



## St. Phoebe Day Toolkit

Will your community join Discerning Deacons in celebrating St. Phoebe this September 2023?

Together we will lead our faith communities to:

- Lift up St. Phoebe on or near the day she is commemorated, September 3
- Pray for the universal church as it is “rethinking women’s participation,” especially for October’s Universal Assembly in Rome ([DCS #60-65](#))
- Listen to women leaders in our communities, for example, by inviting a woman to:
  - Share her perspective on the call to “rethink women’s participation” heard around the world during the Synod (e.g., during announcements at a Sunday gathering)
  - Share a reflection on the readings (as your bishop permits)
  - Preach during a Liturgy of the Word
- Continue to walk with the universal Church for the remainder of the global Synod on Synodality in prayer, learning, and witness.

In October 2023, members of the Synodal Assembly will gather in Rome for the Universal Phase of the Global Synod on Participation, Communion, and Mission. They will discern what steps the Holy Spirit invites us (the universal Church) to take in order to grow as a synodal Church.

During the first listening and consultation phase, a critical and urgent theme that surfaced from listening to millions of people around the globe is rethinking women’s participation. ([Enlarge the Space of Your Tent](#) cf. para. 60).

Catholic parishes and other institutions are invited to join Discerning Deacons in prayer for our universal Church on St. Phoebe Day in September 2023. By celebrating St. Phoebe Day and inviting a woman to give a reflection on the Word or to offer a witness testimony at a liturgy on or near September 3, 2023, parishes and other Catholic institutions will collectively join together to pray for the global synod, celebrate women’s diaconal gifts for ministry, and give witness to the critical and urgent need to re-think women’s participation in the Church.



St. Phoebe delivers the Letter to the Romans. (Image by Laura James)



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## Who Is St. Phoebe?

In the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul commends St. Phoebe to the church in Rome, introduces her as a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae, and asks that they “receive her in the Lord” (Romans 16:1-3).

St. Phoebe was a woman of great courage and deep love. She answered God’s call to minister to God’s people during the earliest days of the Church, when persecution against Christians was strong. She earned the trust of Paul, who depended on her to handle communications with the ecclesial community in Rome.

St. Phoebe’s feast day, September 3, is in the current Roman Martyrology. Her day’s liturgical status is not of a feast or a memorial but that of a “commemoration.” Her liturgy is celebrated in Eastern Rite and Orthodox Churches. *Growing her devotion is one way to help restore her memory and instate a liturgy to commemorate her in our tradition.*

For more about St. Phoebe, see [Colleen Gibson, “Befriending St. Phoebe,”](#) and [Phyllis Zagano, “A Tale of Two Deacons.”](#)

## What Is a St. Phoebe Day Celebration?

**What:** A prayerful celebration that includes a woman giving reflection or offering a witness testimony and invites the gathered community to pray for the Synod through the intercession of St. Phoebe, to celebrate women’s gifts and contributions to the Church, and to bear witness to the critical and urgent need to re-think women’s participation in the Church.

**Who:** Parishes, campuses, and other Catholic institutions around the world.

**When:** During one or more liturgies celebrated on St. Phoebe Day, September 3, 2023, or another date in September 2023.

**Where:** Your local community.



**Why:** The Vatican document synthesizing synodal reports written during the first phase of the synod is called “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.” It devotes six paragraphs to “rethinking women’s participation,” noting that women’s full participation in the life of the Church emerged as a critical and urgent concern all over the world. All the People of God are invited to receive and discern the will of the Holy Spirit in light of this document, especially within parishes and local communities, as we continue to journey together in synod leading up to the synodal gathering of bishops in Rome in October 2023. September 2023 St. Phoebe Day celebrations are opportunities for parishes and communities to prayerfully respond to this invitation and to bear witness to the critical and urgent call to rethink women’s participation in the Church in advance of the bishops’ gathering in Rome the following month. (For further context, see “[St. Phoebe Day: Serving the Global Synod](#)”)

**How:** At their most basic, all St. Phoebe Day celebrations should include (1) prayer through the intercession of St. Phoebe for our Church as we journey together in synod; (2) education about the synod; and (3) witness by way of a woman offering a witness testimony or Scripture reflection.

Resources to support your St. Phoebe Day planning efforts include:

- Liturgy Guide (forthcoming, by May 2023)
- St. Phoebe Day Kick-off Calls\*
- All-Call Trainings\*
- Office Hours with Discerning Deacons\*
- One-time Huddle\*
- Formation Cohort\*
- Welcome Calls\*
- [Preparing the Ground Resources](#)
- Print Resources (postcards, stickers, posters, etc.) (forthcoming)

\* See “[Important Dates](#)” for more information and specific dates for these offerings



## Important Dates

- Unless otherwise noted, all events are virtual.
- Event names listed in **bold** are high-priority for individuals within their respective target audience.

AUDIENCE	EVENT NAME	DATES & REGISTRATION	DESCRIPTION
<b>EVERYONE</b> considering hosting a St. Phoebe Day celebration	<b>St. Phoebe Day Kick-off Calls</b>	<a href="#">Tuesday, March 14, 12-1:30 p.m. ET</a>  OR  <a href="#">Thursday, March 23, 8-9:30 p.m. ET</a>	Whether you already have your St. Phoebe Day celebration on the parish calendar or are just learning about St. Phoebe Day for the first time, join this call to learn about how your parish or community can be a part of the Church's ongoing discernment about re-thinking women's roles in a synodal church by hosting a St. Phoebe Day celebration on or near September 2023.
	<b>May St. Phoebe Day All-Call: Designing Faithful and Powerful Celebrations</b>	<a href="#">Tuesday, May 9, 12-1:30 p.m. ET</a>  OR  <a href="#">Thursday, May 25, 8-9:30 p.m. ET</a>	What are the components of a St. Phoebe Day celebration? What kind of a celebration would be the best fit for my community? How do I get from here to St. Phoebe Day? This call will offer a deep dive into the different components of St. Phoebe Day celebrations, from identifying a woman to offer a witness testimony or break open the Word on St. Phoebe Day to creatively and faithfully working within the liturgy to make St. Phoebe Day a powerful experience of prayer and communion.



	<b>July St. Phoebe Day All-Call: Effective Outreach and Communications</b>	<a href="#">Tuesday, July 11, 12-1:30 p.m. ET</a> OR <a href="#">Thursday, July 27, 8-9:30 p.m. ET</a>	This training call is all about walking in alignment and communion around our public messaging for everything related to St. Phoebe celebrations.
	Office Hours with Discerning Deacons	Availability varies; <a href="#">book a time online</a>	Schedule a check-in during office hours with a member of the Discerning Deacons staff team to troubleshoot, brainstorm, and get all your questions answered about St. Phoebe Day.
<b>WOMEN</b> preparing to offer a witness testimony or offer a lay reflection	<b>One-time Huddles for all St. Phoebe Day speakers</b>	August 2023; dates TBD  1-time session to prepare	<b>All women who are planning to offer a witness testimony or lay reflection as a part of a St. Phoebe Day celebration are strongly encouraged to attend a one-time huddle in August 2023.</b> Offered several times throughout the month, these huddles will offer an overview of St. Phoebe Day and its relationship to the question of rethinking women's participation in the Church, as well as practical tips and inspiration for crafting your St. Phoebe Day offerings.
	Formation Cohort for those who want to prepare their reflection or testimony in community	Summer 2023; dates TBD	For women who are interested in developing their skills giving public witness and/or preaching in advance of St. Phoebe Day, Discerning Deacons will offer opportunities for more intensive and relational formational cohorts during the summer leading up to St. Phoebe Day. To stay up-to-date



			with forthcoming information on cohorts, <a href="#">fill out the interest form</a> .
<b>NEWCOMERS</b> just learning about St. Phoebe Day or Discerning Deacons	<b>Welcome Calls</b>	<a href="#">Monthly on the third Tuesday, 12-1 p.m. ET, beginning April 18</a>	New to Discerning Deacons? Curious how you can get involved in the movement to grow the conversation about rethinking women's roles in a synodal Church, including possibly as deacons? Drop in for a welcome call to learn about Discerning Deacons, to connect with others across the country and world, and to get up to speed on the most current opportunities to step into your protagonism in the Church.



*Recibanla.* (Image by Laura James)



## Preparing the Ground

Discerning Deacons invites parishes and other communities who plan to host or are discerning the possibility of hosting a St. Phoebe Day celebration to “prepare the ground” in your community by hosting a discernment session or a study group.

### Hosting a Discernment Session with “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”

Consider using the following resources to design and facilitate a gathering for synodal discernment on “Enlarge the Space in your Tent” with either your immediate community (parish, campus, ministry), or communities across your diocese or region. We encourage you to be in conversation with your local bishop and diocesan teams, as synodality is about walking together—clergy and lay—as the People of God.

- [Resources for Synodal Discernment in the Continental Stage of the Global Synod](#)
- Resources for focusing your discernment on women in “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”
  - [Agenda Template](#)
  - [Script](#)
  - [Slideshow \(Slides #1-17\)](#)
  - [Report-back Form: Gathering and Sharing the Fruits of Synodal Discernment](#)



### Hosting a St. Phoebe Study Circle

Gather your community for up to six weeks of learning about St. Phoebe, the history of women and the diaconate, and synodality. Follow our small group curriculum guide to learn and reflect together in community ahead of St. Phoebe Day. [Access the guide here.](#)

### Hosting a *Women Deacons* Book Group

Use the provided Reflection and Study Guide as an accompaniment to reading and discussing *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* together in your community over a series of weeks.

- Order the book: [Gary Macy, William T. Ditewig, and Phyllis Zagano, \*Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future\* \(New York: Paulist, 2011\)](#)
- Access the study guide: [Donna L. Ciangio, OP, D. Min. and Sandra De Masi, SSJ, D. Min., “Women Deacons: A Reflection and Study Guide”](#)



## St. Phoebe Day: Serving the Global Synod

Our St. Phoebe Day celebrations take place within the context of a Church that is in synod. In October 2021, Pope Francis convened the global Synod on Participation, Communion, and Mission, with the goal of becoming a church that listens, particularly to those on the margins of our Church and society. Where historically synods have generally centered on the perspectives and authority of the bishops, albeit informed by their relationship with the people they serve, this synod is unique in its focus on listening to the voices of all the People of God.

People accepted Pope Francis's invitation, participating in hundreds of thousands of listening sessions during the first phase of the synod, where we were invited to share our joys and obstacles of journeying together, as well as our vision of what a church characterized by listening might look and feel like. We submitted reports about what we learned in those sessions to local bishops, who in turn synthesized the reports they received and shared those learnings to their respective bishops' conferences. The bishops conferences synthesized diocesan reports and sent them to the Vatican, and the Vatican synthesis team prayerfully crafted the culminating synthesis report, "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," which ushered the Church into the synod's second phase, the Continental Stage.

*"The call for a conversion of the Church's culture, for the salvation of the world, is linked in concrete terms to the possibility of establishing a new culture, with new practices and structures. A critical and urgent area in this regard concerns the role of women and their vocation, rooted in our common baptismal dignity, to participate fully in the life of the Church. A growing awareness and sensitivity towards this issue is registered all over the world."*

*-Document on the Continental Stage, para. 60*



In "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent," the theme of women's full participation in the life of the church emerged across every continent as "critical and urgent." The document devoted six paragraphs to "rethinking women's participation," noting in particular "the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate" as areas in need of further discernment.

Both the U.S. bishops' national synthesis report and the Vatican document





call for continued discernment to take place not only within the formal structures of the present synod but within local Churches and on the ground in parishes and communities: **“The next step for the U.S. Church is to give special attention to its parishes and dioceses, even as we continue participation in the continental and universal phases of the Synod, for that is where the People of God most concretely encounter the Spirit at work and where the first fruits of this discernment will be realized.”**<sup>1</sup>

In celebrating St. Phoebe Day, we pray for our universal Church as we journey together in synod, we celebrate women’s gifts and contributions to our Church, and we bear witness to the critical and urgent need to re-think women’s participation in the Church—including in the areas of preaching, governance, and the diaconate—as Church leaders prepare to gather in Rome for the start of the synod’s Universal Stage, moving from consultation and discernment toward concrete proposals for action within our Church.

We also offer our communities the gift of receiving the Word broken open by a woman during a synod process that places priority on listening to the voices of those at the margins of our Church and society—and within a Church that seeks to grow in synodality beyond the bounds of this particular synod. As a synod report from the Holy Land states, “In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard. Yet they are the backbone of Church communities, both because they represent the majority of the practising members and because they are among the most active members of the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

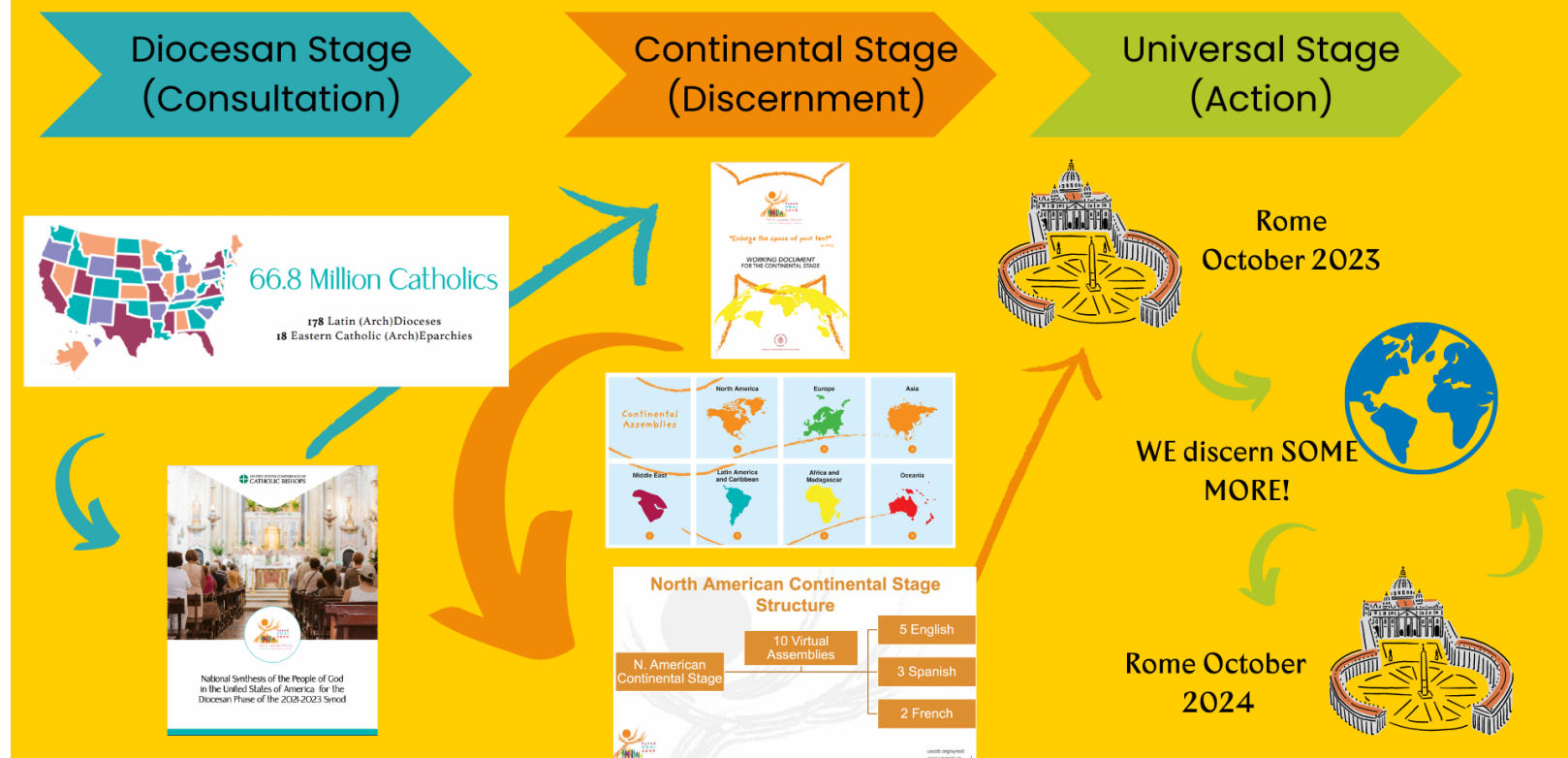
What are the particular gifts women offer this community? How would our community benefit from a re-thinking of women’s participation in the Church that led to more robust opportunities for leadership and unencumbered service on the part of women? How are we, as individuals and a community, being called by the Holy Spirit to respond to the critical and urgent need to re-think women’s participation in a synodal church, a need that has emerged in nearly every national synthesis report submitted during the first stage of the synod? Hosting a St. Phoebe Day celebration gives your community the opportunity to prayerfully discern with these questions, thus responding to the invitation from the Vatican and USCCB alike to practice ongoing synodality and to discern with the “joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties” of our global family surfaced during the synod.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. National Synthesis Report

<sup>2</sup> DCS 61

# Where we're going on THIS synodal journey...





## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q: Haven't Church authorities already spoken definitively against the ordination of women?**

A: All papal and curial statements against the ordination of women specifically address the "ministerial priesthood" and "priestly ordination," not the diaconate. In 2002, the International Theological Commission stated about women deacons: "It pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question." Even as Pope Francis has confirmed that the reservation of the priesthood to males "is not a question open to discussion," he has established two papal commissions to study the question of women and the diaconate.

**Q: Wouldn't ordaining women as deacons open the door to ordaining women as priests?**

A: Pope John Paul II taught that the Church "has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women," and his successors have confirmed this teaching. The ordination of women as deacons does nothing to change this doctrine. The diaconate is a "proper and permanent" order that is distinct from the priesthood. The Catechism of the Catholic Church makes this distinction: "Bishops and priests receive the mission and faculty ('the sacred power') to act in persona Christi Capitis [in the person of Christ the Head]; deacons receive the strength to serve the People of God in the diaconia of liturgy, word, and charity, in communion with the bishop and his presbyterate" (No. 875). In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI revised church law to make clear the distinction among deacons, priests and bishops.

**Q: Isn't it more important to enhance lay ministry in the Church rather than adding another clerical layer and at the same time "clericalizing" women?**

A: The enhancement of lay ministry is an enduring legacy of the Second Vatican Council and a tremendous gift in the Church. This commitment should remain strong. At the same time, the Church retains ordained ministries, which are always in need of renewal and "de-clericalization." The restoration of women to the diaconate, a prophetic ministry of service in the Church, would strengthen this process. The presence of women in ordained ministry means that they would be clerics, not necessarily clerical. The struggle against clericalism is a struggle for both men and women, not women alone.

**Q: Isn't it only privileged women in the Global North who are concerned about the ordination of women as deacons? Shouldn't the Church direct its attention and resources toward the matters of life-and-death that affect women in the Global South?**

A: It is true that the vast majority of permanent deacons live and minister in the Global North, so this ministry is more familiar to Catholics in the United States and Europe than in other parts of



the world. Yet at the recent Synod of Bishops on the Pan-Amazonian Region, the leaders of the Church in the Amazon – both bishops and lay leaders – were very clear that women in the Amazon are already doing the work of deacons, and it is the desire and hope of that church to ordain these women as deacons. Moreover, paragraph #64 of Enlarge the Space of Your Tent indicates that "almost all reports [from the consultation phase of the global Synod on Participation, Communion and Mission] raise the issue of full and equal participation of women" and call for the entire Church to discern women and the diaconate.

**Q: Why do we need deacons (or more of them) anyway?**

A: The diaconate is an ancient ministry of liturgy, Word and charity, modeled on servanthood of Christ, which embodies the Servant Church and helps the Church fulfill its mission to proclaim the Gospel and baptize all nations. If the diaconate serves important pastoral needs in the Church today, then it should be open to men and women. In many places today facing severe shortages of priests, deacons assist in the sacramental ministries of baptism and marriage, preside at funerals and give homilies. Women deacons could also exercise ministry in places where it is difficult for men to serve, like the homes and hospital rooms of women, domestic violence shelters and in women's prisons.

**Q: Women are already doing the work of deacons. Why do we need to ordain them?**

A: Local bishops could train, ordain, and give faculties to these women, expanding the presence of ordained ministers in many spheres of life, and connecting these women with parishes, pastors and local bishops. These women would be able to receive the grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders as deacons, exercise ecclesiastical jurisdiction, serve in offices currently restricted to clerics, and be officially recognized by the Church in a lifetime commitment to its ministry. Particularly in rural and marginalized communities, there is a need for more laborers in the vineyard. Women deacons could preach at Liturgies of the Word with Communion, celebrate baptisms, witness weddings, officiate at funeral services and accompany those most in need of a pastoral presence.

**Q: How do we know that women deacons in the early church were ordained like their male counterparts?**

A: The Apostolic Constitutions (circa 380) emphasize that women deacons do not exercise the same liturgical roles as presbyters and bishops, but they are ordained by the bishop with the laying on of hands. The Council of Chalcedon (451) recognized the ordination of women deacons and required them to be 40 and celibate. Women deacons were ordained by bishops in the sanctuary with an epiclesis and the laying on of hands (e.g., an eighth-century Byzantine ordination rite).

**Q: Isn't the synod over?**



A: No! Pope Francis has extended the global Synod on Communion, Participation, and Mission through October 2024. The Local Stage of this particular synod ended in 2022, with the current Continental Stage slated to give way to the Universal Stage in October 2023. While access to formal mechanisms for contributing to the synod has generally narrowed at each stage, our participation in the synod is also constituted by our ongoing engagement with and reception of the synod proceedings in the context of our local Churches. Furthermore, beyond any particular synod, as a Church we are called to synodality as a way of being church. In the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' *National Synthesis Report*, they wrote, "The next step for the U.S. Church is to give special attention to its parishes and dioceses, even as we continue participation in the continental and universal phases of the Synod, for that is where the People of God most concretely encounter the Spirit at work and where the first fruits of this discernment will be realized" (12).

**Q: I thought women couldn't preach. How is this in accordance with canon law?**

A: According to *Ecclesiae de mysterio*, within the context of a Eucharistic liturgy lay persons (including women) may offer "a form of instruction designed to promote a greater understanding of the liturgy, including personal testimonies...as a means of explicating the regular homily," provided that such explication "may not be such so as to assume a character which could be confused with the homily" (Article 3, n. 2). Practically speaking, this often takes place following the post-communion prayer. The parameters around preaching are much less narrow outside of Eucharistic liturgies, so some parishes and institutions may decide, for example, to host a special Liturgy of the Word featuring a homily given by a woman, or another sort of prayer service that incorporates women's preaching. For more information, see the [complementary norm on Canon 766](#) promulgated by the USCCB in 2001 and [Ecclesiae de mysterio](#), articles 2-3.



## Ideas for St. Phoebe Day Celebrations

Imagine...

- A **parish** celebrates St. Phoebe at all masses the weekend of September 3, 2023 by inviting a diaconal woman from the community to offer a lay reflection before the benediction at each mass
- A **high school** that celebrates St. Phoebe by inviting female students and staff to offer witness testimonies following all-school mass each week in September
- A **university** that celebrates St. Phoebe by inviting a woman to break open the Word at the Mass of the Holy Spirit or the first mass of the year
- An **organization** that celebrates St. Phoebe by highlighting the stories of diaconal women in their network and those they serve in their communications in the month of September
- A **local coalition** of parishes, schools, religious orders, and other Catholic organizations in a particular diocese celebrates by planning a collaborative event that brings together the broader Catholic community in prayer, learning, and witness and offers the opportunity for synodal dialogue

How will you commemorate St. Phoebe? Use the above toolkit to begin planning your celebration, and be sure to register it with Discerning Deacons.

## Key Links and Additional Resources

- [Discerning Deacons Resource Page](#)
- [The Good News of the Story of Now in Our Church](#)
- [Restoring Women to the Diaconate: The State of the Question](#)
- [Document on the Continental Stage: "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent"](#)
- [US National Synthesis Report](#)
- [Discerning Deacons National Synodal Synthesis Report](#)
- [Discerning Deacons Continental Synodal Synthesis Report](#)
- [Workbook: Building Teams \(School for Synodality\)](#)
- [Workbook: Approaching Decision Makers \(School for Synodality\)](#)
- [Workbook: Hosting Synodal Reflection Sessions \(School for Synodality\)](#)



