

Amanda Wehrman – Witness for Saint Phoebe
September 10, 2023, Newman Hall-Holy Spirit Parish

My Newman family, it is a joy and honor to give witness today to the role of Saint Phoebe in our early Church, and to contemplate the role of women today through the lens of synodality.

Being a Millennial Catholic woman is a study in contrasts. In my personal and professional life, I am surrounded by women leaders. My friends who are women are lawyers, engineers, doctors, public servants... all experts and leaders in their fields. I, myself, am a director of a nonprofit that has a leadership team almost exclusively comprised of women. And yet, when I come to Mass on Sunday, I don't get to experience women leaders. Don't get me wrong – I know you're out there! I see you in the pews right now! But, as a little girl who was told she could be anything she wanted to be when she grew up, I see now, as an adult Catholic woman, that we still have a few caveats on that point.

So, when I first learned about Saint Phoebe, I was excited for the opportunity to get to know a woman leader from our early church. Our second reading today was from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, where Paul writes, "owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." But, I'd like to provide some context and call attention to another part of his letter that we don't get to hear in our Lectionary, Romans chapter 16, verses 1 and 2. Paul writes: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may receive her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well."

Phoebe carried Paul's letter from Corinth to the community in Rome. We know very little else about her, except that she made the trip, a treacherous two-week journey by ship. Paul uses three key words to describe Phoebe – sister, deacon, and benefactor. Using the word "sister," Paul acknowledges Phoebe as a member of the community of Jesus's followers – we are all a part of the same family, with equal status in God's household.

The second word Paul uses is "diakonos," which we might translate a few different ways: servant, deacon, minister, emissary. I'm choosing to use the translation of "deacon" (which is the New Revised Standard Bible translation used by Canadian Catholics) to invite us all to consider who a deacon is and what they do. By identifying Phoebe as "diakonos," Paul indicates that she was a preacher and teacher of the faith, and that women in the early church clearly had leadership roles. In fact, we have Church records of women serving as deacons in the Western Church through the 12th century: baptizing, proclaiming and preaching on the Gospel, caring for those on the margins, assisting in liturgy, and helping to sustain the life of the church through their ordained ministry.

Lastly, Paul calls Phoebe a "benefactor." Phoebe supported Paul as a patron, which could have been through hospitality, financial support, social connections, introductions to the right people... any number of ways of supporting Paul's ministry. So, as a Paulist community, let us be grateful to Saint Phoebe as our benefactor by extension!

Sister. Deacon. Benefactor. Three words for Phoebe. Three words that invite us to consider and create space for the leadership roles of women in our Church.

Next month, the Synod delegates will make the journey to Rome to discern on many topics that were raised up by the local Synod gatherings around the world, including ours at Newman last year. These topics include the vocation of women in the Church, the needs of young people, inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, social justice issues, church governance, and polarization. The Synod delegates, which are normally just Bishops, will include laypeople as voting members for the first time, including 54 women. It is fitting, then, that one of the Vatican's working documents on the Synod has the title "Enlarge the space of your tent." That document notes that, globally, "women are the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities, men a minority; yet most decision-making and governance roles are held by men." The Synod is a pivotal moment for our Church to reconsider the role of women – as leaders serving on governing bodies; as preachers offering witness; and as ordained members of the permanent diaconate.

As a woman in the Church, it's heartbreaking to never hear the perspectives of women at Mass. I say this with deep respect and gratitude to our priests who are serving our community, but at the same time, there are so many women in this parish, and in our global Church, who are called and prepared as preachers, servants, visionaries, community builders, teachers, and much more. We must ask ourselves – what wisdom are we missing out on by omitting these perspectives as we consider proclaiming the Word of God?

I have friends from other faith traditions who sometimes ask me why I am still Catholic, when there are other Christian communities that have already created spaces for women as equal leaders. My answer is that I feel so grounded to our Catholic traditions, to the Mystery, to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that I feel compelled to stay here and be a part of the conversation about what comes next. The Synod process, seeing our local and global communities cry out yearning for *more* from our Church – this is a beautiful listening and discernment process that fills me with hope.

Our first reading today, from Ezekiel, a prophet who wrote when the Jewish community was in exile, speaks of a "watchman for the house of Israel." What is the role of someone keeping watch? It's a role with the responsibility to look out for things that are not as they should be, and the authority to speak up when an issue needs to be addressed for the safety and well-being of the community. As the Synod process continues, we are called upon to listen, discern, and keep watch. Let us journey together, guided by the Holy Spirit, to expand and deepen our way of thinking, so that we may approach each other with open hearts as we consider what it means to "enlarge the space of our tent." With Saint Phoebe as our inspiration, let us work toward a more synodal Church open to the Holy Spirit living in her members, a Church that recognizes and centers the giftedness of those who have been overlooked – especially women. Thank you.