



May 15, 2024

Dear Members of the General Secretariat of the Synod,

The following proposal, **Towards a prophetic, synodal diaconate**, is a reflection that draws together and synthesizes what we have been learning as we have held the question of women's participation alongside the call to become a synodal Church.

We offer the following constructive proposal in light of three years of intentional, active consultation and engagement with Catholics primarily, although not exclusively, from across the U.S. to participate in the discernment that has emerged from the global synod process regarding the restoration of women to the diaconate. Our mission has unfolded within the spirit and vision of becoming a more synodal, listening, discerning people, capable of engaging in Conversations in the Spirit and walking together for the good of our Church and world.

The vision of the diaconate holds within it the possibility of tremendous renewal and efficacy as a synodal ministry, rooted in the proclamation of the Gospel and in the primary role of attending to the needs of the people of God by listening individually and through communal processes. We are attentive to the urgency to rethink women's participation in the Church and the need to find concrete pathways for women to be more fully received as co-responsible and equal in baptismal dignity in the ecclesial structures of our church.

We seek to serve the discernment as it unfolds in the Synod Assembly, in the work of study groups conducted in a synodal style within the Vatican, in collaborations across dicasteries, and in the profound wisdom of the Holy Father who guides the faithful on our journey to meet and to follow Christ. At this juncture on the synodal journey we trust that there are seeds that have been planted which will take a generation to bring to fruit. We also recognize there are seeds which were planted in the Second Vatican Council, which are now ready to harvest and to prune, so they can flourish ever more fully in animating the whole people of God for mission – to proclaim Good News, to turn from despair to hope, from apathy to protagonism, and from isolation towards communion. We thank you for the opportunity to participate in the Synod.

Respectfully submitted,

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Towards a prophetic, synodal diaconate

*Making visible Christ who came to serve and walk with humanity,
and in whose example, women and men are called to follow in mission and ministry*

The following proposal is a reflection that lifts up what we have been learning on the synod journey as we have held the question of women in the life and mission of the Church alongside Pope Francis's call that we become a synodal Church co-responsible for serving Christ's mission. Our own thinking has evolved through prayerful attention to the overflow that emerges when we, along with individuals and communities of faith animated by our mission, consider women in the life and mission of a synodal Church. In addition to learning how we might grow synodality by continuing to discern the possibilities for a synodal diaconate, we offer direct quotes from participants in synodal consultations during the interim phase, most recently through a synodal forum with nearly 1,110 participants, that point to the growing consensus for a prophetic, synodal diaconate.

Part I: Our learnings through the synod process

- *Synodality is holding space for urgent questions.* Synodality – its spiritual dispositions and methodological structure – creates energizing and hope-filled spaces for the People of God to encounter each other in and around questions that too often divide us, including urgent questions about women in the life and mission of the Church.
- *Synodality is growing our imagination.* Three years ago we in Discerning Deacons endeavored to create synodal pathways to participate in the discernment about restoring women to the order of deacons. As we have lived this question with a deepening experience of and commitment to animating synodality, our own understanding of the order of deacons has evolved. We now contemplate the diaconate as an *essential ministry* of a synodal Church, one that models Jesus' own ministry of service while also connecting bishops to their people, especially those on the margins.
- *We are imagining together where the Holy Spirit is leading the church, while staying grounded in the reality /"la realidad".* Our vision for what ministries could be is rooted in encounter and listening to what already is. Women are *already* serving the Church in diaconal ministries. Diaconal women are embedded in the communities they serve: in prisons and hospitals, among indigenous peoples, through healing ministries with victims of violence, in parishes and dioceses with sacramental scarcity. To that extent, we are not discerning about something new in the lived experience of the People of God – we are seeing more fully what already is, while growing the imagination for what could be possible as we journey towards a more co-responsible Church.
- *Communion is revealed, and consensus is possible to build.* When we have the structure to listen together, to pray, and to share, then we experience the gift of communion which encourages us to take the next steps towards acting out of a growing consensus instead of reinforcing ideological divisions.

Part II: Dreaming about a renewed diaconate that includes men and women, formed to animate the *diakonia* of Jesus in all of the Baptized

In reflecting with Chapters 9 and 11 of “A Synodal Church in Mission: Synthesis Report,” which invite discernment and deepening reflection with women in the life and mission of the Church and the nature of the order of deacons, we humbly offer pastoral research gleaned from the lived experiences of the growing international community with whom we pray, learn and witness.

“The Diaconate is the bridge order. A bridge between clergy and laity, between sacramental life and every-day life, between faith community and society, between Christ’s love and those most in need of it. The diaconate must include everyone, including women. We need younger deacons, more deacons, holy deacons.”

- *A renewed and prophetic diaconate can catalyze and sustain the generational project of becoming a synodal Church.* Anchored in its historical expression as the ministry that connects the bishop to his people, particularly those on the margins, the deacon may in fact be among the most essential ministries in a synodal Church that seeks to exercise shared authority and responsibility for the Church’s mission. The deacon’s role is, in part, to draw the bishop closer to the cries of the people so that he might better know and respond to their needs and dreams. Deacons are critical in contexts where ecclesial structures are contracting, by allowing for continuity of ministry to the People of God despite changing ecclesial infrastructure. So too, they are essential in contexts of expansion by ensuring that growing populations are sufficiently served.
- *Extending the permanent diaconate to women conveys worthiness – to women and to those on the margins with whom they minister.* We have learned yet again through the Synod process that women are the life force of the Church. And yet they also feel undervalued and instrumentalized by it. So too do the marginalized people that women so often serve when much needed ministries are interrupted or discontinued due to women’s lack of authority in ministry. Including women in a prophetic and synodal diaconate would affirm in compelling ways that women are indeed made in the image and likeness of God; that Jesus’s *ministry* to those on the margins is what we are called to imitate, and not simply his maleness; that we can encounter God in the faces and lived experiences of women; that those on the margins are worthy of being ministered to by those on whom the sacrament of Holy Orders has been conferred. Including women in the diaconate as a permanent vocation would move us toward a fuller embodiment of our own teaching about the equal dignity men and women share in baptism.

“On a personal level, as a woman who has experienced spiritually distressing events including miscarriage and sexual assault, in those situations it has been women in my community whom I have been comfortable going to for spiritual support and guidance. It would have been

so meaningful if there was an ordained female deacon who could have been there for me for spiritual support in those difficult moments.”

- *A synodal Church deepens in integrity when the Church hears and believes the lament of women who name both a deep desire to serve the mission of the Church and the constraints they face in doing so. Listening to women has revealed that many women prayerfully discern a call from Jesus to serve and to lead, to preach and to minister. And yet, existing structures of the Church not only reflect a deafness to women’s spiritual experience but a refusal to believe the truth about God revealed in and through them. Including women in the diaconate would acknowledge that we believe the people of God when they tell us that they long to be ministered to – from the depths and not the shallows of our rich tradition – and that there is an abundance of spiritual gifts that are going under-utilized at an unprecedented moment of spiritual and material need. Including women in the diaconate would signal that we believe in the gifts that they have for attending to the peripheries, to the very edges of human suffering.*

“I truly believe that the recognition of women’s role to the diaconate would serve us all. It would allow the church’s ministry to those on the margins to be expanded and strengthened. It would allow for women’s voices and perspectives to be heard from the pulpit on Sunday. I firmly believe that it would allow for greater protections against the abuse of children, young people and women in the church. It would confirm what many of us already know: that women are also made Imago Dei. It would make it so that more women like me can truly feel as though we are home when we enter church spaces.”

“I think that God is asking us to find better ways to reach those on the margins – those on the margins of society, but also those on the margins of each of our families, communities, neighborhoods, parishes, schools, and places of work. Women seem to be particularly equipped by God to carry out this mission of the church which is very deeply diaconal.”

Part III: Ever ancient, ever new – an approach to diaconal formation

New and instituted ministries can blossom and flourish in an increasingly synodal Church. We envision a harmonious exercise of ministry, marked by co-responsibility, collaboration, discernment of gifts, responsiveness to needs, and always in communion with the ecclesial structures that promote transparency and accountability. To realize this communion, the Church must take seriously its responsibility to order charisms so as to unbind them for the building up of the people of God for mission.

Within our particular growing network there is a breadth and depth of experience of lay ecclesial ministry, and instituted new ministries such as the pastoral associate or parish life director. These have offered many an experience of recognition, which helps the community realize that

this laborer in the vineyard is a minister called and formed for a particular role in the life of the community. This expands our imagination for who is capable of imaging Christ in his ministry. However, instituted and commissioned ministries are often experienced as temporary in nature, subject to a change in ordained leadership. While women most often bear the brunt of clericalism, lay men too experience the instability it often creates.

Delegates to the General Assembly rightly named formation as a critical need for becoming a synodal Church and pointed to potential areas of reform for priest and deacon formation. Our own pastoral research attests to this need: current formation programs for deacons, while guided by national directories, are admittedly uneven and left to the local discretion of bishops. Further guidance from Rome about the renewal of the diaconate could help encourage a shift of emphasis to more fully integrate the dimensions of ministry of word, liturgy, and charity into diaconal formation and expression.

Informed by ongoing discernment in our growing community of believers, scholars, and ministers, we humbly offer that liturgical formation for mission might help to reveal a God who walks close to humanity and to strengthen the collective Body of Christ to show forth the love of God in the world.

The deacon proclaims the Gospel, offers the prayers of the faithful, commends the assembly to offer one another a sign of peace, and sends the people of God forth to love and serve the world and one another. While not primarily about service at the altar, these liturgical roles reflect, symbolize, and signify the life of a deacon as the bridge between the ambo and the streets, between the bishop and the people of his flock, between those at the center and those on the margins. As such, these liturgical roles could help us imagine ways of forming deacons for their essential ministry in a synodal Church: revealing a God who came to serve and who animates us all to co-responsibility for the Church's mission.

For example, to be fully rooted in the *proclamation of the Word of God*, could we consider robust formation in a biblical imagination and the art of compelling preaching that connects the living word to the life of the faithful? To *lift up the prayers of the faithful*, how might we form the deacon to draw near to listen to what is on the hearts and minds of the people — individually and collectively? In *commending the sign of peace*, might we envision the deacon's distinct role in a parish community as fostering a synodal culture of communal discernment? Pastoral councils and ministries could grow, not only in the practice of synodality, but also in practices that help communities navigate conflicts, guiding our feet in the way of peace, and strengthening the capacity of the People of God to respond to the needs of the community — within the life of a parish or given institution, as well as the needs of those on the peripheries. In *sending the People of God forth to love and serve the world*, what if we were to anchor diaconal formation in Catholic social teaching with an emphasis on practical application and engaging with synodal practices to help foster Spirit-led discernment about how particular communities are called to respond to the needs of our world?

In other words, when animated by the liturgical rites of our tradition, we come to recognize deacons as essential synodal ministers who are called and sent for the work of animating the *diakonia* of the people of God.

Part IV: Serving the discernment – Is now the acceptable time?

One of the most consistently named convergences amongst the circles we have been privileged to engage is a sense that the Holy Spirit is saying “now is the time.” The Church as a global institution necessarily moves slowly, and yet at what point can we recognize we are coming to the end of a long period of discernment — for has not this question been alive in the Church for 50 years, since the restoration of the permanent order of deacons at the Second Vatican Council? Seeds for the very ministry we are sensing now were planted in the Council, and they have taken root in the hearts and imagination of the faithful who have come to recognize women’s liturgical ministries – as lector, acolyte, altar server, cantor, eucharistic minister – as fitting and good. Through the global listening consultation the People of God around the globe commended the Church to rethink women’s participation and now to advance women’s roles in serving the mission of the church.

Is now the acceptable time to renew an essential ministry for a synodal Church and to include women in it?

- Is now the acceptable time to explore amplifying the relatively under-utilized dimension of servant leadership in the ministry of the diaconate, tying formation in and exercise of this ministry more closely to the fundamentals of Catholic social teaching and forming deacons to focus on affirming the full human dignity of marginalized persons, catalyzing subsidiarity, and supporting people in building up the common good?
- Is now the acceptable time to alleviate confusion about this ministry that surfaced in the First General Assembly by eliminating the transitional diaconate which continues to tether the ministry too closely to the presbyterate?
- Is now the acceptable time for the global Church to grant permission for local bishops and bishops’ conferences to discern whether the needs of the people of God in their distinct contexts would be served by restoring women to the order of deacons as a permanent vocation?

“I think the inclusion of women in a renewed diaconate would be electric. It would be a jolt to the system that would send shock waves in all directions. I think we’d see more people attending mass. I think we’d see more young people stay Catholic. I think we’d see Catholic Social Teaching lived out more fully. I think we’d have healthier priests. I think we’d have healthier families. I could not be more ready.”

Conclusion: From listening to believing the People of God

There is much more at stake in this discernment than women being included in the diaconate as a permanent order. Within it also lies the possibility of building the efficacy of synodality as a viable way of being Church together, where we discern and then make decisions about things that matter to the People of God. It contains the possibility of tasting the fruits of synodality in the very place where most of the People of God experience the Church: the parish. It also holds the possibility of restoring the credibility of the institutional Church and renewing the peoples' trust, which has been shaken by scandals and the reluctance up until this Synod to engage in meaningful conversation about the role of women in its life and mission. By listening to the People of God about what they need from the Church and then by believing them – by taking their hopes and dreams seriously – we begin to heal wounds, we begin to rebuild trust, we begin to grow co-responsibility for the Church's mission.

The future of the Catholic Church depends on the depth of our belief in women – believing them in their commitment to serving the mission of Church, believing them in what they say they need in order to serve the mission of the Church, believing them in their call to bring their energies, their gifts, their desire to serve God's people through a renewal of this ministry.

The future of a synodal Catholic Church also depends on believing the people of God who, in good faith, continue to participate in the process of becoming a synodal Church, and eagerly await tangible evidence that synodality is indeed a way that we can renew the Church for mission.

This dream for a collaborative approach to ministry, for a renewed, prophetic and synodal permanent diaconate that includes men and women could perhaps be one of the most meaningful, most tangible, most impactful fruits of this beautiful synodal journey on which we have been so courageously led and to which we have so hopefully given ourselves. It may be a primary way that the People of God “taste and see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.”

Appendix

- [April 29, 2024 Synodal Forum: Discerning Diakonia](#)
- [Called to Contribute - Sociological Study](#)
- Pastoral Reality and Women in Ministry:
 - [Dermis de Jesus](#)
 - [Rosa Bonilla](#)
 - [Rhonda Miska](#)
- [Witnesses to the Discernment](#)



New Harmony image by artist Becky McIntyre

In October 2023, Discerning Deacons sent 16 young adult pilgrims to Rome to participate in Together 2023, an ecumenical prayer vigil for young people, and to bear witness to the opening of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This piece was created to capture elements of that experience to share with our family, friends, and supporters as we relayed our experience.

Artist's statement:

During the opening panel of Together 2023 with synod delegates, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich referenced Pope Francis when he noted that when the Spirit is at work, first there is "big confusion" or chaos, and from that comes a "new harmony." He said that when we are open to listening to the Holy Spirit's guidance, we may be opened to be able to see new pathways forward emerge that we hadn't previously recognized.