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A delegation of women ministries leaders meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican on Sept. 30, 2024. (Courtesy of Pilar Timpane)

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Just days before presiding over the start of the major monthlong summit on the future of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis on Sept. 30 met with a global delegation of women's ministry advocates, including leading proponents for restoring the female diaconate.

According to Casey Stanton, co-director of the Discerning Deacons project, the meeting was organized by the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (known as CEAMA) in order to "reflect on the theme of women's ministry and bring forward voices that are walking with those from the Amazon from other parts of the world."

The meeting, which took place in the library of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, comes just days before Francis will officially open the final assembly of the synod on synodality on Oct. 2, which is expected to consider the need for women to be more involved in both "decision-making and taking processes" within the church.

"Part of what we wanted to convey was our gratitude for the synod, which has created a way to dream together about what's possible in our church," Stanton told the National Catholic Reporter in an interview after meeting with the pope.

"We've been growing this dream of a prophetic, synodal diaconate," said Stanton.

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Along with Stanton and CEAMA representatives, the meeting also included two Indigenous women from Canada, a religious sister that serves a remote Aboriginal community in Australia and a young adult minister.

"There are women serving in the peripheries all over the world and we've been walking together on this synodal path," said Stanton, who noted that each of their ministries of service is diaconal in nature.

According to Stanton, the pope thanked the women for their respective ministries and during their time together, the women prayed for the pope and for the synod.

During his papacy, Francis has sent mixed messages on the question of whether he would consider restoring the female diaconate.

Francis has previously established two special commissions to examine the historical questions surrounding the ordination of women to the diaconate, though neither commissions' work has been made public.

The final report of the first session of the synod on synodality in October 2023 specifically requested that the work of the previous papal and theological commissions on women deacons to be presented for further consideration at the next assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to be held in October 2024. And in March 2024, Francis created 10 study groups to examine a number of the synod's hot button issues, including women deacons.

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>
> — Casey Stanton, co-director of the Discerning Deacons project
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But amid the synod's open consideration of these questions, Francis surprised many when in a CBS News interview in May, the pope said he was opposed to women deacons.

Even so, advocates for the cause haven't backed down.

In June, Franciscan Catechist Sr. Laura Vicuña Pereira Manso, vice president of CEAMA, met with Francis and told NCR afterward she did not believe the door was fully closed and she intended to continue to keep the conversation going.

Three months later, she was back at the Vatican with others in tow to introduce the pope to other women on the frontlines of diaconal service.

According to Stanton, she believes this is an indication of the pope's "openness to receive women and their gifts."

"He continues to be open to this conversation and recognizes that it's really important that he continues to have an open posture and as a pope, he models openness and encounter," she continued. "I think he wants all of his other brother

bishops to do the same."

As for what comes next, she pointed to the example of CEAMA, a first-of-its-kind ecclesial assembly to include women in a leadership position, and where power is shared between the ordained clergy and non-ordained.

"This moment, this month is about trying to make the whole church that kind of structure," said Stanton.

"That's the invitation. Can we continue to build a culture where this is the norm? Where our bishops receive us and we can have an honest conversation," she continued. "I think the more we multiply those sorts of encounters, the more the possibility of women deacons emerges."

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