



Pope Francis shares a laugh with some of the women members of the assembly of the Synod of Bishops, including Spanish theologian Cristina Inogés Sanz, left, at the assembly's session Oct. 6 in the Paul VI Audience Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



Joe Ferullo

[View Author Profile](#)



Stephanie Clary

[View Author Profile](#)

## [\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

December 14, 2023

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

For many, 2023 was the year that people and issues on the Catholic margins took center stage. Call it the year they were heard — even with all the expected static struggling to drown out the dialogue.

Giving voice to the voiceless is a large part of our mission at NCR. We and our readers had followed this phenomenon over these past months, and it was front of mind as we began to consider who [would be selected our Newsmaker of the Year](#). It was not an easy choice. We considered groups of Catholics, categories of Catholics and Catholic individuals who seemed to best represent the real progress seen in 2023.

Women religious have long been at the vanguard of climate issues, fighting to keep this existential issue at the forefront. This past year saw Catholic sisters further elevate that role with tangible and decisive action. [Nuns in the United States and Ireland](#) divested their money in fossil fuels and became part of a \$10 million fund to increase investment in climate solutions. A \$2 million gift from the [Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration](#) has enabled women religious to expand their climate lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill.

And the [Sisters of Loretto](#) set aside as a permanently protected preserve more than 650 acres of land surrounding their motherhouse in Kentucky — land that could have easily been sold for substantial sums to developers.

[Santa Fe Archbishop John Wester](#) spent much of 2023 intensifying focus on another issue linked to the survival of our planet: nuclear arms. He was motivated by the

sense that Americans had become complacent about the nuclear threat, and that the issue itself had become voiceless.

In August, Wester along with Seattle Archbishop Paul Etienne, [embarked](#) upon a five-city "Pilgrimage of Peace" to Japan to promote nuclear disarmament.

"Even though we're in a sense of complacency, we should not be," Wester told NCR. "It's one of those things where it's all or nothing. We either completely avoid nuclear war, or we're completely destroyed by it. There's no in-between."

He said that even though nobody wants to talk about it, "We all know prudently and maturely that we have to talk about it. We've got ourselves into this mess and so we human beings have to get ourselves out of it. And the way to get out of it is to get rid of the weapons."

Some people entered our newsmaker discussion because they exemplified the church making an impact on global issues like climate change and nuclear disarmament. But others surfaced in conversation thanks to the voices they raised inside the church — for the marginalized and ignored.

## Advertisement

There was [San Diego Cardinal Robert McElroy](#), with his call for "radical inclusion" and a wider Catholic tent in a January [essay](#) for America magazine. McElroy warned that the church too often "contains structures and cultures of exclusion that alienate all too many from the church or make their journey in the Catholic faith tremendously burdensome." Not surprisingly, given the tenor of our times, his message of openness was met with accusations of heresy by some. Springfield (Illinois) Bishop Thomas Paprocki wrote an [essay](#) titled "Imagining a heretical cardinal" for the journal First Things in which he quoted from McElroy's article, but didn't name him.

We also thought of naming as newsmakers the very people brought into that wider tent at the October Synod of Synodality in Rome — among them, about 80 [women at the synod](#), 54 of whom could not just include their voices at the round tables, but also vote in the official process.

They, and other [lay Catholics](#) seated there in the main hall for the first time ever, expressed long-unheard points of view and perspectives. "We are not afraid of

tensions," Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg [told](#) participants on Oct. 9. "Tensions are a part of the process, as long as we consider ourselves to be sisters and brothers, walking together."

Despite that, some synod participants [reportedly](#) walked out, exhausted by the "tiresome" task of listening — and perhaps unsure of just how many people this tent can hold.

No doubt, the presence of more voices within the synod hall challenged those who've been sheltered by their smaller, soundproof tents — none so much as the witness of [LGBTQ Catholics](#) and their advocates and allies.

"Many of us wept when we heard of that young woman who committed suicide because she was bisexual and did not feel welcomed. I wept," Dominican Fr. Timothy Radcliffe [told](#) the Synod of Bishops assembly on Oct. 18. "I hope it changed us."

Incremental change sometimes feels small and unnoteworthy, but because of the courageous and important contributions of women, laity and LGBTQ Catholics in the synod assembly, any one of these groups could have been named newsmakers.

Much of this progress toward the common good and radical inclusion made in 2023 came with the support of Pope Francis (who could always be named a newsmaker, though we like to pick a U.S. Catholic). We ultimately agreed on [Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick as NCR's 2023 Newsmaker of the Year](#). She devoted years of advocacy and suffered years of adversity in her LGBTQ ministry. She was for far too long a lonely voice calling out into a void. But then all her efforts were recognized by Francis himself this past October, when Gramick was granted a headline-making one-on-one meeting with the pontiff.

In a church always on alert for miracles among us, that moment certainly qualified. She was heard.

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 22, 2023-Jan 4, 2024** print issue under the headline: The margins take center stage.