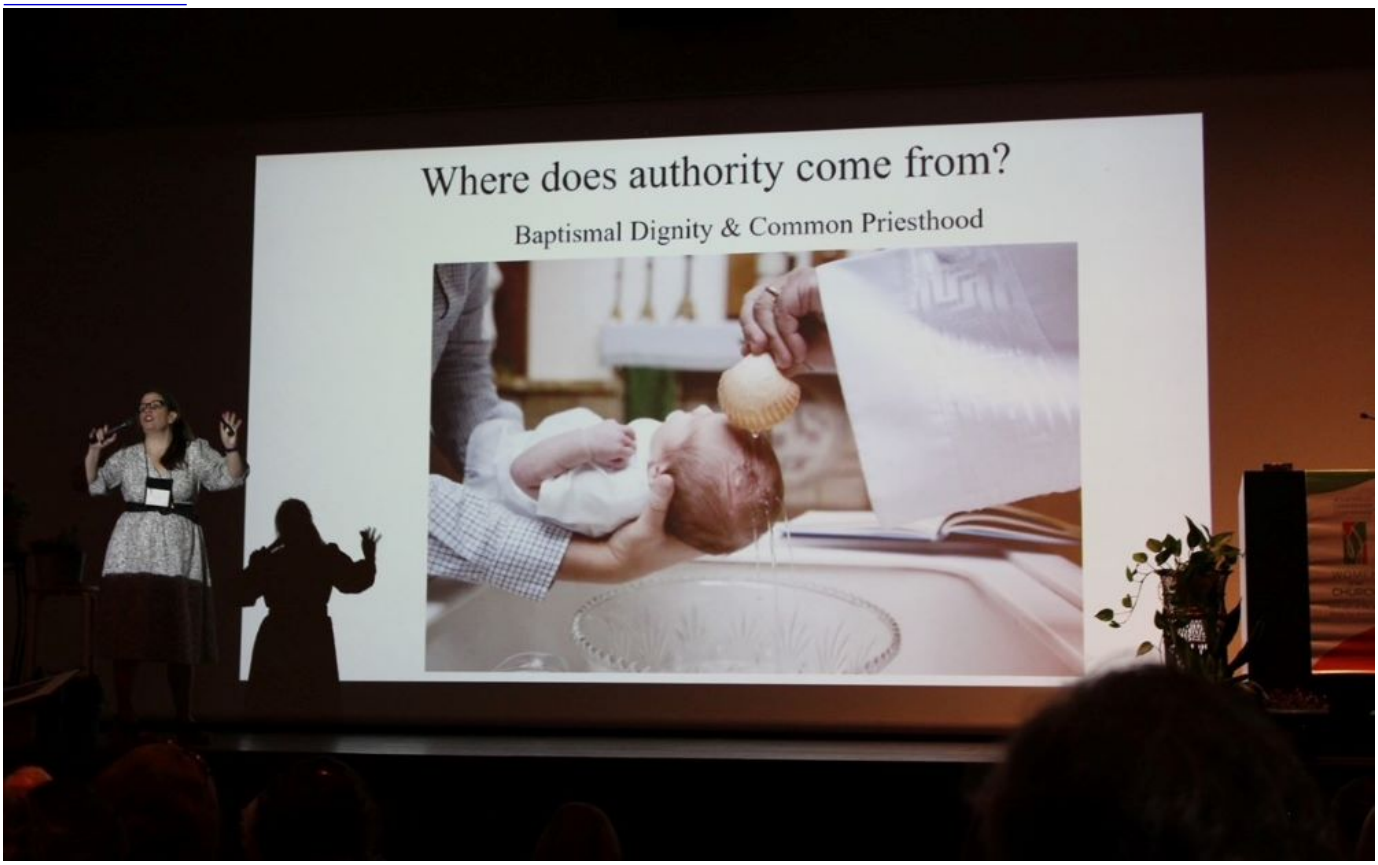
Opinion
NCR Voices



Kristin Colberg, associate professor of theology at St. John's School of Theology and Seminary, speaks at the Women of the Church conference in Collegeville, Minnesota. Her July 19 presentation was titled "Fruit and Seed: New Roles for Women in a Synodal Church." (Courtesy of Janet Millen)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Collegeville, Minnesota — July 26, 2023
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At the third Women of the Church conference for Catholic women leaders, a morning prayer service began with a reading of the Gospel account of Mary of Magdala witnessing the resurrected Jesus outside the tomb. Participants were then asked to call out a word from the scripture passage that spoke to them. The most frequently shared word was "weeping."

Catholic women have much to weep about, and many at the conference expressed pain, frustration and hurt by experiences of sexism in the church. But the overall vibe at the three-day event was one of joy and hope — brought on not only by the opportunity to pray, network and celebrate together, but also by optimism about the church's upcoming synod on synodality and what it might mean for women's leadership in the church.

'Keynote speaker Kristin Colberg set the tone the first night of the conference with her presentation titled "Fruit and Seed: New Roles for Women in a Synodal Church."

"What's happening with women in the church is not just the beginning of something new, but it's the realization of something that's already happening," said Colberg, associate professor of theology at St. John's School of Theology and Seminary.

"Because we're living through it, we can fail to see how radical and exciting of a time this is in the church," she said.

> 'The whole world is ready to move on the issue of women.'
> —Kristin Colberg
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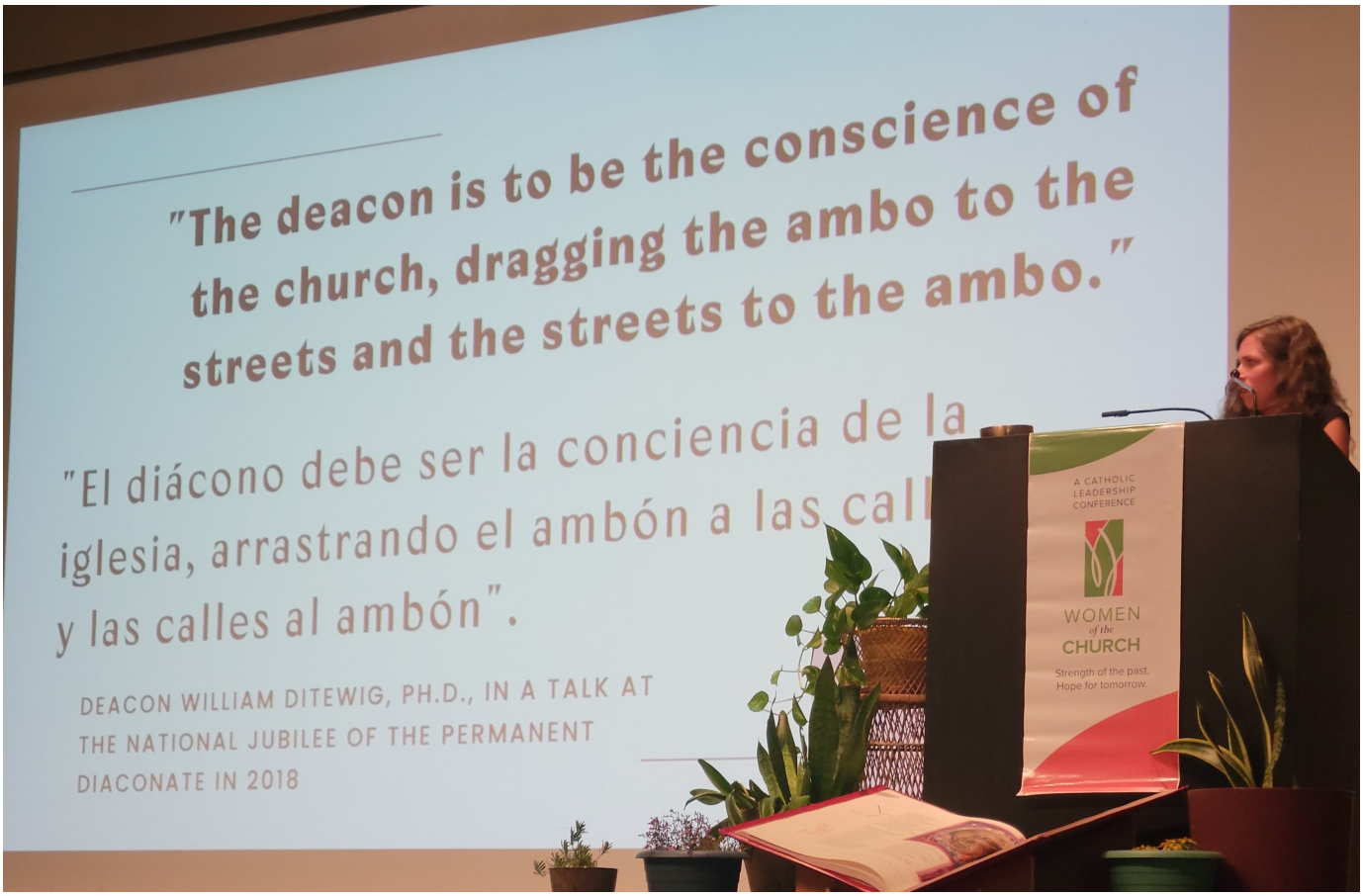
Colberg serves on the synod's theological commission, as the only U.S. member, and was part of the group that wrote the synod's continental document, "Enlarge the

Space of Your Tent." She said that after reading synodal reports from all over the world, it was clear that women's issues were not just a Western concern.

"The whole world is ready to move on the issue of women," she told conference attendees.

Colberg said she believes this synod will bring a "fundamental transformation of the church" and mentioned the addition of women as voting members as a significant shift already. The synod also is bringing new means of discernment and decision-making, she said.

After such changes, she said, "there's no turning back."



Casey Stanton, co-director of Discerning Deacons, speaks at the Women of the Church conference July 20 in Collegeville, Minnesota. She described the organization as "a case study in communal discernment." (NCR photo/Heidi Schlumpf)

The three-day Women of the Church conference was held July 19-21 at St. John's University and the College of St. Benedict in Collegeville, Minnesota. It was the third

such event, after the initial Women of the Church gathering in 2016 hosted by the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana.* The second conference was in 2019 at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. Global Sisters Report was a co-sponsor of this year's conference.

I covered all three events for NCR and gave presentations at the last two, this year about communication skills. More than 120 women attended this year's conference, with a noticeable inclusion of younger women and some women of color. Keynoter Gloria Purvis of America Media shared stories of experiencing racism in Catholic circles in her keynote about taking action, and Carolyn Woo, former CEO of Catholic Relief Services, moderated a panel about necessary capacities for women's leadership. Catholic singer Sarah Hart gave a concert that had women singing along and hugging one another.

Discerning Deacons, a group that advocates to reopen the diaconate to women, had a strong presence, and co-director Casey Stanton was a keynote speaker. She described the organization as "a case study in communal discernment."

"Is the Holy Spirit calling the church to open the diaconate to women?" she asked. "Are women being called to the diaconate? Can we believe women when they say they are called?"

A number of women I spoke to said they were discerning their own paths in the church, and for many that included a possible call to the diaconate.

On the last day of the conference, participants met in small groups for synodal listening sessions, reflecting on the conference topics and on the movement of the Spirit in their own lives.

Attendees at the Women of the Church conference visit vendors between conference session

Attendees at the Women of the Church conference visit vendors between conference sessions at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota. (Courtesy of Janet Millen)

Lisa Cathelyn, who works as the justice, peace, integrity of creation coordinator for the U.S. Federation of Sisters of St. Joseph, said that while it "breaks my heart that God's vision of flourishing for all people is not realized," she felt hopeful after the conference.

"I liked connecting with younger women," said Cathelyn, who is in her 30s. "And I feel I'm able to encounter the synod in a new way."

Lisa Orchen of Wethersfield, Connecticut, said she found a "sisterhood" at the conference.

"I came to actively discern and listen," she said. "I have really resonated with the stories of other women here."

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Carmen Ramos, who works in diaconal formation for the Los Angeles Archdiocese, also said the event was an opportunity to discern where God is leading her. "It fills my cup to be connected with women who are active in the church and who are struggling like I am."

Ramos later wrote on Facebook that the event was "a beautiful and life-giving experience."

"Despite the painful reality that we have a long way to go in moving towards greater equality and female leadership in the Church there are visible signs of both fruits from what’s been done and seeds for the future that are being sown — all indicate we are indeed moving," she wrote. "There is a transformation happening from within."

**This sentence has been updated to correct the host of the first conference.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 4-17, 2023** print issue under the headline: Hope amid struggle for women of the church.