

Discerning Deacons' Participant Guide for the Synod Interim Stage

This is a tool for members of the Discerning Deacons community to prepare to contribute to Lenten diocesan listening sessions requested by the USCCB. This is not an official document of the USCCB Synod Office.

Where are We in the Synodal Process?

The first General Assembly of Bishops in October 2023 – where 54 women were voting members for the first time in the history of the Church – illuminated a new question **for all of the People of God** to consider between now and the next General Assembly this October: *How can we become co-responsible for the Church's mission?*

The General Secretariat of the Synod issued guidance in the document [Towards October 2024](#). They ask the People of God to discern:

- How can we enhance the differentiated co-responsibility in the mission of all the members of the People of God?
- What ways of relating, structures, processes of discernment and decision-making with regard to mission make it possible to recognise, shape, and promote co-responsibility?
- **What ministries** and participatory bodies **can be renewed** or introduced **to better express this co-responsibility?**

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has [directed](#) every diocese to convene two discernment sessions during Lent.

- April 8th: Deadline for each U.S. diocese to submit a two-page report to the USCCB Synod Office gathering insights from diocesan sessions.
- The Conversation in the Spirit continues to be the main method for collective discernment of what the Holy Spirit is prompting.
- Fruits of discernments from around the world will be shared with the Vatican, to inform the next *Instrumentum Laboris*, or working document, which will guide the General Assembly in Rome, October 2024.

Prepare to Participate

Women's full participation in the life and mission of the Church has been named consistently, universally and even *urgently* in synthesis reports generated at every level of the synod thus far—diocesan, continental, and universal.

We can continue to deepen and elaborate on this theme as part of our contribution to become a more synodal Church, and to witness to the question being raised globally: what ministries can be renewed to better express our co-responsibility in mission?

[Step #1](#) - Review the theme as it has been developing

[Step #2](#) - Prompts to Guide Reflection

[Step #3](#) - Familiarize yourself with the basics of the Conversation in the Spirit method

[Step #4](#) - Prepare your witness

[Step #5](#) - Participate

[Appendix](#) - Official Synod Documents Referencing Women and/or the Renewal of the Diaconate

Step #1 - Review the theme as it has been developing

Full text and excerpts from each document to date are included in the [Appendix](#)

- ["Synthesis Report for a Synodal Church in Mission,"](#) (Oct 2023): Delegates to the first General Assembly of Bishops in Rome offer proposals around "Women in the Life and Mission of the Church" and "Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church."
- ["Enlarge the Space in Your Tent,"](#) (Nov. 2022): [Paragraphs #60-65](#) note global consensus (1) that becoming a synodal church hinges on "Women's Full Participation in the Life of the Church", and (2) calls for discernment on specific proposals, including women and the diaconate.
- [USCCB National Synthesis Report](#) (Sept 2022): acknowledges calls for ordination of women deacons surfaced around the U.S. in the listening phrase.
- [Discerning Deacons for a Synodal Church](#) (June 2022): Our own listening to ~9,000 people across the US surfaced a call for a synodal diaconate, focused on prophetic ministry.

Step #2 – Prompts to Guide Reflection

The [USCCB's guiding questions](#) are about whether particular Church structures and/or approaches to leadership foster or impede the ability of all the baptized to serve the Gospel mission and to live “as a community of love and mercy in Christ.”

- In your experience, how have you witnessed Church structures and/or approaches to leadership *that affirm* women's baptismal dignity and/or foster women's ability to serve the mission of the Church and to participate fully in the Church as a community of love and mercy in Christ?
- In your experience, how have you witnessed Church structures and/or approaches to leadership *that fail to affirm* women's baptismal dignity and/or that impede women's ability to serve the mission of the Church and to participate fully in the Church as a community of love and mercy in Christ?
- What recommendations do you want to make for removing impediments to recognizing women's baptismal authority in serving the Church's mission?
- How would the proposal in the document about ordaining women as permanent deacons FOSTER or IMPEDE your church community in becoming co-responsible for our church's mission?
- What difference would ordaining women as deacons within a renewed ministry of the diaconate make in the life of your faith community?

Step #3 – Familiarize yourself with the basics of the [Conversation in the Spirit method](#), which ensures that everyone will have an equal amount of time to share their insights around the prompts provided at your session – but likely not more than two minutes!

Step #4 - Prepare your witness

- Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance as you prepare your witness, perhaps with the [Adsumus prayer](#) used throughout the synod process.
- If your diocese has shared specific prompts for the listening session you plan to attend, have those on hand, as well any reflecting you've done on the prompts in Step #2
- Prepare a brief (typically ~2 minutes) witness to share in your listening session, in light of any prompts provided by your diocese and your preparatory reflection in Step #2.
- Speak from your personal story—people don't follow ideas, people follow people
- Don't avoid lament, but don't get stuck in it either; rather, help those gathered imagine alternatives to what is and share encouragement that we could journey in that direction together
- If able, schedule a coffee or a 15 minute phone call to practice sharing your witness with someone you know wants to hear what you have to say.

Step #5 - Participate!

Determine when and where your diocese will be holding their sessions and attend—bring others with you!

Not sure if your diocese will be holding listening sessions? You may have to do some sleuthing!

- Ask your pastor, parish administrator, or anyone at your parish who has been involved in the synod thus far if they know of any planned diocesan listening sessions.
- Visit your diocese website's events or synod page to see if any synod listening sessions have been planned. If you can't find anything, see if you can find contact information for anyone listed as a synod coordinator to ask them.

Appendix: Official Synod Documents Referencing Women and/or the Renewal of the Diaconate

- ★ [Synthesis Report for a Synodal Church in Mission](#) - The report issued in November of 2023 by delegates to the XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS
 - [Chapter 9 on "Women in the Life and Mission of the Church"](#):
"Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate should be continued, benefiting from consideration of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father, and from the theological, historical and exegetical research already undertaken. If possible, the results of this research should be presented to the next Session of the Assembly."
 - [Chapter 11 on "Deacons and Priests in a Synodal Church"](#)
 - [The Diaconate in the Synod Synthesis](#) - Compiled by *Liturgy on the Margins*

- ★ [Instrumentum Laboris \(IL\)](#)- The working document to guide deliberations in October 2023, XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS
 - [Worksheet on Women's Baptismal Dignity](#)
"Most of the Continental Assemblies and the syntheses of several Episcopal Conferences call for the question of women's inclusion in the diaconate to be considered. Is it possible to envisage this, and in what way?" (Section B 2.3; Qu 4; Page 41-42)
 - Question for discernment regarding the permanent diaconate
"How is the ministry of the permanent diaconate to be understood within a missionary synodal Church?" (B 2.4; Qu 4; Page 43-44)

- ★ [North American Final Document for the Continental Stage](#) - the synthesis report of virtual assemblies with 931 delegates from the U.S. and Canada, April 2023.

#19 - "There can be no true co-responsibility in the Church without fully honoring the inherent dignity of women. The continental delegates recognized the crucial work women do to keep the Church "alive and healthy" (Session IV Group 8). Nonetheless, delegates also named women as a marginalized group in the Church. "We have come a long way, but we deplore the fact that women cannot invest themselves fully" (Session V Group 4). While clarity is still needed around exactly what a fully co-responsible Church looks like, **delegates proposed the examination of a variety of aspects of Church life, including decision making roles, leadership, and ordination.** Central in the discernment of these questions is the faithful acknowledgment of

women's baptismal dignity. A frequently heard call was that "more space needs to be opened for them, especially at decision-making tables" (Session IV Group 8). The Church in North America was encouraged to "recognize, discern, and promote the role of women . . . so that they may have a greater presence in the Church" (Session IV Group 5)."

- ★ [Enlarge the Space of Your Tent](#) - The Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Global Synod that captures global fruits of the listening phase, Secretariat of the Synod, November 2022.
Handout with excerpts from section titled "[Rethinking Women's Participation](#)"

- ★ [National Synthesis of the People of God in the United States of America for the Diocesan Phase of the Synod](#) - Report from the USCCB capturing the fruits of listening sessions around the country, September 2022
 - Women identified as a marginal or peripheral group in society and the church
 - "Nearly all synodal consultations shared a deep appreciation for the powerful impact of women religious who have consistently led the way in carrying out the mission of the Church. Likewise, there was recognition for the centrality of women's unparalleled contributions to the life of the Church, particularly in local communities. There was a desire for stronger leadership, discernment, and decision-making roles for women – both lay and religious – in their parishes and communities: "people mentioned a variety of ways in which women could exercise leadership, including preaching and ordination as deacon or priest. Ordination for women emerged not primarily as a solution to the problem of the priest shortage, but as a matter of justice." (p 8)