



Conceptions of Authority in Roman Catholicism (CoARC): A Seminar and Call for Papers on Co-responsibility in a Global Catholic Church

An Initiative of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at USC

Submission Deadline: January 30, 2026

The 2021-2024 Synod on Synodality revived an ecclesial focus on collaboration, co-responsibility, and leadership in a Roman Catholic Church shared by men, women, lay people, religious, and ordained ministers, together. Its *Final Document* appeals for research and dialogue on “progress made in promoting the laity’s access to positions of authority and to decision-making processes” (paragraph 102) while acknowledging, too, that bishops, priests, and deacons feel “overwhelmed by the expectation that they are required to fulfill every need” (paragraph 74) and that “women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation and place in all the various areas of the Church’s life...to the detriment of serving the Church’s shared mission” (paragraph 60).¹

The inevitable necessity of authoritative decision-making in the Catholic tradition compels deeper consideration as to where such authority lies, how it gets exercised, its limits, and its proper expression in a ‘synodal’ Church. While the Synod introduced new forms of deliberation and consultation to areas of governance and decision-making at the highest levels of the Church, the theological, ecclesiological, and sociological underpinnings of such structural and procedural changes have received less attention. The Church has a strong theology of synodality with roots in Scripture, ecclesiology, history, and tradition; does it have a similar theology for the *exercise of authority* in a synodal Church?

Invigorated by such timeless questions in a timely moment, we invite scholars and scholar-practitioners from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds—theological, sociological, historical, legal, and more—to a dialog and seminar June 23-25, 2026 in Knoxville, Tennessee, USA, in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains.

The seminar will be designed to share, reflect upon, and deliberate participants’ initial drafts of papers that engage new and varied perspectives on conceptions of authority in, of, and for the Catholic Church. We welcome topics such as how new understandings of authority may redistribute responsibility in the Church; comparative looks across cultures and religious or apostolic Christian traditions; the meanings and manifestations of vocation; obstacles and opportunities for decision-making in a synodal church; and how sociocultural contexts influence understandings of ecclesial authority. What theological, canonical, or practical implications (or pitfalls) does the call for synodality infer for the life of the Church?

Qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical approaches are welcome, as are synthetic reinterpretations and agenda-setting pieces. Graduate students and international scholars as well as faculty, researchers, and practitioner-scholars in various career stages and settings are welcome to apply.

The *Conceptions of Authority in Roman Catholicism* (CoARC) seminar aims to (1) speak thoughtfully into ongoing conversations regarding lay and ordained roles in the Church; (2) respond to structural conditions of a priesthood currently stymied in meeting all ministerial needs; and (3) bridge otherwise silo-ed vantage points in social science, history, theology, and practice. The seminar will also serve as a foundation for an edited volume and future public conversations on conceptions of authority in contemporary Roman Catholicism.

¹ *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*: <https://www.synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html>.



Honorariums and Travel Funding

Participation comes with travel funds to attend the seminar as well as a \$500 honorarium. In the case of co-authored submissions, this honorarium will be split equitably among authors. Following the seminar, selected papers will receive additional editorial feedback for inclusion in an edited volume. Authors will receive an additional \$1000 honorarium upon chapter submission (split equitably among co-authors), with an understanding that they will also be open to delivering a short-form synthesis of their contribution for a panel, podcast, or social or traditional media.

Submission Instructions

Interested participants should submit a curriculum vitae along with an abstract of 500-1000 words by **January 30, 2026** to the [web link](#) below. Notification of acceptance will be provided by February 15, 2026. An early draft of the paper will be due by June 1, 2026 for distribution in advance of the seminar.



<https://forms.gle/jXYfu34tMxNxmr2R6>

Important Dates

January 30, 2026: Abstract (500-1000 words) and CV due to link above
February 15, 2026: Notification of acceptance
June 1, 2026: Initial drafts due for distribution prior to the seminar
June 23-25, 2026: Seminar in Knoxville, Tennessee (in-person attendance mandatory)
June 30, 2026: Select participants invited to complete and revise papers for inclusion in an edited volume
January 30, 2027: Full, revised papers due for edited volume

Project Team

This project is organized under the aegis of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California (<https://dornsife.usc.edu/iacs/>). Sociologist Tricia Bruce, PhD, (Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies) and theologian Natalia Imperatori-Lee, PhD, (Associate Professor, Fordham University) will select seminar participants, serve as co-facilitators, and make final decisions regarding papers included in the resulting edited volume.

Questions

Questions about eligibility, submissions, the seminar, or other details may be directed to iacs@usc.edu.