

# Seeking Justice and Inclusion for Women in the Church

## Women and Justice Resource and Discussion Guide

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*This meeting kit is adapted from the resource and discussion guide provided by MSJC for use by Marianist communities (lay or religious) and parish groups who seek a deeper understanding of this topic and prayerful response in light of Catholic Social Teaching and the Marianist charism.*

### Introduction

People committed to building a more just social order are reminded that the Church must model the kind of just policies and structures that we seek to promote in the broader culture. After all, many Church issues affect women. This guide, created by the MSJC Women and Justice Team, is an introduction as to how we can seek justice and inclusion for women in the Catholic Church. This inclusion may include the possibility of women's ordination to the diaconate. We recommend participants [view Phyllis Zagano's video](#) or read the text or view the video of Mary McAleese's talk, "[The Time is Now for Change in the Catholic Church.](#)" Both presentations provide helpful background information about the diaconate.

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## OPENING PRAYER

### Galatians 3:26-28

"Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus."

### Prayer for Inclusion

Disturb us, Lord, when we are too pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when we have lost our thirst for the waters of life because of the abundance of things we possess; having fallen in love with life, we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, to venture on wilder seas where storms will show Your mastery; where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask you to expand the horizons of our hopes and lead us into the future with strength, courage, and love.

Creator God, we are your people. We look to the future with optimism and with faith in you, as we pursue our call to provide justice and fullness of life for all people. We pray that every man, woman, and child may meet You in themselves and in one another.

May we enjoy a totally welcoming community, with You as our center, joined hand in hand with our sisters and brothers. We pray together as a family of the faithful with the vision of a Church community that at its core upholds the full quality of all of its members. We pray that our daughters and yours may know radical inclusion and justice, equality without qualification, and an institution that transforms oppression into love without bounds. Let us build a Church for our daughters. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This prayer is adapted from several prayers, including from Sir Francis Drake and the US Catholic Bishops on people with disabilities (National Catholic Partnership on Disability).

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## Food for Thought

### Background

The serious shortage of priests, the systematic inequality of women in the Catholic Church, and the clergy sex abuse crisis have all contributed to the recent increase in requests to the pope for the ordination of women to the diaconate. “Decades of pain and suffering endured by victims of clergy sex abuse point to the need for a serious overhaul of Church governance structures,” said Sr. Christine Schenk, former executive director of FutureChurch.<sup>1</sup>

In the fall of 2019, at the Amazon Synod of Bishops, the topic of women deacons received reasonably strong support.<sup>2</sup> This recent movement has increased the dialogue on how women can find meaningful ways to be part of the Church’s living tradition and witness. This includes:

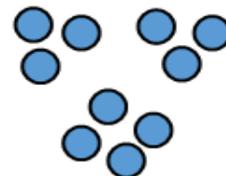
- an exploration of more opportunities for women’s leadership in their parishes and beyond,
- the formation of study groups to dialogue on this issue and possible solutions within parishes and small faith communities,
- writing letters to the editor and to local bishops,
- growing ministries that work toward women’s inclusion and equality in the Church, such as finding ways to give women the opportunity to preach or allowing women to perform last rites when a priest is not available.



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## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ♦ What experiences have you had related to justice for women in the Church throughout your faith journey? Have you felt empowered in the Church? Why or why not?
- ♦ Do you know any women who have left the Church over the issue of gender inequality?



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## Food for Thought

### The Catholic Perspective

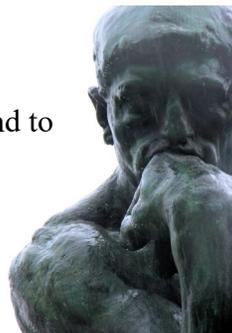
There is a call to increase the feminist influence in the Church and to benefit from all the graces given to the Church. Mary McAleese’s address, [The Time is Now for Change in the Catholic Church](#), provides both a historical and political perspective of the issue.

The video featuring writer and theologian Phyllis Zagano provides background on one aspect of the issue of ordination: women in the diaconate. Action on women’s issues seems to be timely in light of Pope Francis’ dialogue on the role of women within the Church.<sup>3</sup>

There is currently a passionate call across our Church to increase our recognition of the dignity of women,

to amplify the voices of women, and to empower communities for social change. Read, ponder, and discuss the following quotes from various Catholics.

- In 2013, Pope Francis made the following statement: “We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of women within the Church. The feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions.”<sup>4</sup> In response to Pope Francis, Molly O’Connor asks the question, “What does it mean to ‘be identified’ as a Catholic woman?”



- In 1995, the Jesuits' thirty-fourth General Congregation published a statement on the *Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society* that said, "We have been part of a civil and ecclesial tradition that has offended against women. And, like many men, we have a tendency to convince ourselves that there is no problem. However unwittingly, we have often contributed to a form of clericalism which has reinforced male domination with an ostensibly divine sanction. By making this declaration we wish to react personally and collectively and to do what we can to change this regrettable situation."<sup>5</sup>
- María Lía Zervino, as president general of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO), stated, "There are many visionary women who have exercised key roles in the history of the world and in the history of religion. The [Document on Human Fraternity](#) (written by Pope Francis in February 2019) provides another incentive to women today to claim their own responsibility in shaping the society in which we live. The same faith in God embraced by our feminine forebears inspires us today to concretely engage in making human fraternity a reality. Acting courageously and using our professional preparation, without losing our tenderness or femininity, are ways of responding to the evils facing many in today's world. Working together, while respecting our diversity,

***"No longer is diaconal ordination tied inextricably to sacred ordination as priest."***

Phyllis Zagano

provides the opportunity for us women to lead the way."<sup>6</sup>

- According to Sr. Nilma Do Carmo De Jesus, in the final report of the Amazon Synod, "In Brazil, most catechists are women, the leaders of local communities are women, women animate the liturgical aspects of the Mass through song and celebration; these women bring the ministry forward. They are very important, but they are not visible because they don't have institutional recognition."<sup>7</sup>

- Throughout the Catholic Church's history, the medieval mystics held that the qualities often associated with the "feminine genius" can be modeled by the Church in its pastoral concern.<sup>8</sup>

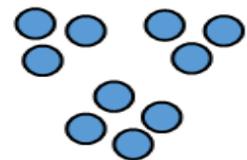
MSJC's Women and Justice

Team agrees with Phyllis Zagano's suggestion that it is not a good idea to mix up the priesthood and the diaconate. She is a recognized expert on the study of the historical roles of women in the Catholic Church. She was the only American appointee to the international commission established by Pope Francis to study the question of women deacons in 2016.

"No longer is diaconal ordination tied inextricably to sacred ordination as priest. (There is no "unicity of orders" to worry about regarding the diaconate. The diaconate is not the priesthood.) . . . Nothing needs to be invented or changed [regarding Canon Law]. There is only the need for the Church to exercise its own law."<sup>9</sup>

## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Phyllis Zagano's video add to your understanding of the diaconate?
- Which of the quotes in "The Catholic Perspective" section affected you the most, either positively or negatively? Why?
- What is the most important reason for the current push for women's rights in the Church and for women to be ordained as deacons?

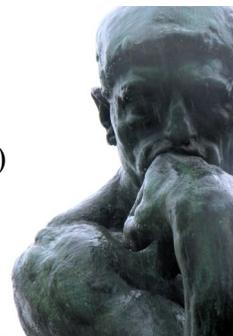


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## Food for Thought

### The Marianist Charism

The Marianist charism uniquely calls us to respond to this issue as members of the Marianist Family. (See below for four qualities that characterize a Marianist approach to social justice.)



- **Joining Voices with the Voiceless:** When we look at the history of women anywhere in the world, we see that women have always been reaching out, especially among the poor, the immigrants, the oppressed, and the victims of human trafficking—the crucified of history. Women have historically shared in this redemptive work of healing and reconciling, seeking justice and making peace. We have learned this from St. Mary Magdalene, the apostle to the apostles, who reminds us that Christ is alive, risen from the dead, and the source of life to anyone who believes in him.
- **Discipleship of Equals:** All members of the community must be equally respected. All members of the community have a voice and a place at the table. “Marianists take a humble role as ministers—not one of power, position, or privilege. We join with Mary in the Magnificat: to scatter the proudhearted, cast the mighty from their thrones, and raise up the lowly. Our community structures are not based on rank but simply on different roles. This is a gift that we can put at the service of our Church to change any ecclesial structures that imply that some People of God have more value than others.”<sup>10</sup>
- **Passion for the Mission:** William Joseph Chaminade had very strong influences from both Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon and Marie Thérèse de Lamourous. These two strong women shared their talents and passion as models of women who worked with the poor and led others to do the work of Marianist social justice. This is similar to many other women throughout history who have used their “feminine genius” to reach out to those on the margins.
- **Adaptation and Change:** The MSJC’s Women and Justice Issue Team would define the role of deacons as those who minister with the poor, the imprisoned, the outcast, and all marginalized members of our communities. As reflected in the Synod on the Amazon documents, many times the work of a deacon is being done by women in the Church. Women already do real ministry with the poor, the imprisoned, the outcast, and all marginalized members of our communities. But they do it without the official blessings and without the sacred strength given through the sacrament of ordination.

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## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which Marianist social justice quality inspired you the most? Why?
- How do you see women contributing to social justice in the Marianist tradition?
- How would Chaminade, Adèle, or Marie Thérèse view the proposal for the women’s diaconate if they were alive today?
- Do you know any women who would be good candidates for the diaconate? If so, who are they? Why do you think they would be a good candidate?



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## Possible Actions

Here are possible actions that you as an individual or as a community might commit to in response to the proposal for the women's diaconate.

ACTION

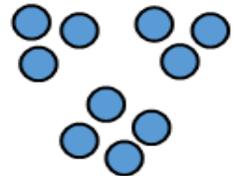


- Write letters to priests, bishops, and others in authority within the Catholic Church to address issues related to affirming ministry of women in the Church. Here are the US bishops addresses listed on the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' website: <http://www.usccb.org/about/bishops-and-dioceses/all-dioceses.cfm>. You might want to include the link to the Reflection and Study Guide on Women Deacons.<sup>11</sup>
- Team up with other people at your parish and start a study group to discuss any of these issues, including the history of women in the Church and the present state of the issue of women being included in the diaconate.
- Encourage your faith communities (including Marianist Lay Communities, Marianist religious communities, parish-based small faith communities) to hold more women-led communion services or Liturgies of the Word. (Suggested feast days include Adèle de Batz de Trenquelléon, Jan. 10; Mary of Magdala, July 22; and St. Theresa of Lisieux, Oct. 1; as well as the anniversary of the death of Venerable Marie Thérèse de Lamourous, Sept. 14.)
- Tell “HER-stories” instead of “His-tory”; many “HER-stories” are available on the Women and Justice Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/119118405374581/>) and can be shared.

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## SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In addition to opening up the diaconate, what other ways can the Church create justice, inclusion, and equality for women?
- What action might you commit to (individually or communally) in light of your Marianist and Christian faith?



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## CLOSING PRAYER

Dear Mother Father God,  
creator of women in your own image . . .  
born of a woman  
in the midst of a world half women . . .  
carried by women  
to mission fields around the globe . . .  
made known by women  
to all the children of the earth.  
Give to the women of our time  
the strength to persevere,

the courage to speak out,  
the faith to believe in you  
beyond all systems and institutions,  
so that your face on earth  
may be seen in all its beauty,  
so that men and women become whole,  
so that the Church may be converted to your will  
in everything and in all ways.

Excerpt of “A Litany of Women for the Church,” provided by *Monasteries of the Heart*. [Click here to pray the full litany.](#)

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## Additional Resources

- Stories of women who have considered a call to the diaconate: <http://catholicwomendeacons.org/100>
- Brandon Sanchez, “Vatican Commission Members: Women Served as Deacons for a Millennium,” *America Magazine*, Jan. 15, 2019. <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/01/15/vatican-commission-members-women-served-deacons-millennium>
- *Catholic Women Deacons*, “*Whether You’re Meeting with Your Bishop or Writing a Letter, Be Sure to Include These Important Talking Points*,” accessed Aug. 1, 2020. <http://catholicwomendeacons.org/support/speak-out>
- Joshua J. McElwee, “Francis Creates New Women Deacons Commission, Naming Entirely Different Membership,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Apr. 8, 2020. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/theology/francis-creates-new-women-deacons-commission-naming-entirely-different-membership>
- John L. Allen, Jr., “If Francis Really Wants Women Deacons, This Seems Like an Odd Way to Go About It,” *Crux*, Apr. 9, 2020. <https://cruxnow.com/news-analysis/2020/04/if-francis-really-wants-women-deacons-this-seems-an-odd-way-to-go-about-it/>

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### Endnotes

1. FutureChurch, “Catholic Governance Structures Must Change Worldwide: Crisis Highlights Need for Accountability, Checks and Balances,” Apr. 6, 2010. [Click here to read.](#)
2. *Crux*, “Amazon Synod Ends by Leaving an Awful Lot on the Pope’s Plate,” Oct. 27, 2019. “In the final document of the synod . . . 184 voting members, mostly bishops from the nine countries that contain a share of the Amazon rainforest, appeared to offer cautious approval to all three ideas: married priests, women deacons, and an Amazon rite—but with an emphasis on ‘caution.’” [Click here to read.](#)
3. Thomas Reese, “Pope Francis Gets It Right on Curia Reform and Women,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 2019. [Click to read article.](#)
4. Molly O’Connor, “A Developing Theology,” *Catholic News Service*, accessed Aug. 1, 2020. [Click to read article.](#)
5. “Decree 14: ‘Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society,’ General Congregation 34 (1995),” *The Portal to Jesuit Studies*, accessed Aug. 1, 2020. [Click to read article.](#)
6. Bernadette Mary Reis, FSP, “Women Creating Human Fraternity,” *Vatican News Service*, accessed Aug. 1, 2020. [Click to read article.](#)
7. Elisabetta Povoledo, “A Bigger Role for Women in the Catholic Church? 185 Men Will Decide,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2019. [Click to read article.](#)
8. See St. Bridget of Sweden, *Revelations*; St. Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Work*; and St. Julien of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*.
9. Phyllis Zagano, “Married Priests and Women Deacons: It’s About Law and Not Doctrine,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Oct. 22, 2019. [Click to read article.](#)
10. August 2018 edition of the *Gifts and Tasks*, quoting Susan Vogt, representative for North America, Asia, Australia and Ireland to the International Organization of Marianist Lay Communities.
11. Donna Ciangio, OP, and Sandra De Masi, SSI, *A Reflection and Study Guide: Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (Ciangio and De Masi, 2018). [Click for the study guide.](#)

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Related resources available at [nacms.org](http://nacms.org) include:

*Things Marianist: How Do Marianists Do Social Justice?*, Jim Vogt

*The Marianist Founders and Social Justice*, Felipe Melcher, SM

*Introduction to Social Justice*, William J. Ferree, SM

*Marianist Charism and Our Life/Work Among the Poor*, Joseph Jansen, SM

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