



Synod 2021-2023

**INTERNATIONAL SURVEY OF
CATHOLIC WOMEN (ISCW)
Synthesis: Executive Summary**



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Report submitted to: Sister Nathalie Becquart, under-secretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops: 20 September 2022.

Acknowledgements: The Fidel Götz Foundation for generously funding the research analysis and publication.
The Catholic Women's Council and its member groups for their support in the distribution and translation of the survey.
The translators and language contacts who generously gave their time: Basia Balicka, Alicja Baranowska, Eva Baillie, Carolina Del Río Mena, Ruth Fehlker, Eleanor Flynn, Paola Lazzarini, Pei-Ju Lin, Shannon Lise, Cristina Morgado, Marisa Noriega Cándano, and Sheila Pires.

Executive Summary

The International Survey of Catholic Women (ISCW) was undertaken for the Catholic Women Speak network as a response to the call for members of the Catholic Church to participate in the process of Synod 2021-2023. It was devised and managed by researchers Drs Tracy McEwan and Kathleen McPhillips at the University of Newcastle, and Professor Tina Beattie, Professor Emeritus at the University of Roehampton, London. This report for submission to the Vatican is based on the survey findings, drawn from responses submitted by 17,200 women from 104 countries across the world. The survey was translated into eight languages – English, Spanish, German, Italian, French, Polish, Mandarin, and Portuguese – and made available online from Tuesday 8 March 2022 (International Women’s Day) to Tuesday 26 April 2022. The Executive Summary provides the key points and recommendations of the submission.

The overall aim of the ISCW was to gather feedback for the Synod on the experiences and insights of Catholic women from around the world. Topics included Catholic identity, significant issues of concern and views on church reform, and the impact of COVID-19 on women’s faith and practice. The large number of responses clearly indicates a desire by many women to share their hopes, aspirations, and frustrations, and to make their views known to the Synod with regard to the current situation of women in the Church.

The ISCW is a significant and unique resource for the Synod in its aim to listen to diverse voices to better discern what it means to “journey together” as the People of God in a Church of many cultures. It gathered quantitative data via “closed” questions where respondents were invited to choose from a set of responses, and qualitative data through “open” questions which asked respondents to comment and share insights. Demographic information regarding respondents’ ages and regions of residence was also collected. The submission to the Synod includes quotations from the open responses which, alongside the statistical overview, reflect the diverse perspectives and concerns of Catholic women.

In preparing the report, the researchers have tried to reflect the diversity of responses as well as identifying common themes and shared concerns. The women who responded valued their Catholic identity very highly, most had significant concerns about some aspects of church practice and teaching, but they also varied widely in their priorities and perspectives, with age and regions of residence playing a significant role with regard to particular issues. An important insight to be drawn from the survey is that Catholic women do not constitute a homogenous group but reflect the many different cultural and communal contexts within which their faith is experienced and practised. It would be reductive to fail to represent this by privileging any one group along the broad spectrum of women’s faith and practice. It is an area of concern to the researchers that this heterogeneity is rarely represented in official church documents, with the result that many women struggle to see the relevance of some church teachings to the complex realities of their lives.

The first major finding of the ISCW is that even when women have considerable struggles with Catholic institutions and structures, their Catholic identity is very important to them. Indeed, amidst the rich diversity of faith and practice expressed in open responses, Catholic identity was of great importance for nearly 90 per cent of respondents. Many who responded to the open questions highlighted the importance of their faith, the centrality of the Eucharist to their lives, and their active participation in parishes and church communities, while also expressing high levels of frustration or dissatisfaction relating to their experiences. Many also described social justice and

care for the poor and vulnerable as vital to their understanding of what it means to be Catholic. Around two-thirds of respondents identified as ecumenical Christians.

A second major finding is that most Catholic women welcome reform in the Catholic Church. Indeed, a vast majority of those who responded supported some level of change in the Church, especially but not exclusively regarding the role and representation of women. Respondents highlighted the need to reform church teachings on issues of sexuality, including respect for freedom of conscience and the place of LGBTIQ persons within the Church; women's leadership roles in Catholic parishes and institutions; liturgical issues to do with inclusive language, women preaching, and for some, the ordination of women to the priesthood and/or diaconate, and remarriage after civil divorce. A minority of respondents rejected reform and instead expressed a preference for the Church to revert to a pre-conciliar model of authority, priesthood, and liturgy.

A third major finding is that respondents identified the sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of women, children, and other vulnerable people as a dominant issue. A substantial majority was concerned about the prevalence of abuse, racism, and sexism in church contexts. A small number shared personal experiences of sexual abuse, racism, and workplace harassment, while others expressed dismay at the lack of effective action to address the continuing scandal of abuse.

A final major finding is that Catholic women are deeply concerned about transparency and accountability in church leadership and governance. A substantial majority of respondents identified clericalism as having a negative impact on church life. There was also a high level of agreement that a less hierarchal and authoritarian model of Church was urgently needed, with greater collaboration and sharing of responsibility and authority between clergy and laity. Some respondents raised concerns regarding economic justice in church affairs, including the lack of adequate pay for female church workers, both lay and religious.

The ISCW constitutes one of the most extensive surveys of Catholic women ever undertaken. The substantial findings should thus inform lasting and genuine change in church institutions, structures, and practices, based on all the principles of synodality set out in the Preparatory Document.