

# *Called to Contribute*

Findings from an In-depth Interview Study of  
US Catholic Women and the Diaconate

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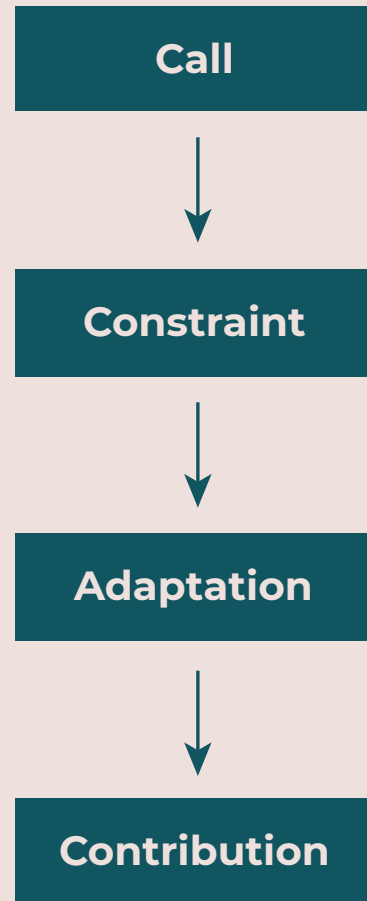
The background features a stylized, high-contrast profile of a woman's face, facing left. The profile is rendered in a dark, almost black color against a lighter, textured background. The face is framed by a decorative, grid-like structure with rounded corners, which is itself set against a larger, textured background. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic, with a focus on clean lines and organic shapes.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women comprise the majority of US Catholics and the majority of lay ministers in the US Catholic Church. While the ordained diaconate remains the exclusive realm of men, women engage in expansive service that overlaps core diaconal functions in word, liturgy, and charity. Many women feel specifically called to be deacons or express an openness to discerning such a call should the vocational path become available to them. Escalating global attention to the question of women and the diaconate compels social scientific research to enhance knowledge regarding how contemporary women experience and fulfill their felt call in the Catholic Church.

This report summarizes findings from a sociological study of women whose ministry in the US Catholic Church approaches that of ordained, exclusively male deacons – but for whom opportunities to live out their call fully are constrained by barriers to ordination. A team of five interviewers led by sociologist Tricia C. Bruce, PhD, interviewed forty women in depth to explore the characteristics, contexts, and contributions of women actively engaged in “deacon-like” ministry. The interview sample reflects diversity in age, race/ethnicity, marital status, parental status, region, language, and length and type of ministry involvement. Interviews lasted 75 minutes on average and were recorded, transcribed, translated into English when necessary, coded, and analyzed.

**The full report explores patterns across Catholic women’s experiences captured within four interrelated themes:**



In brief, major findings are as follows:

**1. Catholic women feel called to the diaconate – or would image and discern such a call if the diaconate were open to them.**

Interviewees describe how gender barriers inhibit their imaginations for how they might serve the Church and restrict their subsequent realities. Some women feel an explicit call to ordination (often kept hidden), noting in particular gifts in preaching, accompaniment, and serving marginalized peoples. Most reconcile themselves to available vocational paths, but long for opportunities to discern different roles for themselves.

**2. Catholic women feel constrained in how they use their gifts, respond to ministry needs, and live out their calls as Catholics in the US Church.**

Interviewees navigate their vocation within the context of constraint. Specifically, women describe how their calls lead to *repudiation*, how *contingency* dictates their access to ministry functions, and how the lack of title, recognition, and authority conferred through ordination results in *ambiguity*.

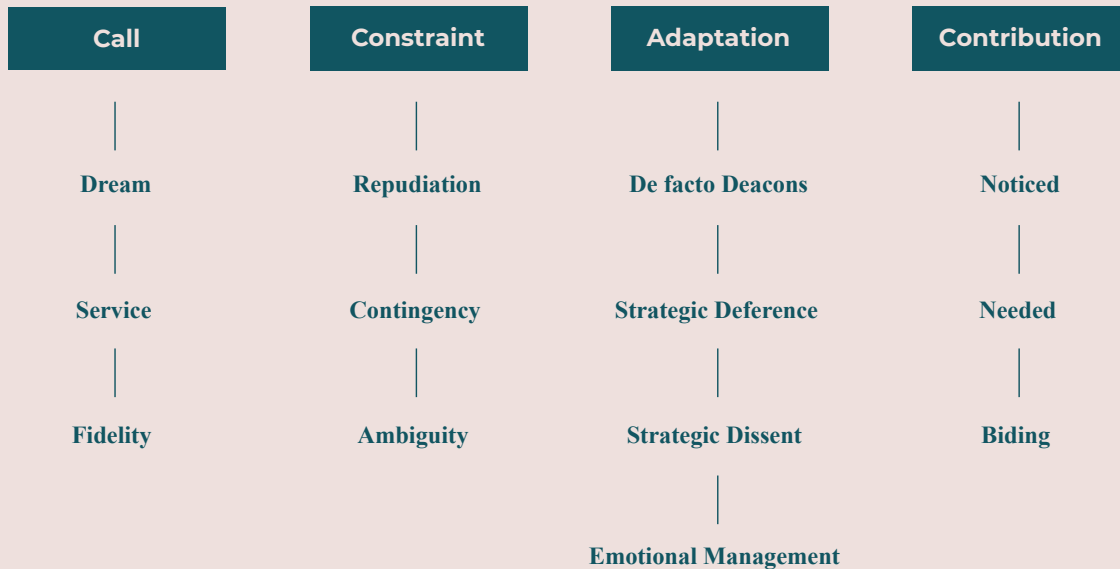
**3. Catholic women adapt to live out their call by operating as “de facto deacons,” engaging in strategic deference, strategic dissent, and emotional management.**

Interviewees approach their ministry through a “do it anyway” mentality, many of them functioning as “de facto deacons” with neither title nor Holy Orders. To do so, women strategically defer to priests and bishops, strategically dissent using tactics such as codeswitching, and habitually manage their own and others’ emotions (e.g., mitigating disappointment and discordance as well as assuaging those who feel “uncomfortable” around women in leadership positions).

**4. Catholic women contribute substantially to the US Church through service that is noticed and needed, while biding for roles that better align with their calls, increase their legitimacy, and portend the long-term vitality of the Catholic Church.**

Women’s labor fills Catholic ministry needs exacerbated by the shortage of ordained priests and deacons. Lay Catholics respond to women ministers as capable, qualified, and gifted in serving the Church. Even as women serve willingly, most are biding: (im)patiently waiting, uncertain, and cautiously wondering when and whether women will be welcomed to the ordained diaconate. Most resolve themselves to its unlikely occurrence in their own lifetimes but retain hope for the future.

The full report expands upon dimensions of each theme as depicted in the figure below.



Overall, this study reveals lay Catholic women as an invisible linchpin in Catholic ministry but an inherently precarious one. Women willingly commit themselves in their call to “deacon-like” service but the Catholic Church does not guarantee circumstances in which it is possible to fulfill that call. Inevitable disconnects between gifts and opportunities mean that women shoulder a high emotional, professional, and financial burden as a cost of entry. Over time, this leads a substantial portion of women to reorient or pull back from ministry commitments, to question whether the Catholic Church is able to use their gifts and value their presence, and to dissuade young women from embarking along a similar path. Women’s centrality juxtaposes with their precariousness to paint a portrait of the US Catholic Church as inherently fragile, rife with inefficiencies, and poised to recalibrate the composition and character of leadership to respond to the realities of diaconal ministry.

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## *Table of Contents*

|                              |           |
|------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b> .....    | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>About the Study</b> ..... | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Major Findings</b> .....  | <b>8</b>  |
| CALL .....                   | <b>9</b>  |
| CONSTRAINT .....             | <b>19</b> |
| ADAPTATION.....              | <b>29</b> |
| CONTRIBUTION .....           | <b>39</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b> .....      | <b>47</b> |
| <b>Endnotes</b> .....        | <b>50</b> |

A stylized, mosaic-like illustration of a woman's profile, facing left. The image is composed of various shades of orange and yellow, with a purple rectangular box containing the word 'INTRODUCTION' overlaid on the top part of the face. The background is a solid light orange color.

## INTRODUCTION

*“I’m sure if God wants me to be a deacon,  
I’ll be a deacon in heaven.” – Angie*

Deacons are ordained ministers called to serve the Roman Catholic Church through liturgy, word, and charity. Deacons preach, teach, and proclaim the Gospel; they perform baptisms, lead prayers, and witness marriages; they preside over funeral and burial services; and they bring the support and resources of the Church to meet needs and respond to injustices in their local communities.<sup>1</sup> Ordained deacons belong to the faithful as well as to the hierarchy, with the Church mediating access to diaconal identity and its functions.<sup>2</sup>

As presently conceived, the diaconate in the Roman Catholic Church is the exclusive realm of men. Per the Code of Canon Law n.1024, “A baptized male alone receives sacred ordination validly.”<sup>3</sup> A 2004 “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World” published by the Vatican Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reiterates that “woman, in her deepest and original being, exists ‘for the other,’” linking women’s “capacity for the other” to motherhood.<sup>4</sup>

While Catholic women today are excluded from the ordained diaconate and revered for their contributions as mothers, they are nonetheless immersed in Catholic life and diaconal service. Women constitute more than half of US Catholics and 80 percent of lay ecclesial ministers.<sup>5</sup> Lay Catholic women are more likely than their male counterparts to be “absolutely certain” of their belief in God, to say that religion is “very important” in their lives, to attend Mass regularly, to read the Bible, and to pray.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, declines in women’s close ties to the Church across recent decades have led some to caution that “women’s long-standing loyalty to the Church and commitment to Catholicism can no longer be taken for granted.”<sup>7</sup>

What does contemporary women’s service in the US Catholic Church look like amid long-standing norms that repudiate their call to the sacrament of Holy Orders? Do some Catholic women discern a call to the diaconate as some men do? How do women respond to

“  
I’ve always felt called to serve in some way in the Church.

– Jill

this call and navigate the juxtaposition between formal Church law and their desire and willingness to serve? Absent a pathway to the diaconate, how do lay women minister through the liturgy, word, and charity? And what does their service and loyalty signify about who women are, who the Church is, and what both mean for the longevity of Catholicism in the United States and around the globe?

Such questions demand particular attention now given the growth and urgency surrounding global conversations on women and the diaconate. The Second Vatican Council specified the diaconate as a “ministry of service.” Changes to canon law introduced by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 reinforced the distinction between deacons and the ordained priesthood. Pope Francis appointed a commission in 2016 to study the question of women deacons in the early Church, its outcome inconclusive. A 2019 Amazon Synod of Bishops reas-



served the “urgent” matter of women’s ministry in light of experiences in regions underserved by priests. Pope Francis appointed a second commission on the question of women and the diaconate in 2020, following a Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation in which he noted that “[t]he present situation requires us to encourage the emergence of other forms of service and charisms that are proper to women and responsive to the specific needs.”<sup>8</sup> Growing numbers of Church historians, theologians, biblical scholars, canon lawyers, and lay activists likewise amplify contemporary discussions on the matter.

Largely absent from these conversations, however, are systematic, social scientific examinations of Catholic women who feel called to the diaconate or who are currently involved in diaconal ministry. The present study aims to fill this gap by interviewing women whose personal and professional lives are deeply invested in service to the Catholic Church and whose ministry – apart from the legitimacy and authority conferred by ordination – closely resembles that of deacons. While there are occasional (and unsurprising) overlaps with lay women who feel called to the Catholic priesthood, this study narrows its focus to the diaconate: women called to the diaconate and women whose ministry functions parallel those of male deacons.

As sociologists, we conducted this study and wrote this report with an intent to build understanding using empirical observations. We are not theologians, nor canon lawyers, nor Church historians, nor apologists, nor activists. We designed the study to listen to and report – confidentially – how real Catholic women feel about, think about, and live out their call in the Roman Catholic Church, as well as how their service overlaps that of the ordained, exclusively male diaconate. We do not make claims as to the normative implications of this study nor its theological underpinnings or consequences. This study’s conclusions are limited by its

particular focus on US women, whose experiences may or may not reflect those of women serving the Church throughout the world.

The report proceeds as follows: 1) *About the Study* summarizes our methodology and characteristics of the women we interviewed; 2) *Major Findings* details key takeaways from interviews categorized within four major themes: Call, Constraint, Adaptation, and Contribution; and, finally, the 3) *Conclusion* distills an overall summary and its corollaries for the future of women, the diaconate, and fidelity in service to the global Catholic Church.

The background is a solid teal color. In the upper half, there is a large, stylized graphic of a woman's profile in a darker teal shade, facing left. The profile is composed of smooth, flowing lines. Behind the profile and across the entire upper half, there are faint, repeating patterns of stylized flowers or leaves, also in a darker teal shade. In the center of the upper half, there is a bright orange rectangular box with a thin white border. Inside this box, the text "ABOUT THE STUDY" is written in a bold, dark teal, sans-serif font.

## ABOUT THE STUDY

*“Thank you for listening to me.  
That alone is a gift.” – Mary*

The current study draws upon in-depth interviews with forty Roman Catholic women in the United States whose call or ministry bears similarities to that of ordained male deacons. Many among the forty feel called by God to the diaconate themselves or would discern such a call should that path open to them. Others do not feel called to ordination and yet engage in forms of service to and for the Church that fall within the realm of diaconate ministry.

Interviewee recruitment involved widespread outreach to hundreds of Catholic women around the US thought to be involved in “deacon-like” ministry. Snowballing generated an initial list; all were invited to complete an online pre-screener in English or Spanish that confidentially gathered information including age, race, marital status, number of children, zip code, religion and religious attendance, political ideology, education/degrees held, and ministry roles currently or previously held in the Catholic Church. From the list of women who completed this pre-screener, we selected forty for in-depth interviews, attentive to diversity across age, race, region, and ministry background.

Figure 1 presents summary characteristics of the interviewee sample. The women range in age from 26 to 78, with an average age of 51. They identify as Hispanic, Black, Filipino, Jewish, Black/Indigenous, and white. A majority indicate that they are politically liberal (a “2” or “3” on a 7-point ideology scale from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative”).

More than half are married. Mothers in our sample (58 percent of the total sample) have between one and six biological or adopted children, with an average of 2.5 children – slightly higher than the average for US mothers overall but especially high when compared to their highly-educated counterparts.

Our interviewees hold higher levels of education than Americans overall (about a third of whom have a BA or more).<sup>9</sup> Ninety percent of women in our sample have at least a college degree. Nine have a Master of Divinity, specifically; others hold undergraduate or graduate degrees in religious studies, theology, pastoral theology, pastoral counseling, ministry, ministry in preaching, education, comparative spirituality, medicine, nonprofit administration, public policy, educational psychology, and social work. Some hold certificates in advanced liturgy, spiritual direction, community health, and more.

Past and present ministry positions, roles, and responsibilities reported by interviewees include but are not limited to the following: pastoral assistant, pastoral associate, project leader, lector, Eucharistic minister, pastoral counselor, spiritual director, Sacristan, lay lector, campus ministry, Director of Religious Education, religion teacher, pastoral council, social justice committee, catechist, small group leader, Catholic newspaper writer, archdiocesan ministry, theology teacher, ministry trainer, professional consultant/speaker, parish staff, director for Latino Ministry, youth ministry, young adult ministry, RCIA, adult faith formation, Catholic Charities, retreat director/leader/speaker, high school theology teacher, director of service learning, preacher, marriage preparation facilitator, parent groups, women’s spirituality, community organizing, vacation Bible school, Director of Pastoral Care, Certified Catholic Chaplain, Bible Study teacher, professor, Communications Director, Hispanic minister, seminary formation, and Office of Clergy Sexual Abuse.

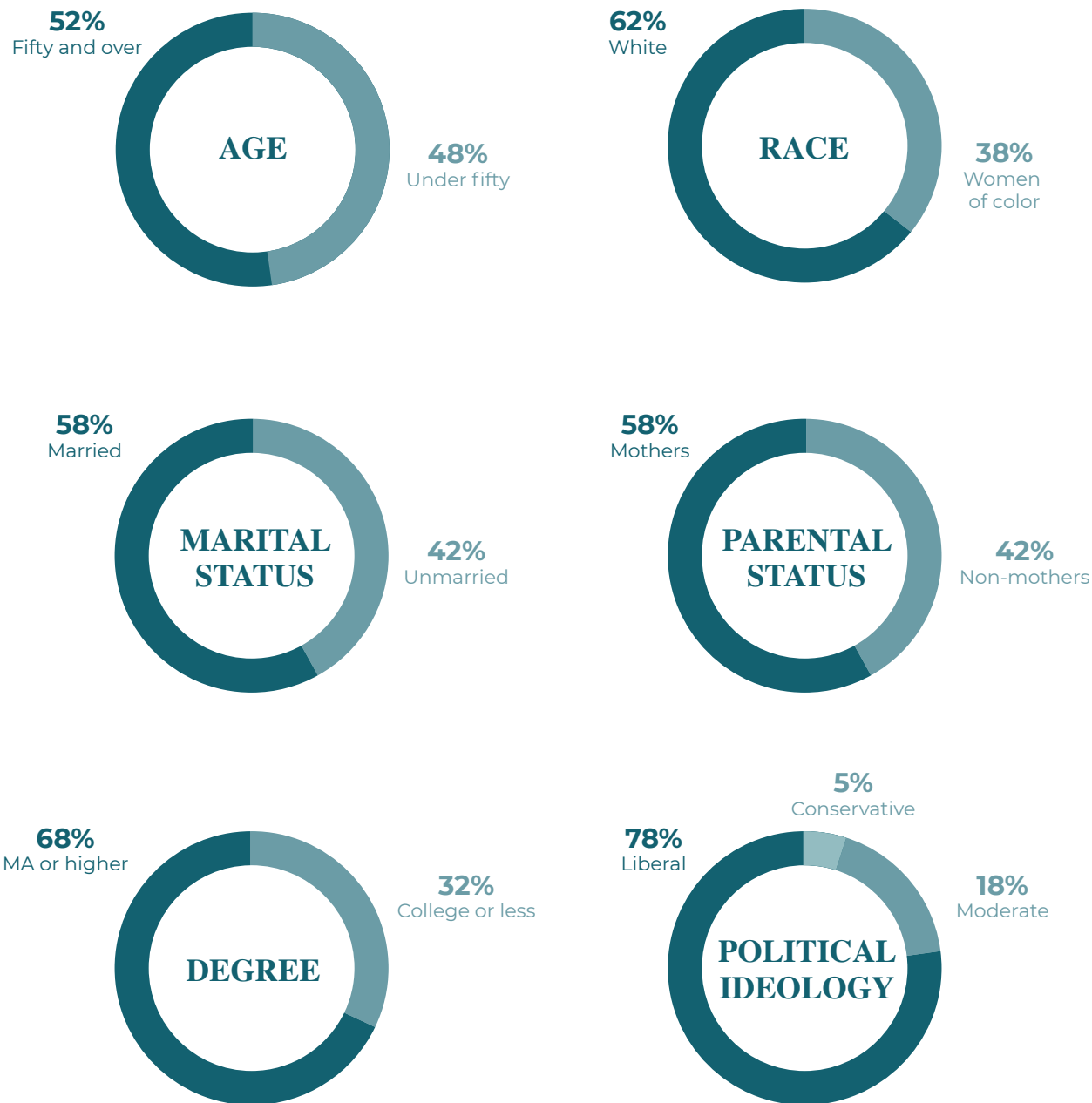


Figure 1: Interviewee Characteristics

ABOUT THE STUDY

Respondents live and work in dioceses throughout the United States, both rural and urban (see Figure 2). Major cities represented include New York City; Miami; Chicago; Phoenix; Los Angeles; San Francisco; Denver; Minneapolis; Cleveland; Washington, DC; and Atlanta.

Confidential interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes, typically conducted via Zoom. Interviewees had the option to complete their interview in either English or Spanish. Open-ended questions broached an interviewee’s religious background, current faith practice and Catholic identity, past and present ministry involvement, interactions with ordained and lay others during ministry, thoughts about vocation for themselves and for the Church overall, and reactions to Catholic women and the diaconate. Interviewees received a \$35 gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Audio for each interview was recorded, transcribed, translated into English where necessary, and edited for accuracy. Pseudonyms replaced interviewees’ real names. A team of researchers subsequently coded all interviews using the qualitative coding software Atlas Ti, generating 85 codes and 13 document groups to aid analysis and comparison. Further analyses identified networks connecting codes across four central areas – call, constraint, adaptation, and contribution – forming the basis of this report’s main findings.



Figure 2: Regional Distribution of Interviewees

A stylized, dark red silhouette of a woman's profile is centered within a grid of rounded rectangular cells. The grid is composed of dark red lines, and the background within the cells has a marbled, organic texture. The overall color palette is monochromatic, consisting of various shades of red and maroon.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

*“I think I might be called to be a deacon.” – Jill*

Ahead, we identify and describe four prominent themes within interviews: (1) *call*, (2) *constraint*, (3) *adaptation*, and (4) *contribution*. Together, these four characteristics showcase the myriad ways in which diverse Catholic women in the US embody and follow their felt vocation, encounter barriers in pursuing ministry opportunities, adapt creatively to fulfill their vocation or meet recognized ministry needs, and make contributions to the overall work of the US and global Catholic Church.



In his message for the 2021 World Day of Vocation, Pope Francis invoked the witness of Saint Joseph to suggest three key elements in an individual's vocation: *dream*, *service*, and *fidelity*.<sup>10</sup> Dreams, said Pope Francis, are where God “quietly speaks in the depths of our heart” and require courage to say “yes”; service entails living for others rather than for oneself; fidelity “daily perseveres in quietly serving God and his plans.” Resonant with this depiction, women interviewed for this study describe feeling quietly called by God, being drawn into service to and by others, and faithfully committing to ministry in the Catholic Church. We use these three elements of vocation to describe and situate women's spiritual call to a life of ministry that frequently looks akin to that of an ordained deacon.

## Dream

Women we interviewed describe lives of faith that took root in their earliest days and were subsequently

nurtured within families, realized through personal character and relationship development, fostered through religious practice and education, and contemplated in prayer and discernment. Most grew up in practicing Catholic families. (“I come from a very, very committed Catholic family”; “My family was deeply Catholic...I grew up pretty immersed in Catholic culture”). A handful came from non-practicing Catholic, Eastern Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish families, typically converting to Catholicism in early adulthood.

Stella recalls riding her bike to daily Mass as a child, sitting in the back of the sanctuary “because I didn't want adults talking to me...I just kind of wanted to pray and look at Jesus.” Iris recalls long talks with “Uncle Jesus”; GraceAnn chatted with “Grandpa God” during elementary school recess:

*I would sneak in the side door of church and go on the other side of the altar rail and sit and talk to Grandpa God. I wasn't supposed to be on that side of the rail, but that's where I was gonna be...I grew up with Grandpa God, you know, a very loving God – I would just talk to him about anything.*

Daniela and her friend used to play ‘Mass’ at home, alternating ‘priest’ and ‘deacon’ roles. Jaime laughs about how she would “force my sisters to listen to me explain what I just learned in CCD a few hours prior,” noting an early love for teaching Scripture. Piper recalls how, “[e]ven since I was a little one, there's something about the liturgy that was transformative for me – that that is a place of sacredness. I believe in the Eucharist.”

Interviewees mention women playing pivotal roles in their early Catholic formation – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, godmothers, teachers, and religious sisters, among them. Jill recounts how her mother brought her

along to deliver food through St. Vincent de Paul (“I think she planted those seeds really, really early and really intentionally”). Lisa says that the Catholic tradition was passed down through generations of women in her family: “My mother, my grandmother, and my great grandmother were definitely the women who were in the Church doing something—always cooking, cleaning, giving, volunteering. It was their second home.” Jennifer watched the deferential way that her grandmother interacted with parish priests.

Seeing Catholic women fill some roles and not others set early boundaries around how interviewees envisioned their own futures of faith and service. Delilah, for example, “felt like the only way I could live out my faith was as a religious, because that’s what I saw growing up.” Lisa learned that “you could be a nun, or...you know, volunteer – be a part of the Church as all other women in our family [were]...they were helpers.” Some felt the early tug of a call that went beyond what they witnessed in their own parishes. Jamie, for example, wrote a letter to the Pope when she was 12, volunteering to be the first female priest. “I remember thinking very clearly... ‘I bet the Pope has just never thought of this’... I thought that was absolutely what God was calling me to do.” Growing up Protestant and seeing women preach, Angie “felt called to the diaconate from the time I was really young.” Teresa attended a parish with a female pastoral administrator, from which she learned to image God and ministers in non-masculine ways. Absent such childhood contexts, others, including Kelsey, never even considered the possibility of women’s ordination (“It honestly never even occurred to me”).

The majority of women describe participation in Catholic ministries that began in their youth and expanded from there – the seeds of a lifelong vocation. Jill, for example, says:

*I think I’ve always felt called to serve in some way in the Church ...I feel like that’s cliché, but as long as I can remember, I grew up in the children’s choir, and then I was an altar server, and then I was a Eucharistic minister, and a sacristan, and a retreat leader – it’s been a part of my life forever. And I keep wanting to dive deeper, despite the challenges that I see and that I’ve faced personally in terms of pursuing that vocation.*

Women cite the relevance of interactions with priests, nuns, and other ministers – both positive and negative – that either encouraged their participation or hinted that their journey into service would not be easy. (“I remember [a priest] training me for altar serving, and he was really patronizing, now, looking back on it”).

“  
...my entire life is wrapped up in the Church.

– Jill

Catholicism feels like “home,” “family” and “a part of who I am” to interviewees. The Catholic Church is “the Church that Jesus established” and “the truth.” “I’m Catholic in my bones”; “It’s where I’m called.” Women share that they love Catholicism’s liturgy, the Eucharist, rituals, prayers, the communion of saints, the



Virgin Mary, and more. “I can’t imagine life without the Eucharist”; life “would not be complete” without Catholicism. For a substantial portion of women we interviewed, Catholicism is *everything*. Jill explains:

*I couldn’t imagine my life without faith and without the Church. It’s my family, it’s my friends, it’s my work, it’s my career, it’s my vocation – it’s my relationship with my boyfriend – it’s nearly every important relationship in my life. ...I do believe that the Holy Spirit is at work; I believe in Jesus and the true presence and kind of all of those other doctrinal things, but, at face value, it’s—my entire life is wrapped up in the Church.*

Women’s call to serve in the Church comes part and parcel with their call to be fully and authentically Catholic.

At this point in life – ranging from age 26 to age 78 among the women we interviewed – how do women think about their call and vocation? What characterizes the dreams they hear God speaking quietly into the depths of their heart?

Interviewees speak of “vocation” at the intersection of God, love, community, gifts, and personal calling to “bring our purpose alive.” Laura tells us that vocation is about actualizing one’s purpose by taking steps toward love with Jesus and the Spirit as your GPS. Sara says that “vocation is what fulfills us...that makes us feel whole, that makes us do what we do with love, with enthusiasm, with joy.” Kelsey says that vocation is what God whispers in the silence:

*Trying to figure out what [vocation] means in a practical way is really challenging, and I believe that God exists in the practical. In*

*my spiritual life, when I sit down and listen to God, God speaks to me through Ignatian contemplation...like, the ‘deep knowing’... God in the silence... What is God saying to me in those moments?*

Riley points out how “vocation” resonates differently for Catholic women than men, whose practical pathways differ:

*If you say “vocation” and “discernment” to a man, they think that you’re talking about the priesthood first and foremost. And, knowing that that was not an option for me – it mean[t] that when I heard those words, I was looking at another direction. I was considering another path, because the one path of spiritual leadership in the Church as an ordained person – as a priest, anyway, versus a sister or a nun – that just was not available to me.*

Juana, who grew up in Mexico, says that women are “not even allowed to discern what their vocation is – much less *what* is your vocation. I mean, they hardly even let them think.” While in high school, Piper asked her parish priest if she could join the discernment circles announced each Sunday after Mass, unsure of her interest but knowing that “I [hadn’t] been given the room to imagine that for my life.” The priest empathized “again and again and again,” but his response remained the same: “If only I had it my way, sure; but, sorry, you can’t come.”

Restricted vocational pathways yield confusion for women who see themselves in lives of Catholic leadership and service but not as religious sisters. Women say that what they hear from the Church instead is that they are not called to be deacons, but mothers. Several

point out that motherhood and service to the Church are not incompatible, but that the latter necessitates formal validation:

*You can just go have a vocation to be a mother and a teacher, and we're delighted for you to go do that. In some ways, the Church has less to do with that. But if we're talking about service here, if you feel like you're called to serve at an institution, that has to get recognized and sorted out. (Christy)*

*As an adult, my vocation is as a mom and to family and spouse in marriage, which I've learned from my Church is my primary vocation...But, like, here's the mission of what Jesus wants the disciples to do. And we pattern our lives after Jesus. (Laura)*

Treating family as a primary aspect of vocation means that even single women frame their aspirations and adjust their commitments in anticipation of marriage, children, and aging parents. Dana never felt called to be a mother and “wasn’t the kid who dreamed about her wedding day,” which left her wondering what to do with her call: “Where does that leave me – like, what are the options on the menu for me?”

Women share how difficult it is to follow a call that remains closed to them. Some, like Silvana, pray for God to give them clarity:

*Sometimes I feel like, ‘What am I doing here?’ But I have to think: it’s not the leadership, it’s not the priests, it’s not the institution of the Church, really, it is the presence of God. And I always say, ‘He has a plan.’ I don’t know what that is, but I can pray and trust that He does. Or She does.*

Jamie describes a disconcerting prayer experience wherein God asked her, “do you want to die having never done what I am telling you to do?,” wishing she had clarity about what this meant. Ann bemoans how Catholic women cannot pursue their calls: “If you feel you have this gift and yet you cannot manifest it – it is difficult. ...a huge loss for the Church.”

Vocational boundaries combine with the lack of female role models to inhibit women’s sense of vocation in the Church. This “diminishes our imagination for ourselves and for our Church,” says Christy. Iris concludes that God is not bound in this same way:

“  
**I really feel called to be a deacon.**  
– Lisa

*Women have no role models. They will not understand that [the diaconate] could be a possibility for them when they have no role models. But guess what? I know for sure God calls. It’s God who calls, and God is the one who’s given me this desire, this flame, that burns. And if you really are a follower, you would go where that leads you. ... The Holy Spirit is the one that does it, and I think it can happen. I think [women] can discern it [a call to the diaconate] without the Church showing models of it.*

Women do feel called to be deacons. Lisa, for example, hears her call to the diaconate loud and clear:

*It seems like everything I read, everything I pray, it's calling. ...When I try and think, 'Oh, maybe this is not it' ...it's just like, 'Nope,' again it tugs at my heart. I really feel it being Jesus and the Spirit. ...I just sort of feel, as I'm sure a lot of other women do, if I could just share with my heart, you know, 'I feel this, this is what I'm called to,' that that cannot be denied. Your testimony of faith can never be denied. And I just don't feel like whoever is supposed to hear has really heard this. Like, it's not just some power trip...I really feel called to be a deacon.*

Several recount instances when others pointed out their gifts and call to them, such as Laura who was told by a Lutheran pastoral placement office, “You know, we could really use you, if you ever wanted to be...you’d be a great pastor.” Michelle shares that a priest she worked with told her, “You are more pastoral than most priests I know. You should be a priest. You should be able to be a priest...God has called you to this.” Her children say the same.

Many hesitate to share their sense of calling or choose to keep it quiet for fear of dismissal and reprisal. Piper, for example, says:

*Even if [my call] was open, which would be joyful...I would face some dismissive comment about how I don't actually – shouldn't be there. Or someone not looking me in the eye. I would be fully prepared that that would happen. And that hurts.*

Others opt to disclose their call selectively despite known obstacles, something that requires “the courage to name the desire,” as Dana says. She shared her call with a religious sister, who responded “I’m not surprised; you are who you are.” Laura attempted to start a formal process of discernment by talking with her parish priest:

*I had a meeting with my priest and told him that I might feel like I had a call to be a deacon. I started talking about how I used to pretend that I was a deacon in secret in my office when I was a parish staff person – and I read all the documents – because I thought that they were helpful... I knew that I couldn't be recognized, but I could just do that as a way to feed a vision of who I could be and how I could act as a lay ecclesial staff person.*

“

**I would discern it.**

**– Leslie**

She next asked to share her call with her bishop, who agreed to meet. After an hour-long conversation, he told Laura that no other woman had ever shared with him a desire to be a deacon.

But most interviewees say that they have not formally discerned a call to the diaconate because, put simply, the Church has not invited them to do so. Posing the hypothetical of whether they might discern or pursue diaconal ordination were it available to them, we heard responses such as Leslie's:

*I would discern it. I don't know what the answer to the discernment would be. But I have really strong liturgical presiding and preaching skills, so the gifts that I have could be a great service to the parish in ways that they're barred right now. ...I would discern it and see where that discernment would lead. And if it was appropriate for the family.*

Many women summarize that the Church unfairly conflates state of life (whether single, married, or religious) with vocation in the community (gifts you are called to share with others). Pushing back against this conflation, Sara, who contemplated religious life before marrying her spouse of 25 years, believes that "my true vocation has nothing to do with whether I am religious or married" and believes that she can help others as a married woman, too. Jennifer says similarly, "Obviously, mother, wife, that's my number one vocation. But I really do feel there's something that God's gonna have me do with this whole 'no place for lay people.' – I think it's a tragedy."

Women share that their discernment is not a one-time or temporary event, but continuous and lifelong. Says Jill, "It's a constant process of discerning and working with spiritual directors and mentors and friends, and personal prayer, and being open to where the Spirit is leading."

## Service

A second key dimension to vocation referenced by Pope Francis likewise reverberates in the ways interviewees talk about their call: *service*, or efforts exerted in the interest of others above self.

Asked to describe themselves, the women we interviewed frequently use words that highlight service dimensions to their personalities. They describe themselves as skilled at connecting others and building community, as learners, leaders, creative, empathetic, good listeners, inclined to say "yes," expressive communicators, peacemakers, and mediators. Translating personalities into skillsets, women commonly mention felt and recognized gifts for listening, teaching, preaching, and leading (often by example), and for embedding themselves in communities such that people are willing to trust and share with them. Women readily attribute their gifts and skills to God, seeing them as life-giving in themselves. Mary says that her gifts "make me more and more alive when I do them." Michelle says of her service, "It wasn't what I did; it is who I am."

Women we interviewed feel personal accountability for living out their call to service, even if they can't actualize it fully within the Catholic Church. Sandra, for example, says that she's had to figure out how to "live that out nonetheless," to "honor that invitation from God." Carrie elaborates on the juxtaposition of a call with no clear path to serve:

*There are men and women who can serve in this role as deacons. It's not a nun; it's not a sister. It's a life. It's a chosen vocation that people are making. It's not another part-time job for somebody to have. It really is a vocation. ...We don't get off the hook*

*just because I'm a woman. I'm going to be accountable. And how can I be accountable for the gifts that I've been given when the Church doesn't allow it? So I've had to find my own venue, if you will, for using my gifts.*

Responses vary to the unease of being unable to use one's gifts – preaching, in particular – within Catholic contexts. Melissa bemoans missed opportunities to serve in light of the barrier to ordination, saying, “Sure; my gifts are here and offered for the Church, but there's a way that ordination would make them more available and more out there for the people.” Amy critiques the Church for making women feel “unworthy” of their gifts. Ann says some women feel compelled to leave Catholicism “to nurture their souls.” Riley came to recognize multiple paths to answer a call: “I could find my vocation in a lot of different areas, perhaps. It could be the Catholic Church, but not exclusively so.”

But the women we interviewed distinguish themselves by remaining in the Church, in service to Catholics as committed Catholics. Silvana settles the question by saying, “I'd much rather be a thorn in my own Church than in somebody else's.” Iris, a first-generation immigrant, says that “being Catholic is like the country where I was born... the only reason I would leave it is if there was some compelling reason to leave...like, I left the country because we had to.” Angie cannot leave because Catholicism is *the* church. “This is the truth... This is the fullness of the faith,” adding that “it doesn't mean that I'm not going to stop fighting for the idea that women should be able to preach, because they should, and that women should have a stronger voice at the table, because they should. But we can't have those conversations on the periphery... We have to be in the ring.” Most women do not seriously consider leaving the Church, though nearly all ponder the option.

A felt call, recognized gifts, and willingness to serve mean that women are recruited into key positions in their parishes, dioceses, and other Catholic arenas of service. Stella, for example, shares how her pastor's invitation to join the full-time parish staff “was an easy discernment” because “I had been doing the ministry of gathering with these women and I could see that things were going well and that they were benefiting and I was enjoying the work and felt called to it.” She saw the invitation as “being recognized for my own giftedness.”

Many women describe how they began in smaller, volunteer roles – whether as a member of the choir, as a Eucharistic minister, or otherwise – and those roles multiplied and expanded. Angie, for example, began as a cantor before the pastor asked her to take over the music director role and, once the pastoral associate left (after a 2-year discernment process), he approached her about filling the job. “He's like, ‘I'm thinking about you for this role; I'd love it if we could pray over it for a little while.’”

Others tell similar stories, not pursuing ministry positions themselves but rather being called into positions by people (most often priests) who recognize their gifts. In Leslie's experience, “I was helping out more, and [the priest] started recruiting me. He's like, ‘I need a pastoral associate, and you're it.’” Barbara prefers this kind of organic promotion for women – being “pulled into it” rather than “asking” or “pushing” for it, which to her would disrupt the “basic natural order” of men leading and women helping.

Lydia likens the ways that women come into service roles in the Catholic Church to what occurs in other denominations, in which “the community calls forth and brings” someone suitable. “That kind of collective input and experience is super important.” Angie says that women's expanded leadership – often unseen – is

“not about power. It’s about you being a representative of the Church.”

Lisa shies away from words like “validation” while still acknowledging that “I do have a faith to share; I do have a message that I feel I’ve been blessed, or graced with. And that I’m glad it’s been received well, and that folks are appreciative...I feel it’s something I can do...I feel like this is what God is using me for. So I really

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**I’ve been very affirmed in my gifts and I want to use them.**

**– Teresa**

feel that sense of being a vessel.” Others say similarly that the Church is “welcoming my gifts.”

All the women we interviewed express appreciation for the affirmation they receive from community members in response to following their call to service, even as some get frustrated that they cannot do more. They are willing to do more. Teresa, for example, says that:

*I can’t do as much as I can handle. I’m very called into ministry – I get to teach and preach and lead retreats and consult and advise and do spiritual direction to my heart’s content. I’ve been very affirmed in my gifts and I want to use them.*

She ties her unutilized gifts to hopes that the presby-terate may be reformed in a way that acknowledges how one person – a pastor – cannot possess all that’s required to be a good parish priest. She proposes col-laboration as a superior model, sharing responsibility based on people’s gifts (“One person can’t like be a good preacher-teacher-manager-administrator”). Lydia echoes this when she says:

*We’re asking a pastor to be an administra-tor, a spiritual guide, a leader, a pastoral – like, people can’t be all that. We’re not equipped to be all that. And so, I would love to see a team model of leadership. ... I don’t think that’s helpful to put it all on one person.*

Part of what compels women into collaborative service, in other words, is a response to their own call as well as a recognition that pastors need help: it takes many – and many gifts – to run a parish well and meet the diverse needs of parishioners.

## Fidelity

A call heeded requires fidelity, adds Pope Francis in his address on World Day of Vocation, which means perse-vering in “quietly serving God and his plans.” Catholic women feel called, serve others above themselves, and exhibit fidelity to that call spanning years despite a lack of formal recognition in the form of ordination to the diaconate.

But fidelity to a call as a woman in the Catholic Church presents inherent tensions between heeding one’s gifts, God’s voice, and unmet community needs alongside boundaries that make this impossible. Fidelity and dream can feel at odds.

Fidelity is well captured by observing how women across the life course persist in their vocational paths. On the younger side, Isabella is a 26-year-old white woman who has never married and has no children. She's currently working on her Master of Divinity and interning with a parish. She also volunteers with homeless people and enjoys time outdoors. Catholicism has "been always an ever-present thing in my life," Isabella says, but during college she found herself drawn to a Methodist community where her love for preaching was "welcomed and wanted." Missing Catholicism, she had to return ("Every time something scary would happen, I would reach for my rosary"). Acceptance into divinity school put her at a crossroads. She recalls asking herself, "I don't know what I'm doing – what can a Catholic woman with an M.Div. actually do? It was not something my conservative Catholic church really talked about much."

Isabella says she's still "on this crazy journey," trying to figure it out, discerning. She likes the idea of chaplaincy, but that too "gets a little complicated in the Catholic Church." She overhears female classmates in divinity school talk about pursuing their degrees and preaching with their church's full support, which she finds "disheartening"; "my gifts that I've been given aren't really given the space that's needed." She realizes that "I can only go so far" along her vocational path, which is a hard thing to come to terms with. Talking to God helps. She longs for her Church to say "yes" to her so that she can say "yes" back, but knows that, even then, "it's not gonna change overnight." She wants her future children to see themselves represented on the altar and know that they are full members of the Body of Christ.

Isabella wants to remain faithful to her call and loves the sacraments of her Catholic faith. And yet, when she sees older Catholic women "who have been doing

the work," who thought themselves that the Church would have opened more opportunities to them by now, Isabella thinks, "I don't wanna get to the end of my life and realize that I didn't get to use the gifts God gave me because of this issue. Because women are not fully seen within the Church."

Nearly two decades older, Sofia is a 45-year-old first-generation Latina who is married with three children. She loves poetry and literature and serves a racially diverse parish. Sofia feels gifted with empathy and an ability to connect with new people and engage in community organizing. Looking back, she thinks her life would have unfolded differently had the diaconate been possible for her. "I felt that those options were made for men, but not for me." Men, she says, can build a profession full of possibilities within the Church. Women discern similar paths but "don't get the name or the recognition – not officially."

At this point in life, Sofia finds herself "a little bit between hope and hopelessness." She sees the diaconate as an avenue for women to serve, transform, give dignity, and generate community. It's a "space of power, in a good way." Sofia explains that unavailable pathways mean that her theological formation is not strong, but that her vocation is "a gift." She asks God to help her discern, understand, embrace, and accept herself as "a woman prophet, as a woman priestess, as a deacon woman, as a woman of faith, as a woman with power." "God help me with this discernment and to go down this path," she prays.

On the older side of the life course is Ann (white, 74, married with two children), who describes herself as an outgoing woman attentive to the deeper underpinning of what's going on in any community or group. She was "invigorated" by the "hope" and "vigor around the liturgy" that she felt during Vatican II. She grew in-

creasingly progressive in her Catholicism through life, seeking out people and places that shared her passion for social justice and ecumenism. Ann created spaces for women to talk about their spirituality, to learn theology, and to hear interpretations of women in Scripture.

Ann says that her enduring “angst” is that “the Church has lost out on half its wisdom” – i.e., women. She’s watched women over many years – herself included – give much to the Church only to be told not to give any more. “Many of us who were very active and had a public role in the Church have been silenced.” At this point, Ann laments the lack of change and fears that younger Catholic women will not be there to carry on the fight:

*My generation – I don’t know that that’s going to happen in our time. And some women are tired of fighting. Some women are tired of going forward. And some women are continuing to go forward, but it’s kind of passing the baton to younger women who are not going to church. They’re not there!*

As for herself, Ann says that “I’m hoping to keep going toward God...I just pay attention to invitations that I feel are invitations of God.”

These three women – one 26, one 45, and one 74 – illuminate the progression of fidelity to one’s call in a context of constraint. All three remain Catholic. All three led with feelings of hope, joy, love of the sacraments, and recognized gifts. Available pathways defined what was imaginable and feasible educationally, professionally, and in service to the Church. In time, devaluation and pessimism threaten to undermine the quiet dream within women’s calls. Fidelity juxtaposes the call; service apart from legitimacy remains.



## CONSTRAINT

A second theme arising from interviews with women whose ministry approaches that of the Catholic diaconate is constraint.

Women we interviewed commonly describe encounters that render them either unable to fulfill or less effective in fulfilling their felt call to serve the people of God. Not all women we interviewed feel (or have yet discerned) a call to the diaconate, specifically, and yet their accounts bear similarities in the kinds of barriers that inhibit their ministry. The diverse contexts in which Catholic women pursue their vocation, in other words, matter substantially to the ways their calls unfold or get stymied and (un)realized in daily life.

What, precisely, does constraint look like among women who aspire to the diaconate or otherwise fill “deacon”-like roles in the US Church? Women’s experiences and efforts to live out their call amid constraint are patterned by three characteristics: (1) repudiation, (2) contingency, and (3) ambiguity. We describe and illustrate each in turn.

### Repudiation

Women approach “vocation” as using their gifts to respond to God’s call and the needs of the world, born of continual prayer and discernment. They feel called; they observe needs; they discern a way and prepare themselves to match their gifts with those needs. But the most immediate and overarching constraint Catholic women face in living out their call is repudiation;

i.e., the Church and its leaders refuse to accept their call. Call denial leads women to a vocational impasse: an end point preventing them from going any further to actualize their gifts in service to the Catholic Church.

**Women say “yes” and ask to give more; the Church tells them “no.”**

Interviewees share numerous experiences of rejection from the diaconate despite prayerful discernment and readiness to serve:

*I would absolutely be willing to serve as a deacon and to minister to people. ...I love Jesus and the Church, and I wanted to give my life to it. But the Church basically said, ‘No, we don’t want you.’ And I felt that if I stayed and kept doing that work, that it would be like being in an abusive relationship. I had to decide if I wanted to be psychologically healthy, or continue to try to say, ‘Love me, love me, I’m trying to serve you.’ (Amy)*

*I identify with those early Christians and early saints, who, in some ways, were persecuted for the first 300 years of Catholicism and were taking great risks to stand for their vision of what Jesus was calling them to be. (Stella)*

Amy describes how “devastating” it is to follow “your deepest sense of what life is for” only to be told, “Please go away.” Jennifer warns women who feel called to “beware that you’re gonna have people that are going to try to tell you your calling is wrong. And no one has power to tell you that.” Kelsey implores the Church to “believe women.”

Many women earn degrees and partake in training identical to that of men who become priests and deacons, but at graduation are treated differently and denied access to corollary opportunities. Iris, for example, completed a four-year master's degree in pastoral ministries, which she loved: "I finally found my 'peeps.'" But at the end of four years, the men could become deacons and the women "did not have anything." Iris "fought the word 'recognition,'" but "wanted to be blessed – I wanted to be sent." Her bishop did not want to do something that looked like ordination and so gave her a plaque instead. Iris describes what she did next:

*I just imagined myself...I just decided – I'm going to enter myself into this. I prostrated myself like [the men] did. I imagined receiving the book of the Gospel. I imagined the hands of the bishop. I imagined myself receiving the same rite at the ceremony [sobs]. And then – that made a difference.*

Sharing one's sense of call with others brings reminders of repudiation and its consequences. Lisa explains how "I've shared [my call to the diaconate] with a few priests, and they're like, 'Oh, but you can't do it.'" Jennifer recounts her priest's refusal to write her a letter of support when applying for military chaplaincy training:

*When I first decided that I wanted to pursue this calling, I went to my priest and I was like, "Father, like, this is what I'm thinking, this is what the Lord placed on my heart."...He said, "[Jennifer], you go down this road, you will be in complete schism with the Catholic Church. I cannot support what you're doing. I will not be a part of it." So, when the army sent out letters of recommendation as part of my packet to get character references, he was not willing to do anything of that sort.*

Once in training, Jennifer says a priest denied her communion "simply because I'm discerning this path."

Fearing similar reactions, women avoid repudiation by not disclosing their call to others. Delilah, for example, says:

*I'm fearful of bringing this up to pastors and priests in my diocese, even those who know me well, because I'm afraid they're going to see me as a fringe person and not trust me or trust where I'm coming from. And that gives me pause – not wanting to bring it up or pursue the conversation.*

Women like Delilah worry that exploring or disclosing a call to the diaconate will cast a shadow on the veracity of their Catholic identity and their commitment to ministry in their diocese.

Some women serve in capacities similar or greater to their husbands and other male family members, whom they see invited into vocational discernment. Laura realized how much she was called to the diaconate when her parish priest, with whom she had worked closely for five years, approached her husband after Mass one day and invited him to consider becoming a deacon. She recounts how, with "tears spilling down my face":

*I got in the car and I was like, "Absolutely not." ...If I can't be a deacon, you can't. I would be angry if you even considered it."...There was something insulting... something that just felt so painful about this person that I had worked with, who had respected me, who had supported...like, somebody I was working with every day could see in my husband, because he's male.*

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I feel not only  
called, but  
capable.

– Frances

Melissa describes a similar reaction when her brother-in-law entered diaconate formation: “I’m so pissed. I can’t even hide it. I am so angry. And I seem to be taking it out on him, but it’s really because I can’t do it – bottom line, whether I would or not – I can’t.” Carrie, too, acknowledges that she had to stop attending ordinations given the anger sparked by seeing male friends in her archdiocese become deacons while their wives stood alongside:

*How dare you allow this woman to put his stole on, but then have the first person that he blesses, or he gives the sign of peace to, is the bishop. Who took care of his kids? Who did his laundry? Who went to every frickin’ class with them for years? And he gets ordained and she doesn’t? ...It was so not fair.*

Dana jokes that the diaconate consists of “a lot of retired men looking for a hobby” – and “it’s weird that retired men looking for a hobby can preach, but I can’t.” When a colleague pointed that out to her, “it made me cry.”

Women often say they see “no place” and “no space” in the Catholic Church for their gifts to be realized fully.

Esperanza reflects sentiments shared by many when she says, “there’s not enough space for my vocation in the Church...I feel like there’s a space for servitude, but not for my vocation.” Jennifer earned a Master of Divinity only to hear, “There is no place for me.... It’s been an incredible spiritual journey for me, to have a calling that sometimes feels like I’m going towards a dead end.” A Protestant minister told GraceAnn that she was “being denied your vocation,” a message that stuck with her ever since. She absolves the Church by seeing the denial as unintentional, but feels its effects all the same:

*I don’t think it was an intentional thing, but I think that’s where the Church has gotten lost. The rules became more important than what— we’re afraid of the Holy Spirit. I think the Holy Spirit’s messy. That’s what I like about her [laughs]: give me the Holy Spirit!*

Even in capacities currently restricted to them, interviewees emphasize their readiness to serve.

Preaching is an especially significant area in which women feel called and capable but denied. Numerous women identify barriers they encounter in their attempts to fulfill this specific component of their vocation:

*I have a call to preach. And I feel not only called, but capable. And so I’ve asked, like, “Where can I find that space?” Their particular response would be like, “Oh, you get to do the opening announcements.” I’m like, “Interesting that you think that’s the same thing.” “Welcome everybody. Glad to have you here. This is the opening song.” – That is not the same. (Frances)*

*I would say [preaching]’s definitely been a barrier where, like, I’ve been called to that but not invited into that space. There aren’t ways that I can easily participate in that. (Delilah)*

*The hardest thing is really having discerned preaching, specifically. ...I just know that I could – I sit through Masses, and I’m like, ‘I’m a better preacher.’ That’s not pride, that’s not ego, that’s just like, I just am, you know? And I’ve gotten that feedback from people I trust and respect, whose views are valid. So, that’s hard. (Dana)*

Women describe frustration in not being given the opportunity to teach and share the relevance of the Gospel through preaching, noting especially their ability to relate to marginalized groups.

Repudiating women’s calls to the diaconate, moreover, leads to inefficiencies and missed opportunities to respond to parishioner needs in the context of a nationwide priest shortage. Lydia, for example, discusses how she would use her bilingual skills “in a heartbeat” to preside at Mass:

*I can’t provide the sacramental experience that our students are asking for. And that breaks my heart. It’s not even so much about my desires; it’s their desire to access the Eucharist, or have confession, or perform baptisms or perform weddings – from a very practical perspective, it’s nutty.*

She identifies inefficiency and impersonality when having to pay priests to “waltz in 15 minutes before Mass” and hand them a worship aid when she is the one “embedded in this community”: “It’s very frustrating that I literally can’t. It’s absurd. That’s a really big barrier.” Frances sees a gap in reaching Catholics of

color and thinks, “I could do that. And I would like to do it as a woman of color – I could do it, no offense, way better than a white man. ...People want something else.” Leslie wishes similarly that she could apply her liturgical presiding and preaching skills where they are desperately needed.

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**I’ve been called to that but not invited into that space.**  
– Delilah

Beyond preaching, Catholic women find themselves hamstrung in their ability to meet lay Catholics’ sacramental needs – particularly those that arise in moments of crisis and urgency. Amy tells about when her student suffered an injury that necessitated amputation. She longed to “be able to pray with him and give him a blessing” prior to his surgery, but could not do so:

*Those are the kinds of moments where I realized that because we have this sacramental tradition, you’re really kind of working with one arm behind your back...you can’t necessarily do as much as you would like to be able to do, or help as much as you would like to be able to help, to make sure that the load is less on the priest and that as many people as possible are accessing the faith who want to receive it.*

In practical terms, the restrictions placed on women block the sacraments and introduce inefficiencies. Priests must be vetted and called in to say Mass; patients requesting the anointing of the sick cannot receive it from the woman chaplain who has been with them the whole time; women trained as preachers are prevented from doing so – even in circumstances with racial and language barriers. Absent legitimate authority, women do all the practical planning but cannot carry out all religious functions.

Coping with the constraint of repudiation can be difficult. Women use words like “heartbreaking,” “painful,” “sad,” and “frustrating” to describe how they feel, knowing that the Church says “no” to their gifts. Several women, including Stella, admit that they don’t allow themselves to consider the possibility of the diaconate because it would only lead to heartbreak:

*It’s been really hard for me to feel the freedom to consider [ordination], because in some ways it would break my heart. It’s not something that’s open to me. It’s hard to discern something that isn’t actually a possibility, because then you’re left with kind of a broken heart, or an angry heart, or a disjointed heart...you’re discerning something but it’s not available to you because you’re female. And it’s just hard. It’s a hard place to be as a female. So, in some ways, I think I’ve resisted or haven’t felt the freedom to fully [discern].*

Several describe how the denial of their call makes them feel unwelcome in the Church as women, and makes the Church appear closed to women. Laura struggles with how to tell her young daughter, who named ‘priest’ as what she wanted to be one day, that she is neither invited nor welcome in that role. “She’s

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It’s hard to discern something that isn’t actually a possibility.

– Stella

literally looking at a bunch of men and boys all around her – and she’s like, ‘Mom, why are you and I here? This isn’t for us,’ like, ‘psst, we’re girls.’ I hate that.” Lydia expresses frustration from a women’s college, where “we tell these students you can be anything, like, strong women, but not this...It’s a cognitive dissonance that like I can’t get over.”

Ordination would fulfill dreams, many tell us, and right long-term discrimination. Sara says that she would “jump with happiness” if pathways to the diaconate were opened to her: “My dream has always been to help and work in the Church without fear, without restriction – without feeling discriminated against or without feeling that they are behind me, pointing, saying, ‘This woman wants to be something that is not allowed.’” Like Sara, many women we interviewed feel that ordination offers a path away from the repudiation they experience.

## Contingency

A second constraint commonly identified among interviewees is that their ability to minister, serve, and live out their call with their gifts in the Catholic Church is contingent. In other words, women's access depends upon others who act as gatekeepers, granting or blocking opportunities to minister. Contingency affirms that women hold no practical authority and remain at the whim of their contexts: which bishop is in charge of their diocese, what their parish pastor wants or doesn't want them to do, and what parishioners will tolerate without getting them (or their pastor) "in trouble."

Priests (and the bishops they serve) are the main gatekeepers when it comes to women's ministry. "I hate the fact that our pastor is like the gatekeeper. He shouldn't be," says Iris. Priests enable, prevent, stipulate, facilitate, and bar women's functions in parishes and other settings. Some support collaborative ministry and invite women into diaconal roles; others restrict or remove women once an ordained priest or deacon becomes available to fill the role.

Women describe enabling interactions with priests in which their gifts are welcomed, often by making room or creatively accommodating lay leadership and collaboration. While priests on the whole necessarily operate within the confines of canon law and Church teaching, many individually look for ways to "honor" and make use of women's service, nonetheless.

Christy, for example, describes her experience finding priests she can talk to who say "let's make a way for you to do this." Sara expresses gratitude for her pastor, who "is very understanding and very open...happy with what I do, with my sharing, with my reflections." Ann speaks wistfully of the years when she and a group

of women – each with a master's in theology – took turns preaching at their parish, with support from the pastor. "People said that one of the most important gifts of the community was the way other people besides just a priest broke open the word. ...I still meet people in the grocery store who say 'I remember when you used to preach.'"

Some women choose their parish (or even their diocese) thoughtfully, knowing that their ability to fulfill their call is contingent upon willing gatekeepers. Leslie describes the pivotal role of "pressure valve parishes" that embrace Vatican II through female and lay leadership among a sea of parishes that do not do likewise. "I never encountered resistance...because people wanted that kind of leadership."

But just as priests and bishops open pathways for women's involvement, they also close them. In Ann's case, above, a new bishop installed a new pastor who put a stop to women preaching ("His hands were tied"). Michelle says that she was able to preach "kind of under the radar" until a new archbishop arrived. GraceAnn found out that she could no longer preach once her pastor removed her name from the schedule, a move he explained as necessary to be in line with the bishop. Priests may extend tacit acceptance but recant out of fear of retribution from bishops, such as when one presider told Christy regarding her planned three-and-a-half minute homily, "We can't have anyone call the bishop":

*Somehow me preaching is the scandal that we're like afraid of in this moment? ...I'm not trying to do anything that's dangerous, or that's violent, or that causes harm to anybody. I just literally am trying to bear the word on the night where what we're talking about is a woman bearing the word*

*to save the whole world. That, for me, was a real clarifying point: that this barrier is not of God.*

Jill admits that “some of the hardest ministerial relationships that I’ve had in recent years have been with priests.”

Women are well aware of the risks that accompany their very presence and participation in male-dominated ministry spaces. They bear the mental load that they’ll get themselves or their pastors “in trouble.” Stella reflects on this burden:

*Every time I offered a Sunday reflection, there’s a part of me that’s like, ‘Am I gonna get in trouble for this?’ Not at the parish level – but at the archdiocesan level – is this something that wouldn’t be thought of as being appropriate? Could I get in trouble or could I get my pastor in trouble or the parish in trouble? And I thought, wow, I can’t believe I have to spend energy thinking about this, when clearly I am as formed as a clergy person, certainly as a deacon. And the deacon isn’t having to expend energy being worried. All I want to do is serve my Church and serve God’s people, and I’ve tried to do that to the best of my ability. It does sadden me that I also have to be worried about ‘am I doing something wrong’ when I so clearly feel a call in the vocation and the invitation to have dedicated my life and my work and my ministry to this.*

Angie acknowledges that “it’s such a risk to speak that truth ... [my pastor] wouldn’t put himself in a position where our bishop might not approve of what he said.” Contingency sparks a backdrop of fear for both the

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**All I want to do is serve my Church and serve God’s people...**  
– Stella

women who pursue their call in the Catholic Church and the pastors who support them.

Beyond access, women’s positions, careers, and financial stability are also contingent, subject to supervisory priests and bishops. Angie says plainly, “It’s kind of at the whim of the pastor. I mean, if we had a pastor in who didn’t like the way that I did things, I would be gone.” And if women face injustice when asked to leave positions, they are largely on their own. Unlike priests, they do not bring the backing of a religious order or diocese to scaffold them or facilitate alternatives.

## Ambiguity

Ambiguity marks the third dimension of constraint among women in diaconal service. Women are both everywhere and nowhere: they hold a wide variety of positions and fulfill a wide range of ministry functions but do not carry titles that adequately reflect their roles or grant them the legitimacy to carry them out.

Women occupy formal positions as pastoral associates, campus ministers, theology teachers, and professors, to name a few, while also volunteering in a myriad of capacities such as preaching and lecturing, teaching faith formation and RCIA classes, founding women's groups, Bible studies and preaching circles, accompanying people in spiritual direction, and serving on interfaith boards. A title like "campus minister" rarely captures what women do or why they are qualified to serve alongside other faith leaders, nor how important their ministry is to the diocese and community.

Lydia says that her ministry is "a little bit of everything. I essentially function as the pastor on campus without the sacramental capacities, because I'm not allowed to do that." And yet – particularly when working with non-Catholics – she notes "confusion" surrounding what to call her or expect of her. Amy says that people learn to expect certain things from priests, deacons, and religious sisters. But when it comes to women in Catholic ministry outside of "sisters," people are unsure what to presume – "They are kind of like, 'Well, who are you? Like, how do you fit into this system?'" Similar to Amy, others elaborate:

*I've gone to conferences where they asked you for your ministry, and it's like a two-minute list. Because in reality, my ministry is whatever is needed. ...If you just say 'deacon,' they accept. If you say 'priest,' they accept. If you say 'religious sister,' they accept. (Iris)*

*I'll have families who are just so grateful that I'm there at the grave for them, and then I'll have families who say 'Well, what, who are you?' And you know what? The answer to that is 'I'm not anybody; I'm just here to pray with you,' you know? And I*

*would like it if I had a better answer than that. (Angie)*

Women's lack of an appropriate title generates confusion among lay people, community members, the Church hierarchy, and the women themselves. Jill shares her frustration in having to continually define herself and her qualifications:

*There's no formal ecclesial role that I can take with me. ...It's on me to continue to define who I am as a minister in any context and be able to articulate that for people. But it also has to fit into whatever context I'm in. I can't always make a job into the ministry that I think I'm working towards or called towards.*

Dana encounters this in interfaith spaces, where she shares the responsibilities and education of non-Catholic clergy but lacks the title to reflect either: "That can create weirdness." Frances predicts that a "deacon" title would resolve ambiguity in both position and function:

*If I was a deacon, this wouldn't be a question. No one would be like, 'Well, what are we gonna do with you?' They would just be like, 'Oh, we already have a liturgical space that has been assigned to you. Fill it.'*

Known titles would both open institutional doors to women and better meet community needs, she says.

Women frequently carry all the qualifications of their male counterparts but cannot hold the equivalent title. Adara names as an "injustice" and a "blindness" the hindrances faced by women who seek chaplaincy certification after completing all competencies required, apart from ordination. Several women allude to themselves as "secret agents" or "undercover" to describe



the ways they navigate their ministry without a title that fits their role. Iris says, “we’re like the secret agent... we’re like the yeast that gets blended in and nobody sees.”

Often, women must rely on others to help legitimate their place absent a title that implicitly embeds such legitimacy, thus reiterating contingency constraints: “I definitely was in a public, visible role and the [priests] were very good about saying ‘[Stella]’s a pastoral associate,’ and sometimes referencing the formation I had received.”

Because they are not included or seen as among the ordained, women cannot leverage the same level of resources and support that priests and deacons can. Daniela jokes with her bishop that she would happily dedicate her life to evangelizing if someone cleaned her house and cooked, as many priests live. Claire admits that the financial piece – particularly as a single woman without a spouse’s supplemental income – is “the hardest thing”; seminarians and priests benefit from many cost-of-living perks to which she does not have access. “It’s a lot easier to say ‘yes’ to a call when everything you need is going to be paid for for the rest of your life.” Many women talk about the risk of getting “burned out” without respite and rejuvenation in the form of directed retreats, continued education, built-in communities of support, and more. Amy says, “I’m always on call, but I’m not getting anything back to fill my cup to say, ‘Oh, you are a real minister; you are doing important work.’ ...I was also kind of depleted.”

Role ambiguity, moreover, can render Catholic women invisible. Many tell stories of priests receiving credit and thanks for work that she performs, often from well-intended lay people who attribute all ministry successes to the person wearing the collar. Jill recounts:

*I’ll never forget one time...a donor was having a listening session with some of my women. I was there, my priest in residence was there, and the donors had been talking about, ‘you guys are so lucky to have such an incredible spiritual leader at the helm of this community,’ and she was talking about the priest in residence, which—he is the leader liturgically, but to me that just felt like a kick in the stomach. Because I am the one who is walking with students in difficult things.*

Leaders in the diocese, bishops among them, may also overlook women whose work is pivotal to the vitality of their parishes. Leslie says tearfully that “I worked for the archdiocese, [but] the archbishop never learned my name. I was at Mass with him. He didn’t even know my name. Like, he couldn’t, just – I was invisible.”

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There’s something  
really corrosive  
about being  
rendered invisible.  
– Christy

Not seeing the women who are actually doing much of the work fuels a kind of clerical authority reliant upon women’s underacknowledged, undervalued labor. Role ambiguity protects men from needing to share power with women. Christy labels this deliberate blindness “sinful”:

*There's something really corrosive about being rendered invisible. The Church, the decision-makers, the people who hold the power – what would it be for them to really see women? It's sinful that they don't. There's a need for conversion and repentance – because the consequences are so huge. ...Every other institution has come around to realize that if you want to improve communities and lift them up, women need more power. As long as the Church refuses to share power and see women, you live in the dark, and we're diminished, and there's more violence in the world because of it.*

Role ambiguity excludes women from decision-making, “seats at tables,” and the highest positions of power in the Church, which are reserved for the ordained. Jill sees this as a vital absence in the Church today: “We need women at every level, helping to make decisions in the Church...it would radically change the experience of Catholic women.”

Overall, constraints including repudiation, contingency, and ambiguity showcase ways in which women are barred, inhibited, rejected, and discouraged from fulfilling their ministry in the Church. Unlike their male counterparts, Catholic women cultivate and offer gifts within contexts that presuppose invisibility, lack of recognition, reduced authority, limited decision-making, and filtered access. Women necessarily negotiate a vocational impasse – forced to contend with the question of whether the Catholic Church is a place where they can feel welcomed and where their gifts can be utilized. This impasse compels women who stay to adapt creatively; it is to those adaptations that we now turn.

## ADAPTATION

Women who serve the Church without access to ordination make creative adaptations to live out their call amid constraints described in the last section of this report. This section explores these adaptations: What do they look like? How do women circumvent, downplay, or overcome constraints to serve the Catholic Church without acceptance or legitimation as “deacons”?

The adaptive character of women and their approach to ministry can be sorted into four themes: (1) “De facto Deacons”; (2) Strategic Deference; (3) Strategic Dissent; and (4) Emotional Management.

### “De facto Deacons”

Women feel accountable to follow through with God’s call for them even as it is not livable in the Church at present. They describe this conundrum using words like

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I just consider  
myself an  
unordained  
deacon.

– Iris

“wrestle,” “struggle,” and “sadness.” At the same time, their vocational impasse leads women who stay in the Church toward a ‘do what you can anyway’ outlook on diaconal ministry. Women do not hold formal titles among the ordained, yet they function as “deacons” to the fullest extent possible.

Iris struggled for some time to come to terms with the fact that the Church would not confer the sacrament of ordination to the diaconate; it was a “hard journey” and she “fought that.” But, like many women, she found solace upon realizing that she could still do diaconal work. She explains how, ironically, being unordained enables her to do things she may not otherwise be able to do:

*I just consider myself an unordained deacon. I’ve been already, in my opinion, a deacon in the church. They just don’t recognize that. And there’s some beauty in that. ...I can go where [deacons] can’t go, because they’re seen as a representative of the Church. ...I’m not answerable to a bishop. ...I’ve just embraced my position as a secret agent. As an unordained deacon.*

She says this enables her to minister more effectively to groups including LGBTQI Catholics. The adaptation feels empowering even while “very, very painful.”

Other women draw a similar conclusion, moving through their disappointment to simply do the work without the title:

*As I’ve learned more and more about the ministry of the diaconate – to word, to liturgy, to service – I have had to recognize that I have essentially been doing the work*

*and I've essentially been doing the ministry. I have essentially been doing it, even if it's not recognized as such; my work has been very diaconal. So that's kind of an interesting place to be landing: recognizing how diaconal my work has been. (Stella)*

*Being a deacon has always been my dream, but it isn't going to happen, the official ordination, but that doesn't mean that I'm not called to that ministry. There have been times when, in my professional and personal life, I've done many things that weren't necessarily legit and fit the job description, but needed to be done. And I did. (Carrie)*

*I want to be a deacon, right? Well, 'You can't do that, can you'? It's like, 'No.' So, I'm going to do all the things that a deacon does except the Church won't permit me to. I'm going to do it as many other women have done in all parts of the world, especially, as we heard recently, the women in the Amazon. ...There's nobody, you know? And so they have to do the work. (Lisa)*

Again and again, women describe how they carve out room for themselves to serve as “deacons” even when doing so demands tenacity:

*I created the space...“If they don't give you a place at the table, bring a folding chair.” ...I think I spent my life bringing folding chairs to tables. (Frances)*

*I'm thinking of that pebble in the shoe. Like, it's, what's it going to be? Where is it gonna go? I'm at a time where, right now*

*the Church does not ordain women. Okay. I'm gonna do what I can otherwise. (Melissa)*

Women also mention that lay status may grant more freedom, as ordination can “tie your hands” with “too many restrictions.”

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I've essentially  
been doing  
the work...and  
ministry.  
– Stella

Education can act as credentialing for women's de facto diaconate status. Most interviewees hold higher degrees; some pursue education to claim authority in place of ordination. Women deploy educational credentials to signal legitimacy and expertise as well as to garner respect. Embarking on her PhD, Frances says: “I don't know that the altar will ever be mine.... For me, it's about accreditation and preparation so I can be in those spaces.”

Women acknowledge barriers in the same breath that they suggest not treating them as barriers. A prominent response to structural discrimination against women in the diaconate, in other words, is to exert personal agency that overcomes it.

De facto deacon strategies enable women to (re)claim (and perhaps re-define) authority where it has been otherwise withheld. Christy describes this as the best way to meet the Church’s needs, which exist apart from Church rules:

*People’s needs are the most important thing, and you just need to stand in the fullness of your authority. They don’t need you to be confused and wishy-washy about whether you can be their chaplain right now. Nope. You are the person God has gotten them in that moment. And so you better just do right by that and fill that up, whatever the inner turmoil or tumult is.*

Jennifer expresses a similar sentiment when she says: “It’s not my responsibility to explain my calling to other people. My responsibility is to just operate in my calling.” Told that she could not proceed as a Catholic chaplain, Jennifer qualified through a nondenominational office instead – where they dubbed her “the undercover Catholic.”

For de facto, unordained “deacons,” function and effectiveness substitute for titles. Women learn to derive value from communities they work with and validation from their service. They cling to the sense that they are fulfilling an obligation to their call and to God rather than searching for a title or approval.

## Strategic Deference

A second adaptation that women engage in pursuing their call to ministry is strategic deference. Knowing that they do their ministry at the behest of priests who make their access contingent, women talk about being careful to respect hierarchical leadership and not assert

power in ways that threaten current power-holders. Stories from women told by priests to stop engaging in ministry serve as counterexamples and admonitions to defer appropriately or risk losing access.

Michelle, for example, talks about staying under the radar around priests “that we knew that were uncomfortable [with women’s leadership],” saying: “I was just very careful and mindful to be appropriately deferential so that I didn’t ruffle their feathers.” Leslie shows intentionality by focusing on what she’s asked to do and doing it within the parameters of the hierarchical Church: “You have to kind of figure out how you do your way and how you do your ministry and how you serve the people you’re asked to serve in a horizontal way, without looking too high and without getting too frustrated at the bureaucracy ... and the sin.” Jennifer learned to “expect people to not be okay with [my call to ministry].”

Women strategically defer by downplaying their own leadership, showcasing others rather than drawing attention to themselves. We often had to ask women to center themselves in accounts of their service; many would instead default to praising the collaborative efforts of ministry teams, willing priests, and the work of the Holy Spirit – internalizing the invisibility many women have learned to associate with their roles. Tala shares an example of a time she went to her pastor requesting a lay-led Advent reflection. When she made the poster to advertise it, her pastor asked, “Why did you not put the name in there of who’s in charge, and then put your name in that?” to which Tala said, “Because I know that there are still people in there [that], when they find that there’s not a priest doing it, they won’t understand. Let them come and be surprised.” Strategic deference not only reaffirms pastoral authority but also secures buy-in among laypeople who adhere closely to ordained authority.

Some women orient their work around seeking approval from those in a supervisory position. In her work on a liturgy committee, Stephanie mentions wanting to do something different (“not really trying to go in just doing the same thing all the time”). But in her attempt to introduce changes, she concerns herself foremost with what Church leadership would approve. She questions “what’s necessary... what can we do, what can’t we do?” and sees this as one of her roles in the parish – to introduce novel approaches while deferring to extant power structures.

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**Women have been discerning things for years that hadn’t been open to them.**  
 – Frances

Other women, by contrast, defer by avoiding situations in which they *need* to seek approval. When Carrie helped plan a funeral liturgy, she took this tactic:

*There was the canned liturgy for a 90-year-old woman. And I was like, ‘No, you don’t get it. This is what we’re going to do.’ And it was totally appropriate... One of the songs that we asked to have played was Hail Mary, Gentle Mother [sic], and he said, ‘Why would you want that?’... And I said, ‘This is a woman’s funeral who was a mother and*

*a grandmother and a great-grandmother.’ ...He just kind of sat back and realized who he was working with. And don’t argue with an Irish woman who knows what she’s doing.*

Circumventing permission-seeking preserves extant structures of power while making room for women’s distinctive contributions.

Strategic deference also takes the form of deferring to God and the Holy Spirit above humans or Church hierarchy. Frances is among many who suggest that women’s ordination is not denied by God but by imperfect humans in an imperfect Church. She instead defers to the Holy Spirit:

*Women have been discerning things for years that hadn’t been open to them. And you’re also talking to a member of a marginalized community – I mean, there are people – speaking of Black people – who were enslaved for years. You think that we didn’t have doctors? We didn’t have preachers? We didn’t have other things? Just because the laws of the time didn’t allow you to listen to the call doesn’t mean you were not called. I think we have to be able to see that God sees our call and it means pushing past the boundaries of the space that’s given us. To say: what is God’s vision? Not the human vision of the world. Because humans move slowly. And God finds a way.*

Acceptance is yet another form of deference, as women inure to their indefinite exclusion. Claire admits that she’s not the type to “get out there and fight and change the system.” She instead faces the system as it is, looking for the best way to share her gifts. Tala

advises similarly to be “realistic” and nurture your gifts within. Women seek out non-clerical roles, accordingly, knowing that this is where the Church tells them they may serve.

## Strategic Dissent

In addition to (and sometimes in contrast to) strategic deference, women also exercise *strategic dissent* as an adaptation to constraints faced in living out their call in the Catholic Church – and, for some, as a means of fulfilling aspects to her call. Women we interviewed remain Catholic even in the midst of doubt, contemplations, or invitations otherwise. Accordingly, they dissent from within the Catholic Church and parameters of what constitutes “dissent” as Catholics, carefully balancing identities of faith while instigating change.

Women tend to view and accept strategic dissent as an inherent part of who they are as Catholics and what they do in serving the Church, even if their approaches differ. Clare recalls a conversation in which she was asked how she handles disagreement, to which she said that her job is to “communicate and convey the love of God and what the Church teaches, believes, and professes to be true...giving people the tools to discern whether they can make these teachings their own.” Jaime says that “[a] lot of my work has been also trying to push the boundaries a little bit.” Mary acknowledges that “the exercise of voice is actually a form of power...and there’s a power in learning to use words well.”

Common among women is a form of strategic dissent that can be called “codeswitching”: carefully choosing vocabulary, labels, and descriptions to respect institutional norms while simultaneously making space for

women to function in diaconate capacities. Women codeswitch when they identify themselves as “unordained deacons,” “advanced lay leaders,” or, like Iris, say, “We are all ‘priests’ in this community.”

Some women put forth their ability to codeswitch as a beneficial trait when ministering to diverse Catholics, such as Delilah who says: “I have a way of changing vocabulary to make it accessible, depending on who I’m talking to. It’s allowed [priests I work with] to expand the capacity of their projects.” Women of color describe using their experiences to relate to historically marginalized groups.

Functionally, the majority of codeswitching happens with regard to preaching. Interviewees refer variously to their preaching as “speaking at Mass,” “reflecting,” “lay reflecting,” “reflecting at homily time,” “offering a Sunday reflection,” “talking about Scripture,” “contemplating a Biblical reading,” a “Scripture nugget,” “guiding a meditation,” “giving a theological reflection,” “lecturing on Scripture,” “offering a devotional,” “teaching,” “sharing the Word of God,” “drafting homilies,” “commenting on Scripture,” and “making an opening announcement.” Michelle laughs as she admits how it works in her parish:

*[The pastor] invited me to come, and he’ll say, ‘Could you come’—and of course we can’t call it ‘preaching,’—but he said, ‘Would you come and share at the parish?’ He said, ‘I’ll come and I’ll say a little line, and then it’s all you.’ He said, ‘we’ll get around that by doing this.’ How much better would it be if we could just call it what it is?*

Sara says that she records “reflections” and “guided contemplations” to send parishioners by text or YouTube. Angie makes clear that she has never “preached

after the Gospel” or “proclaimed the Gospel” but instead finds places outside of Mass to “lecture” and offer theological reflections, thereby minimizing “risk” to her pastor. Interviewees say that leading prayer services for funerals and offering the reflections is “basically preaching by another name.”

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I can do it myself. I just want the space.  
– Frances

Codeswitching creates outlets for women’s preaching gifts in coordination with willing priests. Iris preached as a “lay reflector” on Mother’s Day. Christy would “get invited to Protestant churches to preach, so I preached at my friends’ churches on the regular. They would be very generous in welcoming me into the pulpit.” But back home in her Catholic parish, she sets up “lay reflections” as “creative ways to get to preach, ‘cuz I feel like it’s a huge piece of what I’m called to do.”

Dana drafts parish communications for her pastor, whom she says “doesn’t seem intimidated by me.” Frances reacts less enthusiastically to the prospect of “giving white men my words”:

*This was [the priest’s] first idea: “What if we came every week and opened scriptures together – so you felt like you had a voice in*

*what we’re saying?” I’m like [eye roll]. ... What I am doing is giving you my words to speak for me. I don’t need you to do that for me. ...He was like, ‘What was wrong with what we have right now?’ And I said, “I’m tired of giving white men my words to speak for me. I can do it for myself.’ And they were silent. And I said, ‘I’m not trying to be rude. I’m just trying to tell you that’s what it feels like when you tell me, ‘Come tell me what you want to say and I’ll say it for you.’ I can do it myself. I just want the space.” And just to get that space felt like such a fight [gets emotional]. And such a conversation. And it broke my heart millions of times.*

Eventually the priest invited Frances to do an “after communion reflection.” Codeswitching facilitates dissent within the parameters of fidelity.

Women also describe ways in which they strategically dissent and adapt norms to respond to sacramental needs of parishioners. Sensitive to legacies of racism triggered by asking Black RCIA candidates to leave partway through Mass, Stephanie “disbanded that, and we just do another kind of version that we don’t call RCIA.” Visiting a dying parishioner traumatized by sexual violence, Michelle’s priest invited her to do the anointing of the sick:

*I went to visit with a woman that was at the end of life. And I would visit with her regularly. . . . [T]hen it got to the point where she would be anointed, and he [the priest] turned to me and he said, [Michelle], will you anoint her? And, when he said it, I looked at him and I thought – what are you doing? ...I was kind of shocked...He gave*



*me the oil to anoint her, which I did. And then he asked me to commune himself and her and me, and it was, I watched a human being transformed before my very eyes. For this woman that was in such pain and self-torture, to someone that was free.*

Michelle says that the priest “respected [the woman] enough not to touch her” given her history of sexual violence, adding that the experience is “not something we could talk about...he would get into trouble. Yet this was just what she needed.” A few women also mention quasi confessions they’ve heard through the years from people who know they’ll listen, offering healing if not absolution.

## Emotional Management

A fourth characteristic of the adaptations women make to follow their call amid constraint is *emotional management*. Women learn to cope with and react to emotions – both their own and those of others around them – as yet another strategy to function as female servant-leaders when the Church limits who and what women may be and how they may serve.

Interviewees cope with being barred from ordination using an array of psychological adaptations to put themselves in greater control of their emotions and situations. Personal prayer, self-care, and relying on God play a key role. Women also describe internal efforts to accept the situation, mitigate their emotions, reevaluate the sources of their self-worth, and create support networks and empowering identities.

For many women, accepting the reality that the Church says “no” – and that that response is unlikely to change

– marks a crucial first emotional hurdle. “The higher you go in the levels of the Church, the more fraught it is,” says Leslie, “and it’s hard.” Jennifer explains how she has had to develop a way to prioritize “faith over feelings” so that she can’t get her feelings hurt anymore. Amy describes it as “a very heavy burden” that she had to “put in God’s hands and not try to shoulder it all by myself.” Mary says she’s “learned to compartmentalize.”

Younger women actively discern how to move forward within a Church that tells them they are unequal to men. Leslie spent years working through her own repudiated call to the priesthood: “I’m not a naturally angry person, though...you deal with what you got.” Teresa admits that she tries to “shut them out at this point in my life.” Melissa talks tearfully about how she must “put on a face” at her parish to hide feelings of rejection because “it’s not the real me”; “I’m not being recognized for who I am.”

Women describe reorienting their career paths in response to the heartbreak of rejection or impossible dreams. Some, like Piper and Leslie, pivot to focus on vocational paths clearly accepted for Catholic women – namely, marriage and children:

*I carried with me – some significant hurt... that was like, okay, people don’t want to know my vocational call...I’m just not going to touch that. I do want to get married. – So, maybe I’ll focus more on that.*

*I’ve been gifted with marriage and children, and it would be hard to be a pastor and be married...I mean, I don’t know how people do it. They do it in different denominations, but...*

Some cope with rejection by exercising their faith and gifts in non-pastoral spaces or by generating new spaces entirely. Daniela shares with exacerbation how “I moved away from the institutional Church, because there’s nothing there for me. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Zero.” Adara says of her painful and difficult decision to leave her parish, “I felt just as much that I was following my vocation in leaving as I did in coming into the community.” Several contemplate leaving Catholicism (“I have thought about leaving a lot”).

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I just try not to  
look up and get  
frustrated...I won’t  
let myself do it.  
– Leslie

Others learned to rationalize emotional burdens as a cost of entry. Esperanza, for example, points out that suffering *should* be a part of one’s vocation:

*I don’t think anything in life is worth living if you don’t act like someone’s suffering is your suffering – if you don’t act like someone’s experience is your experience. Like, I think that’s the problem with the world, you know. The problem with the world is we’re like, “That’s not my business.” And so, I want the opposite of that. I know my vocation [laughs] is the opposite of that.*

Christy channels her “rage” toward urging women to accept the value and need for titles and formal recognition, saying:

*I get filled with rage when I think about them trying to say, ‘Oh, you can’t look like you’re trying to get some power,’ and I’m like, what? We can’t be human, too? I think it’s like a human thing to need to have some agency in the world, and especially in the places and institutions that you’re trying to serve in. To, like, want to be recognized and have some agency. Not because I want it to all be about me, but because that honors the people I serve – if I’m coming with the full authority of the Church.*

Representing a counter perspective, Barbara cringes at the idea of disrupting the “natural order” wherein men are leaders and women are “helpmates.” “When women take over something, the men stop,” she says. “If a woman feels called to serve, fine, there are lots of ways to serve...But to push it is a whole ‘nother thing.”

Leslie reminds herself not to get “trapped” within the emotional burden of rejection, learning to “move on”:

*I just try not to look up and get frustrated. I think that’s where I really could get trapped, and I won’t let myself do it. I can only do what I can do, which is minister with integrity in the situation in which I’ve been asked to minister at any given time. And that circle of influence I have the opportunity to treat as beautifully as I can, as pastorally as I can. And that’s what I do. I don’t choose to take myself down a path of anger, resentment, ‘what if...’?*

As indicated in Leslie's comments, a common emotional strategy women use is to narrow their attention to the people they serve in ministry – the people to whom they *are* visible and appreciated. Mary says that she is “so grateful for the warmth of welcome that I have received widely in the Church” and reminds herself to keep her focus:

*There's so many places to show up...to be a little voice of influence...And right now, I feel like I'm having influence in spaces... that people are asking me to come. Am I preaching at Sunday Mass? No, not a whole lot. But, am I being asked to preach missions? Yes. Am I asked to teach and do interesting projects and mediations? Yeah. ...It's like, "Focus your energy. What's your mission? What are you trying to accomplish?"*

Women derive positive energy from focusing on groups that might be otherwise unseen or underserved. Jaime, for example, talks about her strength in ministry as “creating spaces where people who would not typically think that they were welcome to participate feel like they are welcomed.”

Orienting attention to immediate circles of influence buffers feelings of rejection in wider ones, making the fruits of their ministry apparent. Women change where their sense of worth is coming from so that they feel less dependent upon recognition from institutional Church authorities.

Focusing on one's specific contributions, moreover, enables women to derive authority from what people bestow upon them and what they feel from God rather than from an ordained office. This kind of emotional adaptation converts internalized oppression to empow-

ered identities. Dana has seen women do “that internal work of just owning one's identity,” using education as a powerful tool. “There is something about the inner work that we need to do to kind of get over what's presented as ‘humility,’ which is BS, like – that's internalized oppression. To really claim our giftedness.” Jennifer describes her own inner journey this way:

*I got my family. I've got my friends, and I'm at a point in my life as a woman, where I'm really grounded in my identity, I don't have that need to please people anymore, I don't have that need to be something to people anymore. I feel really comfortable in my own skin and just really grounded in just being [me].*

Women also look to support groups as a way to navigate emotional challenges in their ministry. They participate in preaching circles, listening partnerships, alumni associations, retreats, women's groups, and more. Jennifer jokes about how her group named themselves “dangerous women.” Stella says that her check-ins revolve around the question, “What's it like being Catholic and female this week?” Riley points to the imperative of having “a nice, strong core of people who would lift her up when other people are trying to shove her down.” Women talk also about support they derive from other religions – ironically, as a way to help them sustain their Catholic identities. In non-Catholic spaces, women find room to hone their preaching, connect with women mentors, and vent about challenges.

Beyond managing their own emotions, women also describe substantial efforts required to manage *others'* emotions, as well. Strategic deference offers one example of this, as does the work women do to affirm their right to belong against the backdrop of role ambiguity. Jaime shares how “difficult” it is for some priests she

interacts with to see a woman in a pastoral role (“They are so deeply uncomfortable with that”). She takes intentional strides to help them feel “comfortable.” Sara prepares to handle reactions among parishioners who don’t understand why a woman would be speaking “with Father there.” Jill recognizes that many people aren’t “ready” for traditionally male spaces to open to females.

Women notice and attend to the emotional burdens of priests, in particular. Angie offers to do whatever she can to ease the “massive burden” priests carry, whom she characterizes as “burned out.” Amy mentions how “lonely” priests are, “lacking in friendships – especially women friendships.” Claire calls out ways in which male priests become dependent upon women as helpmates, laughing as she talks about encouraging seminarians to “learn how to make the damn coffee.” Women assume the emotional load not only of exclusion but also of inclusion, when others do not accept them or their gifts as equal.

As women take on the functions of deacons, priests, and pastors, mixed responses and role ambiguity mean that they must continually affirm for themselves and others their right to belong. “Doing what you can” within the confines of restricted vocational opportunities doesn’t mean giving up in the search for recognized legitimacy or giving up on one’s call. Women learn to adapt by substituting function for title, strategically deferring and dissenting, and attending not only to their own emotional discomfort but also to the discomfort of those they work with and those whom they serve. Adaptations make it feasible for women to bring and occupy a seat at the table. Adaptations, moreover, bridge women’s calls to the contributions they make in spite of constraints.

## CONTRIBUTION

Women’s contributions to the US Catholic Church are manifold. Those we interviewed serve in an impressive array of pastoral, diocesan, and community capacities. While many wish for enhanced legitimacy, access, and blessings that accompany ordination to the diaconate, all persist in work that looks diaconal regardless of invitations or impediments to become one. Women feel called, face constraints, adapt, and – ultimately – contribute.

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**The role of a deacon is to be closer to the people of God even than priests are.**

– Kelsey

This section elaborates upon the particular (and substantial) contributions women make to the Church apart from ordination. It charts women’s contributions through three themes: (1) *noticed* (in doing much of the work of the Church already); (2) *needed* (as equal participants and representatives of Catholicism); and (3) *biding* (remaining, waiting, hoping for change).

## Noticed

As specified in the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons*, a deacon’s principal function “is to collaborate with the bishop and the priests in the exercise of a ministry which is not of their own wisdom but of the Word of God, calling all to conversion and holiness.”<sup>11</sup> Interviewees talk about the deacon role as one of servant leadership and accompaniment. “It’s about calling and about servant leadership,” says Marie. “I think that deacons serve in the servant heart of Christ,” says Delilah; “they’re living out the works of mercy in the Church – the corporal and spiritual works of mercy – as servant leaders.” Sandra sees the diaconate as “a servant presence” and “model to people of what is the Christian call.”

Deacons accompany people where they are, women tell us:

*The role of a deacon should always be to accompany the community and the people to the beings that they have around them, in the community, in their parish...accompany them in all their spiritual needs, in difficult moments, in moments of joy. (Sara)*

*The role of a deacon is to be closer to the people of God even than priests are. I’ve had the image of Jesus as a good shepherd with me a lot lately....The good shepherd smells like his sheep, right? ...If I were a deacon, I’d want to be smelly. I want to be in it with people, sitting with their pain, sharing Christ, praying together, talking about Scripture—really tapping into that bodily experience, not only with Eucharist, but like the tangible sacramentality, sensory*

*experience of being a Christian, on this earth...really being with the people of God where they're at. (Kelsey)*

In parishes, dioceses, and communities, deacons evangelize. They teach. They preach. They model. They reflect Jesus and the Church. They proclaim the Gospel. They preside at liturgies. They pray with the dying. They witness and guide.<sup>12</sup>

Women, too, sit in these places and functions. “That’s what I did for 15 years,” reflects Laura; “I was a bridge between the Church and the world.” Stephanie points out who is “doing the work” in the Catholic Church: “If not for women, there really would be no Church. If you look in the pews, it’s mostly women. And if you look at who’s doing the work around the church, for the most part, it’s women.” “You actually have people functioning in the Catholic community as priests and deacons,” says Mary, and it would be in the “best interest of the Church” to identify those people and structure the Church to let them minister well.

Contributions are noticed by the people women serve. Lay Catholics respond to women as “deacons,” absent formal recognition or naming as such. Christy explains that people accept the service women offer because their service is needed and appreciated:

*Women do faithfully serve in these ways and constantly do what they feel like they're being asked to do by God and by the people they love, with or without the Church's recognition...it's like – 'I don't know if you're ordained or what, but you're the person before me now.' That tends to be the position that women end up in.*

Likewise, Delilah says that she feels “not only called to that work but affirmed in that, by people’s responses.”

Women describe a range of reactions from their faith communities, including “Thank you for sharing your heart and your faith”; “How is the parish going to survive without you?”; and positive feedback from pastors who see them as “co-pastors.” Women point especially to the subtle, unspoken affirmation they feel when those they serve feel welcome, at home, able to ask questions, able to extend their trust, comforted in their pain, and accompanied in their journeys. Even as women’s lack of validation and institutional support render them unseen, women gain visibility through their contributions.

Women’s visible/invisible service reverberates in the ways that women talk about humility as a central characteristic of their ministry. Kelsey, for example, suggests that ordination risks “posturing” and “inauthenticity,” whereas “women would maybe bring some more humility to ordained ministry, while also bringing a strong voice for justice for women and all people, regardless of race or ethnicity or class.” Angie prays the litany of humility every day, “because I think it’s so important, because I think it’s the litany of a deacon – I really do. Like, ‘God help me forget myself. Because it’s not about me.’” Piper looks to the models of Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day, who “point me to greater holiness” and “humility” by “walking with the marginalized.”

Interviewees at times attribute this character of humility to what women distinctively bring to “diaconal” service, perhaps in contrast to the ways that men approach it. Women acknowledge gendered stereotypes – sometimes as true, sometimes as false – but draw particular attention to the reality that women (including women of color) will in fact see and do things differently than ordained (white) men. For example:

*Stereotypically, women are a little bit more collaborative in spirit than men. I don't really want to stereotype that way. ...Fundamentally, whether you're a woman or a man, everyone expresses life differently and has a different way of interpreting things. ...Let's allow all those whom the Spirit calls to come together and give them the ability to live out their vocation as God has called them to. ...We all see through different perspectives and we work together to move the Church. ...It's just more people to see the big picture and work towards the big picture. (Iris)*

“

**We all see through different perspectives and we work to move the Church.**

**– Iris**

*I think women have a different view. You think about the priests that have been in ministry for however long and never really had any life experience – they went from high school to college and then seminary—and most of them are white males that are going into the priesthood – so their perspective is so different. And if we're talking to a congregation that's predominantly Black, you gotta reach them where they're at. (Stephanie)*

*A woman who wants to talk – I feel that I can understand the person more. Because I have lived that life. The man and the woman are different. ...I can understand another woman who is going through things that maybe I went through. You can understand more when you lived. (Leticia)*

Some decry the clericalism that encumbers authentic service and collaboration. Several speak to instances when exclusively male ordination hindered ministry, such as this story from Carrie about a situation of domestic violence:

*There was a woman who had a real crisis of faith – was a victim of domestic violence, and was frightened to go home. And went to talk to the priest that was on the team with us, [who] essentially told her that she had made a marriage commitment and that she was to go home and be of service to her husband. And that was one of those turning points for me, where it was like, 'No. You have no idea what you're talking about. This is not what the Church says. This is not what God wants. This is not the example for a mother to be teaching her children about what's appropriate.' This would have been a real good opportunity for a woman who had the experience in dealing with victims to step in and say, 'I can take this person and go off to the side and spend some time with her, and get a plan together for when she gets home, for her safety and the safety of her children.' (Carrie)*

Together, women’s contributions reflect the wholeness of the Church, interviewees say. They make the Church “look like the Church”:

*I would like to see the Church embrace ministry that is representative of the Church ...It’s true for all sectors of life: if you don’t have the leadership that looks like the community that is being led, there is, there’s a void there. There are voices that are not being heard, there are needs that are not being met. And, sure, the Catholic Church...it is a force for good ... but if it’s not supporting, if it’s not embracing leadership that looks like the Church that looks more feminine, that looks Black and Brown, that looks, you know [laughs], queer, dare I say, they’re gonna miss out. They’re going to be...the ministry is just not gonna be as strong, not as effective as it could be. (Riley)*

*I see it through the eyes of a woman. I see it through the eyes of a woman that is indigenous. I see this through the eyes of a woman that is Black. I don’t see myself reflected very often anywhere as a Catholic – not as a woman, not as a Black person. ...I remember the first time I saw a Black Catholic presider. ...As soon as I saw him from the distance in this cathedral, I broke down and sobbed, because I had never seen anyone that looked like me, and, even in his maleness, he still looked like me, and I think that is important. We need to be able to see ourselves reflected in the leadership. (Michelle)*

*It’ll teach girls and women how to be in relationship with Jesus and with the Church.*

*It might help fill some of the gap that is being left with the shrinking of the religious communities and the role that they’ve played. But I think it’s just about belonging in the Church and seeing yourself reflected there in a way that’s meaningful and holy and significant and substantial and with authority. (Laura)*

Just as communities, pastors, and the women themselves notice women’s “diaconal” contributions, so, too, do they notice the gaps in their representation.

## Needed

Does the Catholic Church need women as deacons? The magnitude of service women *already* engage in that aligns with obligations of the diaconate suggests that ministry needs are great and that exclusively male, ordained deacons do not – and cannot – fill all of these roles. Amy points out that “there’s just not enough people to do the work” and women, including herself, are saying, “I’m here; I’m willing to do this.”

But if women are already enacting “de facto deacon” roles, why do women see the need for ordination? Even as women articulate a willingness to function as de facto deacons in order to use their gifts and fulfill their call, many long for the recognition and title that better communicates who they are to themselves and to others. Isabella wishes for “that support of a body behind you, but also the power to preach the word and to have some kind of authority on the altar.” When people ask Lisa why women need to be ordained, she says “because that blessing is important for others, and it’s part of the growth of the Church.” Christy explains why she



does not hide this need and desire anymore:

*I felt like I couldn't be working for that Church and be private about it. I needed to live out loud – like, 'Hey, I really feel like I'm called to be deacon here.' I'm just gonna do my work, but y'all need to know that that's why I'm here. Because I actually do want that title and want the ordination and the recognition. And I'm here because I think maybe that will happen in my lifetime. But I'm also glad to be doing all this work.*

Women's service is noticed; acceptance is what women say is needed. Piper juxtaposes her description of a "deacon" with what women already do in "diaconate" service:

*The role of a deacon is servant, right? To serve in a way that is recognized. Not for recognition's sake, but for someone to be easily identified. Like, this is a person who is serving in the Church, who I can go to, and I can trust, who is committed, and all these things, right? People will probably already have those with women in the Church. But it is the recognition piece that I think will make it more known to people. Like, 'I can go to this person,' and this person can be with me through ups and downs of my life.*

Lisa reminds us that women are "already doing it – the women of the Church are already there. And I think it would be exciting for a lot of them to just take on these leadership roles."

Interviews invited women in support of expanding the diaconate to fill in the blank for the question, "The

Catholic Church needs women deacons because..."

Women's responses highlight the necessity of women to the Church's very survival, to keeping women in the Church, to utilizing Catholics' gifts, to validating the work already happening, and to bringing welcome change and vitality into the Church. For example:

*The Catholic Church needs women deacons because God created women.*

*Because the feminine experience matters to our expression of who God is. And without it, we are missing a key part of God.*

*We need women deacons because Jesus is calling them to proclaim the gospel. Because it would be good news. And the Church can use some good news about itself.*

*We need women deacons because we need women preaching. Because we need women's giftedness to be of service to the needs of our times. Because we need to be modeling being an inclusive Church where we recognize everyone's equal dignity as through baptism and through their humanity. And we need women deacons because we need to give, we need to renew our Church in our times and we need to give hope and energy to young men and women Catholics to want to stay and be part of this renewed Church.*

*The Church needs women deacons because the Church needs women. Because the Church needs who women are, what women do, how women see the world.*

*Because they're already doing that work, they're already doing diaconal work. Because they're more than half the church. Because they are close to the heart of God. Because they usher in the reality of the world.*

*Because the Church is dying. Because our children are leaving. Because the Spirit is moving, and it's moving through not just women, but through a whole lot of 'em.*

*Because we're baptized! And we are commissioned to proclaim the Gospel in its fullest ways.*

*The Church needs vibrant voices, and leadership, and catalysts for growth and for the Spirit to work, and to expand, and grow, and co-create this Church.*

*Because society and sexism and abuse of power is killing the Church, literally and figuratively. It's killing people of God.*

*Because God calls women to be deacons.*

*They're damaging the collective Catholic soul by denying them.*

*I think they need them because they're already there. They're already doing all these things, they're already providing pastoral care, they're already preaching in different kinds of contexts or they just make up the Church...because they're already there and they deserve to be seen.*

*We need women deacons because the Spirit is at work for bringing fresh air and new life into a*

*Church that has been longing for new life and fresh air.*

*Women and men and children need to see women functioning in the role of priests, prophets, and kings, and that women, as much as men, have an innate call to serve God and love the community and minister to the community.*

Perhaps as a way to match perceptions to realities, interviewees overwhelmingly support opening discernment to the diaconate to all people of God.

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## Biding

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What does the future look like for women who minister in the Catholic Church, and for the Catholic Church that so heavily leans on women's service?

Catholic women continue to hear and respond to their call, encounter constraints and strategically adapt, and make contributions toward the longevity of the Church. In this, the women we interviewed are *biding*: waiting, continuing, lingering expectantly. Some see and hope for the possibility of change; others wish for change but do not expect it. Some are more patient than others. Some believe women will remain in the Church and wait for change or persist without it; others predict women's departure as a consequence of repudiation and the Church's continued resistance.

We asked women what advice they might offer to a young woman interested in serving the Church. What would they say to her, knowing what they know now? Among the range of responses, women suggest telling her to "run" or think carefully, anticipate constraints,

and seek out mentors and support so that she never feels alone. Interviewees' advice reflects their own ambivalence about their personal past, present, and future in the Church; their uncertainty regarding how to stay or whether to go; and their capacity for managing difficult emotions for themselves and others.

Jennifer and Stephanie warn young women to ready themselves for the pain of their journey, or consider pursuing their call outside of the Catholic Church:

*If I could have known from the very beginning how painful this process was gonna be, well, first of all, I don't know that I would have even pursued it – if I really knew what I was gonna be up against. But now I'm too far into it and now I'm on fire about it, so it's like, "Well, I got nothing to lose, people..." Had I had to go down this road 20 years ago, no way. (Jennifer)*

*Right now, I'd have to recommend that you go find another denomination. I mean, truthfully, you—there is no way. I've been blessed with a pastor who is—what would we say?— radical? – [who] doesn't do things traditionally and believes in the ministry that women have to offer. But the younger priests that I see now that are being ordained are, sadly enough...want to go back to the 'good old days' before Vatican II ...It's scary. (Stephanie)*

Interviewees repeatedly caution younger women about the psychological toll of pursuing a call denied.

Lydia says, "it means you're saying yes to service – and there's going to be cost with that financially, emotionally...Is that what you want to do?" Amy – immersed in Catholic ministry for years with a mother who did the same – says plainly:

*I would tell anyone who wants to do service in the Catholic Church – I would discourage them from doing it. I hate to say that, but I would say 'Don't. Do something else.' I feel a really good way to lose your faith is to try to pursue ministry in the Catholic Church as a woman, because you can confuse the institution of the Church and her sexism, the sexism of people, with Jesus and God. And if you make an idol of the Church, then you can lose your faith... Serve the church in a different way: as a writer, or as an artist, or just in your life, to live your life as a faithful Catholic. ...Honor God by doing your work well, but don't let the Church make you feel that you're unworthy of the gifts you received in your baptism.*

Marie and Angie offer more optimistic advice, telling young women to persist in hope:

*I would say go for it, first of all. ...I'm willing to accompany you in the journey. ...Find good people to accompany you in what you're doing, especially when it gets difficult. Because that's how we make it through, right?...Pay attention to self-care and prayer – those are really important for discerning how this is moving forward. And trust what's going on inside...to not let the norms, and the laws of what always has been define what the future is going to be. (Marie)*

*Don't lose hope. I say this a lot, but particularly to my daughter – she's like, "Mommy, you, you want this so badly, but what if, what if Pope Francis says no?" I said,*

*“Well, then I’ll be a deacon in heaven.”  
(Angie)*

Delilah suggests similarly “to stay rooted in prayer, Scripture, and creation – and to find a mentor,” moving toward a calling in “baby steps” if not fully.

“  
**Don’t lose hope.**  
– Angie

Evoking the imagery of a dream, Frances urges women to listen to their call even when the Church tells them to “go back to sleep”:

*I would say to listen to God’s call even when it feels like people can’t hear it. I think of Elijah, you know, waking up the middle of the night and hearing the call. And them saying, “Go back to sleep, go back to sleep.” But, “No! I heard someone calling me!” “Go back to sleep.” I think we live in a world where people will say, “Go back to sleep; that’s not God’s call.” You need to know God’s call so strong that you’re like, “No; I know what I heard. And I’m gonna keep walking forward even if you don’t hear it.” Because I think that God can be calling us in a way that people around us can’t hear or fully understand - because they haven’t seen it. What I would say is: “I believe you. I hear you. I will pray for you. And even if, in your lifetime, it doesn’t come*

*to be, know that you are just as worthy. And God knows what He wants. It just takes time to get to where we need to be.”*

Mary articulates why so many women remain in the Church despite constraints:

*What I would say to a young woman who was entering into the ministry was that, if this is not your call, there’s really nothing the Church is gonna be able to fix that’s gonna make it your call. ...And if this is your call, there’s really no place else for you to be. For myself, even given the turbulence of the age I’ve lived in. ...If I could do it all over again... I would still totally have given my whole life over to ministry. It has been so full of joy, and adventure, and grief, and sadness, and friendship and depth of relationship, and opportunities and refinement of gold on fire and mentorship. I feel like one of the luckiest people alive.*

In the end, though, Catholic women operate within the reality that women will not be ordained as deacons soon or perhaps ever. Thus, they necessarily approach their own vocational decisions and suggestions for others as a choice between assuming or avoiding the burden of being called to something with guaranteed constraints and requisite adaptations – with the hopeful promise of contribution, nonetheless.

Pairing humility with their lack of access, Catholic women continue to do what’s needed – quietly dreaming and serving with fidelity – and waiting. “I feel so blessed to get to do exactly what I’m doing, and I hope I get to do it for the rest of my life,” says Angie; “I hope I get to do it in the capacity of deacon for the rest of my life.”

A stylized, abstract illustration of a woman's profile, facing left. The face is composed of various shades of orange and yellow, with a mosaic-like texture. The background is a solid, light orange color. The woman's hair is depicted with flowing, wavy lines. The overall style is modern and artistic.

## CONCLUSION

*“I think the Church has closed doors and  
that it is time to open them.” — Sofia*

## CONCLUSION

Lay Catholic women involved in diaconal ministry feel called by God, face constraints as they answer that call within the Church, necessarily adapt to mitigate and circumvent constraints, and ultimately contribute in ways that uphold the very foundation of the US Church.

Four key dimensions to women’s experiences – call, constraint, adaptation, and contribution – appear alongside their defining characteristics in the figure below.

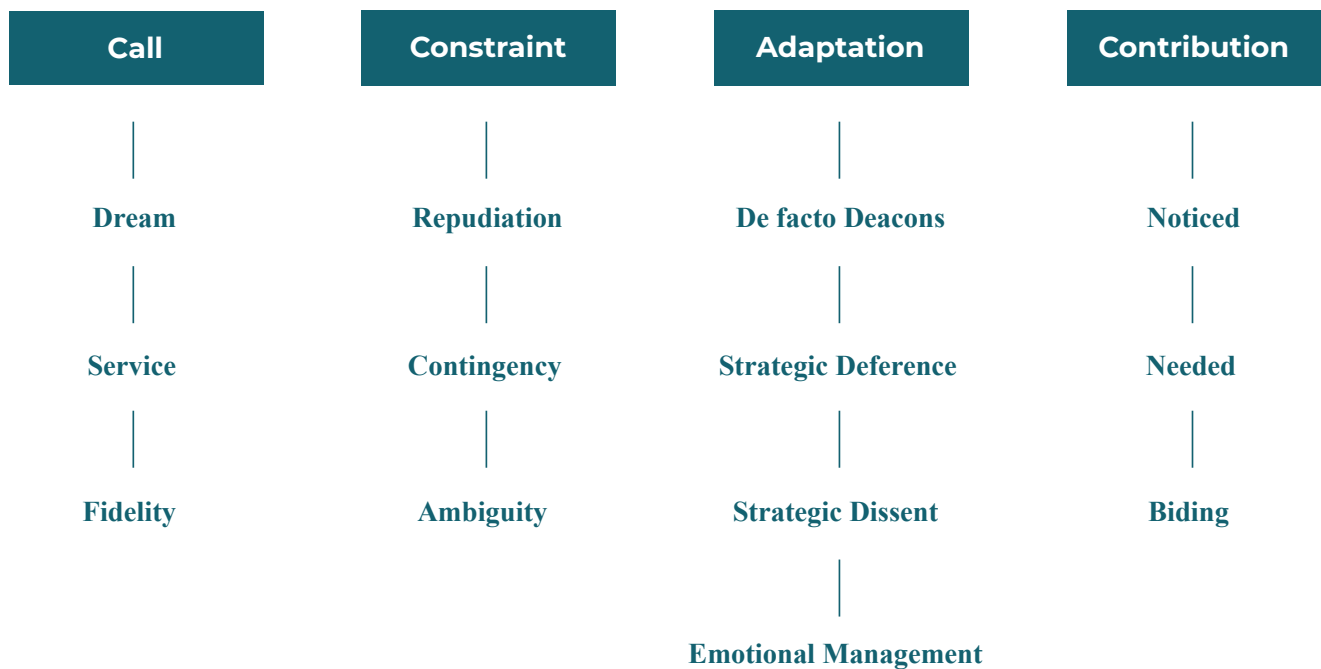


Figure 3: Dimensions to Women's Diaconal Ministry

## CONCLUSION

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Unmet needs in local Catholic contexts generate ample openings for women's increased contributions through word, liturgy, and charity. Myriad ministry functions are made available to women but corresponding ministry positions (and the access and legitimacy they proffer) are not. The Church grants women selective access to "de facto deacon" roles amidst a dearth of ordained male leadership; women fill these roles as a means of following their felt call.

Inevitable disconnects between call and contribution mean that women must shoulder the professional, emotional, and financial burdens of constraint and adaptation themselves. Disenfranchisement is assumed as a cost of entry; ad hoc support systems compensate for women's institutional exclusion. Over time, women come to evaluate the relative worth they bring to those whom they happily serve against the devaluation they encounter within exclusively male ordained settings.

The US Catholic Church benefits collectively from women's unauthenticated and often invisible labor. Individual Catholic women reconcile the burden of exclusion as necessary to remain faithful to their call. Most wind up biding their time: (im)patiently waiting, uncertain, and cautiously wondering when and whether they and all women will be welcomed among the ordained. Most resolve themselves to its unlikely occurrence in their own lifetimes, but retain faith in God, love for Catholicism, and hope for the future.

This study reveals lay Catholic women as an invisible linchpin in Catholic ministry, but an inherently precarious one. Women willingly commit themselves to their call but are not guaranteed circumstances in which it is possible to fulfill that call. A substantial portion of women will reorient or pull back from their ministry commitments, question whether the Catholic Church is able to use their gifts and value their presence, and

dissuade young women from embarking along a similar path. Women's centrality juxtaposes with their precariousness to paint a portrait of the US Catholic Church as inherently fragile, rife with inefficiencies, and poised to recalibrate the composition and character of leadership to respond to the realities of diaconal ministry.

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All names are pseudonyms.