

[Opinion](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



Pope Francis speaks to visitors in St. Peter's Square during his general audience at the Vatican May 29, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



Thomas Reese

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@thomasreeseSJ](#)

Religion News Service

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

May 30, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

[My column last week](#), in which I gave a positive assessment of Pope Francis' interview on CBS News, got some blowback. There were the usual haters who don't like anything that Francis does or says. Others complained that the interviewer should have asked tougher questions or pressed the pope on the treatment of abusive priests such as former Jesuit Marko Rupnik.

But there was also kickback from progressives who normally like Francis, [expressing surprise and disappointment](#) at Francis' [saying "no"](#) not only to women priests but to ordained women deacons.

This crowd was further exasperated by [this week's news](#) about Francis' comments on gay seminarians in an exchange with Italian bishops.

The pope's "no" to women deacons was unexpected because the topic was discussed last October at the Synod on Synodality and previously was examined by two committees appointed by the pope. (Yet another committee is supposed to report back in 2025.)

The progressive response reminds me of Roberto Tucci's comment about Americans' attitude toward Pope John Paul II: "They like the singer but not the song."

Advertisement

Too many progressives believe that Francis reflects their views on the church. In truth, he is pastoral in his encounters with people but unwilling to change church teaching in any radical way. Norah O'Donnell aptly quoted an unnamed Vatican observer as saying that Francis has changed the tune but not the words of the song.

Progressive Catholics have always hoped for significant changes in the church. Yes, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council were great, but they were seen as the beginning, not the end of reform. They hoped for married priests, women priests and

changes in the church's teaching on LGBTQ people, birth control and divorce.

Francis has raised their hopes. While not changing the church's teaching on divorce, he made it easier for divorced and remarried Catholics to go to Communion. He has promoted women to higher and higher places in the church, but ordination is a bridge too far for him.

In regard to married priests, Francis gave a temporary no to the Synod on the Amazon, arguing that it had to be discussed by the wider church.

The Synod on Synodality was the perfect place to have this wider consultation, but the possibility of married priests was barely mentioned at last October's meeting of the synod. Here I fault the members of the synod more than Francis: Neither the bishops nor the laity at the synod made married priests a priority.

Too many progressives believe that Francis reflects their views on the church. In truth, he is pastoral in his encounters with people but unwilling to change church teaching in any radical way.

[Tweet this](#)

Then, Francis further shocked progressives with his language on gays in seminaries, telling Italian bishops, according to [Italian media reports](#), "there is already enough faggotry" in Catholic seminaries. The Argentine pope used the Italian term "frocigaine," a rarely used slur to describe flamboyant gay attitudes. Francis allegedly also used other disparaging words to describe gay men at the May 20 meeting.

The pope quickly apologized for his wording and the Vatican issued a statement saying, "The pope never meant to offend or express himself with homophobic terms, and he issues his most sincere apologies to all those who felt offended by the use of a term reported by others."

But negative words seem to contradict his 2013 comment, when asked about gay priests, "Who am I to judge?" When it comes to gays in seminaries, progressives had hoped that the pope would simply apply to homosexuals the same requirement as heterosexuals: celibacy. Now there is confusion as to whether gays will be welcomed at all, which needs to be clarified by the Vatican.

The Second Vatican Council had a revolutionary impact on the church. The church today is involved in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue pre-Vatican Catholics might never have imagined. It no longer believes that Catholics should make Catholicism their states' religion. The role of the laity in the world and in the church was bolstered, so that the laity are no longer second-class members of the church; they are much more involved in ministry than in the past.

The liturgy is in the vernacular. Care for the poor and working for social justice and peace are seen as integral to the church's mission.

None of this would have happened without Pope John XXIII "opening the windows" of the church, calling a council and allowing free discussion. The council involved all the bishops of the world over four sessions in four successive autumns in Rome, from 1962 to 1965, each lasting eight to 12 weeks.



Pope Francis gives his blessing during an audience with members of the International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education at the Vatican May 24, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

During the council, eminent theologians brought the prelates up to date in theology so they could write the documents they did, like a continuing education program for bishops. Divisions persisted, and some of the texts included ambiguous language each side could interpret as it willed, setting the stage for postconciliar debates. But reform was set irrevocably in motion.

A synod is not a council. Two monthlong sessions cannot resolve issues on which the church is divided, as can be seen by the continuing controversies over gay blessings and women deacons. The conciliar experience should encourage patience.

Francis never saw the Synod on Synodality as a place for resolving divisive issues. The church is not ready. First, the synod must foster listening and dialogue in the church. His hoped-for fruits of the synod are increased Communion, greater participation and renewed commitment to the mission of Christ.

I think of Francis as a grandmother presiding over Thanksgiving dinner that she hopes will bring the family together and heal wounds. She does not want any fights. "Don't shout; listen to one another! This is not the time to decide what to do with the family business. We can't do that until you are willing to respectfully listen to one another."

Sadly, the pope also sometimes sounds like a grandfather who says things that make his grandchildren cringe. Whether the grandchildren will forgive him or stomp out of the house remains to be seen.

Francis never saw the Synod on Synodality as a place for resolving divisive issues. The church is not ready.

[Tweet this](#)

Francis has reopened the windows that were closed by John Paul and Pope Benedict XVI, but the church is still an institution that will not change until there is global consensus for change.

This will not please progressives who want faster change in the church. Some in hierarchy and elsewhere talk about how the church thinks in centuries, or that it takes centuries to implement a council. This is nonsense in a world that changes as

rapidly as does ours. We can't wait.

But the old progressives are tired and dying off. The young simply don't care, having given up on the church as a boring, homophobic and patriarchal institution not worth their time. The church may become more conservative simply because everyone else gives up on it.

This leaves the pope in an unenviable position. Moving too quickly could blow up the church, as it did with many other denominations. Moving too slowly means losing the young. This is especially critical among women, which is why issues like birth control and women priests and deacons are so important.

In Europe, men left the church in the 19th century because of the hierarchy's political stances, but women stayed. At the end of the 20th century, we began losing women.

Despite its male hierarchy, the church cannot exist without women who do the heavy lifting of passing the faith on to the next generation, either as mothers or teachers.

How the church will survive in the 21st century is a mystery. I am sure God has a plan; I just don't know what it is.