

By Svea Fraser, VOTF trustee and chair of Women's Emerging Voices

Listen. Can you hear the sound of voices getting louder in support of women's roles in the Church?

For 20 years VOTF has championed the change for women to be fully recognized as equals in the Church. We took advantage of every opportunity to raise awareness of the needs that would be better met when women have a place at the table. Resources on the website included articles, papers, videos, cards, templates for letter writing and books. One book in particular gave us a laser focus for our ongoing efforts.

The groundbreaking work of theologian Dr. Phyllis Zagano published in the book *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (by Gary Macy, Phyllis Zagano and William T. Ditewig) was a wakeup call for many of us. A free study guide made it possible to hold group discussion groups across the country. We learned things we never knew about women deacons in our faith tradition. Two points were of great significance:

1. Women ministered as deacons in the past.
2. the permanent order of deacons is clearly distinct from priestly ordination.

With increasing awareness, we began discussing women deacons at webinars, at lectures, and among networking groups. Women began to ask the question, "What can we do?" Our VOTF Women's Working group invited others from across the continent to advocate for women and ultimately formed an "advocacy network." Invested in our faith communities and ministering in diaconal ways, we were buoyed by others who shared our pains and hopes for inclusion. As we shared these stories, we changed the working group title from "Women's Roles" to "Women's Emerging Voices" to better reflect our work.

At the same time, other voices were rising in support of women and their status in the Church: at the meeting of the International Union of Superiors General, at the Amazonian Synod, and in a papal-appointed Commission to study the issue.

VOTF at 20: Women's Voices

In Durham, N.C., another voice also attracted our attention. That was the voice of Casey Stanton, the mother of two young children and holder of an Master of Divinity degree with a certificate in prison studies. When Casey encountered incarcerated women in her prison ministry, she came face to face with the reality of abuse and violence leveled against women.

During Mass one day, Casey made a connection: Because only men preach and preside at Mass, could the implicit message that men are more important than women contribute to their treatment as “less than”? What does our Catholic Liturgy say about women?

Casey wondered if other women wrestled with the same issue, and if they shared her strong vocational desire to preach the Gospel. She initiated conversations to find out. Each individual encounter affirmed that she was not alone. Also affirmed was a feeling that women's stories needed to be told. From this grew a desire for a liturgical service to engage others in praying and sharing and listening together.

Saint Phoebe's Feast Day on September third provided an ideal opportunity for a Virtual Prayer Service. Phoebe is the only person named a deacon (in Greek) in the New Testament, yet she was unknown to many of us. Her name is unspoken because the passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans 16:1-2 is excluded from both Sunday and weekly lectionary cycles. Saint Phoebe also suffers the indignity of her Feast Day having been replaced by Pope Gregory I.

The first prayer service attracted 500 participants. Four women spoke of their heartfelt callings to minister as deacons, and their deeply felt emotions brought tears of recognition. The [experience set hearts on fire](#).

Thus emerged a movement, a defined mission, and an informative website was created, under the name [Discerning Deacons](#).

VOTF found common ground with Discerning Deacons: Our goals and mission statements harmonized. We joined in collaboration and mutual support. VOTF's “advocacy network” began to call itself a “Deacon Circle.”

The success and spirited activity that followed is a testament to the power of prayer, the value of story-telling, the dedication of faithful disciples, and the overarching belief that the Holy Spirit will not deny what the Church needs.

The second Virtual St. Phoebe Prayer Service on September 3, 2021, registered 1,500 people from around the world.

VOTF at 20: Women's Voices

From this side of the world, we sponsored an international delegation to Rome: five women from Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, and the United States. With the words of St. Paul in mind when he commended his sister Phoebe to be “welcomed in the Lord as is fitting for the saints,” we sent our group with our prayers and an image of St. Phoebe preaching to the faith community.

I believe that Saint Phoebe is interceding on behalf of women today. The Rome delegation was invited to a front row seat at Pope Francis' weekly audience. When Ellie Hidalgo (a co-director of Discerning Deacons) presented the image of St. Phoebe to the Pope, he accepted it with a smile. And when Sr. Cira Mees told him about her ministry in the Amazon, he looked at her and said, “Firme! Adelante!” (“Keep going forward with inner strength.”). The women were truly welcomed and received “in the Lord.”

As climactic as that event was for us, the story gets better.

In an unprecedented moment in the history of the Church, Pope Francis in 2021 called for a Synod on Synodality. He wants to hear from all the people, both Catholics and non-Catholics, to discern the Holy Spirit's will for the Church.

When was the last time a pope asked you for your thoughts?

As ancient as synods are in the Church's tradition, it is a puzzling word for most of us. Pope Francis explains it as simply journeying together. He invites us to walk together, tell our stories, and listen to the Holy Spirit—just as VOTF and Discerning Deacons have been doing all along! Without naming it, we have been synodal in the process of sharing, listening, and discerning.

An inaugural Mass on October 10, 2021, opened the Synodal path. The window for the laity to tell our hurts and hopes for the Church is open right now. *Pope Francis wants to hear from you.*

Both VOTF and Discerning Deacons, along with other groups and individuals, are offering listening sessions to share your thoughts. Go to the VOTF webpage [“Listening to the Faithful: Synod 2021-2023”](#) to register for the opportunity.

It is time to tell your story.

The Pope is listening.