

NBCW Forum 2026

Experiences of Synodality, Inclusion, and Cultural Belonging

This report is an attempt to summarise submissions from Catholic women across parishes and dioceses in response to the 2026 Annual Forum Questions.

Topic 1: Synodality

1. How are women experiencing the synodal process?

The responses reveal a contrast between initial optimism and a current sense of stagnation, largely dictated by local leadership. Where synodality is functioning, it is driven almost entirely by the energy of the laity and where it is failing, it is due to a lack of structural support.

- **Disproportionate Female Engagement:** Multiple reports highlight that women have been the primary drivers of the synodal dialogue. One facilitator noted that during the initial phases, "About 90% of participants were women".
- **The "Clergy Lottery" and Lack of Momentum:** A dominant theme is that the synodal process is entirely dependent on the enthusiasm of the parish priest and Bishop. Many women report a complete halt in progress due to clerical indifference:
 - One account describes a parish completely cut off: "We are in a diocese where the Bishop did not promote synodality and very much ignored it. Priests have commented that it would not progress when Pope Francis died!"
 - Another respondent shares that despite strong initial numbers, their current parish priest "has no interest whatsoever - in fact he doesn't engage in anything in the parish - other than saying Mass."
 - Even when a priest actively initiates change the momentum frequently floundered if that priest is reassigned.
- **A Shift in Traditional Roles:** Where progress is visible, some women are successfully stepping outside traditional confines (e.g., catering, church linen) into leadership, such as chairing parish council meetings or leading prayer groups. Notably, women from diaspora faith communities are beginning to step forward into these visible roles.
- **Isolation and Lack of Awareness:** In many standard parishes, synodality has simply vanished from the vernacular. "Apart for the few initial groups held within the parish there has been no promotion, discussion or explanation... Most parishioners are not aware what the phrase 'synodal process' means."

2. What role do women see for themselves in fostering a synodal way of being Church?

Women do not view synodality as a means to achieve a superficial consensus, but rather as a "brave space" to journey, listen, discern, and challenge.

- **Formalising Existing Leadership:** Women recognise that they already act as the literal foundations of the local Church, especially amid a shortage of priests. They carry out vital heavy lifting in areas such as catechesis, administration, chaplaincy, and spiritual accompaniment. However, they observe that "formal recognition and authority often lag behind our lived experience of Church."
- **Desire for Sacramental and Structural Roles:** There is a clear call for structural roles and evolution. Respondents note that women bring an essential, missing perspective on family life, children, and pastoral realities that priests may lack.
- **Collaborative, Non-Competitive Progress:** The goal is not to alienate men but to foster authentic co-responsibility. "I think it would be very important to work with men and not to go into competition with them... We should all be aiming for the same outcomes."
- **Enriching the Liturgy and Homiletics:** Women see a distinct role for themselves in breaking open the Word, suggesting that lay women could bring a "whole new perspective to reflecting on the Homily" to make scriptures impact daily life more effectively than highbrow or structurally disconnected sermons.
- **Challenges with Practical Tools:** The practical mechanism of synodality is still poorly understood and frequently fails due to a lack of skilled facilitators and a tendency for participants to reactively agree or disagree rather than offer prepared, personal comments.

Topic 2: Inclusion and Cultural Belonging

1. How can parishes become safe and welcoming spaces for women from different cultures?

The feedback highlights a disconnect in many communities. While ethnic minority groups are frequently called upon to provide vibrant food or cultural displays a few times a year, they remain largely marginalised from day-to-day decision-making and governance.

- **Overcoming Clericalism:** In traditional or predominantly white parishes, a deep-seated mindset exists where "Father knows best" and the priest relies on a hand-picked "core group" rather than an elected, transparent parish council. This makes true inclusion structural and cultural friction.
- **The Danger of Siloed Cultural Communities:** Multiple accounts warn that an increase in diverse parishioners does not automatically equal integration. One respondent noted that while their Indian parishioner base had quadrupled, "They do not interact at all. [Parish Priest] tends to go to them after Mass in the car park. He pretty well ignores the rest of the parish." Conversely, while providing Masses in alternative languages accommodates cultural groups it can inadvertently hinder wider parish inclusion if not balanced with integrated activities.
- **Administrative Barriers (Safeguarding):** Bureaucracy is explicitly cited as an unintentional barrier to entry for volunteers: "We need to manage our approach to safeguarding. It has become a barrier at Parish level to volunteering and participation. We are increasingly being asked to provide personal data for the most mundane and low risk tasks."

2. Common Themes and Actionable Proposals

Area of Reform	Actionable Proposals
Structural Transparency	Conduct a "Power Audit" to rigorously ask: <i>Who influences decisions? Who never speaks? Who controls information? What voices are missing from our leadership?</i>
Clergy Accountability	Shift from a model of clerical control to active collaboration. Priests must intentionally prompt and support lay initiative, as a lack of impetus from the top currently causes lay welcoming and small-group initiatives to fail.
Day-to-Day Liturgical Inclusion	Intentionally invite people of different age groups and ethnic backgrounds to visible liturgical roles , such as reading , welcoming at the back of the church , and presenting the Offertory gifts.
Utilising Existing Nexuses	Leverage high-traffic sacramental preparation periods (Holy Communion and Confirmation classes) to draw in parents from diverse backgrounds into small groups, prayer circles, and social hubs.
Safe Spaces for Dialogue	Protect and fund independent lay organisations and forums which give women "who may feel they are suppressed in their parishes... an opportunity to express themselves freely and safely."

"I have come to understand that Synodality is slow, inconvenient, and sometimes messy. It can feel less "efficient" than being told what to do by Clergy leadership.

But, the alternative, I think, leads to disengagement and passivity. We are energetic, dynamic, and vocal, and we need to enter the Synodal space and claim it."