



**Discerning
Deacons**

Gathering the Fruits

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Methodology

When | Where | Who

From June 1 to Sept. 12, 2021, there were 84 reported gatherings that were hosted virtually or took place in parishes or homes. The gatherings primarily happened across the United States, though about 200 women religious, theologians, clergy, and lay leaders participated in adapted conversations in India and in Canada. One US Jesuit province held a special session with their women's commission to discern communally, and offer their contributions to this report. A majority of participants (approximately 1,000) were women between the ages of 30 and 65, with men comprising just under a third of the 1,500 total.

In the United States, 25 priests, 15 deacons, 38 women religious and 30 lay ecclesial ministers participated. More than 100 participants were of Latino/a backgrounds, originally from Mexico, Central America, Cuba and Venezuela. Numerous lay persons identified as actively engaged in their faith, participating in roles like parish council member, lector, social justice team member, catechist, youth minister, and eucharistic minister. In response to intentional invitations, about 18 people attended who are not actively practicing their faith at this time.

Participants consistently expressed a deep love of the Catholic Church, along with a corresponding frustration or lament that the Church seems slow to make movement toward a greater inclusion of women, based on their pastoral gifts and the needs of the community.

Hosts of the meetings attended a virtual three-hour training, focused on grounding their facilitation in a prayerful space, and modeling speaking from their own center, rather than engaging in debate. The goal was to orient people in their own experience, and to create a sacred container in which to explore and wonder about the possibility of women and the diaconate. Educational materials (written and videos) were provided, often used before or after the sessions, and sometimes incorporated into the sessions. The primary goal was not to become experts on a topic, but to pray with and consider the question of ordaining women to the diaconate in light of life on the ground, in parish communities, and in the context of the Church's local mission and ministry.

Hosts were encouraged to be in active dialogue and partnership with their local pastor and deacons and to facilitate a conversation within the fold of the Church, rather than being antagonistic or outside of relationship with Church leaders. In some cases, this dialogue led to invitations to speak from the pulpit or appear in the bulletin. Sometimes a priest or deacon participated in the session. In other cases, the effort at dialogue was not met with the same enthusiasm, and lay persons held the conversation without the formal blessing of local clergy. Hosts were also encouraged to reach beyond the "likely suspects" in order to connect with those who might think differently from themselves, and to intentionally invite those who feel like they are on the outskirts of the Church or may not be actively practicing their faith.

Following the sessions, hosts reported back through an online form and were invited to attend a consensus workshop with professional facilitation. The goal was for robust, inclusive participation in a process of naming the themes that had emerged and exploring where there was synergy and new insight from the listening.

Central Question for Synthesis

The report below is an attempt to synthesize responses to the central discernment question as it was voiced in conversations during this focused period of engagement:

What are the considerations for the Catholic Church around the question of women and the diaconate?

This question was intentionally chosen to openly explore benefits along with questions and concerns that emerged in the listening process. We humbly submit the following report in the hope it can serve the Church's discernment. We are available for further consultation as requested.

Methodological reflections

People were appreciative of the invitation to engage! They enjoyed praying and sitting around tables to talk about something that mattered to them about the life of the Church. We hope this engagement helped to plant seeds, not for a parliamentary political process, but for the growth of a more synodal, participatory Church, enlivened for mission in the world.

To those who served as hosts and who participated in this listening process:

We hope that in this report you can hear echoes and resonances from your own active participation in the sessions. If you cannot, it is the product of our shortcomings. We appreciate your grace and welcome your ongoing contribution to help us close the gap in our understanding, and help to reveal a fuller witness.

This report was written collaboratively by Laura Boysen-Aragon, Casey Stanton and Ellie Hidalgo

Direct quotes are shown in green.

Gather the Fruits:

Synthesizing Considerations

What are the considerations for the Catholic Church around the question of women and the diaconate?

Categories represent a synthesis or theme that emerged across many sessions, and are explicated with bullet points, brief summaries and direct (anonymized) quotes that were recorded in order to help illuminate the theme, when relevant.

Imagination: Engaging an Active Hope

- Participants expressed a new hopefulness when they considered what it would mean for women to be ordained as deacons.
- This could be a sign of active hope, and a witness to a Church open to the movement of the Holy Spirit.
- It would send an important message to young people about the openness of the Church to live inclusively and to enact meaningful, visible reform.

Image of God: Embodying the Church's Teaching on Justice and Human Dignity

- Opening the diaconate for women would be a tangible witness to Jesus' inclusive ministry and would symbolically demonstrate the Church's professed teachings on the equal dignity of all human beings, created in God's image.
- "The image we get of the Church is often all-male. Ordaining women would give a more truthful image of who God is. Not male. Not old or young."
- "Women would have more respect everywhere if they were ordained."

Preaching: Expanding the Ministry of the Word

- Deacons help draw connections in preaching from their experience in the secular world (i.e. from marriage



- and family life, challenges faced in the workplace, etc.), and so too a woman could offer new insight and perspective as she brings the fullness of her experience to bear in the interpretation of Scripture and in the context of the Sunday Mass.
- Many spoke of the desire to hear women preach both as a way of understanding their own lives and also as a way of expanding their understanding of God's Word.
- "It's amazing that the voices of women are heard everywhere except in the most sacred proclamation of the Word."
- "Having the opportunity to preach changed me, gave me a window into what it could be like to speak and preach on the word of God. It's an opportunity to grow in your own faith. [I] [f]elt the Holy Spirit moving in the preparation and proclamation in the process of preaching and to offer that to the congregation would be a win."
- "People have a deep hunger to hear a woman preach from the altar."
- Women have been seeking and receiving formation as preachers.
- "Catholic Women Preach" is one example of how many women are already offering their contribution and could be enriching local parish communities with their gifts for preaching.

Recognition of the Holy Spirit and Extending Sacramental Grace

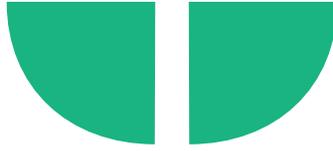
- Women are currently functioning as de facto deacons without the sacramental grace or the title. Women teach, serve, and bring the Eucharist to the sick. They work as chaplains, lectors and Eucharistic Ministers. They are raising children to know God and help others. They bring their families to Mass. Much of their ecclesial work goes unnoticed, perpetuating a culture where the work of women is not fully

valued. Their role is contingent and vulnerable, often lacking the respect or leadership authority commensurate with their commitment and contribution.

- "In the world, women are doing most of the work in the church. Women are doing leadership work. We need to name it and shine a light on it. If women stopped doing the work, a lot of stuff would stop. This is not a strange new world we are building. This is just acknowledging what is already happening."
- "It would change the status of women. They have proven they can do the work, but too many people view them as 'just volunteers.'"
- The women doing the work of the deacon are already known in their local church. "We know many of the people we would want to invite to discern. I can think of seven women who'd be good deacons right away after only three minutes of reflection. Four of these women are already doing the work of deacon[s] in our parish, giving reflections, [serving as] spiritual directors [and] active in the liturgy as far as we are able."

Representation, Young People, and Passing on the Faith

- Women as deacons could represent the Church with greater visibility, while providing leadership role models for younger women.
- A primary concern raised across most sessions was about passing on the faith to the next generation. There was broad consensus that young people are less likely to engage with institutions they perceive as perpetuating injustice and discrimination. As a result, many young people are turned off from the Church because women's leadership is not visible in public worship.
- Seeing and hearing women is



- important for all generations. For younger generations, hearing women is important as they form their view of the world. Consistently, people voiced the concern that if children only see men at the altar, they may assume that only men can be leaders.
- “I heard ‘we know our children have faith, but will our faith have [our] children?’ I want mothers to be able to pass on their faith and feel like it is an inclusive place.”

Evangelical Coherence for a Discerning, Synodal Church

- Participants expressed hope for a Church where everyone is unleashed for missionary discipleship, and where all gifts can be received for the building up of the community.
- Ordaining women to the diaconate could further the reach of bishops and the hierarchy as they seek to draw near to their own flock.
- Many women in ministry already share authority as collaborators with priests and deacons in ministry; they bring particular experience and insight toward furthering a “synodal Church” that listens and journeys together.
- “Women working in the Spiritual Exercises all over the world is a huge contribution to the spread and availability of the Exercises. This experience and formation for discernment could be of direct service to bishops seeking to embody a more synodal path.”

Meeting Spiritual and Pastoral Needs

- Ordaining women as deacons would expand the possibilities available to women in liturgical and sacramental roles that can only be exercised with ordination. Many participants expressed the essential need for women deacons as a pastoral resource and outlet for women and young people.

- Women are well-suited to help women prepare for marriage and motherhood, to support women as wives and mothers, and to support women in end-of-life considerations. Women would be better able to accompany women in abusive relationships, crisis pregnancies, or in the path of annulment.
- “There are many rational reasons why I support women in the diaconate. One is the sheer numbers and need of our Church. Another is recognizing the value of diversity. Closing the door to the perspective and experience of women shuts out so many elements that could be very valuable for Catholics facing different life circumstances.”
- “Women nurture people in a different way than men do. It may help certain people feel more comfortable coming to share problems or concerns.”

Practical Pastoral Considerations

- Women would be able to serve and preach in places where ordination is required, like in jails and prisons, some hospital systems, and active duty military chaplaincy.
- Parish priests are spread too thin and overworked. Some communities have no priest at all. Restoring the diaconate to women would provide additional necessary resources to the Church and enable clergy to reach additional parishioners, both physically and spiritually.
- “With the declining number of priests, in 20 years how am I going to receive the sacraments if only men remain able to give them?”
- “There is enough to do in terms of service for all members to lead. Baptism is a call to vocation and women have heard that call since the time of Christ, as evidenced in Paul’s letters. In our own time, we are missing the reality of what it looks like

- to witness the living out of a woman's diaconal vocation. Think of the untapped resources that are available to the Church."
- "There is so much work to be done, why wouldn't you increase the number of people to do the work?"

Restoring Moral Credibility: Helping to Heal and Rebuild Trust

- There is a great need for healing in our Church in the aftermath of the clergy sex abuse crisis. Women deacons could play a vital role in advancing this much-needed healing. Many expressed their heartfelt concern that the Church has lost its moral authority in the world. They expressed the hope that ordaining women to the diaconate could serve to make the Church less clerical and more welcoming.
- *"This is a justice issue We are called – all of us – to do as Jesus did."*

Surfacing Laments

- The real and perceived exclusion of women from visible leadership roles was named as a reason for family members leaving the Catholic Church or considering leaving the Church.
- There are women who felt they needed to find other denominational homes that would fully receive their gifts and leadership.
- *"Ordaining women as deacons would be a public confirmation and a major step in saving the Church from a massive exodus of women because no human institutions in the 21st century can and will survive by neglecting 51 percent of its members and failing to recognize their gifts."*

In Continuity with Church Tradition

- The early Church was very radical, especially in terms of belonging. As the Church grew, however, it began to conform to Greco-Roman patriarchy.

When Eucharist moved from homes to the basilicas, women's involvement was lost. Adapting to culture is not always a good thing. The Church lost its radical equality that goes back to Jesus. If we go back to the Gospel, we need to reclaim that radical equality.

- *"We're not asking for the invention of something new. It is the reinstatement of something that was lost."*
- Women already serve the Church and are leaders.
- Opening the diaconate for women would represent continuity and faithful development of the Church's trajectory of seeking to promote women's leadership and expand a culture of shared responsibility and decision making.

Renewing the Diaconate

- Expanding the diaconate to women could lead to a renewal in this ministry in the Church and further its development as a witness to Jesus, the servant, to whom we are all called to draw near and emulate in lives of service to the most vulnerable.
- Many participants expressed the view that women in the Church embodied the work of Jesus serving as powerful advocates for the marginalized and supporters of human dignity.
- *"Women know what it is to be excluded. How can that experience open the door to welcome those who feel left out?"*

Strengthening the Sacrament of Marriage

- Opening the diaconate to women would create the possibility for deacon couples, who feel a shared call, to engage in diaconal service as a part of their marriage commitment.
- It would allow for a growing unity across and between the Sacrament of Marriage and the Sacrament of Holy Orders for a deacon couple.

- It could encourage the diaconal formation of the family. If women could be deacons, it would be easier to engage the whole family and further develop the theology of the diaconate to include how the whole family could be engaged in this vocation.
- Some deacons have expressed that their call came from their wives and they are supported by their wives. Many women do the diaconate training alongside their husbands, glean the same knowledge and understanding, but cannot be ordained.

Questions, Concerns and Further Considerations for Discernment

Questions and concerns were also discussed. The following list arose most commonly in house meetings.

Timing

- Is the Church ready to make this change? How do we know? It is necessary to weigh the consequences of acting or not acting.
- If women are not ordained to the diaconate, how many more women, young people, and other parishioners will lose hope in the institution of the Church and leave?
- “We live in a time when we have to ask the question, ‘What does this mean?’ Will it create schism? It will, but that’s not a reason not to proceed. We can’t be held hostage by the conservative element of the Church.”

Implementation and Reception

- How will clergy and parishes be prepared for this change?
- Will some bishops reject it? Will clericalism continue to suppress change? Will priests feel intimidated by women and fear a loss of power?
- Deacons’ ministries are often overlooked. How is this going to help

women? Some pastors do not let their deacons preach. How can we help the diaconate become a more prominent ministry within the Church?

- Even if women are ordained to the diaconate, will they have equal access to the role if they are poor, or wives, or mothers, or women of color?
- Would more married women or single women apply to the diaconate? Would men need to agree to their wives becoming deacons? What age would they be? Would it be threatening to women religious?

Formation

- Restoring the diaconate to women would provide access to education and quality theological formation for women.
- The training needs to be updated to fit contemporary needs.
- “It is likely to be hard on the ‘first generation’ of women deacons, at least in the U.S., just as it was painful for people breaking other barriers like race. It might not be easy for the first women to [get ordained as a deacon]. Need to give them our encouragement and support.”

Fear, Polarization and Schism

- The divisions in the Catholic Church in the United States were named as a concern. Participants recognized and named the polarization, and noted that the topic of women’s ordination can often feel divisive or controversial.
- “Will this further polarize the people of the Church?”
- How might it be discerned so that it leads to communion and consensus? How can we recognize a spirit of fear, which thwarts discernment, and instead be open to the Holy Spirit as our guide?



Cementing a “second-class status”?

- Even if women are ordained to the diaconate, will they continue to be second-class citizens of the Church who do the majority of the work in the shadows of the priests and bishops?
- Are male deacons seen as leaders? The deacon is one of the humblest roles in the church. How does it help the cause of women if they remain relegated to this role? Would women deacons be fully accepted as ministers and leaders?

Collapsing vs. Distinguishing between Deacons and Priests

- “This will lead to women being ordained as priests.” “This will slow down women being ordained as priests.” Both concerns were presented.
- When the questions of the priesthood and the diaconate are collapsed, it becomes harder to see a way to discern anything. Being attentive to the particularity of the diaconate helps to open up a clearer space for discernment.
- “The diaconate is not priesthood-lite. It is a specific role with gifts of its own.”

Conclusion

"The Lord first announced the New Life to women because they were present, attentive, open to new possibilities....Could the Spirit be prompting us to recognize, value, and integrate the fresh thinking that some women are bringing to this moment?"

-Pope Francis

More than 1,500 Catholics from diverse parishes and communities, responded to an invitation from Discerning Deacons to go on a journey of prayer, learning, and communal discernment about women and the diaconate. They sought to bring their witness forward as an offering, during this time when a papal commission has been convened to study the topic.

Catholics gathered to pray, discuss, and discern this issue of consequence for the future of the Church in the third millennium. People came together across generations, as lay and clergy and vowed religious, and as men and women, to have the conversation.

Most sessions began with visio divina, praying with the image of St. Phoebe and the circular, barefoot church gathered around to hear the Word proclaimed. Inspired by this image, we called to mind the people we loved, the examples of women who have been for us the image of Jesus the Servant Leader, and the pastoral needs that are felt in our homes, parishes, and communities. As people were invited to name aloud hopes, laments, concerns, hesitations, and inspirations, we continued practicing how to acknowledge and hold complexities and tensions, while listening for the thread that binds us together. We discovered a sense of communion and purpose as we came together to synthesize our listening, to "gather the fruits," and to name aloud a shared hope for what might yet be.

This report is just a snapshot of this focused listening. We hope it can encourage further conversations, discerning dialogues, and spaces in which to gather and encounter one another in the telling of our stories of faith and the sharing our dreams for the Church.

Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, 63.



St. Phoebe, 2018 (c) Laura James,
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Discerning Deacons we invite you to visit our website:
www.discerningdeacons.org



***“A Church that teaches must be
firstly a Church that listens.”***

Pope Francis¹

Discerning Deacons has responded to Pope Francis' call for a synodal church. During the summer of 2021, more than 1,500 Catholics from Canada, India and the United States gathered via video conference and in-person to actively discern the question of women and the diaconate in our Catholic Church. This report conveys the ideas, hopes, and concerns raised in these discussions.

¹ Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, New York: Simon & Schuster (2020), 84.