



**A Synodal Thematic Forum for the Global Synod on Synodality:  
What's the Holy Spirit saying to you about women deacons?**

**How could ordaining women as permanent deacons help or  
hinder our church to grow in journeying together into the future  
for communion, participation and mission?**

**March 13, 2022, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA**



## Participants

- ❖ 91 participants - 17 men and 74 women
- ❖ Church Leaders: 1 Archbishop, 1 deacon, 4 priests, 9 women religious, 3 doctoral level theologians, 21 lay ecclesial ministers and 28 parents
- ❖ Ages: 2 teens, 4 (20 yrs-30 yrs), 15 (31 yrs-50 yrs), 34 (50 yrs-70 yrs) and 26 (70+yrs)
- ❖ 5 Hispanic/Latinx; 1 Asian American; 4 African Americans; and 70+ European Americans
- ❖ 7 participants said they would discern the diaconate if it were an option for women today, and 2 elder participants said they had served the Church as unordained deacons.
- ❖ Presence of Spanish-language table
- ❖ Artist present contributing a live painting inspired by the Spirit in the synodal session

## Process

The synodal thematic forum, which took place in St. Paul/Minneapolis March 13, engaged Catholics in active discernment about women and the diaconate in our Church. We organized this three-hour consultation in collaboration with the League of Catholic Women Foundation Fund, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, and St. Catherine University. Archbishop Bernard Hebda was present as a listener and table participant, along with 90 lay people, religious, and clergy. The forum took place here because the Archdiocese of Minneapolis-St. Paul has engaged in a local three-year synod process during which the issue of growing women's leadership in the Church consistently surfaced.

We borrowed the concept of a synodal thematic forum from the preparatory work leading up to the Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean in November 2021. A thematic forum focuses on a particular challenge facing the Church or the

community. It is an opportunity to gather theologians, clergy, religious, lay ecclesial ministers, and laity to deepen theological understanding and to listen to the lived experiences of the People of God.

The elements of our forum included prayer, Scripture, and faith sharing; an overview of the invitation from Pope Francis in the Global Synod on Synodality, an educational overview on the history of women and the diaconate; witness testimonies by four women in parish or diocesan leadership; individual reflection time; synodal table conversations; one-word lectio feedback; and participatory discernment. Each table created a visual image representing an aspect of their group's consensus. These images were shared with the assembly (and several are included in this report). At the end of the synodal gathering, people had quiet reflection time to write and submit individual input forms so organizers could gather the fruit of the day. This synthesis report was compiled to capture participants' key insights and the major themes that emerged. Capturing every single idea would have been beyond the scope of the report.

Theologian, writer, and editor Sr. Joan Mitchell, CSJ proclaimed the Gospel of Mark, noting that women followed, served and accompanied Jesus from the beginning to the end. "The women of Galilee witness the primary events enshrined in the creed," said Sr. Mitchell. "Jesus was crucified (they were there); Jesus died and was buried, (they were there) and on the third day he rose from the dead (they were there). They are us, the women of our parishes who follow and serve."

Sr. Carolyn Puccio, CSJ witnessed that during her 39-year career serving in rural parishes as parish administrator and serving on the ground in communities where a priest was not regularly available, she led Word and Communion services, preached, led expectant families preparing for baptism, and visited the sick, hearing their confessions in anticipation of the priest offering absolution. And she wasn't the only one. She concluded, "they didn't call us deacons, but that's what we were."

The assembly was grounded in the history of women in the diaconate by Dr. Cynthia Bailey Manns, scholar, spiritual director, and adult learning director at St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church in Minneapolis, and a member of the theology department at St. Catherine.

Rhonda Miska, a lay ecclesial minister at the Church of St. Timothy, spoke about the significant impact that would be made in the Church by creating a space for women to preach the Sunday homily. She shared with sadness about women she knows who have chosen to live out their call to ministry in other Christian denominations that create more space for women's voices and leadership.

Former director for Hispanic/Latino Ministry and current pastoral associate at Church of the Ascension, Anne Attea, shared her experiences as either the beneficiary of women

who broke through barriers, or one who paved the way for others. However, as a lay person leading the ministry with Hispanic/Latinos, she was only able to walk with immigrants so far – clergy status was required to visit with immigrants in detention centers. Ordination to the diaconate matters, she said.

Following the witness testimonies, those gathered engaged in synodal table conversations. Lisa Amman, deputy director of engagement for Discerning Deacons reminded our group that the only way the bishops of the Church can know the will of the Holy Spirit is by listening to what the Holy Spirit has to say through all the people of God. The central questions engaged in the forum were the following: What is the Holy Spirit saying to you about women as permanent deacons? If you had 60 seconds with Pope Francis regarding women deacons, what would you say? How could ordaining women as permanent deacons help or hinder our Church to grow in journeying together for communion, participation, and mission? The key themes and insights shared by those gathered in their own words are highlighted in this report.

During the forum, many voiced gratitude and blessing for Pope Francis and this global Synod on Synodality. Those who participated expressed encouragement and hope that the synod process is renewing their faith in the Church's growing capacity to dialogue about challenging questions and centers the commitment to discern the will of the Holy Spirit for our Church in the third millennium.

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**Cover Art by Casey Murano, *A Prayer for Synodality*, March 2022.** This painting was painted live during the synodal session. Advent candle wax, colored pencil, watercolor on translucent paper, mounted on bulletins from a Taizé prayer service. This work is a prayer for us to experience this time—both the global synod process and this particular Discerning Deacons Listening Session—as Kairos, as the opportune moment to be transformed by encounter with God.





### **serve as deacon. (37x)**

“Women have been called by Jesus and the Holy Spirit to follow, serve and accompany from the beginning.”

“Today, we know that in every part of the world Catholic women are preaching the Word as catechists, distributing communion, serving as chaplains in hospitals and prisons, leading parishes and social service organizations and engaging in a variety of works of charity and justice. In some places, like the pan-Amazonian region, it is common for bishops to delegate women to preside at baptisms and marriages. Women make up more than half the US Catholics and 80% of lay ecclesial ministers.”

“Restore women to the diaconate; women have done the work of deacons for centuries.”

“I am willing to serve as a deacon.”

“I’d discern the call if my community asked me to do it.”

“Thus began my unofficial diaconal ministry of walking and living with the marginalized. Here I am 30 years later still doing my best, which often falls woefully short, to walk with the marginalized as I serve our primary Latino immigrant brothers and sisters here in the Twin Cities.”

### **To Pope Francis:**

“Por favor, Papa Francesco, escuchan a las mujeres and act for meaningful change. If I could be ordained as a deacon, it would mean receiving the sacramental grace and the backing of a church community that calls forth the gifts of preaching and accompaniment.”



St Phoebe, Romans 16:1-2 ©  
Laura James 2018, printed with artist permission

### 3. Frustration & grief expressed because we do not already ordain women deacons. (29x)

"Why is this taking so long? It should have happened a long time ago"

"It needs to happen. Why discredit half of the world and half of our church?"

"The cognitive dissonance is almost too much for me to bear."

"The pain and cost of not acknowledging the gifts that are being lost is heartbreaking."

"We have missed our call to bring in and acknowledge half of our church. For this reason, we have lost many, in particular women with talents that the Holy Spirit has given them."

"As devout Catholics it is a common experience that our families are being fractured because of patriarchy, clericalism, and frustrations with the old."

### 4. "Yes, yes, absolutely yes!" (28x)

"To me, including women again in the diaconate role in the church - preaching, baptizing, marrying people, addressing the many unmet pastoral needs of our church - is like entering the Promised Land."

#### To Pope Francis:

"Please begin this process - the first step - ordain the wives who accompanied their husbands in formation programs through ordination."

"Please ordain women as Deacons!"

"I am a deacon (over 17 years). I am not threatened by the

prospect of women deacons.

Please make it so women can

serve the church in this ordained role."



### 5. To ordain women as deacons would be to collaborate with the Holy Spirit. (26x)

"The Spirit is urging it. Yes! Yes! Yes!;

"I firmly believe God is calling us to this."

"The Spirit is calling for women to be deacons, for their full participation, formation and service to and with the people of God;

"Can't we sense the Spirit calling us to this in our bodies/the Body of Christ; a "whole body YES!"

#### To Pope Francis:

"Please ordain women as Deacons! The Spirit is urging it!"





## **PART TWO:**

**How could ordaining women as permanent deacons help or hinder church to grow in journeying together for communion, participation, and mission?**

### **COULD HELP (contributed 186 times)**

#### **Top 7 themes:**

1. Provide more ministers for the many unmet needs. - Mission (contributed 32 times)
2. Counter the sin of male superiority - Mission (30x)
3. Preaching to expand, becoming more representative - Mission (28x)
4. The grace of ordination - Participation (27x)
5. Women are gifted to share - Participation (22x)
6. Strengthen the welcome and sense of belonging for women through inclusion and representation - Communion (22x)
7. Keep people in the pews, inspired to contribute.- Communion (21x)

### **COULD HINDER (only 7 times)**

1. Even though it is needed, some people will disagree. (5x)
2. "By reinforcing the clerical / lay divide" (1x)
3. "My concern is about opening ordination to the diaconate without proper compensation for women and to make sure women are not pigeon-holed into a behind the scenes role, that women deacons would not be supported." (1x)



**1. Ordaining women as deacons could help the church grow in mission by unlocking the potential of thousands for unmet pastoral needs (32x)**

“It would allow much needed ministry to expand inside and outside our church walls.”

“It will extend the church’s mission to heal, to go to the peripheries - think about the ministry need for survivors of sexual/domestic violence, miscarriage, fertility, prisons, jails and detention centers, [the VA, and the military.]”

“The pastoral situation that tugs most at my heart is that of the plight of members of our immigrant communities who have languished in detention centers because there aren’t enough ordained ministers to attend to them...in this setting, and in prison policy across the nation, the distinction of the ordained matters!”

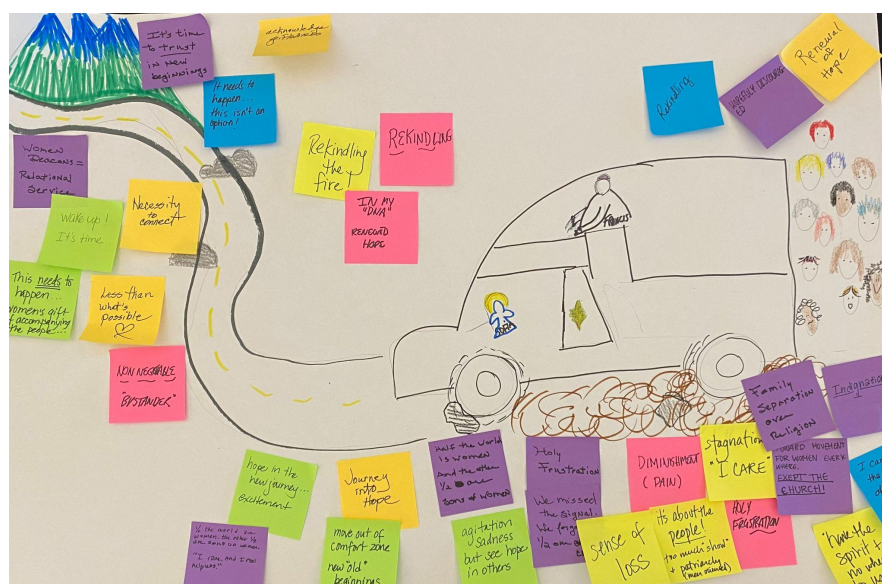
“It would increase the number of people who are linguistically and culturally competent to minister in a parish setting to the largest growing segment of our Catholic Church in the US.”

“Women deacons could help the church in its mission of bringing God’s love into the world with vibrancy and courage, compassion and justice.”

“Women and men together in the service of the People of God strengthen our engagement in the mission of the church – to love.”

“What a gift it would be to have women be permanent deacons - to serve the People of God, live out the works of Mercy, help guide the church into the future and bring the fullness of humanity to the leadership of the church”

*This poster was created by one of the small groups at the synodal session. In this image women are pushing the popemobile (which is stuck in the mud) towards a brighter future.*



## **2. Ordaining women as deacons could help affirm that men and women are equal in God. And could help to counter the sin of male superiority in the church and in the world.**

"Boys and girls need to see women recognized for their contributions so they can carry that attitude into their secular, everyday life/interactions with people."

"Women as preachers would help to end violence in our homes and communities."

"Collaboration of men and women in ministry is a sign (sacrament) of communion, participation, and mission."

"Women can help the church get serious about changing the culture that led to so much abuse."

"Ordaining women as deacons can open new ways of affirming, appreciating, valuing differences, living through conflicts, expressing mercy and forgiveness."

"The women auditors got that into Gaudium et Spes - no discrimination, sexism, racism. Vatican II passed it. It's today's world."

### **To Pope Francis:**

"Sexism and clericalism reflect poorly on the church and dim the light of its witness."

"Embrace and validate this role of equality for the women of our Church."

"We have ordained women deacons to serve the Word, mission and charity in the past. We need to do it now before it is too late to help the church from the sin of exclusion and bias."

## **3. Ordaining women as deacons could help preaching to expand and become more representative of the People of God.**

"Parishioners want to hear women's voices preaching at Mass."

"The perspective from half the whole human race would be better included and spoken in a new voice, women - sharing the voice of God."

"Allowing women deacons would show that women's voices are worthy of being heard and that God is present in everyone."

"The Holy Spirit assures me that my daughters - and all of our children - will be more fully activated in their faith when they hear the Word of God proclaimed and broken open by women."

"I dare to believe that I and many women like me - theologically trained, oriented towards service, passionate in our love for Christ and the church - are called to live the preaching charism not only through writing or offering reflections, but breaking open the Word in the weekly assembly."

### **To Pope Francis:**

"Our church will be so much better, so much more effective if representative voices are included and represented."

"The church needs to hear from all of us. Men have only half the story."

**4. Ordaining women as permanent deacons could help the church grow in participation by strengthening women in the service they are already doing through the graces of ordination, thereby strengthening the church (27x)**

“In 1965, the Second Vatican Council restored the diaconate as a permanent vocation noting men already function as deacons and thus: ‘it is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate.’ The path to the diaconate as a permanent vocation for women has already been laid before us:...women already function as deacons and thus: ‘it is only right to strengthen them by the imposition of hands that they may carry out their ministry more effectively because of the sacramental grace of the diaconate.’”



“I was doing the work of a deacon for 39 years; I am an unordained deacon.”

“Women have been and are deacons/servants in our Church. Let’s recognize that, claim that and ordain them so.” (from a parish priest)

“For 35 years, I have preached in churches, at community and school events, done mission talks, preached at funerals for sisters, friends, and family members; for our Church centennial in my hometown, sometimes even at Sunday Mass.”

“I believe the Holy Spirit is pleading with me/with us, to acknowledge, claim and name the ministry of countless women across the globe as diaconal service and to ordain them as deacons within the Roman Catholic Church;”

**To Pope Francis:**

“Women already bear the fruit of the diaconate in their good works. Bless and sacramentalize that good work by allowing bishops to ordain women deacons.”

“Please welcome officially the many talented women ministers who already serve and the next generation who may be called.”



## 5. Ordaining women as deacons could help the church grow in participation by receiving the many gifts of women. (22x)

"God's people are blessed to share - let us no longer hinder gifts to be shared."

"We have so much to share - to serve, to accompany the people of God on this road through life!"

Women have so much to offer and share and contribute - reinstating women to the diaconate will allow women to further share, contribute, grow and strengthen the church."

"The church would benefit from the gifts of many women who are cut off from this ministry, simply

due to their gender."

"They will bring their gifts just as men have and share generously so the burdens and joys will be enhanced and embraced by the ecclesiastical church."

"Existing women and women to come have so much to offer."

"Not recognizing the gifts of women in the ordination of women as deacons is a serious loss for everyone in the world and in the Church."

"The church is languishing without more than half of Catholics being able to fully engage, share and contribute."

### To Pope Francis:

"Women deacons can lead the effort to create a listening church grounded in dialogue."

"Women model vulnerability which is a sign of strength rather than weakness. A culture of vulnerability encourages new ideas and an openness to change & GROW!"

"Listen to your heart - There are no shepherds closer to the flock than the women who raise and inspire them."

"Women deacons with deep commitment to service and collaboration could be key in the paradigm shift necessary to opening ourselves to being a synodal church."

"As a man, I need to listen. I need to ask myself, 'do I just look to men for spiritual nourishment, leaving behind what the women in my community have to offer?'"

## 6. Ordaining women as deacons could help the church to grow in communion by attracting and retaining more Catholics, especially young ones. (22x)

"This more than 50% of our church membership is essential to church health and growth."

"Jesus depended on women to support Him. Why do we think we can be a healthy institution without them?"

"Could help our Church grow and stop diminishing in numbers and also in Spirit!"



“When little girls can see themselves represented in those commissioned by the

church.”

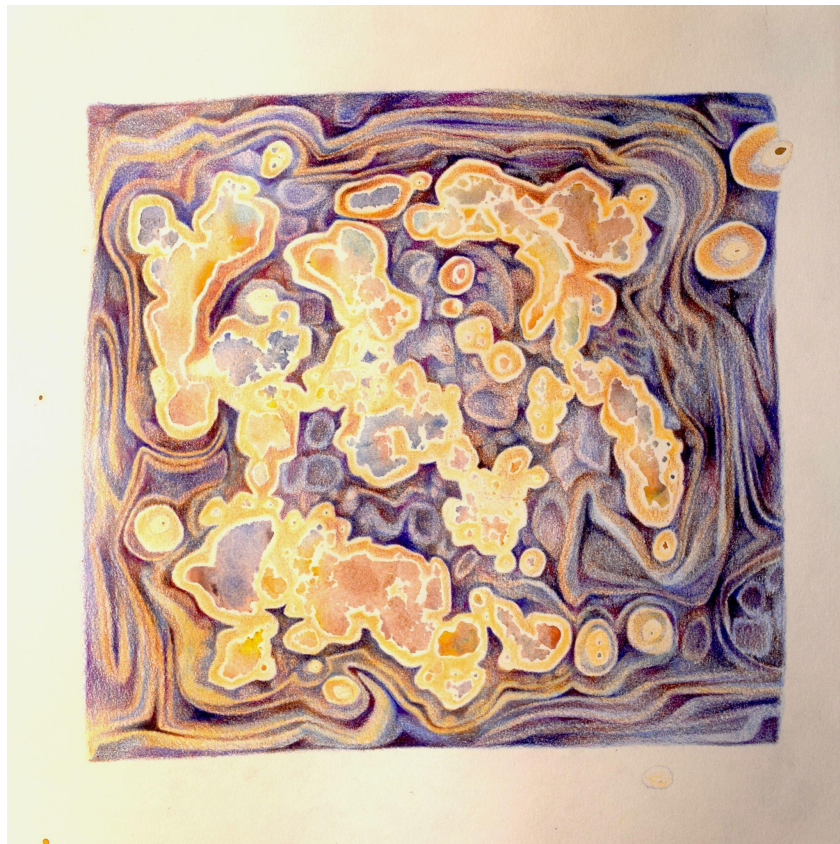
“It would help demonstrate the unwavering love for ALL of God’s children. We cannot place half of our children in a dark shadow and keep them in the cold.”

“Lots of girls experience sadness when encountering the boundaries society has constructed around their potential - the house of God is where she should be fully welcomed and all her gifts treasured. Representation matters to young eyes and old.”

“It broke my heart when my six-year-old daughter felt excluded from Mass, sharing with me that ‘church is for boys.’”

**To Pope Francis:**

“It would help be an authentic image and concrete expression of the radical inclusivity at the heart of the Gospel call.”



*By Casey Murano, Surfacing, 2022. 12 x 12 in, watercolor and colored pencil on paper.*  
The paper from the *Prayer for Synodality* is porous, and watercolor drips down onto the paper underneath, like a print. This residual prayer becomes the foundation of the drawing I create throughout the Discerning Deacons listening session. Through the process of tracing around these initial droplets of color, of drawing in response to my prayer for synodality, I sit with the gathering’s guiding questions: *what is the Holy Spirit saying to me about women deacons?*