News
Religious Life

The heads of women's religious orders leave an audience with Pope Francis in Paul VI hall at the Vatican May 12, 2016. During that session with members of the International Union of Superiors General, sisters asked Francis about the possibility of women deacons returning to the church. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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A group working to keep the discussion of women deacons alive in the Catholic Church is holding dozens of forums on the issue this fall, with two events specifically for women religious.

Discerning Deacons, a group whose mission is to engage Catholics in the discernment about women in the diaconate, is planning more than 50 Phoebe Forums, named for St. Phoebe, whom St. Paul identifies as a deacon in Romans 16.

Charity Sr. Tracy Kemme said the discernment events are an answer to the call in the final synod on synodality document, which says, "The question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue." She noted that Pope Francis declared the document to be magisterial teaching.

"We see this as a very natural next step in this conversation," said Kemme, who, along with Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Michelle Cimaroli, co-leads the team organizing the forums. "They're to help educate folks on what the new teaching says and have a space to say, what is the Vatican doing about it?"

The 90-minute virtual forums for Catholic sisters are via Zoom at 3 pm Eastern Daylight Time Sept. 27 and 7:30 pm Sept. 29. Participants should register by Sept. 20.

Kemme said that while Discerning Deacons members may be in favor of women deacons returning to the Catholic Church, the forums are really about discernment.

"We would love for anyone to take part and see what the Holy Spirit is calling forth," she said, noting that the final synod document in the section on women's roles in the church says that "what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped."

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"Since we're a synodal church, we would like this to be a synodal discernment," Kemme said.

Women deacons in the Catholic Church would not be new.

"It's pretty clear that through the first 1,000 years of the church, women were deacons," Kemme said. "They were only phased out in about the 12th century."

She said that as deacons — both men and women — were phased out, women religious began to increase in numbers and take over much of the work deacons had been doing, a situation that continues today.

"We would love to hear from sisters who have been doing ministry like this," she said. "What has worked in the past, what hasn't worked, and what might work now?"

Kemme said the two virtual forums specifically for Catholic sisters makes sense because it was sisters in 2016 who asked Pope Francis about the possibility of women deacons returning to the church, and have been central to the discernment since.

The Phoebe Forums held in September and October will lead to a series of large listening sessions in October and November. What happens after that, Kemme said, depends on the Holy Spirit.

"We'll have to wait and see what comes from these conversations."