

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE AND THE PRACTICE OF SYNODALITY IN OUR CATHOLIC CHURCH:

**A Submission to the Synod on
Synodality**

April 2024



Introduction

Catholics for Choice was founded in 1973, the same year the U.S. Supreme Court decided *Roe v. Wade*. Tired of pro-choice Catholic voices being silenced in conversations about sexual and reproductive health, a group of ordinary Catholics founded our nonprofit organization, then known as Catholics for a Free Choice. Today, Catholics for Choice encounters, educates, and emboldens people of faith who support reproductive freedom. For 50 years, we have worked in the U.S. and around the world to ensure that all people everywhere can freely determine their sexual and reproductive destinies with dignity, respect, and affirmation, acting in solidarity with those most affected by systemic oppression.

Catholics for Choice believes access to the full scope of reproductive healthcare — including birth control and abortion — is a human right. We advocate for the rights of all people. Barriers to abortion access have the greatest impact on and exacerbate the suffering of the poor, the marginalized, the vulnerable, and people of color. Our faith calls us to affirm reproductive and religious freedom as essential to Catholic social justice.

We find God in all things and all people, acknowledging every person's dignity, identity, background, and experiences. We also uphold the principles of Catholic social justice, especially the call to participate in public life and the preferential option for marginalized people. We trust Catholics' inherent ability to follow their consciences and make informed decisions about their bodies and lives.

Through this submission to the Synodal Process, we hope to help build a strong, compassionate Church that engages in deep listening and embraces change — the very Church Pope Francis has called us to be through this synod.

Synodal Elements in Catholics for Choice and Our Community

The document “Towards October 2024,” released by the General Secretariat of the Synod in December 2023, calls for consultation with individuals and groups with experience and expertise in synodal activity. The document states that the objective of the collection of contributions and new reflections is “*to identify the paths we can follow and the tools we might adopt in our different contexts and circumstances to enhance the unique contribution of each baptized person and of each Church in the one mission of proclaiming the Risen Lord and his Gospel to the world today.*”

In the section “Some Suggestions for Organizing the Work,” we find the following statement: “*It will be important to involve people and groups that express a variety of experiences, skills, charisms, ministries within the People of God.*” Additionally, the document states that the local churches are invited to *involve the whole People of God (formative activities, theological in-depth studies, celebrations in synodal style, **grassroots consultations, listening to minority populations and groups living in conditions of poverty and social marginality, spaces in which to address controversial issues, etc.**).*

This is why Catholics for Choice advocates feel called upon to contribute to this phase of the Synodal Process. As Catholics, we are taught a theology of social justice that compels us to center the lives of marginalized people who are too often denied the basic human right to access equitable healthcare, to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to have or not have children, and to parent children in safe and sustainable communities. The Catholic Church has a long history of care and concern for those who are

the most marginalized and vulnerable — the very same people who are most impacted by systemic barriers to healthcare.¹

Support for access to the full range of reproductive health services has long been misrepresented as fundamentally incompatible with religion. In reality, the overwhelming majority of Catholics believe in reproductive freedom because of our deeply held faith, not in spite of it. For some, access to abortion care and birth control has literally saved their lives. There are many misconceptions about what Catholics believe about sexual and reproductive ethics. **We know this because we have the data:** In the U.S., 6 in 10 Catholics think abortion should be legal in *all or most* cases, and only 11% of Catholics agree with the Church’s official position that abortion should be illegal in all cases ([Pew 2024](#)). In 12 countries with high Catholic populations, 65% of Catholics said abortion should be legal in all or some cases (Guttmacher 2011).

Even among more traditionally conservative Catholic Republicans, abortion legalization is popular. According to [Pew](#), 78% of Catholic Democrats think abortion should be legal in all or most cases — and a stunning 43% of Catholic Republicans agree.

These numbers demonstrate that these Catholics have reflected on their lived experiences of pregnancy and abortion, and they determined that Church teaching on reproductive rights is in disagreement with their carefully formed consciences and beliefs. We pray that the hierarchy realizes that **these numbers do not reflect the idea that Catholics are leaving the Church, but in fact, the Church is leaving them.**

But even amid all of these statistics, here are the ones we most want the synod to hear: In the U.S., 1 in 4 abortion patients is Catholic (Guttmacher 2016), and 98% of Catholic women have used birth control (Guttmacher 2020).

This means that women who are sitting among us in the pews, giving out Communion, teaching in our Catholic schools, cleaning the priests’ vestments, and washing their dishes in the rectory are having abortions. And how does our Church thank them for their devotion? By proclaiming from the pulpit and in the parish bulletin that they are complicit in homicide.

This is an unspoken pastoral crisis, and it is time we as a Church reckoned with it.

Some of these women had abortions in an early stage, some much later in gestation. Some were forced into sex; others took pleasure from the sex but were not ready to care for a child. Some needed abortions because something catastrophic happened; others chose it because they needed their freedom, or their education, or to escape an abusive relationship, or to be able to feed and care for the children they already had. The majority of abortion patients are already parents. Again, these women are among us, laboring in our Catholic parishes, charities, and college campuses.

Pope Francis, who earns much praise for his gentle approach to fraught issues, has actually escalated the damaging rhetoric. More than once, he has equated the choice to have an abortion with “[hiring a hitman](#)” and has plainly called it “murder” at any stage.

¹ The Roman Catholic Church is the largest nongovernmental provider of healthcare services in the world, treating 1 in 7 U.S. patients at more than 600 hospitals across all 50 states. Catholic-owned and affiliated institutions, including hospitals, clinics, and Health Maintenance Organizations, are governed by the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (ERDs) authored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The ERDs explicitly forbid medical procedures that contradict Church teaching, regardless of the religious beliefs or religious denomination of the patient seeking services or the medical professional providing them.

This is spiritual violence against women, and we as a Church need to name it.

Catholics for Choice acknowledges that abortion can be a morally complex issue for many people. Pregnancy, miscarriage, premature babies, and the many complications that often come with gestation and delivery make powerful demands of our moral imaginations. We all have heard miraculous stories and agonizing accounts of pregnancy and birth that cannot but affect our perception of the issues.

At the same, most Catholics have also been reared on shame, misinformation, and the fear of losing their families, communities, and even the Eucharist itself if they simply question the Church's teaching on abortion. They face excommunication and harassment if they dare to tell their abortion stories. But avoiding the deeper truths and refusing to engage in the realities of abortion experiences is putting Catholic women's physical, emotional, and spiritual health in peril.

The Church exerts enormous power over the bodies of women and gender-expansive people. Catholic doctrine on abortion, contraception, and pregnancy has forced countless women, many of them the poorest of the poor, to give birth — even if they are rape victims and/or facing high-risk pregnancies that could kill them. Forced birth is violence against women.

This moment of the Synodal Process is pivotal: The experiences of faithful Catholics are being overlooked. Now is the time to encounter and listen to the people who are the life of the Church, are in the pews, attending Mass. Our leaders must examine how our Church's teachings contribute to people's suffering — the same people who deeply love our faith and its traditions. This constant invalidation of our lived truths does profound spiritual harm and makes us feel powerless.

Our faith calls on us to be fearless and forthright, and we answer that call by bringing these issues to the attention of our Church's leadership. Our Church must honor all people as moral agents, free to make their own personal decisions about their bodies, families, and futures according to their consciences. Because our conscience comes from God's sacred gift of human reason, we regard it as both a gift and a responsibility: **We are called to follow our conscience and respect the right of others to do the same.** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* confirms that “in all they say and do, the human person is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right” (para. 1778) and “a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself” (para. 1790).

Data once again proves that individual conscience serves as the primary guide for moral decision-making for most Catholics. [According to the Pew Research Center](#), 73% of U.S. Catholics say that when answering difficult moral questions, they rely on their conscience “a great deal,” as compared to 21% on Catholic Church teachings, 15% on the Bible, and 11% on the Pope (2016).

In Catholic theology, there is room to question previously written teachings and support different positions to move forward as a Church. That is what the Synod on Synodality is all about — a process of listening and dialogue, a journey that follows the Church's “renewal” proposed by the Second Vatican Council.

How Can We Be a Synodal Church in Mission?

In April 2024, Catholics for Choice invited our community of U.S. advocates to share their thoughts and reflections on the Synodal Process using the USCCB's guidelines and guiding questions, along with the worksheet produced by the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops.

The faithful Catholics of our community reported feeling unheard in their local parishes and churches. Additionally, they spoke about misinformation and unfamiliarity with the Synodal Process. Overall, there was a sense of sadness and confusion because community members believe our Church has much to offer, and yet it excludes those who seek to participate in the life of the Church.

“If we are honest with our Church, they kick us out.”

Some community members have been attempting to communicate with their priests through email, in person, and over the phone about their concerns regarding abortion rights and other social justice initiatives. Parishioners have been ignored each time. Being neglected at the local level makes these Catholics feel helpless and powerless, and that eventually leads people to leave their parishes altogether.

Our community members repeatedly said that the Catholic Church makes people in the pews feel unwelcome and judged, especially if they are pro-choice or belong to a marginalized community. We ask our Church leaders to honor Pope Francis’ call to encounter by listening to these stories.

“I go to Mass every single week, and not once did I hear the synod being mentioned.”

Many community members were concerned that their local church leaders did not attempt to hold synod events and worried their voices were not valued.

Some believed that because Pope Francis is unpopular with U.S. bishops, the USCCB is preventing American voices — particularly women’s — from being heard in the Synod on Synodality. Many members of our community believe in the traditions of the Catholic faith, but it saddens them that loved ones who are LGBTQIA+ or vocal about bodily autonomy lack a home in the Church.

The Synod on Synodality is a historic moment for our Church and a tremendous opportunity for transformation. Catholics who have chosen abortion are part of the life of the Church: They participate richly in our sacraments, and their abortion stories are woven into the fabric of our community. The Synod on Synodality can only come to its full potential if they can be heard. We pray that our Church leaders will have the courage to listen.

Yours in good faith,

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