

LET HER VOICE CARRY

A report on listening sessions held for women and women's ordination advocates for the Synod on Synodality



Women's Ordination Conference

A VOICE FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

The mission of the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) is to advocate and pray for the ordination of women as deacons, priests, and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic Church. Founded in 1975, WOC is the oldest and largest grassroots-driven organization promoting activism, dialogue, and prayerful witness to call for women's full equality in the Church.

The collective vision of WOC is a Roman Catholic Church that affirms women's gifts, responds by calling them to ministry and ordination, openly and actively supports women's voices, and reflects the example of Jesus – welcoming all to the table.



Table of Contents

OVERVIEW — 2
CALLING TO BE HEARD — 4
CALLING FOR EQUALITY — 5
CALLING FOR HEALING — 6
CALLING FOR COMMUNITY — 7
RECOMMENDATIONS — 8
CONCLUSION — 9
CONTACT INFO — 10

Overview

WE TAKE POPE FRANCIS' INVITATION TO DIALOGUE SERIOUSLY

We at the Women's Ordination Conference embraced Pope Francis' invitation to collective discernment and dialogue through the Synod on Synodality. We studied the preparatory documents and created various resources and "toolkits" for our members to learn more about the history and role of synods, as well as the opportunities for discernment and engagement with the synodal process. We created an open Facebook group as a place for support, questions, and sharing of news and analysis of the synod proceedings.

Women long for their voices to be heard in the church.

Women long for their voices to be heard in the church, and in that spirit, we offered six virtual listening sessions in English and two in Spanish from December 2021 - April 2022. These sessions were attended by approximately 300 people, evenly split between those who are members of the organization and those who were engaging with the organization for the first time. Many found our listening sessions through the Vatican's synod resources website. Overwhelmingly, participants lamented the lack of opportunities to engage in their local diocese, or said that they felt uncomfortable or unwelcome to do so.

During our listening sessions we invited participants into prayer and reflection through the practice of *lectio divina* or an Examen adapted for women in the church, followed by small group discussions. We encouraged participants to practice deep listening, to discern the movement of the Spirit in what was being shared, and what the most loving response might be to what or where God was calling the church. Each small group had a facilitator and a note-taker, and we then brought the small groups back together to reflect collectively.



Throughout the listening phase, WOC sought to empower as many women as possible to participate in the process. This is uphill work, and requires vulnerability and an unwavering belief in the movement of the Holy Spirit. One participant in our first listening session described the feeling of “trying to love again after heartbreak,” a tension that was echoed by many others. The institutional church has broken the hearts of many women. We found that hurt to be raw and tender, and in need of deep healing.

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However, the listening sessions affirmed what we know from decades of experience: Catholic women persist. Despite their heartbreak and doubts, women are able to cultivate joy and find hope in their Catholic identity and faith. These gatherings reminded us that the Holy Spirit is alive and moving among us, letting our voices carry to dream aloud of a more inclusive church. The following report is a summary of the themes and prayers that emerged from our sessions, the contradictions of hearing God’s call but not being heard, of hope and heartbreak.

We are reminded of Pope Francis’ words that the church must be a “field hospital” caring for the seriously injured: “You have to heal [their] wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. ... And you have to start from the ground up.” That healing must begin with courageous conversations with women in the church.

We pray that the voices of these women, the women in your diocese, and women everywhere will carry throughout the synod: carry weight, carry hope, and carry the church to a new day.





Calling to be heard

“WE HAVE TRIED TO BE HEARD.”

This simple comment from one listening session participant sums up what many who attended expressed: As women, or as people who disagree with the church’s teachings on an all-male priesthood, LGBTQ+ equality, or reproductive justice, they have felt repeatedly marginalized and silenced by their pastors and in their parishes. The global consultation phase of the Synod on Synodality, instead of offering an opportunity to discern and be heard, became in their local contexts either a surface-level appearance of listening, or simply nonexistent.

“Is there really the capacity to listen?”

From these experiences, participants expressed a sense of vulnerability or unwelcome at engaging in the synodal process, at least as presented in parishes and dioceses. “Is there really the capacity to listen?”, they wondered. Some entered our listening session processes with an admitted feeling of fearfulness. But in each session we held, people expressed gratitude for the safe and respectful space we sought to create through our sessions, even calling such a space “radical.”

Participants also named skepticism about the hierarchy’s commitment to the process of synodality, particularly when decision-making is ultimately in the hands of male bishops, many of whom are “against” Pope Francis’s actions and reforms.

One person wrote in our independent feedback form: “I’m tired of the hierarchical and judgmental male voices I hear too often. I yearn to hear feminine voices, with their perspectives on the problems of the world. Our world needs more balance. Our Church needs more balance.” To paraphrase another participant, those gathered for our sessions wanted to journey together not on the hierarchy’s terms, but on their own.

I wish you could
hear my call
like I can.

Calling for equality

“CHRIST CALLS WOMEN CLEARLY AND POWERFULLY. I HAVE BEEN CALLED TO ORDINATION.”

This clear and profound statement is one that carries the most joy and sadness for women of the church. Many women have sincerely discerned calls to priesthood or the diaconate, and the rejection of that call by the institutional church is a source of immense sadness, grief, or anger.

Some have answered their call to priesthood through independent Catholic movements, or have found supportive faith communities that affirm their vocations and a more collegial or “intimate” model of church. These communities are a source of joy and fulfillment. But those emotions exist in tension with the rejection of their vocation by the institutional church.

While not all of our participants would identify themselves as called to priesthood, each and every person expressed a longing to be ministered to by women, for their individual gifts to be valued equally in the church, and for women and people of all genders to have a place at decision-making tables.

When asked to describe their experience of church, words like rejected, overlooked, and marginalized were all used. Women do not feel equally respected or valued in the church, and expressed sadness that they could not share their gifts, nor express their hope for women’s ordination in their communities.

Many described the ban on women’s ordination as “in direct contradiction to the church’s teachings on social justice,” and “hypocritical” of a church that professes social justice. There was a sense that this “contradiction” and “injustice” undermines the church’s potential for good in the world.

“The church could go far in upholding women throughout the world by recognizing their gift as priests. I’m sure this will come up in the synod and I would like to add my voice of support.”



Calling for healing

“I AM FRUSTRATED AND VERY DISAPPOINTED WITH THE CLERICALISM AND LACK OF RECOGNITION OF THE TALENTS, LEADERSHIP, SKILLS, AND COMPASSION FOR ALL WITHIN THE CHURCH.”

We found a deep well of frustration, pain, and anger with leaders of the institutional church who perpetuate misogynistic theologies and practices, both on a personal and global level. “The deeply misogynist male clerical culture continues to do immense harm to women and girls,” said one participant. Many expressed doubt that anything would change if bishops continue to make decisions “behind closed doors,” excluding the People of God.

Despite this pain, over and over again, participants expressed a longing or even a vocation to heal the wounds of division and oppressive structures that stifle the Holy Spirit. Again, Pope Francis’ “field hospital” metaphor was evoked, with many expressing a calling to reform the church or speak out: “If not me, who?” This sense of proactive responsibility and longing toward healing, despite one’s own pain, is a potent reminder of the persistence and strength of women in the church.

This sentiment was rooted in an intense love for their faith, trust in the Holy Spirit, and a desire to light a path of healing for others. Many expressed the importance of storytelling, of inviting bishops to truly listen to women, and a deep prayer that there is room for the Holy Spirit in this synod.

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Calling for(th) community

“I DIDN’T LEAVE THE CHURCH,
IT LEFT ME”

Many women find themselves “one foot in, and one foot out” of the institutional church, and generally lament the lack of a “living and supportive church,” where they can be authentically themselves and experience life-giving pastoral care. One participant, reflecting on Matthew 5, described the institutional church as the “salt that has lost its taste.”

*“What is my role in
sharing God’s love?”*

The phrase, “I didn’t leave the church, it left me” was captured in many forms, and participants shared their gratitude and energy for small faith communities, reform organizations, and emerging models of church where their pastoral needs can be better met or their call to ministry can be answered. Frequently, participants mentioned Zoom liturgies and online prayer experience as a path toward unity, community, and intimacy.

“What is my role in sharing God’s love?” one participant asked, and we found many have answered that call outside of institutional structures.

And yet, though many have found an affirming community outside of the walls of the institutional church, many have not, and are isolated in their prayer for a more welcoming church. People are searching for community and longing for spiritual nourishment. Even those who have cultivated affirming communities of support still experience a tension with the institutional church, a longing for acceptance, reform, and renewal.

Recommendations

"...THE PURPOSE OF THIS SYNOD IS NOT TO PRODUCE MORE DOCUMENTS. RATHER, IT IS INTENDED TO INSPIRE PEOPLE TO DREAM ABOUT THE CHURCH WE ARE CALLED TO BE... TO STIMULATE TRUST, TO BIND UP WOUNDS, TO WEAVE NEW AND DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS..." (VADEMECUM)

In that spirit, we offer these recommendations of ways we might continue this synodal journey together.

- **Continue the conversation with women in your diocese.** Women long to be heard and many have felt they did not have an opportunity to do so in their diocesan listening sessions. The conversation and collective discernment must continue so that their stories might be heard and responded to.
- **Ensure the voices of those on the margins, and particularly those who challenge church teaching on issues of equality, are heard.** Women's ordination is an urgent question of our time, worthy of discernment, discussion, and prayerful consideration. We ask you, as pastors, to seek out and listen to the sincerely discerned calls of women, and nonbinary and trans people, to the diaconate and priesthood, and consider how the church might "journey together" with them.

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- **Include women in substantial and equitable ways in the process of synthesizing regional, and continental synod reports and in the synodal gathering in 2023.**
- **Practice transparency and accountability throughout the synodal process.** The involvement of the laity must not end with the close of the diocesan listening phase. Consider inclusive ways to involve the whole church at every level of the synod.
- **Cultivate relationships with church reform organizations, whose members love their faith and are willing to do the work to more fully realize Jesus' inclusive message.** If Pope Francis is asking us to consider: "Where is God calling the church as it journeys together?", we must answer that call together.



Conclusion

A CREATIVE, BOLD, AND LOVING RESPONSE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Synod is an unprecedented moment for the global church to listen deeply to its members as they discern the movement of the Holy Spirit. We hope and believe the church has the capacity to live up to the vision of the synod's preparatory document. One objective of the Synod is described in the document in this way: "recognizing and appreciating the wealth and the variety of the gifts and charisms that the Spirit liberally bestows for the good of the community and the benefit of the entire human family."

Over and over again, we heard our participants share that those "liberally bestowed" gifts include the gifts of women's call to ordained ministry. Some expressed the pain of having their gift denied; others expressed the longing to be ministered to by women with the authentic charism to priesthood. Did you hear those same voices, calling out for inclusion, equality, community, and healing?

Women comprise more than half the church - in denying their gifts, the church loses an immeasurable treasure that would benefit the entire human family.

Women's exclusion from ordained ministries not only undermines their capacity to make decisions as leaders, but reinforces cultural and social discrimination, and perpetuates structures that subordinate women and can lead to gender-based violence.

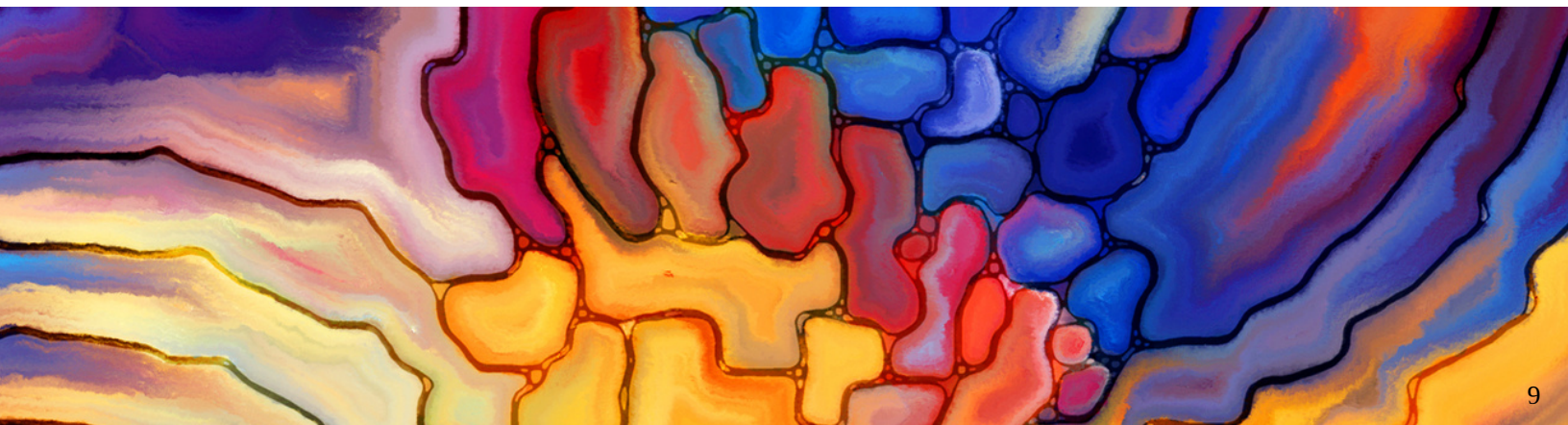
Again we turn to the wisdom of the Synod's preparatory document: "The Spirit, according to the Lord's promise, does not limit [herself] to confirming the continuity of the Gospel of Jesus, but will illuminate the ever-new depths of his Revelation and inspire the decisions necessary to sustain the church's journey."

In the spirit of conversion called for in the synod document, we urge all members of the church to be unafraid of pursuing new paths that empower women as equals.

There are many decisions that must be made to sustain the church's journey in the twenty-first century, and one of them must be the decision to open all ordained ministries to people of all genders. Just as this discernment cannot happen without the radical inclusion of women, these decisions cannot happen without the voices and votes of women.

Now is the time for the church to not just recognize women's leadership, but transform its institutions to honor their leadership sacramentally. The crises in our world and our church deserve nothing less.

The synod calls us to a creative, bold, and loving response to the Holy Spirit - as does the Gospel. Our participants have spoken with the courage and *parrhesia* the moment demands.





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*Our call for equality is
informed by Jesus' radical
inclusion of and
friendships with women*

