

# Receive Her in the Lord

## *Reimagining Women's Participation in a Synodal Church*

### **A Synthesis Report of the Synodal Thematic Forum on Women's Participation in the Church**

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## Introduction

*The synodal consultations report that hearing the joys and witnessing to the wounds that others have experienced, with an inclined heart, has opened a way forward for the Church in the United States to better experience and express its communion as a people united in a common faith. The next step for the U.S. Church is to give special attention to its parishes and dioceses, even as we continue participation in the continental and universal phases of the Synod, for that is where the People of God most concretely encounter the Spirit at work and where the first fruits of this discernment will be realized. The call is an ongoing challenge. (U.S. National Synthesis Report, 12)*

In May 2023, in the midst of the continental stage of the global Synod on Synodality, nearly 200 individuals from across the Archdiocese of Seattle gathered for a synodal discernment event focused on the question of reimagining women's participation in the Church, which had surfaced as a key theme on every continent in the synod's first stage.<sup>1</sup>

It is our hope that this report, which seeks to synthesize what was shared at that gathering, arrives as a gift – to our archdiocesan, parish, and organizational leaders, as well as to everyday Catholics and all people of goodwill. We hope this gift is one that illuminates experiences of the faithful and broadens the horizons of our imagination, guided by the Holy Spirit, in particular as the Church in Western Washington embarks on the historic Partners in the Gospel effort, which will ask us all to grow in our practices of synodality and to imagine and live into new ways of being church together. Concretely, parishes and other Catholic institutions may choose to utilize these pages in local listening sessions as they consider the roles of women in their communities, as we are asked to practice journeying together in synodality both during Partners in the Gospel and in an ongoing way in the Global Synod, especially following this October's General Assembly of Bishops.

Since May's gathering, the vitality of questions about women's participation in the Church were reaffirmed when in June 2023 the Vatican released the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL). The IL reflects the fruits of the synod's continental stage and sets the agenda for the General Assembly of Bishops in October 2023, which, for the first time in history, will include laypersons, including 56 women, as voting members. Women's participation in the life of the Church appears at multiple points throughout the report, which asks how "the Church of our time [might] better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?" and whether women's inclusion in the diaconate can be envisaged (IL B 2.3).

We echo the authors of the Document on the Continental Stage (DCS) in suggesting that

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<sup>1</sup> Document on the Continental Stage #60-65, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>

the following document “will be understandable and useful only if it is read with the eyes of the disciple, who recognizes it as a testimony to the path of conversion toward a synodal Church. This means a Church that learns from listening how to renew its evangelizing mission in the light of the signs of the times, to continue offering humanity a way of being and living in which all can feel included as protagonists” (13).

We pray with our global church:

*Lord, you have gathered all your People in Synod.*

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

*Help us to enter these pages as on “holy ground.”  
Come Holy Spirit: may you be the guide of our journey together (DCS 14).*



The gathering was interspersed with opportunities for prayer.

# An Overview of the Synodal Discernment Session

## The Structure of the Event

On May 6, 2023, 171 individuals from 40 Catholic institutions across the Archdiocese of Seattle gathered on May 6, 2023 at St. James Cathedral's Cathedral Hall for "Receive Her in the Lord: Reimagining Women's Participation in a Synodal Church."<sup>2</sup> The event, which was organized by a team of local Catholic leaders<sup>3</sup> and which counted ten Catholic parishes and organizations among its partners,<sup>4</sup> lasted 3 hours and included multiple opportunities for prayer, presentations on the current global Synod on Communion, Participation and Mission, and synodal conversations.

The event in and of itself was unique in the recent history of the Archdiocese of Seattle. As one participant shared, "This meeting is unprecedented." "This conversation would not have been allowed under previous popes. We've already won." People found the gathering both "illuminating and disturbing," "energizing and exasperating!" They drew great hope from the gathering itself and the presence of others: "Trust the call and the fact that we are all here." Efforts were made by the organizers to incorporate large numbers of participants in meaningful and visible ways, with approximately 40% of attendees holding a leadership role in some way.<sup>5</sup>



Annie Nieto Bailey, a parishioner at St. Louise in Bellevue, emceed the event.

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<sup>2</sup> The name of the event derives from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans: "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well" (16:1-2).

<sup>3</sup> The leadership team was comprised of Annie Nieto Bailey (St. Louise de Marillac), Vince Herberholt (St. Joseph, Seattle), Rose Hesselbrock (St. Therese), Corinna Laughlin (St. James Cathedral), Maria Laughlin (St. James Cathedral), Andrea Mendoza (St. John the Baptist), Sarah Pericich-Lopez (Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center), Anna Robertson (Discerning Deacons), Will Rutt (Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center), and Deacon Steve Wodzanowski (St. Joseph, Seattle).

<sup>4</sup> Event partners included Discerning Deacons, the Ignatian Spirituality Center, Immaculate Conception-St. Therese, the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center, Our Lady of the Lake Catholic Church, Seattle University Campus Ministry, SEEL Puget Sound, St. James Cathedral, St. Joseph Parish (Seattle), and St. Leo the Great Church.

<sup>5</sup> Individual attendees were invited ahead of the gathering to serve in various roles, including by serving as note takers and facilitators during the synodal discussion, leading the community in prayer, and serving as readers, greeters, and ushers.

Emcees Annie Bailey and Erica Cohen Moore welcomed attendees and invoked the Synod Prayer (DCS 14) in English and Spanish before inviting attendees to call to mind a woman who has inspired their faith. Following the opening exercise, six women shared aloud their prayers for the Church,<sup>6</sup> punctuated by a sung refrain<sup>7</sup> led by Laura Ash, Director of Music at St. Joseph Parish in Seattle. Each woman began her prayer echoing the Synod Prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit."

"Bring us back to one another," prayed Tayz Hernandez-Campero, a recent graduate of Seattle University who serves as Campus Minister for Liturgy there, "that we may be co-creators of a Church rooted in encounter." Gaynell Walker of St. Paul Parish in Seattle read a prayer prepared by SeVera Dowe, a parishioner at Immaculate Conception and member of the Black Catholic Advisory Circle for the Archdiocese of Seattle: "We listen, clothed in the sacred garments of the Good News of Jesus the Christ. We listen, assured that You have formed and gifted our hearts and minds for all that calls us forward." Seattle Preparatory School senior Alex Ruelos prayed, "that the youth and the new generations have voices that are strong and vibrant, rather than gray and misheard. That the youth may not only be a topic of discussion, but will be a part of the discussion, as well as women, and the marginalized." At the close of the prayer, all attendees were invited to reflect with the invitation, "Come, Holy Spirit," and to write their prayer for the Church on a sticky note.

Following a brief presentation by Anna Robertson, Director of Distributed Organizing at sponsoring organization Discerning Deacons,<sup>8</sup> that contextualized the gathering within the Global Synod, and an introduction to the spiritual conversation process by Corinna Laughlin, Director of Liturgy for St. James Cathedral and coordinator of synod efforts in the Archdiocese of Seattle, the synod portion of the event began. Attendees prayerfully read aloud paragraphs #60-65 of the DCS, which together comprise the section on "Rethinking Women's Participation in the Church"<sup>9</sup> and which, along with the entire DCS, were shared with participants ahead of the gathering for prayerful review. Following the synodal discussions, which took place at mixed tables and are detailed throughout the remainder of this document, participants had the chance to discern practical next steps toward continued engagement in the Church's discernment about women's participation in the Church through conversations with members of their respective parishes or institutions.

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<sup>6</sup> The women who offered prayers were SeVera Dowe (Immaculate Conception, Seattle), Tayz Hernandez-Campero (Seattle University Campus Ministry), Patty Repikoff (St. James Cathedral), Alex Ruelos (Seattle Preparatory School), Mykhanh Pham (St. Joseph Parish, Seattle), and Sr. Christine Still, OSF (St. Leo the Great).

<sup>7</sup> "Spirit wind \ Breath of God \ Breathe new life into the world" (Scott Soper, "Spirit Wind," 1997)

<sup>8</sup> Discerning Deacons is a project that supports the Church's active discernment about women and the diaconate. For more information, see [www.discerningdeacons.org](http://www.discerningdeacons.org).

<sup>9</sup> Readers were Sharon Spence-Wilcox (St. Therese), Barbara Connor (Immaculate Conception, Seattle), Janet McDermott (St. Joseph Parish, Seattle), Sr. Judy Ryan, SNJM (St. James Cathedral), Deacon Denny Duffell (Our Lady of the Lake), and Mercy Lazo (St. Therese). Rose Hesselbrock (St. Therese) facilitated.



## Who Participated

The 171 individuals who gathered for the event represented diverse backgrounds, ages, geographic regions, and perspectives from across the Catholic community in Western Washington.<sup>10</sup> 51% were active in paid or volunteer ministry, and 11% were employees of Catholic organizations. Most were practicing Catholics, but a few also identified as former Catholics, “lapsed Catholics,” or non-Catholics. Eight percent were students at Catholic schools or universities. Seven percent of attendees identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community. The vast majority – 96% – were laypersons, of whom seven individuals were members of religious orders. There were three priests and four deacons in attendance, as well as three women who were married to deacons or deacons in formation. Notably, 13% of attendees were women who indicated that, if given the option, they would discern a call to the diaconate.



Two attendees share in conversation during a break.

Generally, points of diversity and difference proved to be generative sources of insight during the synodal discussions. For example, there was notable generational diversity at the gathering, which showed up in multiple conversations. Older women were strongly encouraged by the presence of younger women: “I’m really excited that this is happening. I’m amazed by the younger women here, who are talented and have passion in their faces.” “I’m excited about what’s going on in the Northwest; I wish I was 50 years younger.” Another said: “I had a fear that everyone [here] would look like me and not seeing that is helpful.” Older people also expressed lament and grief as they imagine the future. It is a “terrifying thought,” one said, that “the Pope will die and the younger generation will not be interested.” Another remarked: “I don’t want to die before things change and I’m getting older each year.”

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<sup>10</sup> In an effort to better understand who was in the room, organizers included optional demographic questions on the event registration form, which was completed by 129 attendees. Of the 120 attendees who reported their gender, 24% were male, 75% were female, and 1% was nonbinary. A small number of LGBTQ+ gender minorities participated, including one self-identified trans woman and an individual who identified as nonbinary. Ten percent of registered attendees identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community, eight of whom were under the age of forty. Of the participants whose ages were known, 51% were 65 or older, 31% fell between 40 and 64, and 18% were between the ages of 18 and 39. In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, of the participants who self-reported, 86% identified as white, 7% as Asian, 5% as Black or African American, 2% as Native American or Alaska Native, and 2% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, numbers which include several participants who identified as multiracial; 8% identified as being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.

Younger people also noted a generational difference, where a young adult expressed having “low expectations, but not as much baggage.” Another noted that as part of a “new generation, [she is] excited to see what’s next.”

Many of those present wished to re-envision women’s roles in the Church, not so much for themselves as for their daughters. “I have daughters and I’ve witnessed how the unequal treatment of women in the church has hurt them.” One person observed that her daughters “question how she can be part of something that doesn’t invite her to participate fully, and she doesn’t know how to answer them.” A young parent “wonders how she can baptize and raise a daughter in a church that doesn’t accept her fully.” “How can my daughters feel welcome in a Church which does not view them as equals?” Another said, “That’s why I am here. If I leave, who is there to protect and build a future in my church for my daughter and even my sons?”



Sr. Judy Ryan, SNJM was among the women religious present.

The fact that 96% of attendees were laypersons suggests the enthusiasm of the laity for synodal processes in general and related to the question of women’s participation in the Church specifically, while also surfacing a possible future priority around engaging the clergy more intentionally around such conversations. Among the laity were seven members of religious orders, whose relatively small numbers at the gathering made a significant impact in table discussions. As a group, women religious were recognized in the DCS when it

reflected that “...women, especially women religious, are already at the forefront of synodal practices in some of the most challenging social situations we face” (DCS 65). One participant “was moved by the comments about the diminished and growing diminishment of the role of women religious.” One woman religious said, “there were over a thousand sisters in my congregation, now less than 400. They used to say ‘Let sister do it,’ but now no sisters to do it...we have critical issues in the world to tend to. We don’t have time to infight over who should do the work. We need to do it.”

## **Preparation of the Synthesis**

Three members of the event’s leadership team who had experience synthesizing results of other Synodal gatherings came together to prepare the synthesis of the May 6 meeting. We read all the reports from the gathering, and then met to discern a process for preparing this document. Following that meeting, we each read the reports a second time. We listened once again to the passion of participants, who expressed pain,

weariness, frustration, anticipation, love, and hope. We began to note down patterns and themes. Those notes informed this synthesis and provided the shape for this document.

## **Synthesis of Listening**

### **Synodal Process**

*Those who were most committed to the synod process were women, who seem to have realised not only that they had more to gain, but also more to offer by being relegated to a prophetic edge, from which they observe what happens in the life of the Church... (DCS, 60)*

The vast majority of people who participated in this gathering also participated in Synodal listening in their parishes in 2021-22. Participating in the Synod has been a meaningful, hopeful, even a healing experience: "At my Parish people feared the Synodal process or thought we would not get anywhere with it. This IS the first step. It already feels better just being here." "The Synod inspires me as an opening in the life of the church and the possibility of renewal." "I have a lot of hope, I love the process and think there is so much value in sharing and hearing." "Now we witness how the Church is diminished, with data suggesting that only 20-25% of our youth remain active in the Church. Yet, in this synodal process, I am more hopeful than I have been in the last 20 years."

People found reading the Document for the Continental Stage a powerful experience of solidarity with others around the world. People were "impressed by the fact that synodal responses have been consistent around the world." "It was surprising to hear that around the world the struggles and yearnings are the same [as] for me. This is the very beginning of change in the church. I am very hopeful." "[Hearing] all the quotes from all around the world is exciting and encouraging."

As several participants noted, the Synodal process demands patience and a sense of freedom in regard to outcomes. "It is hard to let go of wanting an outcome. I am trying to leave room for the Holy Spirit for *Her* to work."

### **A Love for the Tradition**

Alongside a sense of revitalization born of synodality, many participants expressed a deep love for the Catholic Tradition that sustained their faith through challenges: "There is truly a lot of hope and love about being part of the traditions, being part of this...I wouldn't be a Catholic if I didn't see hope." Several invoked holy women of history as models, both for women in the Church and for the Church as a whole. One spoke of "the rich witness of so many women through time. Teresa of Avila, bound on every side



by patriarchy, but she found a way...The amazing work of the Spirit inspiring women, even women centuries ago." Another looked to Dorothy Day, "who was extremely faithful to the Church, but also a harsh critic. To me, that is part of what is needed."

For those who have struggled with burdens of pain and disappointment in the Church, it is often the Tradition that keeps them Catholic. One participant, reflecting on what was illuminating in others' sharing, identified with "people's love for all the rituals," noting, "That's why I'm still here." A woman observed, "The Eucharist is what keeps [me] in the church but it can be hard sometimes." For friends and family of many participants, however, the Church's traditions and rituals have not been enough to keep them Catholic. "Many have left the Church. Indeed, my wife, a gifted liturgist, no longer attends." At one table, "More than a few of the parents spoke of their children leaving the church and how that realize that they have to accept that right now — 'How can you blame them?'"



Four deacons were in attendance at the gathering.

## Burdens of Pain and Disappointment

*...many feel sadness because their lives are often not well understood, and their contributions and charisms not always valued... (DCS, 60)*

Many participants carry burdens of pain and disappointment from past experiences in the Catholic Church. One woman noted that though she is still part of the Church, many have left: "I'm wounded but I'm here. But so many women are wounded, and they can't get past that." Another participant said that she was reluctant "to commit to this event even verbally because of sadness and anger." Some expressed exhaustion and resignation born of a sense of futility: "I come to this today after spending a lifetime serving the Church with family, and professionally. The woundedness is certainly there. But there's also that sense of losing energy because of just beating my head against [it]." This pain and woundedness is sometimes expressed in a lack of trust in the institutional Church. "When I commented to a friend that I planned to seek guidance from a priest, she replied, 'Why ask priests to offer advice on anything?'" One participant observed about the Document for the Continental Stage that she appreciated the sentiments, but added: "Some of what was written is like the 'thoughts and prayers' — words we use after a school shooting, empty and meaningless."

While most participants were themselves practicing Catholics, many referenced friends and family who had chosen to leave the Church. This in itself was an additional source of pain and disappointment for participants, many of whom spoke of adult children who have left the Church: “I think because they’ve seen and heard hypocrisy in the Church and it doesn’t feel like home.”



The event was interspersed with opportunities for both individual reflection and sharing.

The history of this local Church was referenced frequently. Under previous Archbishops, particularly Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen (1975-1991), laypeople, women among them, were appointed to lead parish communities and were permitted to preach. For those who lived through that time, there then was a sense of a springtime, a feeling that further change—even the ordination of women—was around the corner. The subsequent withdrawal of permission for women to preach, the reduction of the number of women leaders of parishes, and the recent closure of two parishes with a tradition of lay leadership and lay preaching: these add to the sense of pain and frustration people expressed. One participant observed that as a young parent she was very active on the school commission at her parish, where a woman

religious preached regularly. She “assumed that was part of an evolving church that I hoped for from my college days... then that changed. Very sad for me. I hold on to the memory of that hopeful time.” Another participant observed, “The Diocese would rather close a vibrant parish than have women lead.”

## The Charisms of Women

*From all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptised and equal members of the People of God... (DCS, 61)*

The equality of women in the eyes of God was a constant theme in the listening. Many people couched that equality in terms of the Scriptures and the sacraments. “Are we not all made in God’s Image?” “Jesus appeared first to the women. Did we somehow miss this action, as if it could be viewed as simple happenstance?” “If women have such prominent roles to Jesus, why are they not leaders in this institution?” “I think when Christ said everyone he meant everyone.” “The ritual of baptism is the same for women and men because we are equal.”

There also emerged a sense that women's gifts are not being fully tapped, shared, and experienced. "What is squandered or neglected by not recognizing women's gifts and leadership?" One person in parish leadership noted, "it's very much a male perspective, a male way – it's logical, organized, but not listening with the heart. I think we need as many voices in the circle as we can, to get clear in our minds and in our hearts where the Spirit is calling us." "There are some tendencies to a different approach between men and women, and I think we're not taking advantage of that."

There is a general sense that the Church is missing out by not drawing on the gifts of women. "So many charisms are going underutilized.... Are we even aware of the treasures these women might hold?" "Some of the best preaching I've heard has been from women. How many more could I have heard that would have deepened my faith if women could preach?"



Rose Hesselbrock, a member of the parish council at St. Therese, facilitated the transition into synodal conversations.

Several spoke about women with a vocation that they are unable to fulfill.

One noted that it "took me into my adulthood [to understand] that women had aspirations to become a priest. That must be gut-wrenching. You're called to be something, but your church doesn't allow it.... Must be very painful for women who can't pursue their call to priesthood." Another mentioned a friend who moved to the Episcopal Church in order to follow the call to priesthood. "This is a huge loss to the Catholic Church. Her voice was important and now is lost to us." "The pain of not being able to live that vocation fully is observable." An ordained deacon shared, "when I became an ordained Deacon, I felt guilty around my fellow lay ministers (female) because I could take this step and they could not."

## **Women in Liturgy and Leadership**

*Women participating in the synodal processes desire both Church and society to be a place of flourishing, active participation and healthy belonging... (DCS, 62)*

Many commented on the importance of the representation of women in the liturgy and in leadership. One participant observed that "in Mexico... Girls could not be altar servers, readers, nothing... When [I] came to the Northwest, [my] own daughter had doors open to roles that weren't open to me. [My] daughter encouraged [me]. As mother and daughter, all of a sudden we started to serve together and share [our] passion for [our] faith and for our Lord." An older woman observed how powerful it

was to see her daughters serve: “I have three daughters who were all altar servers. My brother was an altar boy and I wasn’t allowed to go back behind the altar to tell him we were waiting for him after Mass.” People also noted the fragility of these forms of leadership: “there was also awareness of how quickly that responsibility could be taken away under a clerical change or by patriarchal shifts in the culture of a community.”

In addition, people expressed the importance of having women involved in decision-making. Many expressed that this shift is long overdue: “Why is it taking the Catholic Church this long to give women leadership roles?” People noted the presence of women in many leadership roles in parishes and at the Chancery, but they also noted that women’s leadership “goes up to a certain level and then it stops.” “Men in power feel threatened.” “Getting in the door is one thing. Being supported once you’re there is another.”



## Changing the Culture

*The call for a conversion of the Church’s culture, for the salvation of the world, is linked in concrete terms to the possibility of establishing a new culture, with new practices and structures (DCS, 60)*

*Some reports note that the cultures of their countries have made progress in the inclusion and participation of women, progress that could serve as a model for the Church (DCS, 62)*



At the same time, many participants expressed that change is needed beyond women's participation. "It's not just that we need more women in the Church, but we need a cultural shift." "We have to reboot the system."

Several noted that even where women are at decision-making tables, they often lack freedom. "I see women in [leadership] positions. They have the title, they are running the Church, but there is no freedom to challenge anything." "Just having women there is not enough. They also need to be free to speak without fear of losing their jobs." As one participant noted: "Until women feel safe expressing themselves, and men feel sharing power is actually a benefit to them, until that happens, we can't reap the benefits." "How do we change men's feelings about women in power?"

Some expressed concern with "a broken system of seminary training." Several expressed that clericalism is not a male issue and cautioned that rethinking women's participation in the Church should not be approached as a panacea in regard to the Church's problems. One participant observed, "We helped create the glass ceiling." "We should bring women into leadership because it's the right and just thing to do, but not with magical thinking! Women feed into clericalism just as men do, so bringing them into leadership structures that are inherently clerical won't change that." "I hope we don't just create clerical women." "Women are not necessarily the solution to the problems of the church."

Multiple participants bemoaned a pervasive culture of fear: "My prayer for the Church is that we let go of fear. What are we so afraid of? Why are we afraid of having women in the diaconate, women preaching? We can't love if we're afraid." "Where there is fear there is no love."

Several participants reflected on the particularities of their own cultural communities related to the question of women's participation in the Church, both in terms of challenges and opportunities. "One of my fears/risks is seeing my Latino community dividing between men and women. There are a lot of new people coming to the community and I'm afraid they'll be critical of why the priest is allowing women and girls in sacramental and preaching roles." A participant from Africa noted, "My background, coming from Africa, is different, men dominate the women; it is a man's world." A Native American participant noted, "What strikes me most is how some cultures...such as my ancestors, have made so much progress and have women hold spiritual leadership positions because they gave birth, because the Creator gave the women the ability to bring forth life...it is not only our church but the whole world that has a hard time putting women forward as life-givers."



## Ways Forward

*After careful listening, many reports ask that the Church continue its discernment in relation to a range of specific questions: the active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, the possibility for women with adequate training to preach in parish settings, and a female diaconate. (DCS, 64)*

For participants in this gathering, there is an urgency about women's participation in the Church, not just as a matter of justice, but as a matter of need. "Women move in where there is a need...there is a need!" "This is a convergence and urgency...the talents and answers for [the] Church are there, we are just not using them." Several people expressed that the future of the Church depends on women: "The Church is at a point where it has to open the doors to women or it will die." "As long as we are a church that doesn't lift up women, people will not come back or join."



Barbara Connor, a ministry leader at Immaculate Conception in Seattle, called upon the witness of her mother before reading aloud a passage from the DCS.

Some expressed the need for listening, reconciliation, and healing, before moving forward. "Before we can reconcile, we have to speak the truth." "We should follow the example of Truth and Reconciliation processes around the globe, and first state what was done, what sin was committed, before we forgive and answer the call to more participation."

Some spoke about the importance of imagination. One participant pointed to the reality of "mental resistance to women as deacons due to seeing only men in this office for so long." Others acknowledged their own

difficulties in this regard. "I'm a little conflicted, too. I love the tradition but we need women actively participating." One woman observed, "reimagining women in churches was difficult due to the barriers between men and women in church and in my culture."

Language matters. Several pointed to the importance of using the positive language of love: "the language of love is so important." "The positivity and spirit and language is really important." People were "glad to hear the use of positive language of transformation and change."



An important thread in the conversations was the need to lift up the marginalized. “This cannot be women only. We cannot prioritize the inclusion of women to the detriment of others.” “I think we need to go beyond women. This synod process is a great thing, an important thing. Women who are active need to take the focus broader.” “We need to focus on love and service.” One participant called this impulse “key to the diaconate – moving us away from places of safety and into the margins,” evoking the universal call to the baptized to embody *diakonia*. People also expressed their desire to keep on listening to others, including those with contrary viewpoints: “We must be mindful of the fears of the people who don’t understand the inclusion of women, who fear inclusion of LGBTQ. We need to be mindful – not timid, but loving – in trying to understand so that we can move forward with them.”

Participants expressed a realistic awareness that change takes time, and that it is important to celebrate the small victories. “It will be real change, but it will take generations.” “We are very excited about the possibility of change and renewal. This is a HUGE, gargantuan organization. It can’t turn on a dime, but it is so important to take joy in every little step and progress. It may not happen in my lifetime, but I am doing work to keep it moving.” “I do see the seeds of change that have been planted and that these are good seeds that will flourish.” “The ground is fertile for a fruitful future.”



More broadly, participants echoed an enthusiasm and desire for continued synodality that has been shared across countless synod reports around the world. “[It] feels so good to be invited, to greet another experience with curiosity. It is a spiritual gift – touch the one who touches the holy.” “I feel like I need to get to know people more, so that I can understand the pain they have experienced and the depths behind their stories. I pray for the Holy Spirit to give me the space and opportunities to hear stories.”

“I love the whole experience of sharing; this is a great opportunity we have to listen. This is great for the Church to keep listening to people, we need more energy and more feedback.” This enthusiasm is accompanied by an emerging recognition among the laity of their common baptismal dignity and the authority it bestows: “We shouldn’t wait for leaders to change structures, but go to the margins, and do that together. If we come together to love in the way that God most needs us to love, I’m curious how that would then change structures.”

## Conclusion

With dioceses across the United States undergoing strategic planning and restructuring efforts, there is a unique opportunity for exercising synodality at every level of the Church, even as leaders grapple with the pastoral and practical challenges that accompany these processes. The success of such restructuring efforts may well depend on our ability to walk through this chapter of our history in an increasingly synodal way: will we the Church become a sign of unity in a sea of polarization, where lay and ordained alike feel a sense of responsibility for and appropriate authority within the Church? What will our contribution in particular be within the Archdiocese of Seattle?

Likewise, this shift in how we organize our life together as Catholics presents an opportunity to practically consider how our ways of imagining women’s leadership and authority within our Church structures might have contributed to our current crises, and how a reimagination of women’s roles might better serve the Church’s mission today. We must resist the urge to avoid conversations about women’s roles in the Church for fear of broaching the taboo, getting people’s hopes up, exposing existing divisions, or aggravating those with institutional authority who maintain the stance, made demonstrably incorrect by the current Synod, that the topic is off-limits. It behooves our communities to foster active connection to and participation in this area of the Church’s ongoing discernment, both pertaining to those horizons under active discernment within the Global Synod, such as expanded opportunities for women with proper training to preach, to participate in Church governance, and to serve as ordained deacons, as well as to existing possibilities for the creative reimagination of women’s leadership in the Church. As one deacon shared in the listening sessions, “I want to make it more imaginable for parishioners. Right now, it seems irregular to have women in church leadership roles. It is an exception, but once we make it more regular then the greater church can accept it.” “It is like we ourselves are stuck in that hierarchical structure and we believe we need permission, no we don’t. Perhaps we need to be more aggressive and be assertive. It is time to speed up and accelerate.” Tensions such as these have the potential to be generative, vivifying, and transformational if approached in the spirit of synodality.

As the Church continues to journey together in synod, there will be a need for continued synodal engagement at the local levels through both formal avenues as they

emerge and through more informal avenues that continue to grow from the grassroots. The synodal conversations that took place on May 6 reflect a widespread hunger for the sense of connection and agency born of synodal encounters. People were especially energized by the opportunity to encounter others across parish and institutional borders. The *Instrumentum Laboris*, which includes worksheets that serve as practical discernment tools for the many issues being discussed, reaffirms that the synod's progression along through the universal stage does not preclude the continued engagement of the faithful at all levels of church life. It notes that the worksheets "can be used for in-depth thematic meetings in a synodal style at all levels of Church life" and continues, "Each person is invited to choose the ones that they feel best enable the riches of their own Church context to be shared with others. This will be their contribution to the common task" (24). On the question of women's participation in the Church as well as the many other points of connection between the IL and the Archdiocese of Seattle's own synthesis report, the IL can be employed as a readymade tool for discernment or adapted for use in particular contexts.

In embarking into the territory of synodality, Church leaders may find themselves hesitant to turn toward any single issue for fear of seeming to show preference for that issue over the many other issues that have arisen, or indeed out of a genuine desire to find a way to address all of the issues adequately before moving forward on any one of them. While understandable and often well-meaning, for people who are marginalized in one way or another, this reasoning has too often resulted in the indefinite postponement of meaningful action on the part of those who hold institutional power. Luckily, the structure itself of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, where the many issues confronting the People of God intertwine throughout the document, suggests a path forward. When we approach the concerns of the People of God in a manner that is open, curious, and free of fear, we find that their concerns are related at the level of both fruit and root, and that to address any single issue in such a spirit of openness opens the door wider to addressing them all.

The Synod is on! As Pope Francis shared during a June 2023 visit with a delegation of women leaders from the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (CEAMA) and the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM), "regarding the changes that have been taking place in the Church, there is no turning back."<sup>11</sup> Let us pray for grace as we journey together forward as protagonists on the path of synodality, rejoicing as we live the joy of the Gospel.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://discerningdeacons.org/there-is-no-turning-back/>



