



# St. Phoebe Study Circle Guide

Thank you for your interest in hosting a St. Phoebe Study Circle. This packet includes suggested content for up to six weeks of guided learning and reflection.

While individuals can certainly learn from and engage with the materials, they are gathered here with a small group setting in mind. We suggest gathering a small group of 6-10 individuals over a series of weeks for 1-1.5 hours. If there is interest from more than ten people, you might consider breaking up into multiple small groups. You can engage with all the sessions or choose those that are most resonant with your particular parish or community.

The material is broken up across six sessions, plus an appendix of suggested prayers:

- [Week 1: Befriending St. Phoebe the Deacon](#)
- [Week 2: Recovering Our Call to \*Diakonia\*](#)
- [Week 3: The History of Women Deacons](#)
- [Week 4: Women and the Diaconate Today](#)
- [Week 5: Toward a Synodal Church](#)
- [Week 6: Women and the Synod](#)
- [Appendix: Suggested Closing Prayers](#)

Each session includes preparatory materials, which participants are encouraged to read and/or watch *before* gathering as a group, as well as suggested discussion questions, prayers, and songs for utilizing during your small group session.

You may structure your sessions in whatever way is best for your community's needs. We suggest using the following session agenda as a starting point for your sessions:

1. Opening Prayer and Scripture
  - a. Opening Song
  - b. Opening Prayer
  - c. Scripture Reading
2. Sharing with Discussion Questions
  - a. For each discussion question, the facilitator reads the first discussion question and each person in the group is given the opportunity to respond, speaking from their own experience. After everyone has shared, the facilitator invites a moment of quiet reflection before initiating a second, brief round of sharing during which participants are invited to share one thing that resonated with them or struck them during the first round of sharing.
  - b. A similar structure can be repeated for each of the suggested discussion questions. If time is an issue, the second round of sharing can be eliminated for some or all of the questions.



3. Final Round of Sharing: Before closing with prayer, invite everyone to share in a few sentences where they have experienced grace and/or any invitations they are feeling from the Holy Spirit for themselves or for the parish/organizational community.
4. Closing Prayer: We've included an appendix with a few options for closing prayers. Feel free to use one of these or to invite a participant to share a prayer of their choosing.

## Week 1: Befriending St. Phoebe the Deacon

### PREPARATORY RESOURCES

You may encourage participants to engage with some or all of the preparatory resources in advance of the session.

- Read
- [“Befriending Phoebe, a co-worker in the kingdom,”](#) by Sr. Colleen Gibson, SSJ, published in *Global Sisters Report* (2020)
  - [“Unheard Of,”](#) by Mary Catherine Tillman, published in *Notre Dame Magazine* (2018)
  - [“A Tale of Two Deacons,”](#) by Phyllis Zagano, published in *The Tablet* (2021)
- Watch
- [“Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ preaches for the Feast of St. Phoebe”](#) on *Catholic Women Preach* (2021)

### SUGGESTED SESSION AGENDA

Opening Prayer      Enlightened by grace and taught the faith by the chosen vessel of Christ, you were found worthy of the diaconate and you carried Paul's words to Rome. O Deacon Phoebe, pray to Christ God that his Spirit may enlighten our souls and guide the discernment of the Church that the gifts and voices of women may be received and affirmed in our day for the service of your people!

Paul proclaimed you a protector of many, and you became his helper. Hearken to those who approach you with faith and who cry out to you with love: Rejoice, glory of Corinth and pride of Achaia; rejoice, you lamp of Cenchreae; rejoice, O Deacon Phoebe.

*Prayer texts adapted from hymns of the Orthodox liturgy: Apolytikion in the Third Tone and Kontakion in the Second Tone.*

Suggested Song      [“Christ As Her Vision,”](#) by Bernadette Farrell (sung to the tune of “Morning Has Broken”)

Scripture              **Rom. 16:1-2**

A reading from the letter of St. Paul to the Romans:



I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is [also] a minister [diakonos] of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I am grateful but also all the churches of the Gentiles; greet also the church at their house.

Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first fruits in Asia for Christ.

Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you.

Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners; they are prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before me.

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the holy ones who are with them.

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

The Word of the Lord

**Praise to you, Lord, Jesus Christ.**

Discussion  
Questions

- What from today's preparatory materials surprised or challenged you?
- How did you sense the Holy Spirit at work in you as you engaged with this week's materials?
- We learned this week about women who have often been overlooked in our tradition. What difference does it make for you to know about these women? For whom in your life might it make a difference to know about them, and why?

Closing Prayer

Choose among the ["Suggested Closing Prayers"](#) in Appendix 1, or invite a participant to offer a closing prayer.



## Week 2: Recovering Our Call to *Diakonia*

### PREPARATORY RESOURCES

*You may encourage participants to engage with some or all of the preparatory resources in advance of the session.*

Read

- [“Service.”](#) by Phyllis Zagano
- [“Diaconal Reflections.”](#) by DIAKONIA World Federation (an ecumenical, global organization)
- [“Allocution to the Permanent Deacons and Their Wives Given at Detroit, MI.”](#) by Pope John Paul II (1987)

### SESSION MATERIALS

Opening Prayer      **Peace Prayer of St. Francis**

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.  
Amen.

Suggested Song      “Servant Song,” by Richard Gillard

Scripture              **Ephesians 4:1-16**

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it is said,



“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;  
he gave gifts to his people.”

(When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry [*diakonia*], for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

Discussion  
Questions

- Addressing permanent deacons and their wives, Pope John Paul II wrote, “*The service of the deacon is the Church’s service sacramentalized*. Yours is not just one ministry among others, but it is truly meant to be, as Paul VI described it, a ‘driving force’ for the Church’s *diakonia*.” All that baptized are called into the work of the Church’s service, its *diakonia*, even as ordained deacons sacramentalize that service. How do you understand *your* call to service or *diakonia*?
- How have you encountered the “church-as-servant”? How might a renewal of our understanding of “church-as-servant” transform our way of being church for the better?

Closing Prayer

Choose among the [“Suggested Closing Prayers”](#) in Appendix 1, or invite a participant to offer a closing prayer.



## Week 3: The History of Women Deacons

### PREPARATORY RESOURCES

*You may encourage participants to engage with some or all of the preparatory resources in advance of the session.*

- Read
- [Timeline of the history of women and the diaconate](#), in *A Matter of Spirit*, p. 11 (2021)
  - [“Summary of the Discerning Deacons Primer.”](#) Discerning Deacons
- Watch
- [“Deacons, Deaconesses, and Women’s Ordination.”](#) by Fr. Casey Cole, OFM (2021)

### SESSION MATERIALS

Opening Prayer     [“A Blessing with Roots.” by Jan Richardson](#)

Tug at this blessing  
and you will find  
it is a thing  
with roots.

This is a blessing  
that has gone deep  
into good soil,  
into the sacred dark,  
into the luminous hidden.

It has been months  
since the ground  
gathered the seed  
of this blessing  
into itself,  
years since the earth  
enfolded it.

Sometimes  
that’s how long  
a blessing takes.

And the fact  
that this blessing  
should finally show  
its first fruits  
on the day



you happened by—

well, perhaps we shall  
simply call the timing  
of this ripening  
a mystery  
and a sweet grace.

Take all you want  
of this blessing.  
Take every morsel  
that you need for  
the path ahead.  
Let its fruits fall  
into your hands;  
gather them into  
the basket of  
your arms.

Let this blessing  
be one place  
where you are willing  
to receive  
in unmeasured portions,  
to lay aside  
for a moment  
the way you ration  
your delights.

Let yourself accept  
its inexplicable plenitude;  
allow it to give itself  
to sustain you

not simply for yourself—  
though on this bright day  
I might be persuaded  
to think that would  
be enough—

but that you may  
gather its seeds  
into yourself  
like the ground  
where this blessing began

and wait  
with the patience  
of seasons



and of years

to bear forth  
in the fullness of time  
a stunning harvest,  
a plenteous feast.

Scripture

**Matthew 26:6-13**

A reading from the Book of Matthew:

Now when Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him with an alabaster jar of costly perfumed oil, and poured it on his head while he was reclining at table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant and said, "Why this waste? It could have been sold for much, and the money given to the poor." Since Jesus knew this, he said to them, "Why do you make trouble for the woman? She has done a good thing for me. The poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me. In pouring this perfumed oil upon my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Amen, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her."

Suggested Song

["Precious Woman," by The Porter's Gate](#)

Discussion  
Questions

- We learned in this week's readings that prominent among the reasons cited for the restoration of the permanent diaconate at Vatican II was the fact that "[there] are men who actually carry out the functions of the deacon's office," and therefore, "it is only right to strengthen them by the...sacramental grace of the diaconate." Can you think of women who "actually carry out the functions of the deacon's office?" What does that look like?
- Deacon Bill Ditewig calls the diaconate an "instrument of renewal," which the "church-as-servant" will need as it "continues to find creative ways to meet the needs of an increasingly complex world." What in our church is in need of renewal? What needs of our "increasingly complex world" might be better met by such a renewal?

Closing Prayer

Choose among the ["Suggested Closing Prayers"](#) in Appendix 1, or invite a participant to offer a closing prayer.

(We suggest ["Litany of Women Deacons"](#) as an excellent closing prayer this week.)





## Week 4: Women and the Diaconate Today

### PREPARATORY RESOURCES

You may encourage participants to engage with some or all of the preparatory resources in advance of the session.

- Read
- [“Catholic women feel called to be deacons. The Church should listen to their stories”](#) by Casey Stanton, published in *America Magazine* (2021)
  - [“Executive Summary.”](#) *Called to Contribute: Findings from an In-depth Interview Study of US Catholic Women and the Diaconate*, by Tricia Bruce (2021).
  - [“Callings Unanswered.”](#) by Anna Keating, published in *Notre Dame Magazine* (2022)
- Watch
- [Called to Serve: Two Women’s Witnesses](#)

### SESSION MATERIALS

Opening Prayer      Christ has no body but yours,  
  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which He looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

(Prayer attributed to St. Teresa of Ávila)

Scripture      **John 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42**

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar,  
near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.  
Jacob’s well was there.

Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well.  
It was about noon.

A woman of Samaria came to draw water.  
Jesus said to her,



“Give me a drink.”  
His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.  
The Samaritan woman said to him,  
“How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?”  
—For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.—  
Jesus answered and said to her,  
“If you knew the gift of God  
and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink, ‘  
you would have asked him  
and he would have given you living water.”  
The woman said to him,  
“Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep;  
where then can you get this living water?  
Are you greater than our father Jacob,  
who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself  
with his children and his flocks?”  
Jesus answered and said to her,  
“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again;  
but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst;  
the water I shall give will become in him  
a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”  
The woman said to him,  
“Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty  
or have to keep coming here to draw water.

“I can see that you are a prophet.  
Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain;  
but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.”  
Jesus said to her,  
“Believe me, woman, the hour is coming  
when you will worship the Father  
neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.  
You people worship what you do not understand;  
we worship what we understand,  
because salvation is from the Jews.  
But the hour is coming, and is now here,  
when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth;  
and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him.  
God is Spirit, and those who worship him  
must worship in Spirit and truth.”  
The woman said to him,  
“I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ;  
when he comes, he will tell us everything.”  
Jesus said to her,  
“I am he, the one who is speaking with you.”

Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him.  
When the Samaritans came to him,



they invited him to stay with them;  
and he stayed there two days.  
Many more began to believe in him because of his word,  
and they said to the woman,  
“We no longer believe because of your word;  
for we have heard for ourselves,  
and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.”

Suggested Song [“God of the Women,” Karen Schneider-Kirner](#)

Discussion  
Questions

- In today’s readings, we learned about Catholic women who feel called to the diaconate and/or who function diaconally in their ministries. What was new, surprising to, or resonant with you about these stories and experiences?
- Women ordained as deacons could do ordinarily what laypersons can do only with special permission, such as baptize and witness marriages. What difference would the ministry of a woman make in your parish?
- Throughout the Gospels, women are often among the first to recognize and proclaim Jesus’s true nature, as in our opening Scripture, where the Samaritan woman facilitates an encounter among her people with Christ: “We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world.” Who is someone in your life who has helped to facilitate an encounter with Christ?

Closing Prayer Choose among the [“Suggested Closing Prayers”](#) in Appendix 1, or invite a participant to offer a closing prayer.



## Week 5: Toward a Synodal Church

### PREPARATORY RESOURCES

You may encourage participants to engage with some or all of the preparatory resources in advance of the session.

- Read
- [“A closer look at synodality and its promise for a more inclusive church.”](#) interview with Rafael Luciani by Hosffman Ospino for *National Catholic Reporter* (2021)
  - [“Summary of the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod.”](#) prepared by Ignatian Encounter Ministry (2022)
  - [“An Intercontinental Synodal Encounter: Synthesis of proceedings, insights, and points of discernment.”](#) presented by the Women and Ministeriality Thematic Core Group of the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (CEAMA) and Discerning Deacons (2022)
  - Consider reading your parish or organization’s synod synthesis report, if one exists.
- Watch
- [“Where we’re going on this synodal journey.”](#) by Maureen O’Connell, in “DD Reflects with the Global Synod” (2021), 24:54-35:12

### SESSION MATERIALS

Opening Prayer      Lord, you have gathered all your People in Synod.

We give you thanks for the joy experienced by those who decided to set out to listen to God and to their brothers and sisters during this year, with an attitude of welcome, humility, hospitality and siblinghood.

Help us to enter these conversations as on “holy ground.” Come Holy Spirit: may you be the guide of our journey together!

*Adapted from “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”*

Scripture            **Isaiah 54: 1-17**

Sing, O barren one who did not bear;  
burst into song and shout,  
you who have not been in labor!  
For the children of the desolate woman will be more  
than the children of her that is married, says the Lord.  
Enlarge the site of your tent,  
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;  
do not hold back; lengthen your cords  
and strengthen your stakes.



For you will spread out to the right and to the left,  
and your descendants will possess the nations  
and will settle the desolate towns.

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;  
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace;  
for you will forget the shame of your youth,  
and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more.

For your Maker is your husband,  
the Lord of hosts is his name;  
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,  
the God of the whole earth he is called.

For the Lord has called you  
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,  
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,  
says your God.

For a brief moment I abandoned you,  
but with great compassion I will gather you.  
In overflowing wrath for a moment  
I hid my face from you,  
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,  
says the Lord, your Redeemer.

This is like the days of Noah to me:  
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah  
would never again go over the earth,  
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you  
and will not rebuke you.  
For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,  
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,  
I am about to set your stones in antimony,  
and lay your foundations with sapphires.  
I will make your pinnacles of rubies,  
your gates of jewels,  
and all your wall of precious stones.  
All your children shall be taught by the Lord,  
and great shall be the prosperity of your children.  
In righteousness you shall be established;  
you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;  
and from terror, for it shall not come near you.  
If anyone stirs up strife,  
it is not from me;  
whoever stirs up strife with you  
shall fall because of you.



See it is I who have created the smith  
who blows the fire of coals,  
and produces a weapon fit for its purpose;  
I have also created the ravager to destroy.  
No weapon that is fashioned against you shall prosper,  
and you shall confute every tongue that rises against you in judgment.  
This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord  
and their vindication from me, says the Lord.

Suggested Song [“Santa María del Camino/Come As We Journey.” by Juan Espinosa](#)

Discussion  
Questions

- What are the unmet needs of people in your community?
- What do we need to walk on this synodal path—to become a church that listens, accompanies one another on the journey of faith?
- What were points of resonance with your own experience in the “Summary of the Working Document for the Continental Stage” and/or in the proceedings from the “Intercontinental Synodal Encounter”? What were points of tension with or divergence from your experience?

Closing Prayer

Choose among the [“Suggested Closing Prayers”](#) in Appendix 1, or invite a participant to offer a closing prayer.



## Week 6: Women in the Synod

### PREPARATORY RESOURCES

You may encourage participants to engage with some or all of the preparatory resources in advance of the session.

- Read
- [“Rethinking Women’s Participation.”](#) *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent* para. 60-65 (2022)
  - [“Are We Protagonists Yet?”](#) by Susan Bigelow Reynolds in *Commonweal* (2022)
  - [“Cardinal McElroy on ‘radical inclusion’ for L.G.B.T. people, women, and others in the Catholic Church.”](#) Cardinal Robert McElroy in *America Magazine* (2023)

### SESSION MATERIALS

#### Opening Prayer      **Magnificat**

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed:  
the Almighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his Name.  
He has mercy on those who fear him  
in every generation.  
He has shown the strength of his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,  
and has lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.  
He has come to the help of his servant Israel  
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
the promise he made to our fathers,  
to Abraham and his children forever.  
Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

#### Scripture      **John 20:11-18**

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus



standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Suggested Song

[“We Remember You: A Litany.” by Laura Ash](#)

Discussion  
Questions

- What were points of resonance with your own experience in “Rethinking Women’s Participation”? What were points of tension with or divergence from your experience?
- Cardinal McElroy writes, “One productive pathway for the church’s response to these fruits of the synodal dialogues would be to adopt the stance that we should admit, invite and actively engage women in every element of the life of the church that is not doctrinally precluded.” How does this approach land with you?
- In her article included in this week’s readings, Susan Bigelow Reynolds asks, “Does the Church want women to be its ally? What would it mean for women to be recognized as protagonists in the Church, as full subjects, diverse in every respect, with the agency to respond in freedom and creativity to the call of the Gospel?” How might you begin to answer that question?

Closing Prayer

Choose among the [“Suggested Closing Prayers”](#) in Appendix 1, or invite a participant to offer a closing prayer.





## APPENDIX 1. Suggested Closing Prayers

- [Litany of Women Deacons](#)
- [Universal Prayer Petitions for the Continental Stage](#)
- Orthodox Prayer to St. Phoebe

Enlightened by grace and taught the faith by the chosen vessel of Christ, you were found worthy of the diaconate and you carried Paul's words to Rome. O Deacon Phoebe, pray to Christ God that his Spirit may enlighten our souls and guide the discernment of the Church that the gifts and voices of women may be received and affirmed in our day for the service of your people!

Paul proclaimed you a protector of many, and you became his helper. Hearken to those who approach you with faith and who cry out to you with love: Rejoice, glory of Corinth and pride of Achaia; rejoice, you lamp of Cenchreae; rejoice, O Deacon Phoebe.

*Prayer texts adapted from hymns of the Orthodox liturgy:  
Apolytikion in the Third Tone and Kontakion in the Second Tone.*

- Synod Prayer

Lord, you have gathered all your People in Synod.

We give you thanks for the joy experienced by those who decided to set out to listen to God and to their brothers and sisters during this year, with an attitude of welcome, humility, hospitality and siblinghood.

Help us to enter these conversations as on "holy ground." Come Holy Spirit: may you be the guide of our journey together!

*Adapted from "Enlarge the Space of Your Tent"*

Additional prayers and spiritual resources for the Synod can be found on the ["Spiritual and liturgical resources" page at synod.va](#).