News



Flyers for the Catholic Women Strike initiative. (Courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference)

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As Lent began on Ash Wednesday (March 5), Catholic women frustrated over being disenfranchised by the church despite promises of greater recognition are going on strike, withholding numerous services and ministries to their Catholic parishes, schools and universities.

Organized by the Women's Ordination Conference, a 50-year-old group based in Rome that advocates for women to be made priests, bishops and deacons, the Catholic Women Strike is planned to go through Easter, April 20. It also includes a day of action on March 9, where women are invited to protest and advocate for greater inclusion and influence in the church.

"We're calling the women of the Catholic Church to join together in striking from sexism by withholding labor, time and financial resources from the church during Lent, " said Kate McElwee, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference.

Catholic women urged to 'strike' over inequality in the church

The conference has prepared a toolkit to answer questions about how to participate in the strike, suggesting that women refrain from attending Mass, send letters to their local priest or bishop highlighting the need for recognition of women's roles or withhold donations and work. According to church data, women perform the vast majority of the work in churches and dioceses and make up 80% of lay ecclesial ministers.

The recently ended Synod on Synodality, a three-year-long global consultation of Catholic faithful called by Pope Francis in 2021, raised hopes that the church might open the door for women to be ordained as deacons, who may perform some of the church's seven sacraments and preach at Mass. Women's roles in the church was among the top concerns of Catholics in the consultation that went on in parishes and dioceses, with most saying they'd like to see women have a greater say in decisions.

But before the synod's final meeting in Rome, where women were given a vote in the proceedings alongside bishops and other clergy, the pope put the brakes on the push for women deacons, saying the question "was not yet mature." He instead created a study group to further discern the church's options.

"Following the Synod on Synodality and the lack of concrete actions for women and women's greater participation in the life of the church, there was a lot of disappointment, anger and heartbreak," said McElwee.

> "You kind of wonder, why am I going to all these meetings and giving all this time when my voice isn't going to be heard? So I just keep on working, because I will never leave the Catholic religion, because I don't feel like I can change it if I leave it."
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McElwee said that it's hard to gather data on how many women will take part in the strike but said she was hearing from women working in embassies, universities, schools and dioceses, from the United States to Poland and Italy. Many women who volunteer in their parishes are also taking part in the initiative.

Suzanne Holt-Savage, 62, a lay Dominican associate who worships at Christ on the Mountain Catholic Church in Lakewood, Colorado, said she learned about the strike in an email from the Women's Ordination Conference and decided to lead a group of 10 women to participate and lead a witness outside the Denver Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception on March 9.

"I had misgivings about the Synod on Synodality, but I still hoped it would bring women's ordination forward, and it really didn't," Holt-Savage said in a phone interview.

She said she already sent an email to her priest explaining why she won't be attending Mass on Sundays and that she will also withhold her donations. Holt-Savage explained that she has longed for women to have a greater voice in the Catholic Church, adding that she was struck on the few occasions she heard women in other denominations preach.

> "If you are a woman who is very active in promoting women's roles, they might be happy if you are not there," Belotti said. "Being present is also a form of resistance that needs to be maintained."
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"Having more girls grow up seeing the likes of Bishop (Mariann) Budde, what she said from the pulpit, that's what I want," Holtsavage said, referring to the Episcopal bishop of Washington who made an appeal for mercy during a prayer service attended by President Donald Trump the day after his inauguration. "That was so fantastic to me, seeing a woman speaking like that, having that platform," she added.

Kelly Hamilton, 66, one of the women who will protest outside the Denver cathedral, said she can't do much more for the strike. She performs countless ministries for the Christ on a Mountain parish, including leading the choir as a soloist and working on a committee to provide underprivileged families with everything from Christmas gifts to grocery cards. Hamilton also visits nursing homes with the parish's deacon to make sure that the elderly have the Eucharist once a month. During her interview with RNS, she was cooking a casserole for a funeral service.

"I will not withhold my ministry because, to me, it would hurt other people. It would hurt mostly the women that I work alongside, because their workload would double," she said, "but I do see the necessity of having more power, or at least have a place at the table in the church, and we really don't have that."

Hamilton said she was among those who were disappointed by the synod's failure to recognize the role of women and the female diaconate, especially after she had taken part in several synodal meetings in the parish, where the question was front and center.

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it," she said.

If women's roles are a concern in U.S. churches, said Elisa Belotti, 28, a Catholic in Brescia, in northern Italy, simply not showing up at church gatherings or Mass would be counterproductive in Italy.

"If you are a woman who is very active in promoting women's roles, they might be happy if you are not there," she said. "Being present is also a form of resistance that needs to be maintained."

Instead, as a member of Italian Women for the Church, a separate Catholic feminist organization, she will join the strikers by focusing on raising awareness about the work women already do in the church and informing as many people as possible about the strike and the reasons behind it.

"We want the church to be evangelizing and open to everyone who wants to be a part of this faith," Belotti said, adding that she hopes "this strike will be the necessary jolt to have a more concrete understanding of the problems that exist."

This story appears in the **Lent 2025** feature series. View the full series.