News



Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, speaks to a reporter during a "Don't Kick the Can, Women Can Be Priests" action in Rome during the Synod on Synodality meeting in October. The group is now planning a women's strike during Lent of 2025. (Courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference)



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What would the Catholic Church do without women? If some activists have their way, we're about to find out.

A new project is urging women to strike by withholding time, labor and financial resources from the church during Lent, which begins March 5. The planned action is in response to the Vatican's synod on synodality, which concluded in October without action on women's leadership, including the opening of ordination to the diaconate or priesthood.

"The strike is for Catholics who are looking for a way to express their disappointment, frustration or anger at an institution that refuses to recognize the equal dignity of half of its members," said Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, which is organizing the strike.

The project, called "Catholic Women Strike: Global Witness for Equality," calls on women to "make your presence in the church known by your absence." It was launched earlier this month.

"Our hope is to make visible what is often invisible," McElwee told NCR. Women make up more than half of the Catholic Church in the United States and compose a majority, about 80%, of lay ecclesial ministers.

Participation in the strike could include not attending Mass and instead choosing a women-centered liturgy, withholding financial contributions, declining to volunteer during Lent, or joining a one-day walkout from Catholic organizations around International Women's Day (March 8).

The project encourages women to report their activities to the strike's central database and to church leaders.



Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, participates in a protest in Rome in August 2021. The group is now planning a women's strike during Lent of 2025. (Courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference)

The choice of Lent was intentional, McElwee told NCR. "It's really a potent season in our tradition, a time when Catholics simplify their lives and make sacrifices," she said. "So we felt it was a liturgically important time to withhold and abstain from systems of sexism and patriarchy."

Women's Ordination Conference had originally planned a similar strike in March of 2020, but it was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the yearslong synod process, which began in 2021, members and other activists participated in the Vatican summit on the future of the church.

"We threw our whole hearts into the synod process, yet the final document seemed pretty insufficient," McElwee said.

The synod's final document stopped short of moving on women deacons but left the issue "open" — despite Pope Francis telling television host Norah O'Donnell a few months earlier that he was opposed to the idea.

The paragraph in the final synod document that mentioned expanding the diaconate received the most "no" votes, but it still passed. The issue of women's leadership also had been moved to one of 10 study groups created after the October 2023 Vatican synod meeting, but that group has largely operated in secrecy.

After the final synod meeting, "it felt like the time was right" to reconsider a strike, given members' disappointment, McElwee said. So far, the response has been enthusiastic, with some women noting that they have been "striking" from the church for years, she added.

In 2019, a group of German Catholic women organized a boycott as part of the "Mary 2.0" movement. Almost a decade earlier, Irish women also organized a Mass boycott or wore green armbands to highlight women's inequality.

McElwee said the upcoming strike project took inspiration from the 1975 "Women's Day Off" in Iceland, in which 90% of women refused to work, cook or take care of children for 24 hours to protest wage and other inequalities.

Organizers of the Women's Ordination Conference strike are encouraging women to be creative, perhaps even asking men to cover for their ministries while they are striking.

"People have to do what's best for the people of their community," McElwee said. "But the strike is supposed to cause a shift — a shift in perspective and in labor. People will feel women's absence."

Organizers say they are no longer waiting for ordained men to decide the parameters and pace of synodality. "Endless 'study' on the subject of women is a

patriarchal stalling tactic developed by ordained men to maintain the status quo," the project's website says.

"We will no longer wait until ordained men decide the time is right."

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