



**Responses to the DSC
from the World Women's Observatory (WWO)
of the World Union of Catholic Women's
Organisations (WUCWO)**

March 2023

Introduction

Thousands of women around the world have participated, in some way, in the synodal process. The experiences have been diverse. Each woman who participates in this journey contributes with her life story, her views and her belonging to a determined community, geographically and spiritually. In order to know how women from different continents have experienced this process, and their perception of the main challenges and proposals on the Church, the World Women's Observatory (WWO)¹ developed a project to listen to, value and disclose the experiences of women members of teams responsible for the synodal process at the diocesan, national or continental level in all regions of the world. (Appendix 1)

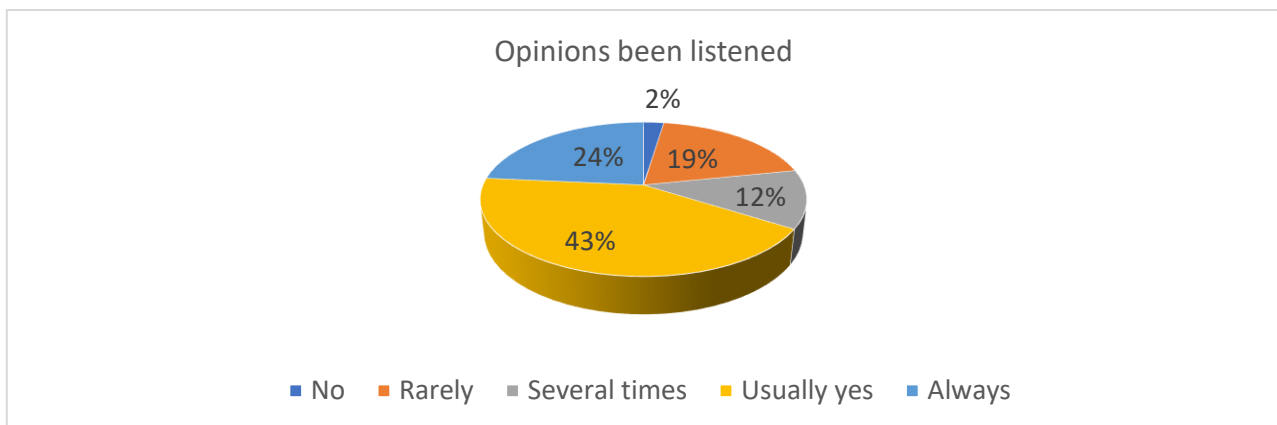
Answers regarding the Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS)

In this contribution, we will try to answer the three questions of paragraph 106 of the DCS, highlighting the common lines that have emerged between all continents and mentioning the differences found.

1. "Having read and prayed with the DCS, what intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church on your continent? What experiences are new or enlightening to you?"

The women's responses to the survey convey different lived experiences, which, in the overall balance, raise the general desire to participate equally in the Church, urging structural changes towards a Church that is more equitable, inclusive and close to those most in need.

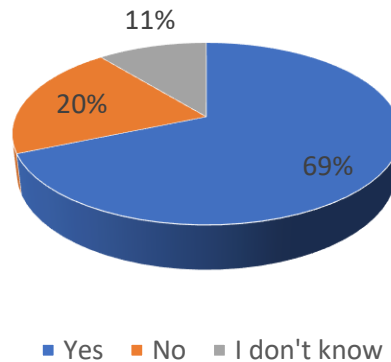
There are experiences of the women surveyed that light up new and hopeful paths. For many of them, the synodal experience has opened spaces for women to participate and be listened to. The survey data is quite revealing in this regard. Globally, 67% of the women surveyed, who were members of teams responsible for the synodal process, responded that they were always or generally listened to.



These positive responses came mostly from the Middle East (76%) and Europe (75%); not so much from Africa (47%).

¹ The WWO was created in 2021 by the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO), an organization that aims to promote the presence, participation and co-responsibility of Catholic women in society and in the Church, so that they can fulfill their evangelizing mission and work for human development. The WWO, under the slogan of "listening to transform lives", seeks to give visibility to women, especially the most vulnerable who seem "invisible", in order to inspire and generate changes that favor their integral development.

Were you effectively involved in decision-making during this process?



Something similar happened when asked if they had been effectively involved in decision-making during the synodal process. A large majority (69%) answered “yes”

The women of the regions that reported a higher percentage of being involved in decision-making were from Europe (77%) and the ones that reported a lower percentage of being involved in decision-making were from Latin America and the Caribbean (61%).

These data contrast substantially with the general feeling of women in all continents that they are not listened to in the Church nor are they summoned to decision-making spaces. The difference is overwhelming, which allows us to interpret that the Synod is marking a path of enhanced listening to women and creation of new spaces within the Church where they are participating in decision-making. Even so, the absence of the right to vote in the final instance of the synodal process is highlighted. *“As the process moves forward, less and less women are involved and in positions in the church so their voice may be lost”* (woman from North America).

Synodality as a path of dialogue in the Church proposes a new way of relationship between people and has been a generally positive experience. There are calls from many parts around the world to continue the synodal process as an "ongoing strategy" to listen to all voices; to teach synodal methodology to bishops, priests and laity and to work on structural changes that build an environmental space of synodality.

One of the experiences that resonate more strongly among women is the lack of equal conditions of participation in the Church with respect to men. *“The number of women participating remains low, which is why the topics will be directed by men... Decision-making remains primarily in the hands of the ecclesiastical authority”* (woman from the Middle East). Their shared feeling is that they are not listened to enough and that their opinions carry no weight. This discrimination experience reaches, in some cases, the fear of expressing their points of view and submission in the presence of the clergy. *“Women feel inferior, afraid to share their views and, once the clergy has spoken, they don't speak. Some women accept everything they are told without questioning”* (African woman). *“For lay women it is often a challenge to be listened to in such forums, unless one is a theologian or a well-recognized member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy”* (Asian woman). Inequality is experienced in daily dealings, but also in the impossibility of accessing to decision-making positions in the very structure of the Church. *“In my experience, I was trusted to organise the collection of responses and design of local engagement, but as soon as it came to longer term decisions or any real action as a result of the process, my voice was no longer effective and I was kept out of decisions”* (woman from Oceania).

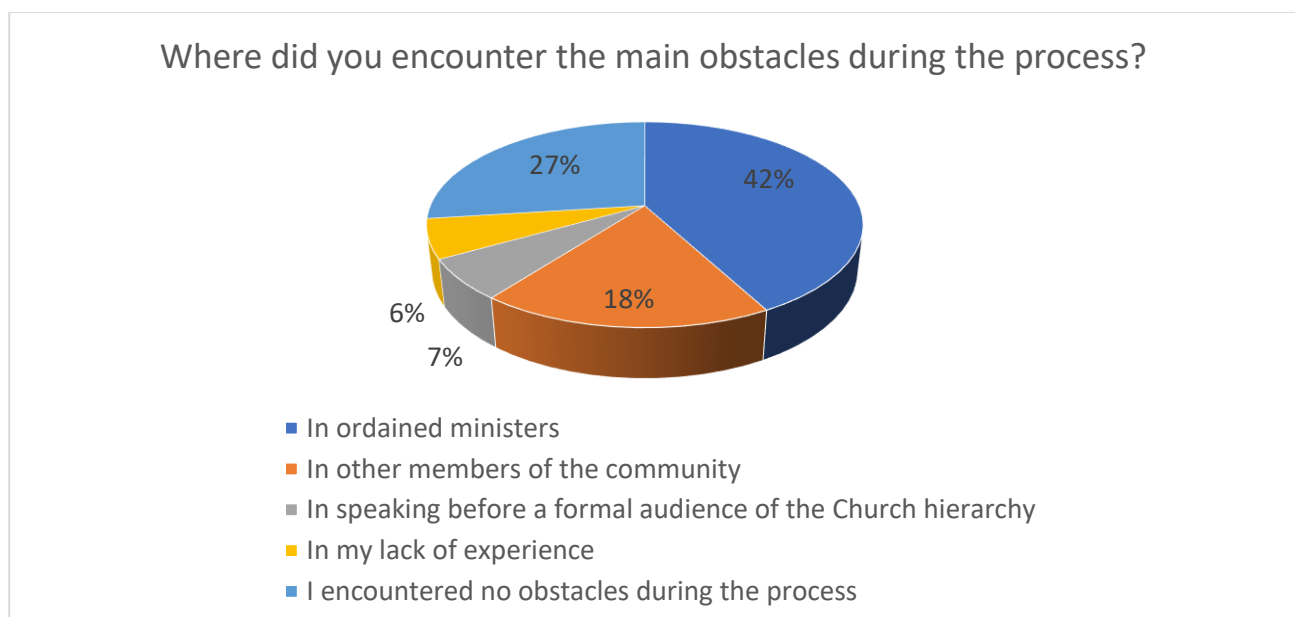
World wide, women from different continents have expressed in the survey that clericalism, often founded on the patriarchal culture of the society in which they live, exacerbates and explains, to a large extent, the

discrimination they suffer, not being empowered to contribute with the leadership of the Church. *"The patriarchal mentality is always prevalent (Asian woman)". "The greatest challenge is that clericalism is still alive and active. The Parish in many cases is still dominated by the Parish Priest or by parishioners who still refer everything back to the priest's opinion"* (woman from Europe). While they cry out for structural and systematic changes, there is a growing sense of a female awareness that they must empower themselves in their theological and synodal knowledge to strengthen and consolidate their role in the Church. Women recognize themselves as proactive architects of their own destiny in the Church.

The Church is not perceived as a large, open tent where all people have a place. Women perceive that there are groups that are not being integrated into the Church. The absence of young people in churches is a concern shared by women on different continents: *"Integrating young people into the church and its institutions and giving them a leadership role"* (woman from Middle East). They also call for care for single women, widows, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ groups and those on the margins of society who are often excluded and not listened to. *"Propose a reform of parish councils so that they become more participatory, synodal and take decisions that revitalise the life of the communities"* (woman from Latin-American and the Caribbean).

2. "Having read and prayed with the DCS, what substantial tensions or divergences arise as particularly important in the perspective of your continent? Accordingly, what are the questions or issues that need to be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?"

The women's responses reveal some substantial tensions that are reiterated with some particularities in the different continents. On one hand, the desire for openness, inclusion and closeness of the Church to all people is manifested. *"Open to the 'other' and to different cultures and thus maintain unity in diversity within this process"* (woman from the Middle East). *"Increased efforts to listen to the voices of minority women, particularly African Americans"* (woman from North America). *"Give more space to marginalized women such as informal workers, single mothers, indigenous women"* (Asian woman). On the other hand, women emphasize the fear and resistance to change of some members of the Church.





The governance of the Church also poses tensions. Some women ask for an ecclesiastical structure revolution in order to build different ways of participation and new forms of relationship between the laity and the clergy, more in line with the Vatican II ecclesiology. *"Explore ways in which lay men and women can truly engage and assist clerical leadership in the Church"* (woman from Oceania). These changes must be accompanied by a greater participation of women in decision-making positions within the Church.

The proposed changes in the role of women come into tension with the place they have traditionally occupied within the Church. *"Women's place in the Church has traditionally been supportive rather than truly participatory. It will be difficult for the men of the Church to diminish or share the power they have traditionally had"* (woman from Europe). Clericalism, has contributed to maintaining a peripheral role of women in the governance of the Church. Faced with this, the desire of women is to be respected, valued and taken into account in their opinions. *"The possibility of a woman appearing next to the man, and not through him, to express an opinion or make decisions"* (Asian woman). *"The male hierarchy really needs to give women a space and respect our opinions, instead of mocking or labelling us"* (woman from Oceania).

Tensions regarding participation in pastoral service are evident in the call for new ministries for the laity and also for the female diaconate. The demand that appears in most of the responses from women co-responsible for the synodal process is the need to provide greater formation for the laity in general and for women in particular. They should be trained in theology and preaching. The female diaconate is a recurring request, particularly in Europe and North America. Some responses from both regions mentioned the female priesthood.

Changes in the level of participation of women also reach the synodal process. *"Our voices are lost, especially in the universal phase when only bishops meet"* (woman from North America). *"Only one known vote (Sr. Nathalie Becquart) at the level of universal synod"* (woman from North America). Many women ask to be able to vote.

The Synod process also raises divergences as to its results. On the one hand, the most widespread perception is that it has served to listen more to women. However, some women raise uncertainty about its outcome and whether it will actually have an effect on bringing about some changes in the Church. *"The resistance of ordained ministers and more conservative members of the different communities who sometimes find it difficult to listen and if they do it is because they are forced to do so and not because they are convinced of the synodal process. Some suspect that this process will end only in words and good intentions but that nothing will change. Some priests believe that people can be enabled to say what they think but that in the end they are the last authority in their parishes and they will decide what seems best to them since canon law protects them"* (woman of Latin-American and the Caribbean).

In this framework, some of the **questions that need to be addressed for the next steps of the process** are as follows:

- *How to make the synodal process more inclusive and equitable by including the most marginalized groups?*
- *How to promote and replicate good synodal practices?*
- *How to develop capacities in synodal methods for clergy and laity that improve listening?*
- *What role will women have in the final sessions of the Synod? Will women have the right to vote in the final stage of the synodal process?*
- *What strategies can be employed to increase the dissemination of the synodal process and its results?*

- *How can a more meaningful and qualified training for lay people in the Church be guaranteed?*
- *Is it possible to advance in a more active role of women that includes female diaconate, preaching in the temple, collaboration on clergy's formation, access to positions of decision making in the Church? How could it be done gradually?*

3. "Looking at what emerges from the above two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?"

The most recurrent theme in women's responses is the lack of appropriate participation of women in the Church in order to allow them to bring out their talents and potentials in the pastoral service to the People of God. This great theme encompasses different more concrete calls to action that arise from the lived experiences of women in their continents and the tensions they have perceived:

1. Develop a synodal culture within the Church that defeats clericalism.

It is necessary to let the Holy Spirit speak in the Church also through the voice of the baptized laity, men and women, and of religious women committed to its service. Women ask to overcome the culture of "machismo" and clericalism that reduces their service to the Church.

This cultural reform of the Church needs to be developed within the ordained ministers and the women and men of the People of God themselves. *"At the end of the process, we should not see the bishops deciding on the conclusions. A group of lay people, or even a group of women, should be allowed to participate in the final decisions"* (woman from Europe).

2. More theological and synodal formation for lay people, especially women and sisters

Theological, biblical, pastoral, etc. training of religious women and lay women and men of the People of God is essential to provide their qualified contribution to pastoral service. Only in this way can a synodal style be carried forward, enabling more members of the People of God to "walk together", to be listened to and to collaborate in decision-making.

3. Create more systematic channels for women's participation in the Church while preserving the synodal style

Women are asking to create new structures for new participation, including new ministries with more responsibility and introducing the synodal style into pastoral work. *"Propose a reform of the parish councils so that they are more participatory, synodal and make decisions that reactivate the life of the communities"* (woman of Europe). Call *"to encourage women to have a positive role in the parish"*. *"Give women a greater opportunity and role and trust them more"* (woman of Africa).

4. Inclusion of qualified women in the seminary formators' teams

From the voice of women listened to in this process, it emerges that it is necessary to involve women in a greater and direct way in the formation of new priests. *"Encourage male/female parity wherever possible. Involve more women in the formation of priests"* (woman of Africa). This inclusion should always be aimed towards a synodal Church, in which priests are trained to consider men and women equally worthy in the service of the Church and to be prepared to go out to meet, listen to and welcome the poorest and most marginalised with tenderness.

5. Greater access of women to decision-making positions in the Church

As was clearly expressed in the DCS, women are calling for greater participation in the Church's management and decision-making structures. *"Have a quota system where you must have at least the same number of women as men in leadership positions and on key committees"* (woman of

Africa). *"The laity, especially women, can hold positions in the Curia and be allowed to participate in decision-making"* (woman from Latin-American and the Caribbean).

6. Preaching and female diaconate

Women, particularly in North America and Europe, demand that they be allowed to preach in assemblies and that the positions of responsibility they already hold be better valued and publicized. The female diaconate appears strongly in these regions.

7. Right to vote for women in the final stage of the Synod

Several times the right to vote is perceived as necessary in this participatory body for giving legitimacy and support to the synodal process.

8. Greater inclusion of more marginalized groups

The call for greater closeness of the Church to the most marginalized individuals and groups is recurrent. *"Making room for women by having the voices of vulnerable and marginalized groups heard"* (woman from Middle East).

9. Always strive to strengthen ecclesial communion and not polarity

The goal of the proposed changes is not to polarize men and women. *"That priests understand that it is not proposed to compete but to "be" church "together"* (woman from Latin-American and the Caribbean).

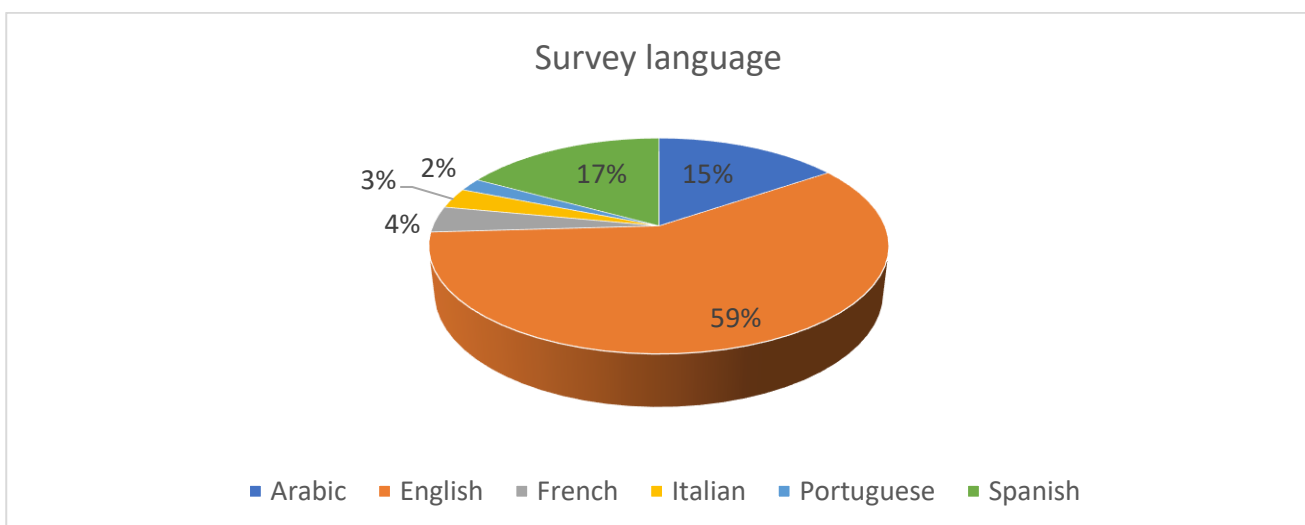
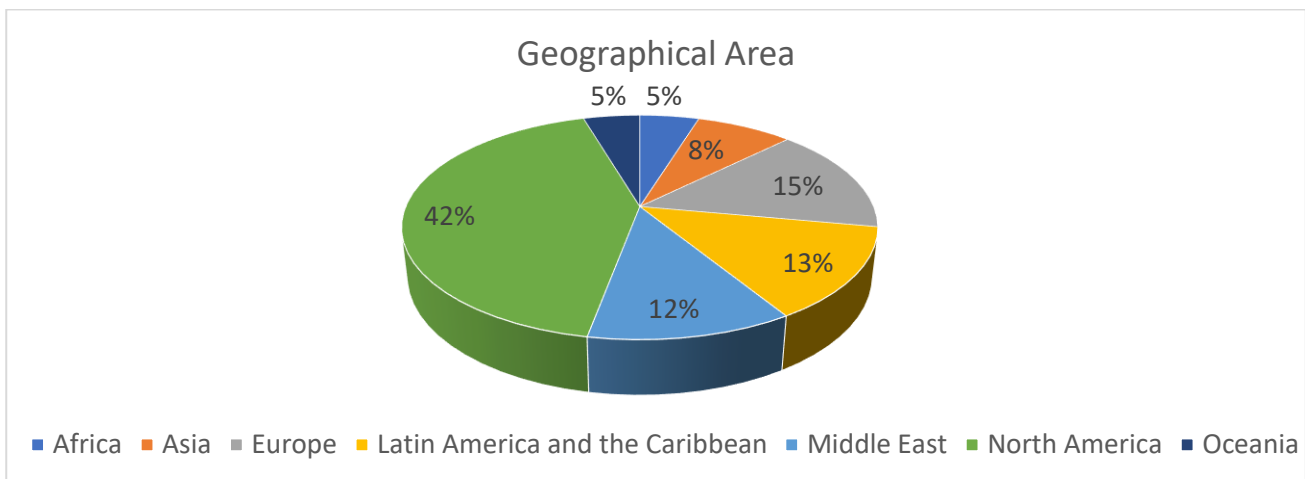
Appendix n. 1:

The research

The tool used for listening to women has been a survey in 6 languages (Arabic, Spanish, French, English, Italian and Portuguese) with 10 questions that deal specifically with:

- Geographical area and role played in the synodal process
- How they lived the process
- How to improve the rest of the synodal process (main challenges and initiatives)
- Proposals to improve women's participation and leadership in the Church

A total of 459 women from all continents participated, with a notable majority from North America and, in second place, similar percentages of women from Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East.



More than half of the women participated in the English-language survey and, in second place, in Spanish and Arabic.

Rethinking women's participation is a critical point in the conversion of Church culture. The answers given by women to the Observatory show many coincidences with the challenges and tensions raised in the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod (DCS). They also chart a path based on the priorities that women demand for a renewed and synodal Church.

The main points raised in the DCS about the role of women in the Church emerge clearly in the survey responses. According to the DCS: "From every continent comes a call for Catholic women to be valued." The common baptismal dignity is not reflected "In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard."

Following those experiences, the women who responded to the survey ask, in different ways, to be heard and valued by "their" Church. They express explicitly the need and importance of "freeing the Church from clericalism" and having a Church at their side to help them "fight against the forces of destruction and exclusion." The desire for greater participation, full and equitable, is mentioned, as a common denominator, by almost all participations. The women who answered the questionnaire often feel left on the periphery of the Church, and their answers offer a valuable opportunity for the universal Church to change and put the Gospel into practice in a more decisive and concrete way.

As already noted in the DCS, many women who participated in the survey "call for the Church to continue discernment on certain specific issues: a more active role of women in the governance structures of Church bodies; the possibility for women, with adequate training, to preach in parish settings, the diaconate of women..."

The Survey

Rethinking women's participation is a critical point in the conversion of Church culture, according to the Synod's Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS). "From every continent comes a call for Catholic women to be valued first" (DCS 61); and she continues: "In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard." The GLOBAL WOMEN'S OBSERVATORY of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (WUCWO) is one such space. We ask you to respond to this survey as soon as possible, to give visibility to the women who mobilize the Synod and who are "invisible" to many. Deadline: February 1, 2023. You will find the first results from 1 March 2023 at: <https://www.worldwomensobservatory.org/en>

The survey is anonymous. By answering these 10 questions, you consent to the use and dissemination of your answers.

1. Have you been or are you a member of the team responsible for the synodal process at the diocesan, national or continental level? Or are you a delegate (e.g. or online) to the Continental Meeting?	
Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>



2. Geographical area

Africa and Madagascar	
Asia	
Europe	
Latin America and the Caribbean	
Middle East	
North America	
Oceania	

3. Would you consider the number of women within your (parish, diocese, institution) synodal action group to be:

More than the number of men	
Equal to the number of men	
Less than the number of men	
I do not know	

4. Why do you think you were summoned?

Because I am a theologian	
Because I'm considered a good secretary	
For my pastoral formation	
Because I am an employee in the structure of the Church	
No sé	
For another reason (explain):	

5. Has your opinion been heard during the work of the synodal process?

No	
Rarely	
Multiple times	
Usually Yes	
Always	

6. Did you actually participate in decision-making during this process?

Yes	
No	
I don't know	



7. Where did you encounter the main obstacles during the process?

In ordained ministers	
In other members of the community	
Speaking before a formal audience of the ecclesiastical hierarchy	
In my lack of experience	
In another issue (explain):	
I found no obstacles during the process	

8. What are the main challenges that women will have to face in the continental and universal phases of the synodal process?

Briefly mention a maximum of 3 challenges.

a)	
b)	
c)	

9. Would you like to take initiatives in the actual synodal process?

Yes	
No	
I don't know if so, briefly name up to 3 initiatives you would take	

9.1 If so, briefly name up to 3 initiatives you would take

a)	
b)	
c)	

10. Improving women's participation and leadership in the Catholic Church: What do you suggest?

Please indicate a maximum of 3 possible changes.

a)	
b)	
c)	

Thank you for answering the questions!

Optional

If you want to contribute even more to the visibility of the results of the work "Synodality according to women in charge of the synodal process, its contributions and challenges", you can do so with a short video requesting instructions to: info@worldwomensobservatory.org