

# Amazon Synod calls for married priests and increased role for women

The meeting for the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian region has approved a final document which calls for the ordination of married men as priests and for women to be considered for diaconal ordination.

The 33-page document, approved Oct. 26, is the result of a three-week meeting in Rome. The synod's 181 voting members, together with representatives from indigenous communities, religious orders, lay groups and charities, discussed a range of issues concerning the region, spread across nine countries.

In ordinary sessions of the Synod of Bishops, delegates are elected by the world's bishops conferences. In the special session for the pan-Amazonian region, all attendees were by special invitation.

The document presents the synodal assembly's reflections and conclusions on topics ranging from environmentalism, inculturation in the Church, and the human rights of indigenous communities in the face of economic, environmental, and cultural exploitation.

The draft text was presented to the assembly on Oct. 25, and various amendments were proposed and debated during the approval process. The synodal document does not have magisterial authority; the conclusions are presented to Pope Francis, who will issue his own document later.

One of the document's most anticipated and likely controversial items is the call by the synod fathers for the ordination of proven married men, so-called *viri probati*, in the face of an acute shortage of priests in many parts of the region.

"Many of the ecclesial communities of the Amazonian territory have enormous difficulties in accessing the Eucharist," the document says, while noting that some communities go for months, even years between visits from a priest.

The synod fathers said that they "appreciate celibacy as a gift of God to the extent that this gift enables the missionary disciple, ordained to the priesthood, to dedicate himself fully to the service of the Holy People of God."

But, the bishops concluded, "legitimate diversity does not harm the communion and unity of the Church, but expresses and serves it."

The document proposes "to establish criteria and dispositions on the part of the competent authority... to ordain as priest suitable and esteemed men of the community, who have had a fruitful permanent diaconate and receive an adequate

formation for the priesthood, having a legitimately constituted and stable family, to sustain the life of the Christian community.”

These criteria, together with each individual paragraph of the text, was approved by a two-thirds vote of the synod’s voting members.

Speaking after the session ended, Cardinal Peter Turkson said that the voting process had proceeded smoothly and that all the articles of the document had passed by a comfortable margin.

Bishop Erwin Kräutler, the retired head of the Xingu prelature in Amazonian Brazil, told reporters that the proposal for the ordination of married men was not a surprise.

“It is what we expected, of course,” Kräutler said. The article passed by a margin of 128-41.

Kräutler has been an adamant proponent of married clergy, telling an Oct. 9 press conference that there is “no other option” for the region, and said that indigenous people in the Amazon were unable to understand the evangelical witness of celibacy.

While the proposal to allow the ordination of married men garnered a clear majority of synod participants, the issue of married clergy was a focal point of debate during the weeks of the synod.

Shortly before the synod opened, Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, published a book entitled *Friends of the Bridegroom: For a Renewed Vision of Priestly Celibacy*, and Cardinal Robert Sarah, head of the Congregation for Divine Worship made several public interventions in favour of celibacy.

The synod’s final document explicitly linked the proposal to ministry in “the most remote areas of the Amazon,” but recognized that several of the synodal participants “were in favour of a more universal approach to the subject.”



Cardinal Michael Czerny

Presenting the document at a press conference on Oct. 26, new Canadian Cardinal Michael Czerny, special secretary of the synod, said some members felt that proposing to change the discipline of clerical celibacy should be reserved to the universal Church.

“Other felt that the existing norms of canon law... allow us to consider this within the context of a specific region,” said Czerny who also serves as under-secretary of the Migrants and Refugees Section of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay and a close advisor of the pope, said in an interview that he was in favour of the proposal, in as much as it represented a merely disciplinary change.

“I think that the present canon law...says its an impediment if you have a wife to receive orders, but it is an impediment that can be dispensed by the Holy See – and it has been dispensed. But I think there should be very clear criteria, conditions put [on the proposal],” Gracias said, referencing how the Church had worked to incorporate married former Anglican ministers who had been ordained as Catholic priests.

The synodal document also called for new and enhanced ministerial roles for women in the life of the Church in the region.

Noting that “the Magisterium of the Church since the Second Vatican Council has highlighted the central place that women occupy in the Church,” the document called for the Church to “recognize and promote (the leadership of women) by strengthening their participation in pastoral councils of parishes and dioceses, or even in instances of government.”

The bishops also recognized that in the Amazon “the majority of Catholic communities are led by women,” and asked “for the institution of a ministry for ‘women’s leadership of the community’ to be created and recognized within the service of the changing demands of evangelization and community care.”

The bishops also noted that “in a large number of these consultations, the permanent diaconate for women was requested.”

“For this reason the theme was important during the synod,” the bishops wrote, but noted that Pope Francis had already created a commission to examine the question and so requested that they be given the chance to feed into that process.

In his speech to the closing session of the synod on Oct 26, Pope Francis said that he would consider reconstituting the commission, which he established in 2016 under the auspices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to examine the historical role of female deacons and expand the commission to include new members.

Earlier this year, the pope addressed the issue directly, noting that “the formulas of female deacons’ ‘ordination’ found until now, according to the commission, are not the same for the ordination of a male deacon and are more similar to what today would be the abbatial blessing of an abbess.”

In its own right, the final synodal document has no teaching or binding authority of its own. Synods are merely consultative assemblies, convened by the pope or a bishop, to advise on some particular topic. Typically after a meeting of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, the pope issues a post synodal apostolic exhortation.

In his remarks in the synod hall, Francis said that he hoped to issue an exhortation before the end of the year, time permitting.

During the press conference on Oct. 26 Paulo Ruffini, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Communications confirmed that the pope hoped to issue an exhortation “within a relatively short period of time.”