Organise a discussion group at your school, parish or local community. Download our ambassador guide online



Aside from global synods, diocesan or national synods happen from time to time. Be on the lookout for local synodal processes in your diocese or country and become actively involved. Advocate that women are equally included.



Stay tuned for updates and action alerts ahead of the Pan-Amazon synod that starts on October 6th 2019.

⁷ <https://apnews.com/f934de6ce7ff403b83ddc748ed9312b6>

Additional Reading and Resources:

MEDIA ARTICLES

English

[Catholic Women Religious Superiors Should Vote at The Synod](#)

[Vatican Faces Modern-Day Suffragists, Demanding Right to Vote](#)

[Superiors general see no reason why women shouldn't have vote at synod](#)

[World's superiors general to ask for greater women's voice at synod](#)

[Pressure building on Vatican to give women vote at synod](#)

German

[Ungewohntes Bild: Flyer-Demo im Kloster Fahr](#)

Spanish

[María Luisa Berzosa: "Me imaginaba que el Sínodo iba a ser con pocas mujeres, pero no tan pocas"](#)



Lasallian Br. Robert Schieler, one of two non-ordained religious brothers serving as members in the synod on young people said on religious sisters voting: "It's our baptismal vows first that call us to mission and send us. For me, that's the important message here, that all of us, by our baptism, have a vocation, have a mission in the church." ⁸

⁸ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/worlds-superiors-general-ask-greater-womens-voice-synod>

www.overcomingsilence.com

Please add your voice to the www.overcomingsilence.com movement and help us send a message to the Roman Curia and Pope Francis about women in leadership and decision making roles in the Catholic Church.

If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact –
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