

# Editorials

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## Pope Francis invites Catholics to speak up

One doesn't have to be Roman Catholic to appreciate the challenges facing Pope Francis or the courage he has shown in meeting them. Now the church is beginning a three-week synod in Rome, where participants will tackle such questions as the role of women in church governance, celibacy of the clergy and the church's stance toward the LGBTQ community.

Among some Catholic leaders, just to raise such topics threatens a departure from treasured orthodoxy — even schism. In the months leading up to the synod, Francis has urged Catholic leaders not to fear the discussion. And he has repeatedly expressed his view that a Christian life demands “concrete actions.”

Roman Catholic doctrine is none of the Star Tribune Editorial Board's business. A church's freedom to practice religion is as fundamental as a newspaper's freedom to practice journalism — and both of those rights reside in the protections afforded by the First Amendment. Yet the Catholic Church and affiliated agencies exert a considerable influence — around the world, across the United States and here in Minnesota — in ways that transcend doctrine.

Admirably, he wants the church to be open to discussions on the role of women, same-sex unions and clergy celibacy.

About 1 in 5 Minnesotans identifies as Catholic, but many more are directly touched by the church's work. A child in central Minnesota need not be Catholic to benefit from the help of Catholic Charities of St. Cloud. A woman in the Twin Cities need not be Catholic to feel the



effects of the church's efforts to curb abortions. The unsuccessful 2012 campaign to pass a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage in Minnesota was promulgated by the Rev. John Nienstedt, then the archbishop of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Clearly, non-Catholics have an interest and a stake in how the Catholic Church regards women and how it treats members of the LGBTQ community. It's significant that the synod will include the voices of women as full participants in its deliberations about the life of the church. At previous such meetings, voting membership was limited to men. Now, out of about 365 voting members, 54 are women. That's not quite 15%, but it is infinitely more than zero.

What's more, Francis has indicated a possible willingness to consider allowing Catholic clergy to bless same-sex unions. He stops well short of referring to such unions as marriages, and he does not go so far as to suggest that such unions could be performed by priests or celebrated in churches. But he has opened the door a crack, and even that much change is enough to arouse the ire of some church leaders.

A five-member group of conservative retired cardinals has warned that the faithful might fall prey to "confusion, error and discouragement" on several issues to be discussed at the synod, such as opening the priesthood to women. The cardinals challenged the pope to reaffirm traditional church teaching, citing Pope John Paul II's assertion that the church had "no authority" to ordain women as priests.

Francis declined to contradict John Paul, now regarded as a saint, but allowed that the ordination of women "can be a subject of study." (In Minnesota, the Pew Research Center has found that Catholic women outnumber Catholic men, 53% to 47%.) But that simple assertion that study is needed may border on heresy in the eyes of some.

In his reply to the cardinals, Francis wrote that it is part of the church's mission to ensure that "all the People of God ... make their voice heard." Cannily, he added that "with these very questions you manifest your need to participate, to freely express your opinion and to collaborate" — just as he intends the synod to do.