

Mainstreaming Women's Ministries in the Roman Catholic Church

A Survey of Young Catholic
Women in Formation and Ministry
in the United States

Executive Summary
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Women's Ordination Conference



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About the Researchers

Mainstreaming Women's Ministries in the Roman Catholic Church:

A Survey of Young Catholic Women in Formation and Ministry in the United States

This report presents findings from a study conducted by the staff of the Women's Ordination Conference as a Pastoral Study Project of the Louisville Institute,* and contains:

- Major outcomes;
- Methods of interpreting the results;
- Discussion of findings;
- Implications for the Roman Catholic Church;
- Survey Charts, Graphs, and Narrative Responses;
- Representative narrative responses.

The study is based on a survey of self-identified Catholic women aged 21-40 in the United States who have earned or are pursuing an advanced degree in ministry, theology, religious studies, or related subjects, asking questions about their Catholic identity, career, vocations, financial security, and attitudes toward the Roman Catholic Church, particularly regarding opportunities for women.

A questionnaire was circulated to 32 academic institutions, various alumnae groups, and membership associations; it included eight demographic metrics, thirty-one multiple choice or yes/no questions, and six open-ended questions. 224 women completed the survey electronically from May 4, 2019 – July 8, 2019, although of the 224, not all chose to answer every question posed.

*Through its Pastoral Study Project program (PSP), the Louisville Institute enables pastoral leaders to bracket daily work routines in order to pursue a pressing and significant question for the life of faith. Grants of up to \$15,000 support independent or collaborative study projects ± projects that privilege pastoral perspectives and rhythms and honor grassroots research conducted by skilled clergy. PSP grantees use a variety of platforms to share what they learn with a wider audience, extending their leadership in ways that benefit the broader church and culture in North America. Louisville Institute is funded by the Religion Division of Lilly Endowment and based at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary (Louisville, Kentucky).

The Institute's fundamental mission is to enrich the religious life of North American Christians and to encourage the revitalization of their institutions, by bringing together those who lead religious institutions with those who study them, so that the work of each might inform and strengthen the other.

Throughout the report, “the respondents” refers to the survey takers, a group of women of whom:

- 97% of whom were baptized before the age of twelve;
- 68% hold an advanced degree in theology and 32% were pursuing an advanced degree in theology;
- 89% are currently attending or have graduated from a Catholic university or seminary, and of those, 52% listed a Jesuit institution;
- 86% attend a Roman Catholic parish;
- 82% attend Mass at least once a week;
- 55% are employed by the Roman Catholic Church, and
- 16% are employed by non-institutional Catholic organizations, schools, or social efforts.

Major Outcomes

- 73% of respondents described their Catholic identity as “extremely important to them,” with sacraments (22%) and community (18%) as the most frequently named sources of joy in their Catholic identity.
- On the global level, 80% are not satisfied with the opportunities for women with ministry degrees and training in the global institution of the Church, and 65% responded feeling that their ministry or vocation is not recognized by the global Church.
- On the local level, 73% were also not satisfied with the opportunities for women with ministry degrees and training; however, 66% responded that they felt their ministry or vocation was recognized in their local faith community.
- 80% believe it is “theoretically possible” for the Roman Catholic Church to ordain women as deacons.
- 74% believe the Roman Catholic Church should ordain women as deacons.
- 63% believe it is “theoretically possible” for the Roman Catholic Church to ordain women as priests.
- 62% believe the Roman Catholic Church should ordain women as priests, and 11% responded that they were “unsure.”
- 41% of respondents said they would not pursue ordination to the diaconate or priesthood, even if the Roman Catholic Church opened those ministries to women. 30% said they would pursue ordination, and 30% responded they were unsure.

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- 82% said they would not pursue ordination through independent catholic movements, such as the "Roman Catholic Women Priests" or the "Ecumenical Catholic Communion," both which welcome women candidates for ordination.
 - When asked what barriers or challenges, either institutional or personal, experienced in their work or studies, the most frequent response was sexism, out-dated gender roles, or lack of women's ordination as a type of "glass ceiling." The next most frequent barrier was financial insecurity and cost of studies, followed by clericalism.
 - When asked what the most crucial changes they would like to see in the Roman Catholic Church, "women's inclusion" ranked first (20%), with "women's ordination" to the priesthood or diaconate a close second (19%).
 - When asked what non-financial support they received during their work and studies, respondents listed spiritual direction and their communities (friends, groups of women) equally as the largest support systems.
 - When asked what opportunities exist for women in the Church today, lay ministries such as spiritual direction or chaplaincy ranked first (18%), teaching was ranked second (17%), and "none/inadequate" ranked third (15%).

Interpreting Results in this Report

In order to evaluate the open-ended questions, we sought to quantify qualitative data using an iterative analysis process (Kripeendorff, 1989), by entering comments into a spreadsheet, identifying emergent themes within the data, and coding each comment according to the themes (ie. one mention = 1), accounting for multiple themes within one response. This process resulted in tables of the frequency of a theme and the percentage of comments associated with that theme. We identified typical, representative, and interesting comments as narrative examples.

We believe the findings of this survey are representative of a wide spectrum of experiences of women within the parameters of this study. We proactively sought participation from diverse perspectives unfamiliar with or opposed to the work of the Women's Ordination Conference and largely focused on outreach to academic institutions. Of the thirty-two institutions contacted, we received positive confirmations that the survey was disseminated to students or alumnae from representatives of: Boston College School of Theology and Ministry; The Catholic University of America, College of Saint Benedict and St. John's University; Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology; Harvard Divinity School; and Union Theological Seminary. However, the survey was rejected by the National Association of Lay Ministers because: "Some serious concerns have been raised by the board regarding this project as the goals were and sponsorship were unclear."

Nevertheless, we conclude that we were successful in this diversity outreach and point to our findings on more controversial issues within the Roman Catholic Church, such as women's ordination, largely mirror current national survey data.

Discussion of findings

The results of this survey are perhaps best understood in three categories: Catholic identity, professional opportunities, and vocation. We found these categories to be distinctly experienced among the respondents, with significant compromises made in pursuit of fulfillment in all three.

Catholic Identity

This survey confirmed that Catholic women (21-40 years old) place a high value on their Catholic identity (73%) and attend Mass at a significantly higher rate than the average Catholic in the U.S. (82% of study). A large majority of respondents work for the institutional Roman Catholic Church (55%), and nearly half volunteer in a Catholic setting (47%). When asked to describe what gives them joy about being Catholic, sacraments, community, history and tradition, and social justice teachings ranked highest.

Many described their joy rooted in the global nature of the Church and feeling connected to a heritage, a lineage through the saints or their family; and for some, the joy is complicated:

"Though I know no institution is perfect or lacking in serious issues, I have often looked longingly at the experience of women and LGBTQ people in many Protestant denominations. At the end of the day though, the Catholic Church is where I feel at home. My joy is something that I wrestle with as I feel it in tandem with oppression. However, when I worship with my community I simply feel at home. I love our rituals, I love the sacraments, I love the sacramental worldview, and the understanding of the human person as both fundamentally good and still flawed. I find joy in the messiness of the church as we wrestle with each other from very different points of view. I love our music, I love our symbols, I love the richness."

"First: Community. Community gathering together sharing life, stories - and encircling this with Spirit and prayer and hope. Acknowledging and recognizing and naming the truth that our lives, lived with integrity embrace the paschal mystery. That our lives are, embraced, are the attempt/movement to be an incarnational sharing of God's love within the world. There is joy in empowering one another and supporting each other as we each seek ways to en flesh our faith with integrity. We also have a rich history of meditation, contemplation.....that feeds us. Mostly, the joy is the people I have come to know and whom I serve---together---and sharing that journey with common markers/ themes, understandings of how Spirit/God/ our brother accompanies, inspires, guides."

"I love being part of a long line of Catholics and I love feeling the traditions and beliefs of my parents and their parents and the generations of parents before them in the rituals and prayers and seasons. I love being part of a global and multi-racial Church. I love that we are economically and educationally diverse. I love the heart for social justice and the belief in the validity of science. I love the Blessed Mother and the Communion of Saints that I think points to an innate desire towards gender balance and the potential holiness of women - strong, smart, outspoken women as well as mild-mannered and meek women. I love the boldness and campiness of the Catholic Church. And I love that it consistently works to come to terms with its difficult past."

"Everything. Incense, crying babies, families of ten, young nuns, old nuns, middle-aged nuns, single moms, female doctors of the Church, daily Mass, "Weird Catholic Twitter", priests who podcast, my boys altar serving, receiving the body and blood of Jesus. Churches named after women."

"All the sensory pleasures: the smell of incense, warm water washing my feet on Holy Thursday; the feel of rosary beads threaded through my fingers, the awe of soaring steeples. I love knowing I have a whole team of saints as spiritual allies and friends. I love the grit and embodiment of Catholic social teaching and I love the mysticism of high liturgy and transubstantiation. I love that it connects me to my... ancestry."

Professional Opportunities

We found that the women of our survey understood the positions "available" to women in the Church, and for many their vocational calls fell into those categories. However, many expressed pain or frustration at the limits placed on their careers (or vocations, in some cases), and while lay ministries and teaching were understood as professional opportunities, women still expressed a hope for more, or a sadness about the compromises they would have to make to "fit" into those roles:

"If I was willing to not talk about issues that are important to me, then I could do pastoral ministry or work at a diocese."

"Teaching, nun, or working for USCCB (None of which I feel called towards)"

While many identified feeling supported in academic settings, using their degree within their Archdiocese or official Catholic institution was described as a volunteer opportunity, or limited. Lastly, the third most popular response for opportunities for women was "Inadequate or none":

"I've worked in ministry and pursued a degree in Theology. I've found that I am generally supported in pursuing as much education and training in these fields as I want. There are ample opportunities for me to volunteer to help my local church community or the Archdiocese I'm located within. I appreciate being able to use my talents and time for something bigger than myself."

"This will be my last job within a Catholic context. It is too painful; I cannot keep participating in my own oppression."

"I don't see any more opportunities for me in the Catholic Church. Until women are ordained, how can there be? Every day I discern leaving. I go to an Episcopal Church regularly now. But it's so hard and so painful."

"None where I can be fully myself. It's so many ways we are required to become inauthentic, to become less. Sad about this."

These professional choices are inherently connected to financial security. Our respondents were evenly divided between those who have or had student loans for their advanced degree and not, however, thirteen percent identified financial support from the Catholic Church or a Catholic foundation.

"It is also difficult for women in ministry to advocate for themselves financially. My 12 years in education have been formative and valuable but have not fully used my best vocational gifts. I found myself there because it was the only branch that could use my skills and also pay the bills... We are missing out by making ministry something lay people can only do if they have a financially successful partner, or have spent years clawing their way to some degree of financial stability."

"Financial-- paying for studies and loan repayment that I can't meet on the salary range of this employment field."

"I experience challenges financially as well because of the high cost of living in my city and the low paying nature of ministry jobs, hence why I have both a full time and part time job to supplement my income."

The financial discrepancy between men and women in ministerial degree programs significantly disadvantages women. For instance, a male student preparing for ordination often lives in a community-sponsored apartment or residence, where expenses are financed by the Church. He is not expected to provide for a family or any dependents, and can dedicate himself fully to study. In addition to tuition fees, often meals, laundry, and a stipend are provided. If tuition fees are not covered by the diocese or his order, then student loans are forgiven once he is ordained.

A woman in the same program simply does not have the same financial advantages, nor the opportunity to pursue ordination upon completion of her studies. They balance jobs and familial responsibilities on top of their academic pursuits.

Vocation

Our respondents overwhelmingly agreed (82%) that the institutional Church does not value women's ministries and vocations equally to men, and just 35% felt their ministry or vocation was recognized by the institutional Church. Interestingly, nearly twice as many respondents (66%) answered that their ministry or vocation is recognized by their local faith community, confirming the importance of mentors, small faith circles, women-church groups, and supportive parishes described throughout the survey.

Even with these statistics, analyzing women's vocations through this survey is perhaps the most complicated story to tell.

The statistics found 61% of respondents identified a call to teaching, 52% identified a call to pastoral ministry, 50% identified a call to social justice ministries, and 35% described themselves as having a vocation to preaching. Just 17% described themselves as having a vocational call to priesthood, and even fewer, 12%, described a calling to diaconal service.

As researchers, we took particular notice to the 13% who responded "other" to describe their vocational call, the 11% who responded "I'm not sure," and the many times throughout the survey where women articulated their vocation beyond the "common" options we listed. These honest and creative responses were also reflected in attitudes toward ordained ministries, which is to say: It's complicated.

When asked if they would pursue ordination if the Roman Catholic Church opened ordained ministries to women, 41% responded no and 30% responded "unsure." When asked if they might pursue ordination through independent catholic movements, 82% responded no.

While a large majority (80%) believe it is theoretically possible for the Roman Catholic Church to ordain women as deacons, and 74% believe the Church should do so, a smaller majority—63%—believe it is theoretically possible for the Roman Catholic Church to be ordain women as priests, and 62% believed the Church should do so.

We found that not only do women experience their vocations beyond the institutional hierarchical structures, but a majority believe that simply ordaining women is not a solution to the deeper inequalities and intersectional oppressions of the Roman Catholic Church. That said, when asked about the “most crucial change/s” needed, “women’s leadership” (followed by women’s ordination) was the most cited response.

Promoting women into leadership positions and opening ordained ministries to women are needed steps to better support women’s vocations on an institutional level, but for holistic transformation and for many women, healing will require the creativity of the Holy Spirit, which we found in abundance among our survey respondents.

“I see myself called to agitate, irritate, comfort those who suffer, and bear prophetic witness. This may be on the fringes of the institutional church, but this is where the church is most alive.”

“As a Catholic woman, I see my greatest opportunity personally in healing work on those margins with people who have experienced spiritual/religious trauma and yet for whom the power of the Gospel and the presence of Jesus still feels potent. As a queer woman, working mostly with unchurched/non-churched or spiritual-but-not-religious folks, I see an opportunity to alternatively represent Catholic identity and a way to reconcile being a follower of Christ with ideals of plurality, ecological reverence, mystical unity/mystery, and cultural restoration.”

“I want to be part of a movement to advocate for women to be restored to the permanent diaconate -- and to grow in our gifts for preaching, pastoral ministry, and integration with powerful organizations for social/economic/climate/racial justice in the wider world.”

"Of course, being a Catholic woman is enormously frustrating. Were there a diaconate, I would pursue it. Were there more of a place for expressing my gifts to the Church more widely, I would find that place. But the institutional Church (and this is felt at the local level) continues to invest in vocations that are dying, and send all kinds of wrong messages to women and others on the margins (LGBTQ) that their contributions, like their identities and orientations, are imperfect."

"I also feel deeply challenged by the emotional/psychological labor of being in alignment with my calling that also requires the "swimming upstream" against the currents of institutionalized sexism of my own tradition. Though I believe Spirit has called me to it because I am capable, it is profoundly taxing to my physical and spiritual body to dwell in the space of unknown/unfolding and "not yet"--to be building the ship as we sail it, as it were."

"I teach because I can't preach." Has become how I describe my vocation. I am called to be a Catholic priest, but if I were to be ordained I don't know that I'd have the financial support to start my own community. I wouldn't be able to keep teaching at a Jesuit school either."

Implications for the Roman Catholic Church

This survey affirms the multiplicity of women's experiences as ministers and explores the significant compromises women navigate to contribute to the institutional Roman Catholic Church.

While their Catholic identity is overwhelmingly described as "extremely important," the lack of women's leadership opportunities, financial insecurity, and clericalism present the biggest barriers to sustainability and fulfillment on their ministerial paths.

Some solutions to these challenges could be considered straightforward: increase leadership opportunities to women, ordain women to the diaconate and priesthood, provide institutionally-backed funding for women in ministry and theology programs and career opportunities with a living wage. While these may be understood as radical proposals requiring discernment, they also do not engage deeply enough with the inadequate and sexist theological language and scaffolding of the Church that reduces women and women's contributions to lesser, unequal, monolithic complements to that of men.

Our data reveals the complexities of women's own discernment as they navigate their relationship with the Church and the creativity required to do so. Our Church will require both innovative and holistic thinking, and creativity to truly empower and support women. Our recommendation is to look to the women who persist in ministry, such as those in this survey. This will not and is not a painless process, but the risk is too great not to embark toward equality.

We recognize that our data must now be interpreted in light of how the pandemic is shifting the nature of gathering and acting as Church. Short-term, many of our respondents will miss their graduations. Hiring processes may have stalled, lay ministries have receded, and those doing "works of mercy" are putting themselves at greater risk. Teachers are grappling with an enormous change to their teaching systems in a short period of time.

On one hand, the sacramental life of the church is being centralized into the hands of the ordained clergy. Livestreamed Masses often consist of a male priest celebrating the liturgy alone or in the presence of other members of their communities; therefore, the majority of those receiving the Eucharist at this time are ordained men.

But on the other hand, many women are finding ways to minister beyond walls, remotely, and through creative use of online platforms. This is a living example of how, despite the obstacles they face, women who minister find a way.

Survey Charts, Graphs, and Narrative Responses

Our survey respondents, Catholic women ages 21-40, provided the following answers in four categories: Catholic Identity; Education; Ministry and Ordination; and Opportunities and Barriers.

Catholic Identity (p. 16-21):

Age of Baptism
Current Religious Service Setting
Frequency of Religious Services
Importance of Catholic Identity
Vocational Call
Joys of Being Catholic

Education (p. 21-28):

Catholic Education (pre-grad school)
Enrollment or graduation in higher education
Type of Degree Programs
Higher Education Setting
Volunteer Work in Catholic Settings
Student Loans
Grants and Financial Support
Emotional and Spiritual Support
Employment Status
Field of Employment
Religious Affiliations of Employers

Ministry & Ordination (p. 29-34):

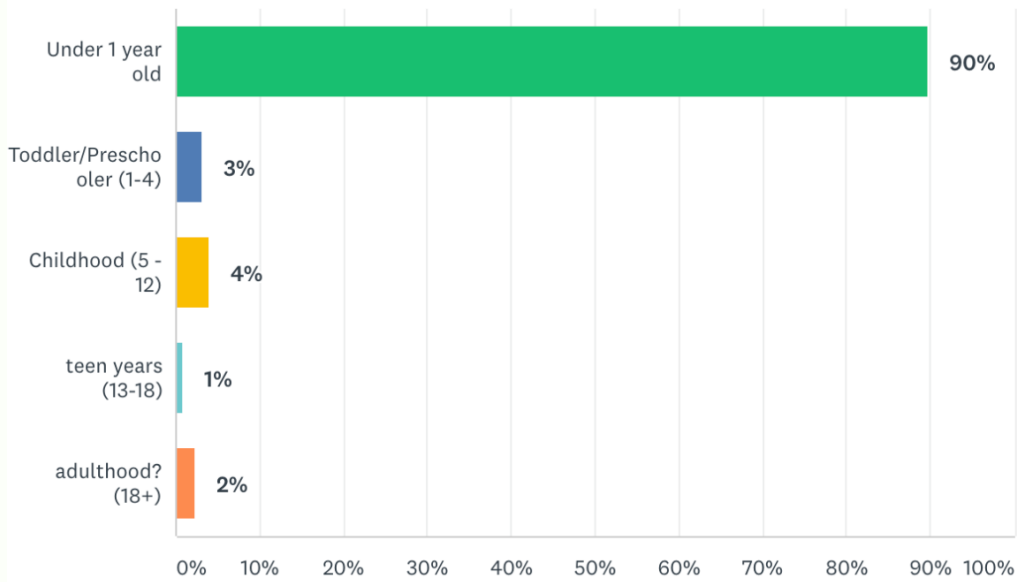
Opportunities for Ministry in the local Roman Catholic Church
Opportunities for Ministry in the global Roman Catholic Church
Recognition of Ministry Locally
Recognition Ministry Globally
Value of Women's Vocations
Ordination of Women as Deacons
Ordination of Women as Priests
Pursuing Ordination to the Diaconate or Priesthood
Ordination Through Independent Catholic Movements

Opportunities & Barriers (p. 35-48):

Opportunities for Catholic Women
Barriers and Challenges Experienced
Barriers and Challenges for Women in the Church Today
Most Crucial Changes

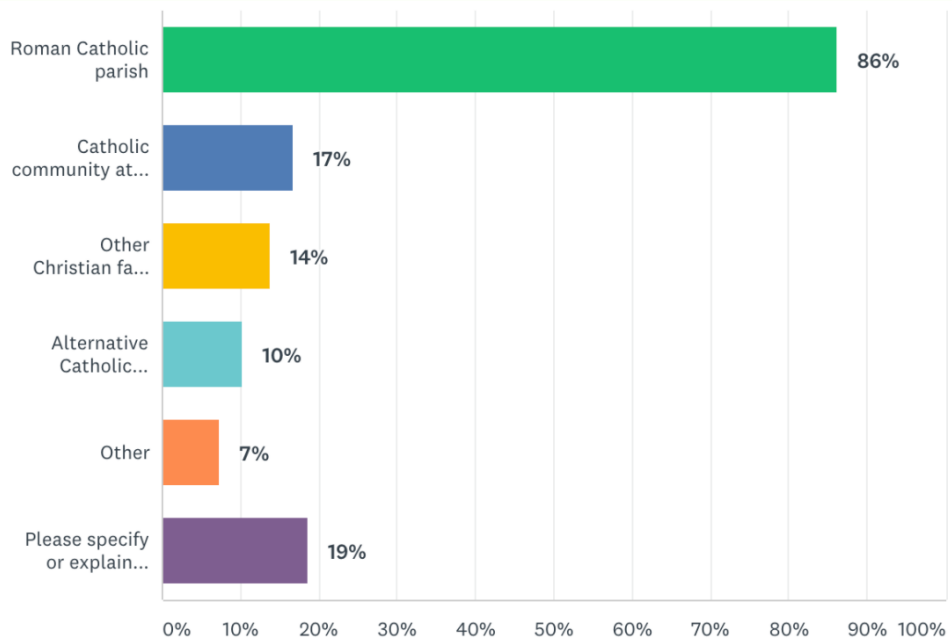
Age of Baptism

Ninety-seven percent of respondents baptized before the age of twelve.



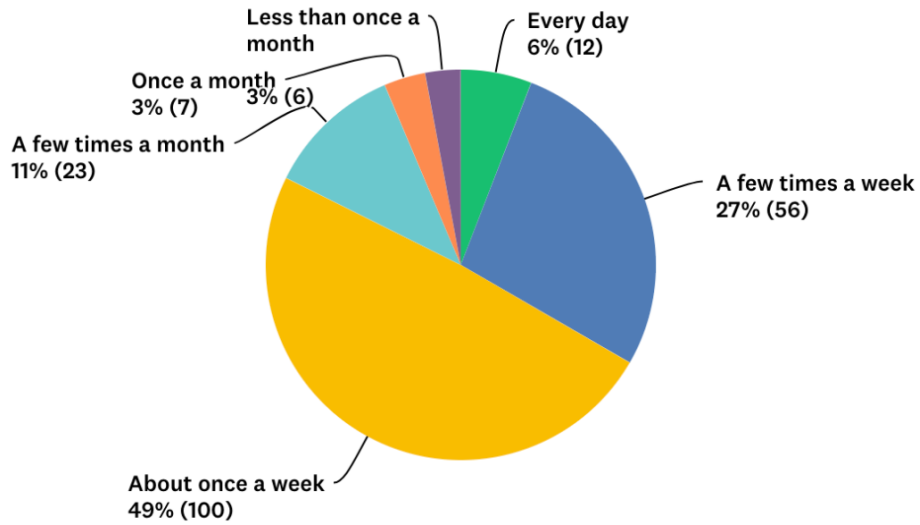
Current Religious Service Setting

Eighty-six percent attend a Roman Catholic Church parish.



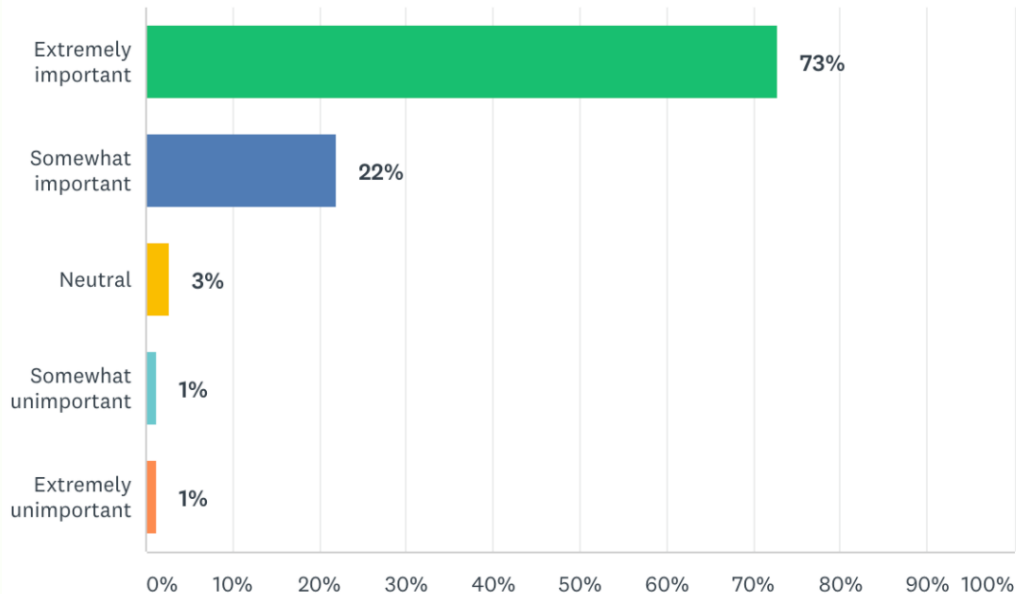
Frequency of Religious Service Attendance

Eighty-two percent attend Mass at least once a week.



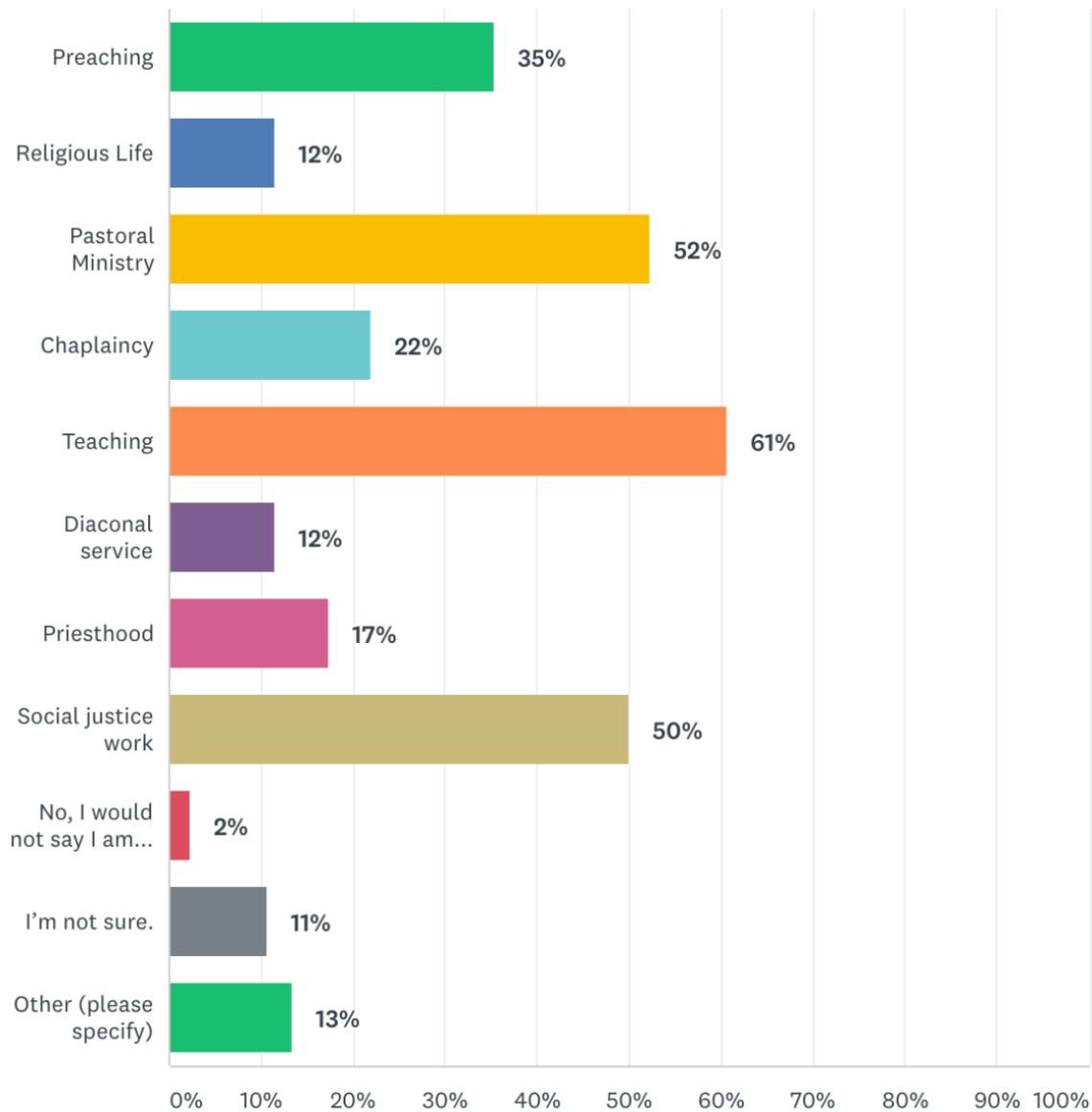
Importance of Catholic Identity

Seventy-three percent of respondents described their Catholic identity as "extremely important" to them.



Vocational Call

Respondents were instructed to select all that apply. Four percent included "motherhood" in the "Other" section.



Joys of Being Catholic

This was an open-ended question and the following themes emerged.

Rank	Theme	# of Comments	Percent of Comments
1	Sacraments/Liturgy/Ritual	102	22%
2	Community/Universal	85	18%
3	History/Tradition/Theology	56	12%
4	Social Justice/Catholic Social Teaching	43	9%
5	God/Holy Spirit/Jesus	36	8%
6	Communion of Saints/Mary	32	7%
7	Spirituality/Prayer/Mysticism	24	5%
8	Catholic Women/Women Religious	13	2.8%
8a	Music/art	13	2.8%
8b	Identity/heritage	13	2.8%
9	Moral teaching	11	2.3%
10	Scripture/Gospels	9	2%
11	Diversity	8	1.7%
12	Truth	6	1.3%
13	Resurrection	5	1%
14	Service/volunteering	5	1%
15	Catholic Workers	4	0.8%
16	Environment	3	0.6%
17	Nothing/Negative	3	0.6%
	TOTALS	471	100%

Representative Narrative Responses

#1 Sacraments, Liturgy, Ritual

"The deep tradition and ritual continually ties me to my faith. The Mass and the Eucharist, the communion and fullness of community, help me overcome all of my disagreements on doctrine and teaching."

"The sacraments and the community. If it was not for Christ['s] true presence in the Eucharist, I think this recent sex abuse scandal would have lead to my departure from the church."

#2 Community/Universal

"Being part of the universal Church. I love knowing that I am connected to Christians throughout the world and across time in a spiritual and institutional way."

"I like knowing that I am part of a community that has stood the test of time. I like knowing that I am not alone in my faith. And I like knowing that I can join a Catholic church no matter where I am and feel welcomed."

"It brings me joy to be a part of a tradition that is genuinely diverse and global - I have been to Mass in multiple countries with people from all over the world who speak different languages, but we all can share a liturgical space and community giving thanks and expressing lamentation. I love the beautiful art - from novels to hymns to cathedrals - and the beautiful lives that make up this tradition. It brings me joy to go to Mass and afterwards grab a drink with friends at the pub just around the corner - and I love that my tradition has taught me that both of those can be sacred spaces! It brings me joy to see the work for justice being done by Catholics all over the world, and in times of despair, it lifts my spirit to know that we do this work together, empowered by the grace of God ever-present. Finally, it brings me joy to be a part of a tradition that teaches that we are always in relationship to the horizon of God, who stretches out towards us in love."

Representative Narrative Responses

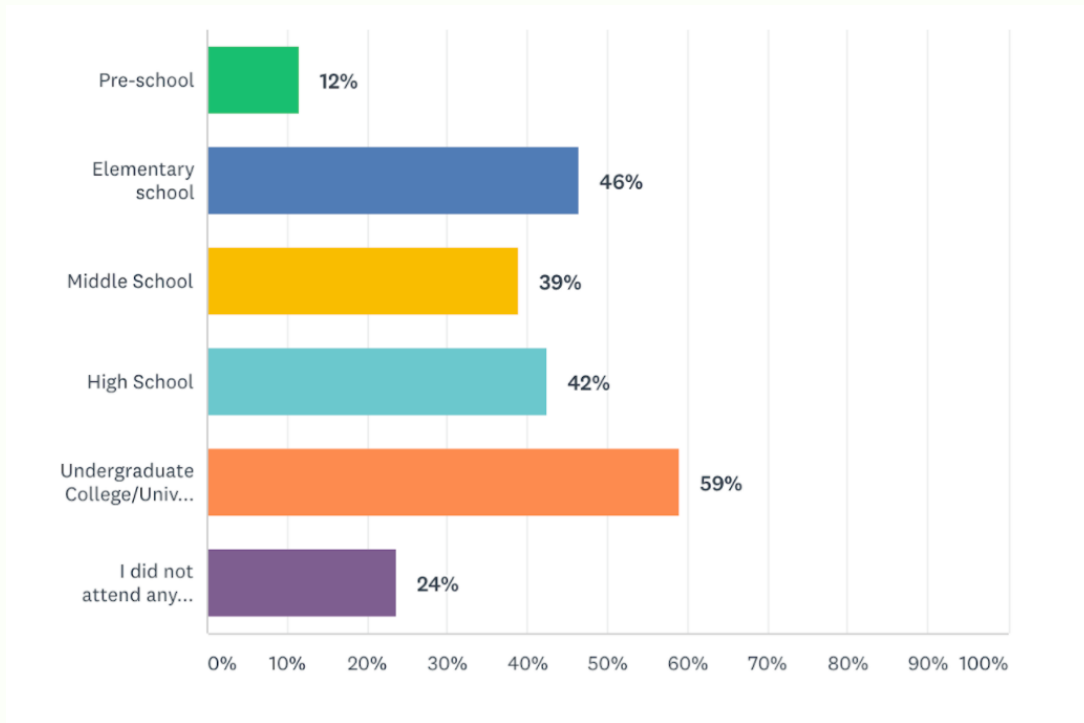
#3 History/Tradition/Theology

"We are rooted in tradition! And such an intellectual tradition!!"

"Our rich history and beautiful traditions. A sense of worldwide communion. The liturgy (although at the same time it pains me that it has been so dominated by ordained men in the last centuries). Our music, our theologians, especially women theologians. Our great social justice tradition and incredible worldwide outreach to those in need."

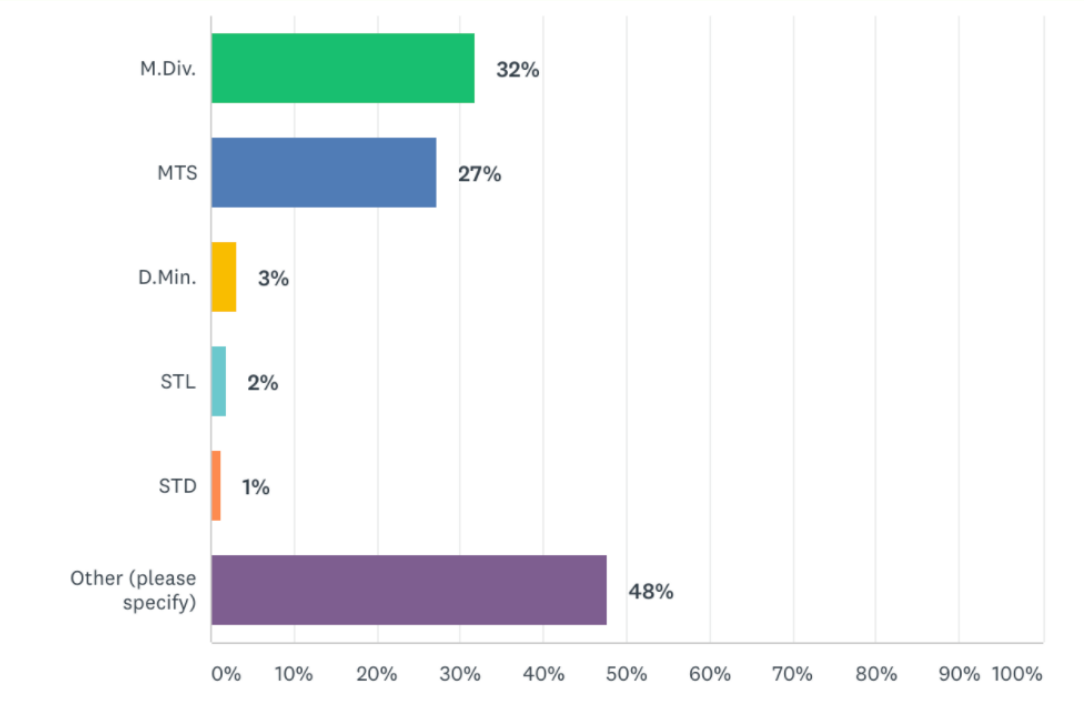
Catholic Education

Respondents were instructed to select all that applied. Seventy-six percent of respondents attended some form of Catholic schooling during their education.



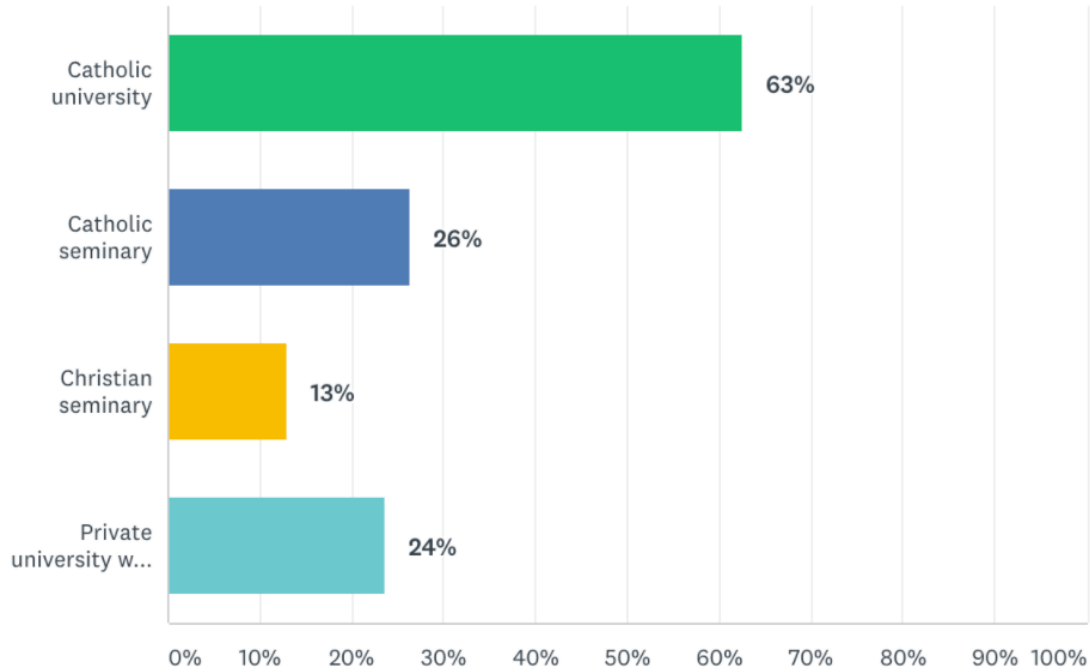
Degree Program

"Other" largely included M.A. programs and Ph.D. programs, with 15 respondents specifically indicating an M.A. in Pastoral Studies.



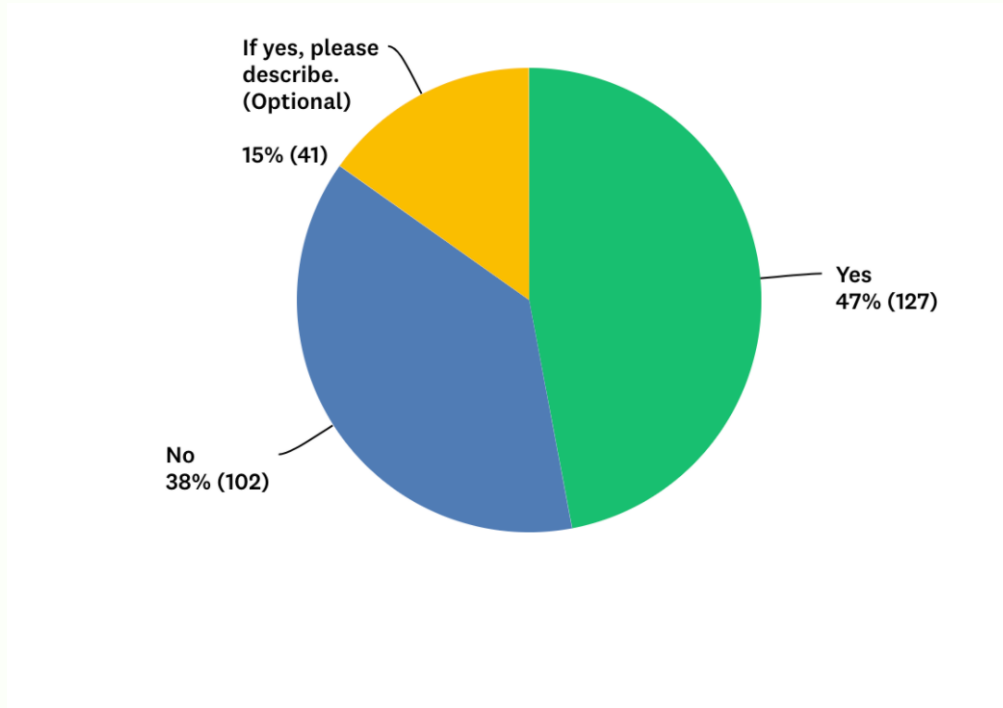
Higher Education Setting

Most respondents (eighty-nine percent) attend or attended a Catholic university or seminary. Twenty-four percent attended a private university with a school of religion or divinity.



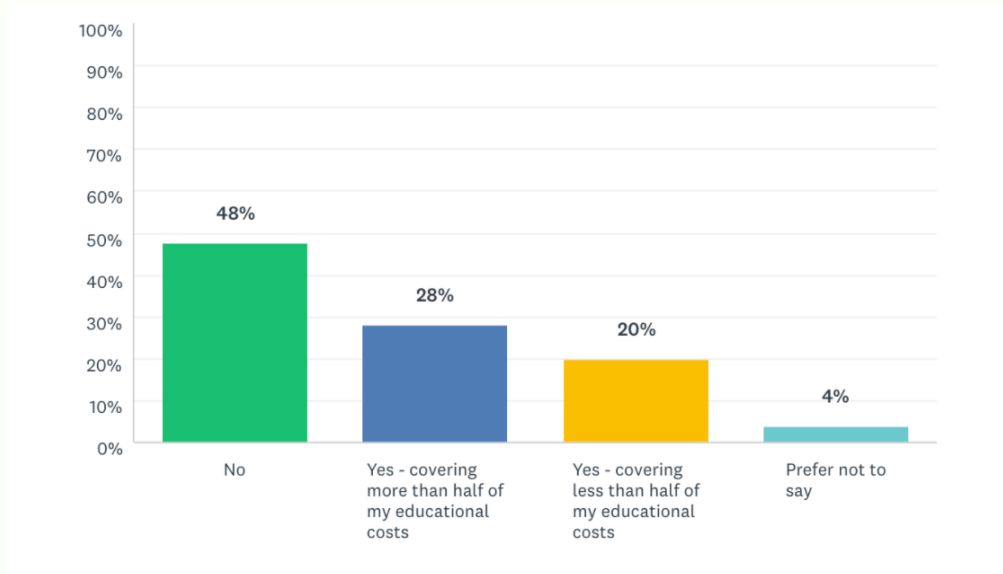
Volunteer in Catholic Settings

Nearly half volunteer in a Catholic setting. For the fifteen percent who opted to describe their volunteer work, fifty-three percent (18 respondents) named parishes as the site of their volunteer work.



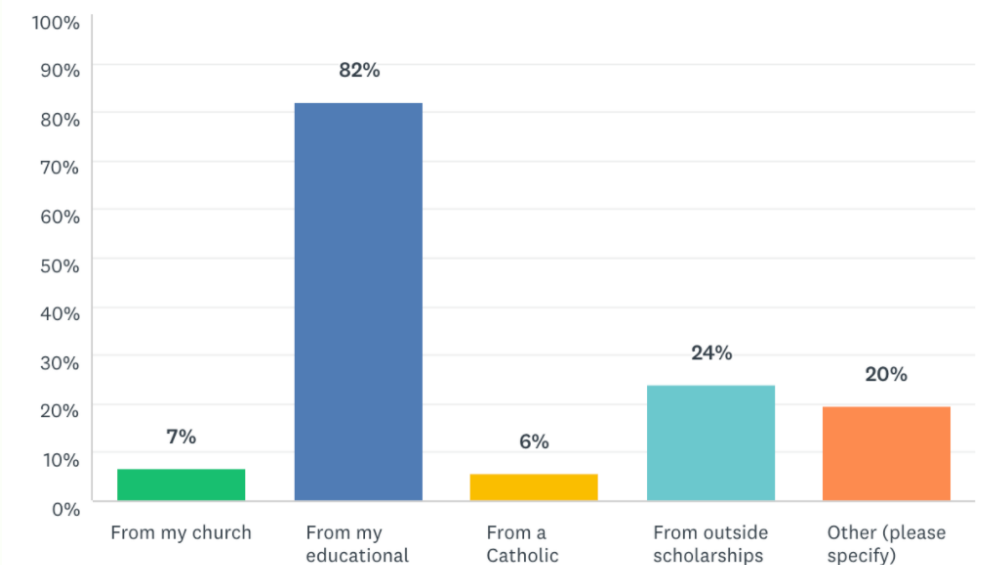
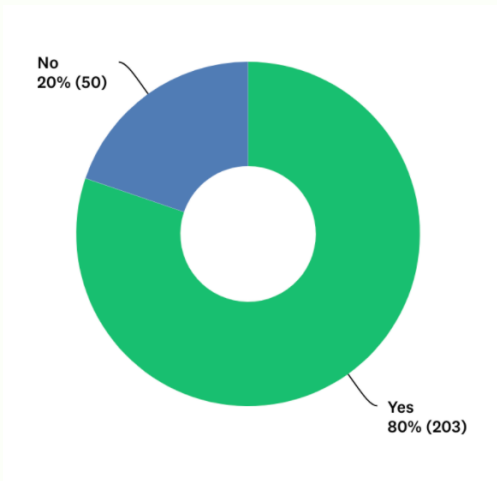
Student Loans

Of those who opted to respond, respondents were split equally between those who received and those who did not receive loans for their educational costs (forty-eight percent).



Grants and Financial Support

Eight percent of our respondents received grants, scholarships, or non-loan financial support for their degree, with a large majority receiving financial support from their educational institutions. The most frequently cited "Other" response was support from family members.



Emotional and Spiritual Support

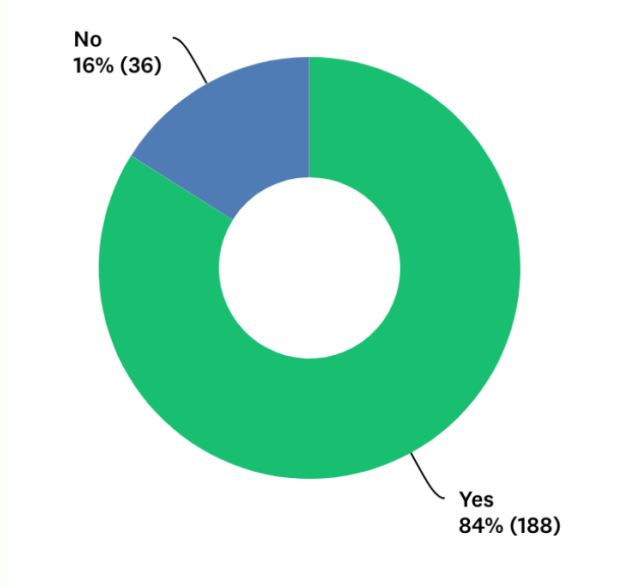
When asked what other support, either institutional or personal, experienced during work or study, this open-ended question showed an even representation of support from a spiritual director or program, and community.

Rank	Theme	# of Comments	Percent of Comments
1	Spiritual Director / Pastoral Counseling/ Mentor/ Chaplain	80	25%
2	Lay Faith Community/ Women's Prayer Groups/ WOC/ RCWP/ CTA	60	13%
3	Friends	39	12%
4	Colleagues/ Fellow Students/ Co-workers	37	11%
5	Family (including Parents)	30	9%
6	Faculty / Academic adviser/ Campus Ministry (often women)	29	9%
7	Partner/ Spouse	18	6%
8	Pastor/ Priests	13	4%
9	Women & Men Religious	12	4%
10	Inadequate Support/ No Support	4	1%
	TOTAL	322	100%

(Data analyzed by Aisha Taylor, Ph.D.)

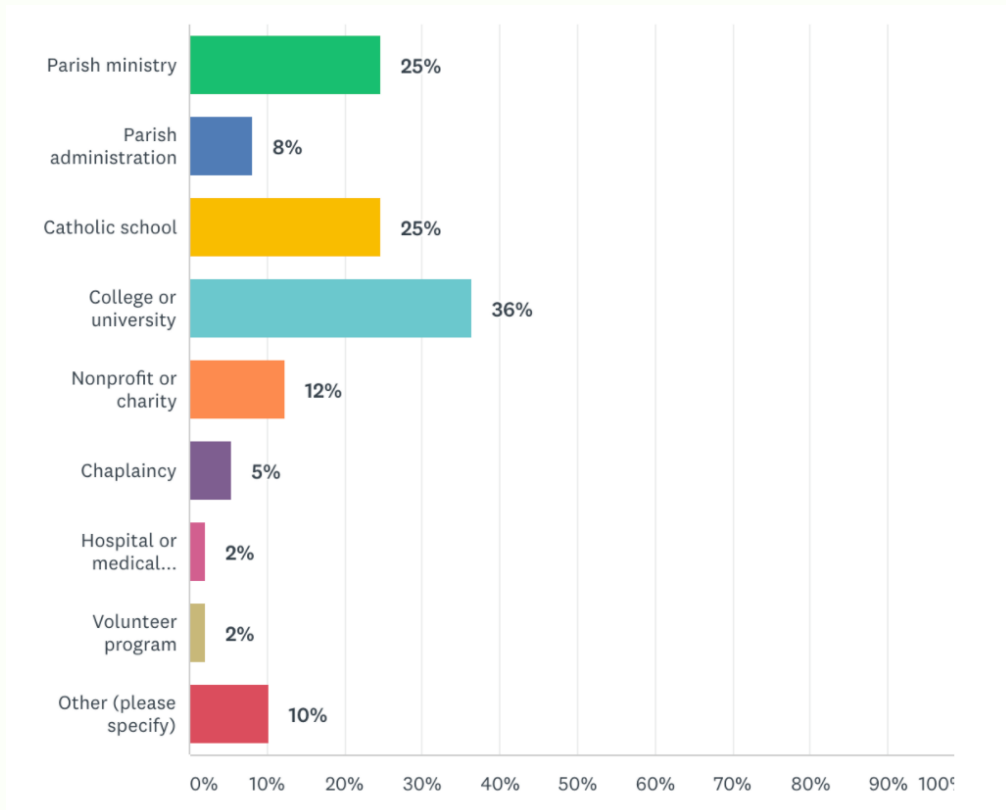
Employment Status

When asked if currently employed, eight-four percent responded yes.



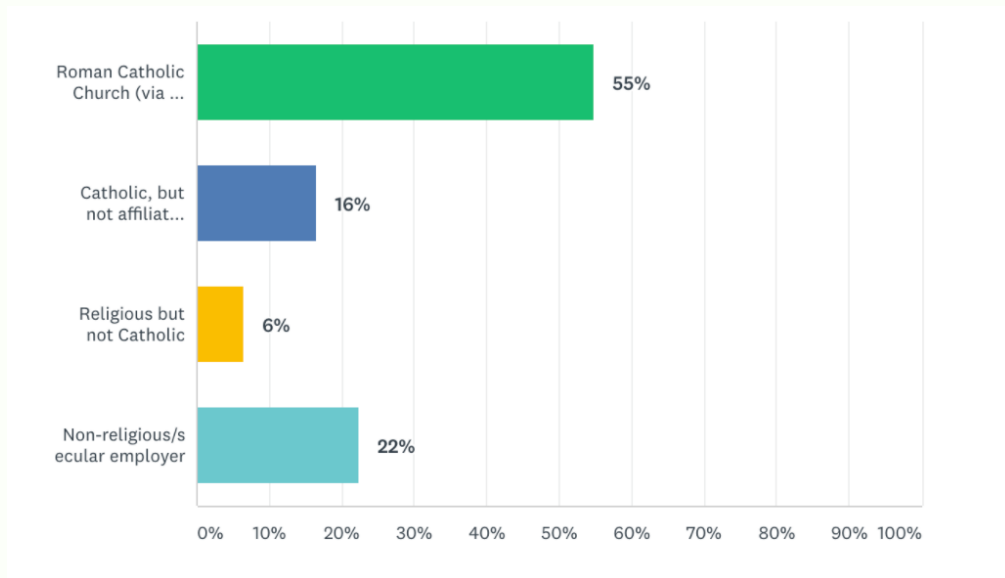
Field of Employment

The top fields of employment for respondents were education—either at colleges and universities or Catholic K-12 schools—and parish ministry.



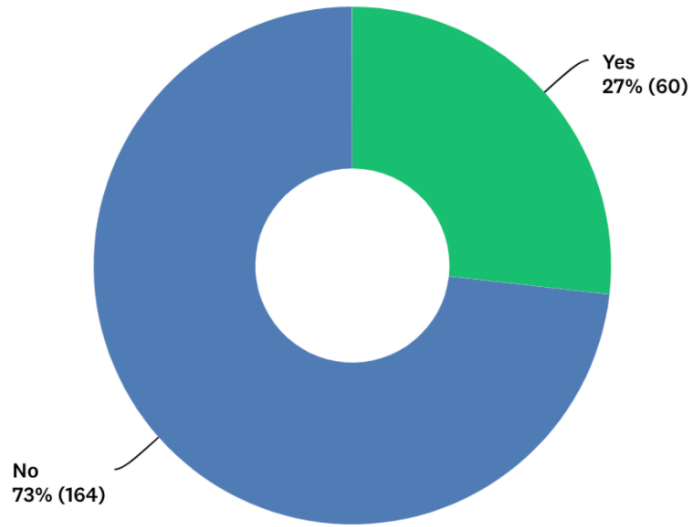
Religious Affiliation of Employers

Fifty-five percent are employed by the Roman Catholic Church, and fifteen percent are employed by non-institutional Catholic organizations, schools, or social efforts.



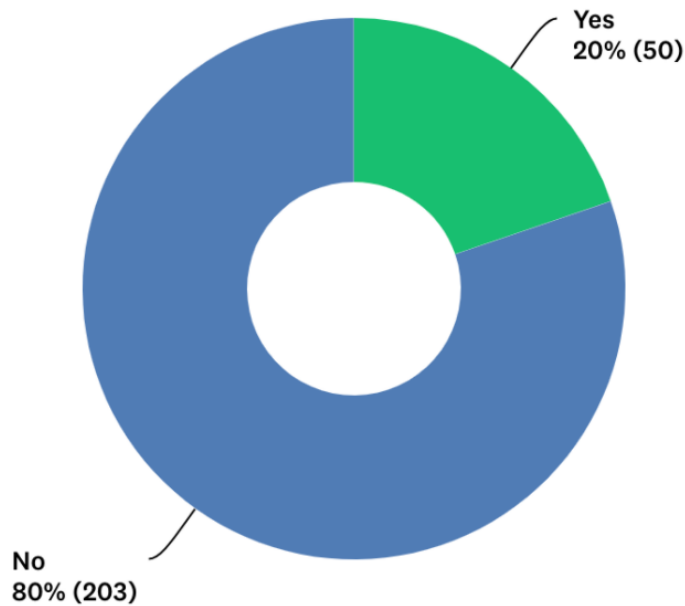
Satisfaction with Opportunities for Ministry in the Local Roman Catholic Church

When asked if satisfied with the opportunities for women in ministry locally, only twenty-seven percent replied yes.



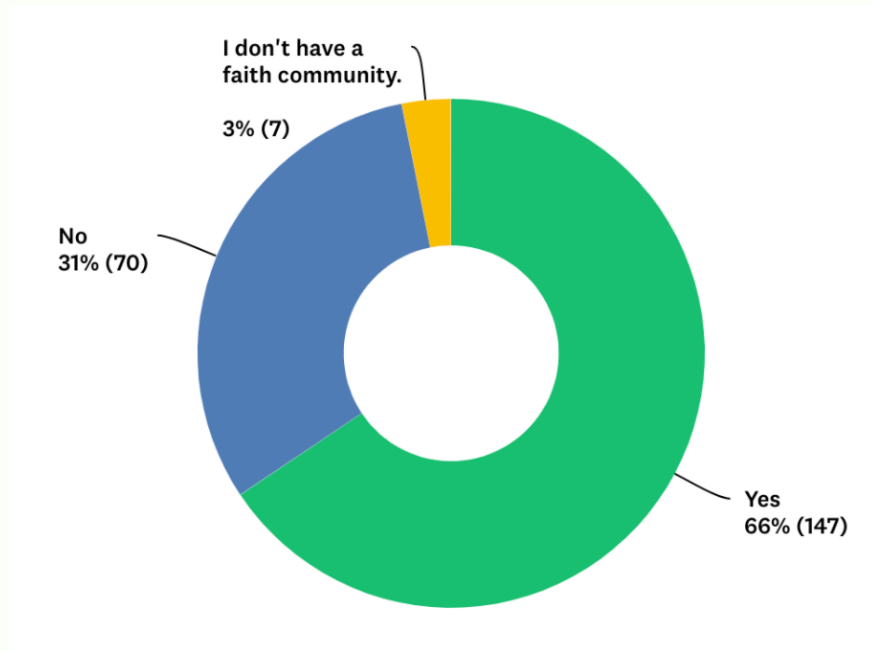
Satisfaction with Opportunities for Ministry in the Global Roman Catholic Church

Even fewer respondents - twenty percent - said they were satisfied with the opportunities for ministry for women in the global Church.



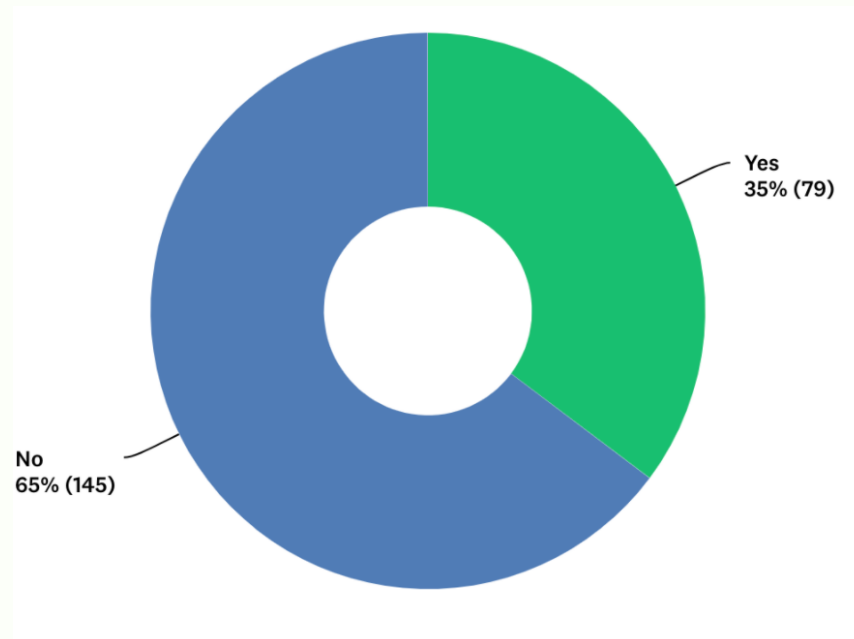
Recognition of Ministry Locally

Two-thirds of respondents said they feel that their ministry or vocation is recognized in their local faith community.



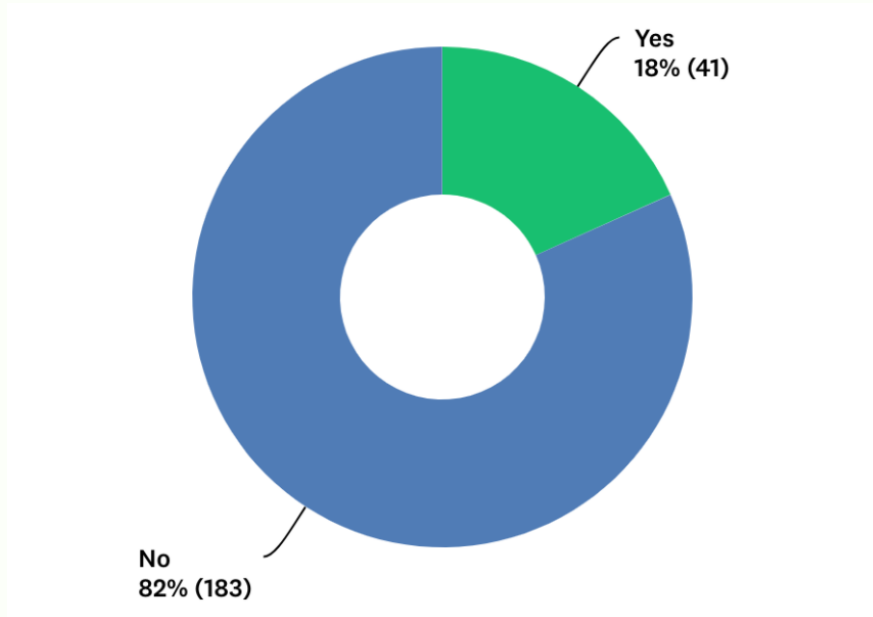
Recognition of Ministry Globally, in the Institutional Church

Only thirty-five percent of respondents said they felt that the global institution of the Church recognized their ministry or vocation.



Value of Women's Vocations

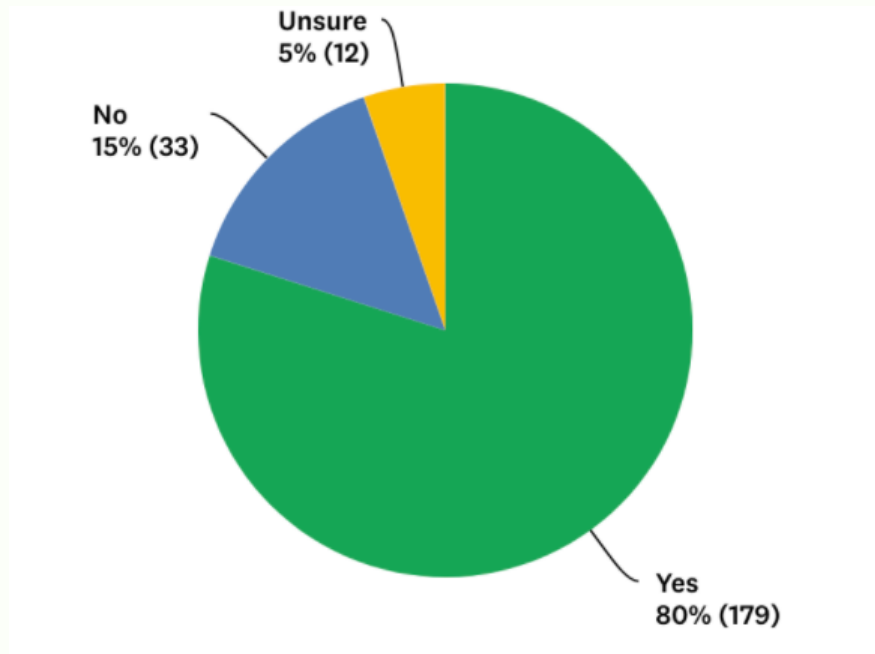
More than eight out of ten respondents answered that the institutional church valued the ministries of women less than those of men.



In your opinion, does the institutional Church value women's ministries and vocations equally to that of men?

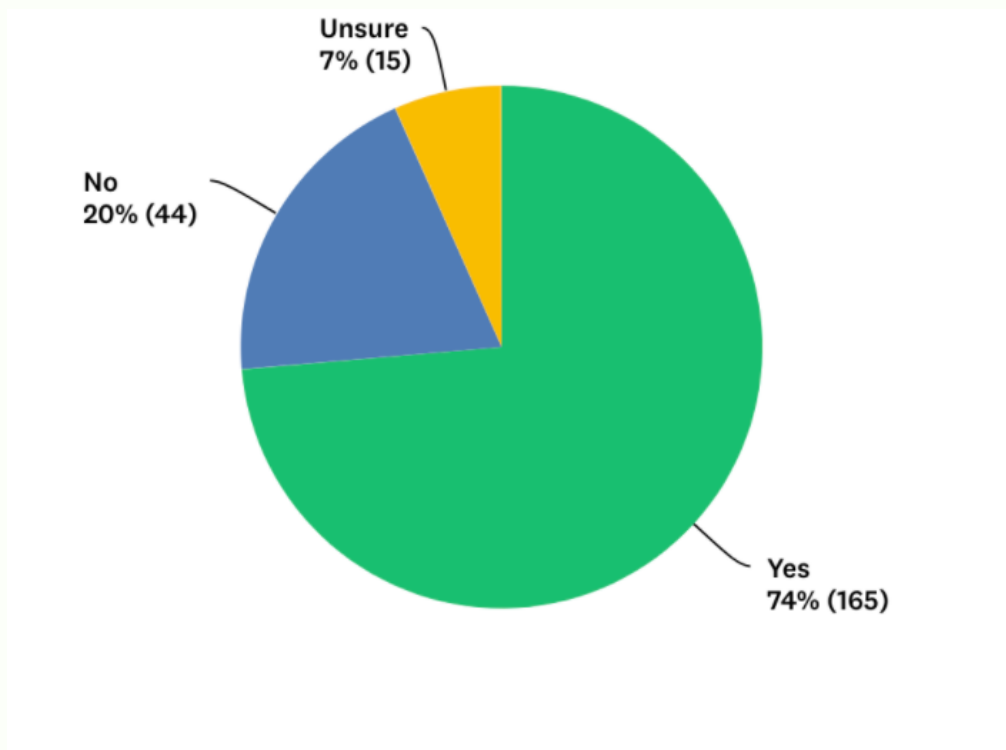
Ordination of Women as Deacons: Theoretically Possible?

Eighty percent of respondents answered that it is "theoretically possible" for the Roman Catholic Church to ordain women as deacons.



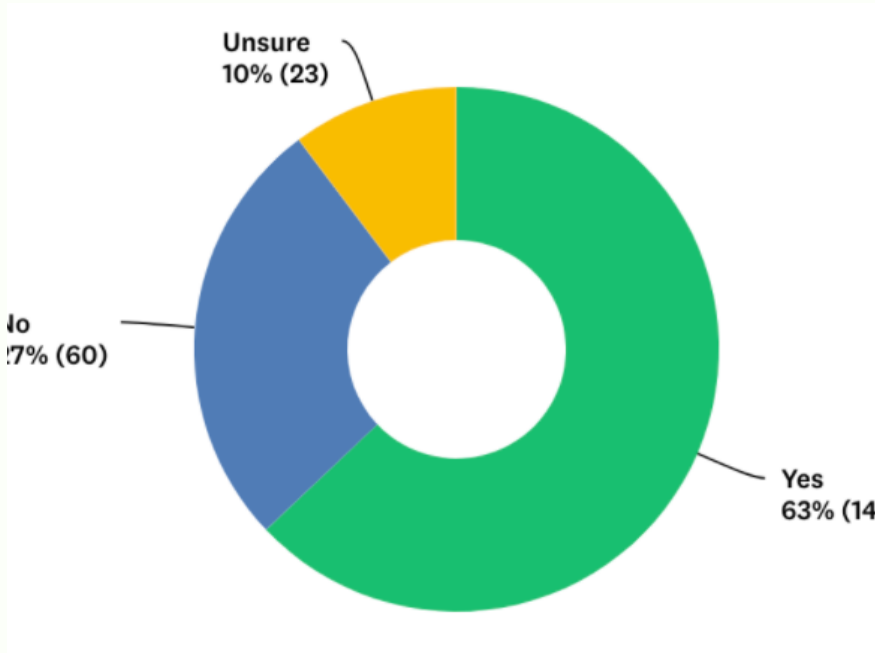
Should the Church Ordain Women as Deacons?

Slightly fewer—seventy-four percent—said the Church "should" ordain women as deacons.



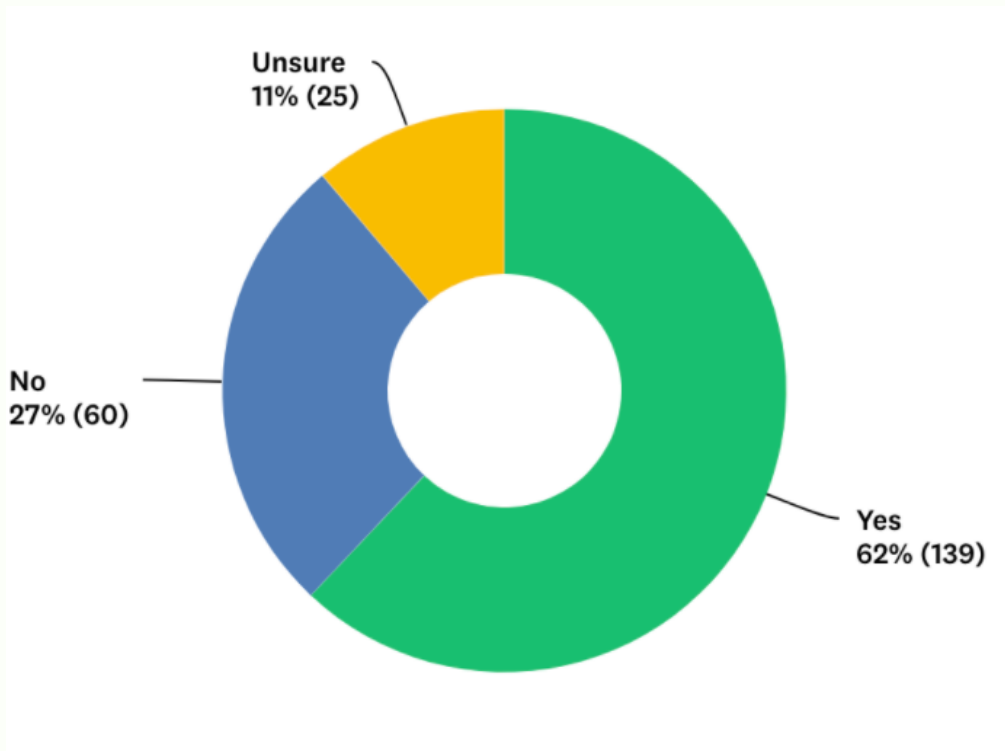
Ordination of Women as Priests: Theoretically Possible?

About two-thirds of respondents answered that it is "theoretically possible" for the Roman Catholic Church to ordain women as priests.



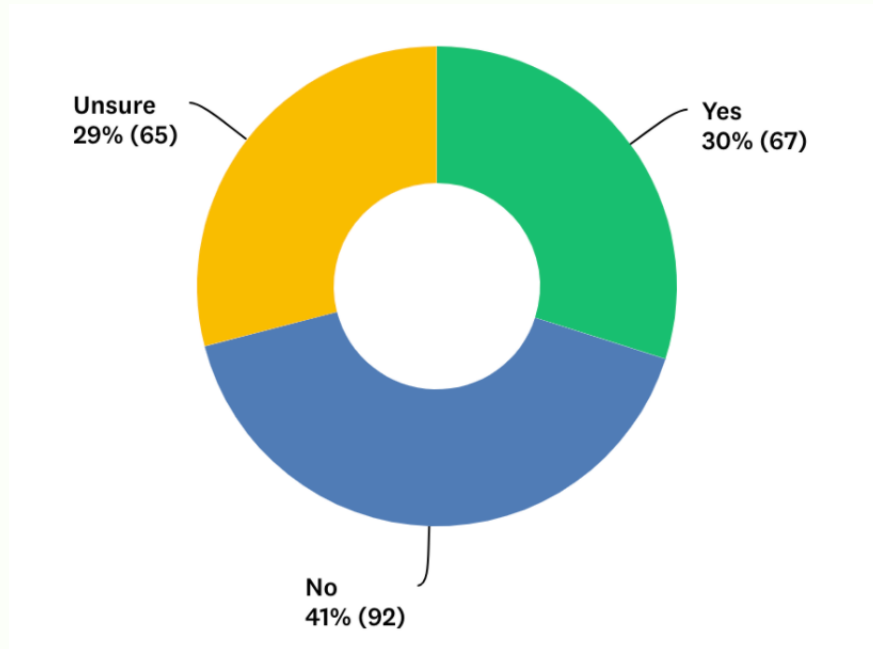
Should the Church Ordain Women as Priests?

Nearly the same number—sixty-two percent—said the Church "should" ordain women as priests.



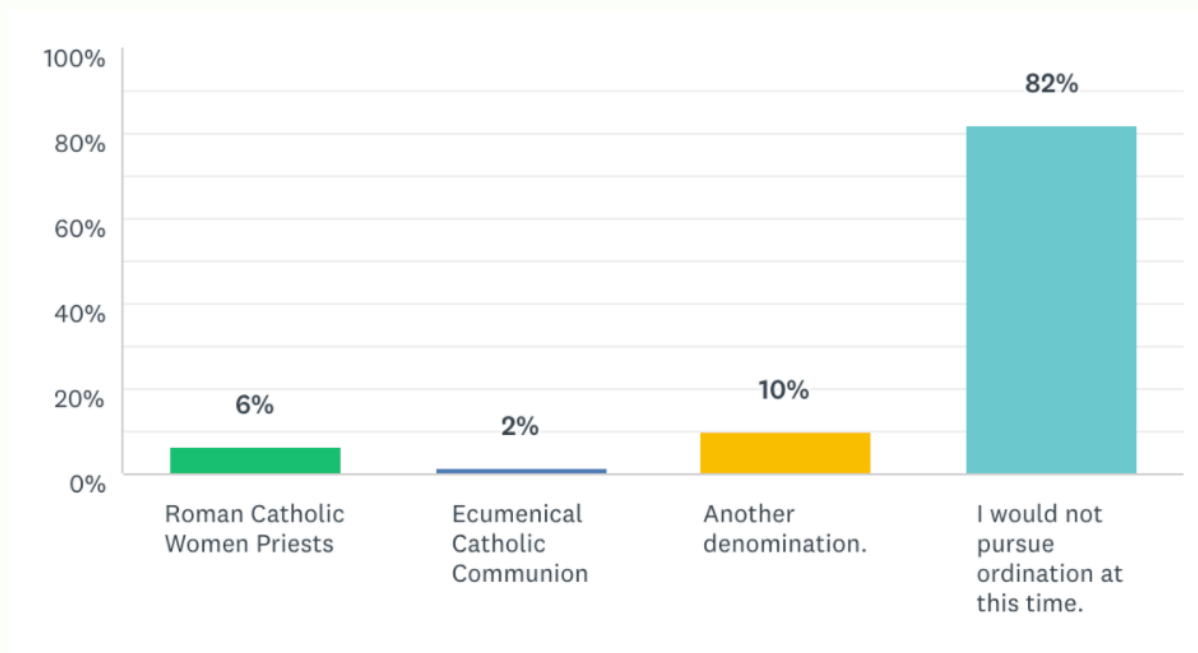
Pursuing Ordination to the Diaconate or Priesthood

Forty-one percent of respondents would not pursue ordination to the diaconate or priesthood if the Church opened those ministries to women.



Ordination Through Independent Catholic Movements

Most respondents would not pursue ordination through independent Catholic movements that receive women as candidates for the diaconate and priesthood.



Opportunities for Catholic Women

When asked what opportunities they see for themselves as a Catholic woman in the Church today, the most frequent response to the open-ended question was spiritual direction or advising, or various lay ministries, followed by teaching. The third most frequent response was "none/inadequate."

Rank	Theme	# of Comments	Percent of Comments
1	Spiritual Director or Advising/ Pastoral Counseling/ Mentor/ Chaplain / Lay Ministries	64	18.6%
2	Teaching, non-university level	60	17.5%
3	Inadequate/None	53	15.5%
4	Community leader / social justice / volunteer	49	14%
5	Liturgical or pastoral ministries	41	12%
6	Theologian / University Faculty	29	8.5%
7	Administrative Support	19	5.5%
8	Religious Live	13	3.8%
9	Retreat Leader	8	2.3%
10	Advisory (to men)	7	2%
	TOTAL	343	99.7%

Representative Narrative Responses

*#1 Spiritual Director or Advising/ Pastoral Counseling/ Mentor/
Chaplain / Lay Ministries*

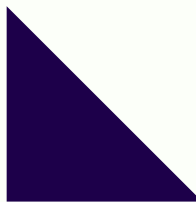

"If I was willing to not talk about issues that are important to me, then I could do pastoral ministry or work at a diocese".

"Innumerable volunteering and employment opportunities as our parishes would utterly collapse without women on the ground level. Women work at all levels in my diocese, too. It would be good to get more professional women involved at the Vatican level too."

#2 Teaching

"Teaching, nun, or working for USCCB (None of which I feel called towards)"

"I've worked in ministry and pursued a degree in Theology. I've found that I am generally supported in pursuing as much education and training in these fields as I want. There are ample opportunities for me to volunteer to help my local church community or the Archdiocese I'm located within. I appreciate being able to use my talents and time for something bigger than myself."



Representative Narrative Responses

#3 Inadequate/None

"This will be my last job within a Catholic context. It is too painful; I cannot keep participating in my own oppression."

"I don't see any more opportunities for me in the Catholic Church. Until women are ordained, how can there be? Every day I discern leaving. I go to an Episcopal Church regularly now. But it's so hard and so painful."

"None where I can be fully myself. It's so many ways we are required to become inauthentic, to become less. Sad about this."

"I'm honestly trying to figure out how to get out of employment from the Catholic church so that I can live out and free with my family. If that happens finally, I could see myself still volunteering in progressive parish or retreat center settings because I really value the work being done at the margins. It'd just be nice to do it without risking my family's livelihood."

Representative Narrative Responses

#4 Community leader/social justice/volunteer:

"I see myself called to agitate, irritate, comfort those who suffer, and bear prophetic witness. This may be on the fringes of the institutional church, but this is where the church is most alive."

"I want to be part of a movement to advocate for women to be restored to the permanent diaconate -- and to grow in our gifts for preaching, pastoral ministry, and integration with powerful organizations for social/economic/climate/racial justice in the wider world."

"Few in the institutional church, more on the margins, speaking truth to power."

"I do not see any opportunities nor am not interested in working for the mainline Catholic church. I see our greatest opportunity in re-awakening the church on the margins, a voice that cries out to the Church-Aligned-with-Empire that is our institutional church today. As a Catholic woman, I see my greatest opportunity personally in healing work on those margins with people who have experienced spiritual/religious trauma and yet for whom the power of the Gospel and the presence of Jesus still feels potent. As a queer woman, working mostly with unchurched/non-churched or spiritual-but-not-religious folks, I see an opportunity to alternatively represent Catholic identity and a way to reconcile being a follower of Christ with ideals of plurality, ecological reverence, mystical unity/mystery, and cultural restoration."

Barriers and Challenges Experienced in Work or Studies

When asked what barriers or challenges, either institutional or personal, experienced in your work or studies, the most frequent response was sexism, outdated gender roles, or lack of women's ordination as a type of "glass ceiling."

Rank	Theme	# of Comments	Percent of Comments
1	Sexism/ Outdated Gender Roles/ Lack of Women's Ordination	65	22%
2	Finances/ Cost of Studies/ Low Wages & High Cost of Living	47	16%
3	Clericalism/ Women's Ministry Undervalued & Overlooked	39	13%
4	Lack of Job Opportunities (especially In Catholic Institutions)/ Less Qualified Men Often Preferred	33	11%
5a	Lack of Study or Work/Life Balance/ Burnout/ Isolation	26	9%
5b	Lack of Support & Resources that Ordination-Track Men Have	26	9%
6	Male-dominated Classrooms / Bullying, Hostile, Abusive Professors, and Male Classmates/ Sexual Harassment	18	6%
7	Heterosexism/ Homophobia	17	6%
8	Intersections Of Oppression: Sexism, Racism, Heterosexism, Ageism	12	4%
9	Being Catholic In Protestant Spaces/ Protestant Condescension	9	1%
	TOTAL	291	100%

(data analyzed by Aisha Taylor, PhD)

Representative Narrative Responses

#1 Sexism/ Outdated Gender Roles/ Lack of Women's Ordination:

"The sexism in Catholic Theological Higher Ed is deep and pernicious, and... runs rampant in classes/discussions and makes the learning space unsafe for Catholic women."

"My expertise is in liturgy and preaching, but men preparing or having already been ordained often balk at learning 'priestly arts' from a lay woman. It is not uncommon to be interrupted, corrected, or challenged in a graduate theology class for introducing topics or viewpoints that are not simply parroting current ecclesial documents."

"Internalized structures that say women should not speak at the pulpit, that they are not to be listened to with authority, that they should be nice and amicable only, and easy going."

Representative Narrative Responses

#2 Finances/ Cost of Studies/ Low Wages & High Cost of Living

"Financial-- paying for studies and loan repayment that I can't meet on the salary range of this employment field."

"It is also difficult for women in ministry to advocate for themselves financially. My 12 years in education have been formative and valuable but have not fully used my best vocational gifts. I found myself there because it was the only branch that could use my skills and also pay the bills... We are missing out by making ministry something lay people can only do if they have a financially successful partner, or have spent years clawing their way to some degree of financial stability."

"I experience challenges financially as well because of the high cost of living in my city and the low paying nature of ministry jobs, hence why I have both a full time and part time job to supplement my income. "

Noteworthy comment:

"I cannot bring about any of the changes that I notice need to happen in the institutional church."

Barriers and Challenges for Women in the Church Today

When asked what barriers and challenges one sees for herself as a Catholic woman in the Church today, the most frequent comment was feeling unheard or unaccepted because of clerical structures, followed by a lack of opportunities for leadership, professional growth, or ordination.

Rank	Theme	# of Comments	Percent of Comments
1	Clericalism/Unheard/Acceptance	86	28%
2	Leadership/Ordination/Professional Opportunities	74	24%
3	Intersecting Oppressions: Ageism, Sexism, Patriarchy	57	18%
4	Financial	20	7%
5	Institutional	14	5%
6	Emotional/Mental	12	4%
6a	Conservatism/Orthodoxy	11	4%
7	Balance/Family	10	3%
7a	LGBTQIA issues	10	3%
7b	None	10	3%
8	Sexual Abuse	3	1%
9	Abortion	2	.6%
	TOTAL	309	100%

Representative Narrative Responses

#1 Clericalism/Being unheard/Acceptance

"I often feel like my voice and opinion are not valued as highly. I also feel like I am shut out of spaces that priests are warmly welcomed into without question."

"Lay-ordained collaboration can be especially challenging being a young, professional, lay woman. The ordained do not always see me as an informed, formed, authority. Students also assume that ordained members are more qualified than lay people to come to with questions or seeking guidance."

"So many priests still operate from a clerical model, which has really oppressed my ministry up until now."

Representative Narrative Responses

#2 Leadership/Professional Opportunity/Ordination

"I see the challenge of leadership in the church being a barrier for me. Effective leadership where others listen to me with seriousness and great intentionality. I feel that as a woman leader many men might not take me seriously as a Catholic woman who has an advanced degree in theology."

"As a woman I don't have an opportunity to have a place at the table in the hierarchy of the church. I don't ever have the opportunity to preach or to hear someone who looks like me preach in a mass setting, with a ready audience. It often feels like I have to convince people that I have something meaningful or valuable to contribute - I have to work hard to earn any influence I might have."

"Being considered a serious theologian will certainly be a challenge, at least by the majority of those who consider themselves to be loyal Catholics. Such people generally do not respect or take seriously female theologians. I see almost no way that my theological contribution could have a further impact in Church teaching or policy. The Church's theology is written and proclaimed by men."

Representative Narrative Responses

#3 Intersecting Oppressions

"It's tough to gain respect in a parish community as a young woman. Folks are either dismissive, patronizing, or just fascinated as if I'm on display."

"Toxic misogyny, patriarchy, oppressive gender roles, backwards framing of Mary and other female mystics/saints, dealing with women who have internalized toxic gender roles. I worked at the Archdiocese for four years and can go on and on with the toxic work culture, especially the sexual harassment."

Most Crucial Changes

When asked what the most crucial change or changes they would like to see in the Roman Catholic Church, we found many intersectional responses, but the most frequently cited response was women's leadership, followed by women's ordination.

Rank	Theme	# of Comments	Percent of Comments
1	Women's Inclusion	73	20%
2	Women's Ordination (diaconate and priesthood)	70	19%
3	Address Clericalism, better training for priests	52	14%
4	LGBT Inclusion	32	9%
5	Total restructure/revolution needed	31	8.5%
6	Radical Social Justice; Service to Marginalized Communities.	28	8%
7	Culture Shift	26	7%
8	Address Sexual Abuse Within the Church	23	6%
9	Return to Orthodoxy and Tradition	21	6%
10 (Tied)	Optional Celibacy for Men	4	1%
	And Things are OK as they are	4	1%
	TOTAL	364	99.5%

Representative Narrative Responses

(Note: we found these responses to be intersectional, including many changes within one response, so have included a variety representing the five most cited categories.)

"Women's leadership needs to be systemically elevated, both by admitting women to ordained ministries and by holding the ways that women already lead on par with male, ordained practices of leadership. Moreover, local communities need to reimagine what ministry looks like beyond service to the nuclear family or a single constituency (ie university students on a college campus)."

"Clericalism is the worst. I want to see a departure from authoritarianism. Whether from a priest, bishop, or nun, the "because I said so" mentality is frustrating. The power structure is flawed, and it makes keeping power the primary purpose rather than spiritual growth."

"The Catholic Church desperately needs to change its sexual ethics and treatment of LGBTQ people. I would like to see women ordained and for the Church to more boldly live out its Catholic Social Teaching and commitment to the marginalized."

Representative Narrative Responses

"Real change to seminarian formation and an end to clerical culture, real (not token) roles for women in the church, a return to early-church communal life together, valuing all the gifts and calls of the Christian community. Women's ordination."

"Change the structure: ordain women. This isn't just about women's ordination, though. It's about bringing new life and a new way of understanding the Gospel and the church to the church. If women were ordained by the structure and kept otherwise the same, it wouldn't work. We need outside voices, ordained and non-ordained, involved in making decisions. We need the leadership to actually listen to the people. We need decision making to be shared by the church."

The Researchers

Kate McElwee, Executive Director

(she/her/hers)

Kate currently serves as the Executive Director of the Women's Ordination Conference, where she has worked since 2011. Kate attended Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts earning her B.A. in Religion and later attended SOAS in London, earning an M.A. in International Human Rights Law. Kate serves on the Leadership Circle of Women's Ordination Worldwide and the Parish Council of Caravita Catholic Community in Rome, where she and her husband have lived since 2014.

Katie Lacz, Program Associate

(she/her/hers)

Katie works as Program Associate for the Women's Ordination Conference, where she has worked since 2018. She holds an M.Div. from the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in Berkeley, CA, and earned her B.A. in Journalism from Ithaca College. Her previous work experience has centered on the intersection of faith and social justice with young adults working on the margins, and community organizing against the death penalty. She is a trained spiritual director, and she lives outside Boulder, CO, with her husband and two young children.

About the Women's Ordination Conference

Founded in 1975, the Women's Ordination Conference is the oldest and largest organization working to ordain women as deacons, priests, and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic Church.

A feminist voice for women in the Roman Catholic Church, WOC is a grassroots-driven movement that promotes activism, dialogue, and prayerful witness to call for women's full equality in the Church.

Visit womensordination.org for more information.