

MARY MCALEESE

Equality
is not a Favour

ANNETTE SCHAVAN

A Dilemma with
Consequences

VIRGINIA SALDANHA

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GOD'S STRONG DAUGHTERS



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Worldwide

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Das Buch »Weil Gott es so will« hat der Diskussion um Weiheämter für Frauen einen kräftigen Schub verliehen. Dieser Band geht noch einen Schritt weiter: 100 Männer der Kirche, darunter viele Prominente – Priester, Diakone, Ordensleute, Laien, auch eine Reihe Bischöfe – solidarisieren sich mit den berufenen Frauen und appellieren, Frauen nicht länger den gleichberechtigten Zugang zu den Ämtern zu verstellen.

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EDITORIAL

About This Issue

God's Strong Daughters" – under this heading, up to 600 Catholics from all over the world came together on 18 and 19 September 2023. Some 100 participated live in the Propstei St. Trinitatis in Leipzig (Germany) and the others took part online. Around 30 speakers, including many women professors of theology and religious, had travelled to Leipzig from 18 countries and 5 continents: The power of women theologians at its best!

The initiative and responsibility for the congress lay with the theology professors *Margit Eckholt* (Osnabrück), *Julia Knop* (Erfurt), *Johanna Rahner* (Tübingen), and *Dorothea Sattler* (Münster) as well as *Maria-Sybille Bienentreu* (Gossau SG) and Sr. *Philippa Rath* OSB (Eibingen). The Catholic Academy of the Diocese of Dresden-Meissen, particularly Dr. *Thomas Arnold* and *Jonatan Burger*, was the local cooperation partner and organiser. International women's networks and women's associations, foundations, and aid organisations from Germany and Switzerland made the hybrid implementation and live translation of the conference possible. Once again, we would like to thank them.

The aim of the congress was to give Catholics from all over the world a voice on the "women's question". The structural discrimination against women in the Catholic Church is not only a theological nuisance, but also a political challenge. The conference in Leipzig has highlighted the importance of international networking and mutual empowerment. It is not enough to rely on men at the leadership level of the church to bring women's concerns

into the current synodal processes. Powerful voices and womanpower are needed at all levels of the church.

With this issue, we continue the discourse on the world church. We have added contributions from other strong daughters of God. Some 36 women and 3 men provide information about the situation of women in the countries of the global church. They report on their experiences of the World Synod 2023 to 2024 and reflect on gender justice as an unfinished task of the Catholic Church. They formulate the consequence of their experience: The opening of all sacramental ministries to women. Their voices, positions and arguments are now available in German (print and e-pub) and English (e-pub).

The "Herbert Haag Foundation – for Freedom in the Church" has made the bilingual production of this issue possible with a generous donation. Many thanks for this! Dr. *Jason M. Miskuly* (USA), Dr. *Petra Bauer* (U.K.), *Maria-Sybille Bienentreu* (CH), *Tomàs Martin* (CH), and *Roman Schmuki* (CH) were responsible for the careful translation of the articles from four languages. Editing was carried out in Erfurt at the Chair of Dogmatics by theology students *Johanna Birkefeld*, *Antonia Dölle*, and *Jette Hollmann*. Coordination and overall responsibility lay with Prof. Dr. *Julia Knop* and Dr. *Stefan Orth* from the Herder publishing house. Thank you all for the excellent co-operation!

Erfurt, January 2024, Julia Knop

INHALT

Herder Thema



About the pictures

The pictures in this issue are from the cycle "The great daughters of God. Strong women in the Bible" by the illustrator Susanne Janssen.

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GOD'S STRONG DAUGHTERS

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“A first necessary step would be the ordination of women deacons.”

IMPRESSUM

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für Freiheit in der Kirche

God's Strong Daughters

God's Strong Daughters" – The title of this issue of Herder-Thema is a statement. Women have long ceased to see themselves as the weaker sex – if they ever did. They are standing up for their dignity and their rights worldwide. They expect and demand gender equality. Even in the Catholic Church.

God's strong daughters are speaking out – worldwide in local and global networks. In global synodal stages, and at international congresses such as the one in Leipzig in September 2023. In congregations and communities, in church and politics, and in theology and other sciences. That is good and that is important. It is good for women and good for the Catholic Church, because the church's misogynistic tradition continues to have an impact in the 21st century. It characterises the doctrine, structures, and liturgy of the church and the faith and lives of the people.

Even in the 21st century, women are still excluded from key decisions in the Catholic Church. They are denied leadership positions. Their vocations are not recognised. Sacramental ordination is withheld from them. Only in exceptional cases are they allowed to lead church services. They encounter great resistance in pastoral work. Many suffer violence, even at the hands of men in the church.

In the Catholic Church, leading clerics still define what women are, should, and may do. Teaching, leadership, and liturgy are still for men only in the Catholic Church. But this is theologically untenable, institutionally anachronistic, and a spiritual imposition.

The claim that the structural disadvantage of women in the Catholic Church is not discrimination, as is regularly stated in doctrinal texts, is simply no longer convincing. By its very definition, discrimination occurs

when people are disadvantaged or restricted in their rights based on a group-related characteristic, such as their origin, religion, skin colour, or even their gender. The fact that women are excluded from church offices simply because they are women is clearly gender-based discrimination. Even if this is done by invoking the will of God or a natural order of the sexes.

Gender equality must not be up for discussion on religious grounds. That is deeply contrary to the ethos of human rights. It also contradicts the biblical message. God created all humans – women and men – in His own image, according to the first chapter of Genesis (Gen 1:27). A little later, male dominance is interpreted as a result of sin (Gen 3:16). Patriarchy is therefore contrary to creation. Hierarchies based on origin, class, and gender, which characterise both ancient and modern societies, should no longer apply among Christians, as the apostle Paul demands. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). And the freedom and glory of the children of God should shine forth among Christians (Rom 8:21).

The Women's Question: The Future of the Catholic Church

Standing up for gender equality in the church and society is therefore not an adaptation to the zeitgeist nor neocolonialism toward cultures that supposedly cannot be expected to accept women's equality. Standing up for gender equality means proclaiming the Gospel and defending the God-given dignity of all people. Standing up for gender equality means standing up for a human good wherever it is jeopardised. Even within our

own tradition. And toward church authorities.

The "women's question" has become the question of the future for the Catholic Church. Because the traditional Catholic answer to the "women's question" is no longer convincing. It has become a nuisance. It is driving women worldwide out of this church. We urgently need better answers.

In this issue, 36 women and 3 men from a total of 22 countries around the world offer such better answers. They do so in a theologically sound, pastorally experienced, and spiritually immersed manner. Many of them are lecturers at theological institutions. Many hold positions of responsibility in the church or politics. Some are experts or delegates to the World Synod 2021–2024, "For a Synodal Church: Community – Participation – Mission."

As such, they themselves are already part of a better answer to the future question of the Catholic Church regarding the fair participation of women at all levels. But they are only pioneers in this role. They are still a long way from representing normality in the Church.

It is therefore even more important that through their texts they make the voices of Catholics in their country, their order, or their network heard. That they present the results of international surveys and studies. That they speak on behalf of many women. They profess the experiences and voices of Catholic women from Africa and Europe, Asia and Oceania, and North and South America. They will testify that the "women's question" is asked throughout the Catholic world and that better answers are expected everywhere.

The first part of this issue provides an insight into the diverse challenges that women in particular face in different countries and continents. They show

how “effectively” patriarchal patterns characterise religions and cultures and how strong the correlations between the church and the “world” are in the matters of gender issues.

Of course, this could also be turned towards a positive direction: How much good the Catholic Church could do for women as a global player if it stood up unreservedly and powerfully for a gender-equal world! But this is still happening far too little – and above all not coherently. It is not credible to stand up for the dignity of women externally and to deny them fundamental freedoms and opportunities for development within their own domestic sphere. Several texts mention this discrepancy. Many women are now running out of patience and strength to keep asking for participation without any sustainable steps being taken. They are resigned because their voice, their experience, and their expertise are simply not being heard in the Catholic Church. “There needs to be action and change, we can’t keep having the same conversation”, says *Nontando Hadebe*, quoting women from South Africa.

World Synod

The second part looks at the experiences and formats of the World Synod 2021–2024. The contributions show: The lack of women’s participation is lamented on all continents. The traditional Catholic connection between power, ordination, and male gender is questioned worldwide. Everywhere, the faithful have brought the “women’s question” into the synodal deliberations.

In the reports and syntheses of the local churches, the continental assemblies and most recently the Roman Synod, however, this question fades away as the synodal process progresses. The higher the ecclesiastical level, the less willing there seems to be to do justice to women in the church.

The fact that Pope Francis appointed 100 priests, religious, and lay people, including 54 women, to the Synod of Bishops alongside 275 bishops was an important, forward-looking start. But

that is far from enough. For as long as the voice of women is “ignored, gender justice and equality will remain a reality on paper only but will not shape an ecclesial reality. Then the goal of a synodal Church is only on paper”, says *Jolly Vasupurathukaran* (India).

Gender Equality

The third part is titled Gender equality. This part addresses the underlying principles. In addition to ecclesiastical and theological perspectives, cultural and political aspects are also discussed. It is about discursive dead-ends and hardened debates. The contributions make it clear that the church risks jeopardising its religious mission and its political effectiveness if it remains trapped in patriarchal paradigms and mentalities.

We must, writes *Luis Carlos Aguilar Badilla* (Costa Rica), „set out together, deconstruct ourselves, our habits and structures and build new, more prosperous ones.... To do this, however, we men must overcome our self-image as heroic machos and recognise women as self-determined subjects.”

The fourth part draws theological conclusions from national reports, synodal experiences, and debates on gender equality. During the 20th century, many other Christian churches have gradually introduced the ordination of women including churches that understand the ministry sacramentally and see it as anchored in apostolic succession. Two contributions specifically open an ecumenical horizon. At the leadership level of the Roman Catholic Church, however, there seems to be a conscious desire to oppose this ecumenical development. The explicit exclusion of the ordination of women seems to be increasingly part of the denominational profile.

In doing so, however, central points of the Second Vatican Council are ignored, namely the pneumatological foundation of ecclesiology and the theology of ministry. However, according to *Serena Noceti* (Italy), “gender-specific stereotypes must be recognized and denounced. ... We

must overcome the widespread reading of a female Marian and male Petrine principle based on the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Although it has no biblical foundation, it has become the linchpin of the distinction between gender-specific roles in the church.”

Moving Forward Together

Where do we go from here? The World Synod facilitates an intense exchange of experiences and expectations among Catholics. It opens spaces for joint consultations. It paves the way for good, sustainable decisions. On this basis, concrete agreements can – and must be reached, if the Synod is not to be merely an inconsequential consultative forum. Agreements need to be sensitive to culturally different possibilities and respective next steps, yet, at the same time be clear and courageous in a common direction and perspective. The goal can be no other than the unrestricted honouring of women in the Catholic Church – their full equality. The contributions in this issue show very clearly that this is a common goal, not a luxury problem of Western cultures.

The path to get there is arduous. Controversies are inevitable. They must be dealt with courageously and skilfully. The forces of inertia in the church hierarchy are immense. Historically evolved structures and gender concepts are being increasingly sacralised to prevent them from being reformed.

This makes it even more important to recognise the theological, pastoral, and spiritual expertise of Strong Daughters of God so that Catholics can truly walk in a synodal spirit and truly move forward together. The authors of this issue make their important contribution with voices from all over the world and for the benefit of the entire Church.

Maria-Sybille Bienentreu, Margit Eckholt, Julia Knop, Johanna Rahner, Philippa Rath and Dorothea Sattler

On the Future of Catholicism

The women's question is the issue of the future for the Catholic Church." This sentence has been quoted many times, including in the announcement of the hybrid international conference "God's Strong Daughters" on 18–19 September 2023 in Leipzig. In one of his first interviews following his election as Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop *Georg Bätzing* described "the issue of women in the church as the most urgent question we have for the future" (ARD Morgenmagazin, 4 March 2020). He went on to say, "We will no longer be able to wait for women to gain equal rights."

Bishop Bätzing gave the interview in 2020. Since then, there have been many texts, discussions, and national and international synodal meetings. His statement, "we can't wait any longer," is becoming increasingly surreal. Because it is true: "We can't wait any longer." But as things stand now, actual changes are beyond the realm of expectation. After all, those who wait are not the ones who can ensure that women in the church are given equal rights. Once again, the 2023 Synod of Bishops in Rome has not ended the wait.

So, what should we do? Wouldn't a revolution or a final farewell be the better option? Hasn't everything been said long ago, and isn't the church resistant to change? The Herbert Haag Foundation for Freedom in the Church is convinced that change in the church remains necessary and possible and that international coalitions are the best starting point. That's one reason we support "God's Strong Daughters."

The conference and this publication of its results represent international networking. It has been demonstrated empirically and theologically that the exclusion of women from church offices worldwide leads to a lack of freedom, injustice, and the continued oppression of people of all genders. Only an ideologically outdated theology can "justify" this situation. The question of women's ordination and gender justice has become a symbolic benchmark in reform efforts to determine if the Catholic Church can overcome the "rupture between the Gospel and culture" (*Paul VI*). Will it



Ute Leimgruber, born in 1974, Dr. theol., member of the Herbert Haag Foundation Board, is Professor of Pastoral Theology and Homiletics at the University of Regensburg. Her current research focus is on "Hidden Patterns: Abuse of Adult Women in the Catholic Church."

finally integrate the equality of all people performatively into its doctrine and practices? Or will it continue to exculturate itself from the endeavours for human rights and freedom (see Oliver Roy, "Heilige Einfachheit: Über die politischen Gefahren entwurzelter Religionen" [Sacred Simplicity: On the Political Dangers of Uprooted Religions], Munich 2010) and ignores not only the theological but also the human and social science findings on gender along with the experience of oppression of its own faithful (see, among others, Ute Leimgruber [ed.], "Catholic Women. Menschen aus aller Welt für eine gerechtere Kirche" [People from All Over the World for a More-Just Church], Würzburg 2021 and Philippa Rath, "Weil Gott es so will. Frauen erzählen von ihrer Berufung zur Diakonin und Priesterin" [Because God Wills It: Women Speak About Their Vocations as Deacons and Priests], Freiburg 2021).

The questions of women's ordination and gender justice have become a touchstone as to whether the church sees itself as a "church in the world" (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*) and receives the cultural paradigms of freedom and justice because they are based on the idea of universal human rights. Justice always entails freedom. Those who deny women equal rights reinforce the prevailing injustice and contribute to keeping people unfree. Freedom and justice are twin sisters.

Nontando Hadebe (South Africa) writes, "The quest ... for liberation is a defiant act, fuelled by a vision of justice, equality, and dignity that resists oppression and legitimising ideologies" ("Wie wir uns selbst befreien," in Leimgruber, 133–148; here 133).

What happened at the conference in Leipzig can be seen as such an act of self-liberation. Women theologians from all over the world countered the discriminatory traditions, scriptural interpretations, beliefs, practices, and laws that legitimise their marginalisation and exclusion from ordained ministries with liberating theologies, visions, practical possibilities, and their charisms. They have made it clear that they no longer want to accept stalling tactics: "We can't wait any longer."

In this sense, one can speak of a revolutionary act that counters the magisterial interpretation according to which God does not will the ordination of women and the church has no freedom, theologically speaking, to reverse this understanding. Freedom

and justice, equal rights, and an end to discrimination against all genders must also be conceivable in the Catholic Church. “Revolutionary action is not a form of self-sacrifice, not a bitter devotion and willingness to do whatever it takes to bring about a future world of freedom.

Rather, it is the defiant insistence on acting as if one were already free“ (David Graeber, quoted in: Maggie Nelson, “Freedom. Four Variations on Affection and Coercion”, Berlin 2022, 31).

The participants at the conference, many of them impatient, angry, and defiant,



Susanna

© Susanne Janssen, of the cycle „Die großen Töchter Gottes. Starke Frauen der Bibel“, Leipzig: Edition Chrismon, 2018.

insisted that the injustice at the heart of Catholic gender doctrine must not be the last word and that the exclusion of non-heterosexual non-men is no longer considered theologically plausible. They have taken a stand against the forces of inertia that want to prevent the equality of women. Because the unequal treatment of women in the church is violent, it provokes exploitation and oppression. The church's teaching on gender leads to actual experiences of violence in people's lives.

In Leipzig, a large, international coalition of people extending far beyond German and European theology came together to emphasize that gender justice on all continents and in all areas of the church – such as church leadership, pastoral practice, academia, and much more – is a *conditio sine qua non* for a dignified life, for a faith in accordance with the Gospel, and for the future of the Catholic Church as a catholic church. The lack of gender justice in the Church is a diachronic and synchronic phenomenon. The commitment to justice and equal participation of women in the Catholic Church is not new and has been international from the beginning – the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO) was founded as early as 1910, for example. A Roman Catholic strategy has long been to ignore, disavow, or channel the needs of *female* believers, their striving for justice and freedom as well as the cultural and epistemological changes in the world around them by referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and to stereotypical female behavioural norms. Fundamental changes regarding gender justice – in anthropological and ministerial theological terms, for example – are usually excluded. This strategy arises because the institution feels confident and strong enough to be able to determine change (or standstill) itself.

The tenor is clear: Even if society becomes more democratic and liberal in terms of gender, the church could

never become democratic and gender-liberal. In addition, the Church could never think of gender equality, no matter what "the world" formulates as a human right regarding all genders (regardless of sexual identity or orientation).

For the Catholic magisterium, there are only and exclusively two genders in mutual complementarity. In this logic, women can never be ordained as priests. The more liberal the world is on gender issues, it seems, the more ideological become the Catholic lines of defence against gender justice and equality measures (see Leimgruber, "Hostility Toward Gender in Catholic and Political Right-Wing Movements," in: Religions 11 [2020] 301).

"Gender Ideology" as a Perpetrator-Victim Reversal

In his greeting to the plenary assembly of the German Bishops' Conference in September 2023, the apostolic nuncio Nikola Eterović contrasted the binary, "deeply Christian anthropology" of exclusively man and woman with so-called gender ideology, describing it as

The church's teaching on gender becomes an actual experience of violence in people's lives.

- "ideological colonisation,"
- – violent oppression in ideological terms. I see this
- as more than just a semantic perpetrator-victim reversal.
- The term "gender ideology" is a fighting term
- invented at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 –
- incidentally by the Vatican
- – to disavow political

measures for more gender equality and its protagonists.

The practice of this strategy continues in large parts of the Catholic Church, especially for issues such as women's or LGBTQ rights. Arguments are spiritualised with reference to immutable divine law, the so-called biblical creation "accounts," or revelation, thereby immunising them. Methodologically sound and valid findings from the social and human sciences, regarding the problem of a binary understanding of gender, for example, are denied scientific validity.

Resentment toward the secular world was and is the strategic tool of choice, rather than a substantive examination of the arguments (see Michael Hölzl, Leimgruber, "Ressentiment als pastoraltheologische Herausforderung" [Resentment as a Challenge of Pastoral Theology] in: Maria Elisabeth Aigner et.al. [ed.], "Weiter Gehen. A Roadmap to the Open," Würzburg 2021, 146-160; here: 146).

When it comes to striving for gender equality, the Catholic Church pursues exculturation coupled with a sharp demarcation line against a rejected outside world – supposedly for anthropological reasons. This is a fast track to religious fundamentalism and ghettoization (see Andreas Reckwitz, "Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne" [On the Structural Change of Modernity], Bonn 2018, 410f).

Gender justice is crucial for the liberation of individuals. Important church texts emphasise the equality of all people, such as in *Gaudium et Spes* 29: "Any form of discrimination...in the fundamental rights of a person, whether because of sex or race, colour, social status, language or religion, must be overcome and eliminated, since it is contrary to God's plan." At the same time, the equal dignity of all people in Catholicism does not lead to equal rights.

Theologically, there is no doubt that the church should promote freedom and justice as core values, not only in lip service or regarding transgressions beyond its own internal space, but also ultimately regarding its own teachings on gender and access to church ministry. Further exculturation based on gender justice or gender equality and recourse to a traditional theology are the path to a separate religious counterculture with an exclusionary religious identity. The Herbert Haag Foundation for Freedom in the Church is not the only organisation concerned that this should not happen. The women's question is about the future of a church that is not only catholic in the denominational but also in the literal sense.

Ute Leimgruber

The Synodal Path and the Universal Church

Women in Church Ministries and Offices

Do the reform proposals dealt with in the Synodal Path in Germany play a role outside Western Europe? Empirical studies show that the burning issues from Germany are being discussed worldwide, albeit with different emphases. **BY CATALINA CERDA-PLANAS**

In 2022, the Catholic Academic Exchange Service (KAAD) and the Institute for World Church and Mission (IWM) presented the study, “Synodal Path: World Church Perspectives.” The study aimed at discovering how important the topics and reform proposals of the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany are worldwide.

Some 578 scholarship holders and alumni from the three German scholarship organisations IWM, KAAD, and the scholarship organisation Latin America-Germany (ICALA) from 53 countries took part in an online survey. The greatest differences were found in relation to the participants’ region of origin (Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East). For that reason the results of the first phase were discussed in focus groups in a second phase. The groups were organised by world region.

A Question of Weighting

The research results show that the texts and topics of the synodal forums on “sexuality” and “women” are on a personal level the most important for the participants overall, followed by “power” and “priestly existence.” In terms of the importance of these topics for the diocese or the church in the respective country, the order is slightly different. Here, the topics of “sexuality” and “priestly existence” are at the top, closely followed by “power.” The topic of “women” is in last place.

There were considerable differences between the regions. The topic of “women” was particularly relevant for the participants from Latin America. They showed the highest level of agreement with



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the importance of the topic for them personally and for their local churches. The participants from the Middle East also considered the topic to be important for their future. In contrast, participants from Eastern Europe expressed the least interest in the topic.

More than 75 percent of respondents felt that women play an important role in their communities. However, some regional differences exist. African respondents (closely followed by participants from Asia and Latin America) rated this first point as positive, while respondents from the Middle East and Eastern Europe did not express a clear opinion.

As regards to the second point, the item “women are sufficiently heard and have sufficient influence in Catholic communities,” opinions were divided. Only 39 percent answered this question in the affirmative, while 44 percent answered in the negative. Asia and Africa are the regions with the highest level of agreement, although clearly not in favour.

Finally, 59 percent of the respondents favoured opening ordained ministries to women and 25 percent were against it. Once again, Latin America was the only region with clearly positive votes. Participants from the Middle East and Asia tended to vote in favour, but not as clearly as those from Latin America.

The qualitative phase also revealed that this topic was particularly relevant for the Latin American and African participants. In their opinion, women are insufficiently recognised and included in decision-making processes. This is perceived as problematic and unfair, as women

make up the majority of those involved in the church in quantitative terms, bear responsibility for pastoral life, and play a fundamental, religious, and symbolic role. However, participants from both regions of the world were sceptical as to whether the ordained ministry for women could offer a solution to this problem or whether the entire hierarchical structure of the church should be reformed.

Participants from the Middle East, Asia and Eastern Europe stated that men and women play different roles in their local churches. As a rule, women oversee internal church matters, but rarely take part in decision-making processes. However, the participants emphasised that despite different roles, the dignity of all church members is the same – different roles are therefore not problematic. Nevertheless, the Asian participants were open to discussing the topic and thinking about female leadership within the church, as women have long since assumed leadership positions outside the church.

Diversity Within the World Church Is Not an Obstacle – It’s an Opportunity

The data clearly shows the diversity of the approaches to the topic of “women in the church” in the global church. It is not easy (if even possible) to find a standard position on the topic. Along with the diversity of the global church, internal plurality exists within the continents and countries.

An initial conclusion can be drawn from all of this. How we experience faith and build ecclesial communion is contextual and situational. However, this should neither be seen as an obstacle to finding consensus, nor as a threat to the unity and universality of the church. On the contrary: Contextual diversity becomes understandable as an expression of theological diversity – as a possible condition for experiencing genuine unity. Unity does not mean uniformity: It is based on mutual devotion and genuine encounter.

From the perspective of Christian theology, the diversity of experiences, positions, and expectations of believers from all over the world expresses the different cultures in which God himself is present and in which the Church is built. We believe that God is the creator of all that exists and that in Jesus Christ they have accepted humanity, including all cultures. Christianity is thus constitutively characterised culturally. This should not be seen as problematic, but rather as an unavoidable and valuable dimension of the Christian faith.

The argument of the universal church and its diversity must therefore not be used to hinder or delay urgently needed church reforms. The status quo, which many want to maintain, is often based on unilateral decisions by certain sectors of the Church. We cannot overlook the contextuality of the associated internal plurality of the church. Throughout the history of the church, this has often led to one part of the church imposing its vision on all others. Today, we need to build a consensus and (be able to) make decisions in and from (and not despite) diversity.

The question and the challenge are therefore how to deal with diversity within a synodal church. The first step is at the same time very simple and very difficult: Dialogue. Genuine dialogue, which does not present and defend one’s own point of view, requires really listening to the other person. It is important to be humble and not to believe that you are always in possession of the truth. It is important to be open, to understand the other person and to want to be changed by him or her. Because the other person is the place from which the Holy Spirit speaks today. Only a genuine dialogue can serve as the basis for a solution for everyone.

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It is not about majority decisions, but about synodal processes that must hear and include all believers, because the Holy Spirit works in all of them.

With this in mind, women have yet to be recognised as ecclesial subjects and interlocutors to be taken seriously.

The documents of the continental phase of the World Synod, as well as the results presented here, show the transversal relevance of the topic of “women” for the faithful throughout the world. The expectations that women should truly participate in church life do not, of course, only relate to their participation in pastoral life – in which they have long been the

majority. Rather, the expectations relate to women being included in decision-making processes in the church. Not to replace other voices, but to contribute to the intersubjective dialogue. This dialogue should be the basis of church leadership, which has so far mainly been determined by male voices.

Dialogue is the first step. Now it is necessary to move on and make decisions. The road will certainly be long and arduous because the Catholic Church is not used to conducting a dialogue in diversity. It does not (yet) have suitable institutions, structures, processes, and methods to ensure joint decisions that do not exclude divergent or marginalised views. The church urgently needs to work on this.

Only if we make the personal and contextual differences and particularities visible and conduct a dialogue based on (and not despite) these differences will we make progress on synodal paths. Only then will we become a church that succeeds in finding valid answers to concrete questions, such as the role of women in the church (and its ministries). ■

The Shortcomings of the Special Model of the Swiss Church Structure

Equality Does Not Come in Instalments

Politically a latecomer, Switzerland occupies a special position worldwide when it comes to equal rights in church structures. Dual leadership gives women access to leadership positions and more democratic co-determination. But appearances are deceptive. Canon law sets limits on the equality enshrined in state law. Participation in decision-making ends with pastoral issues, the visibility of women at the altar and their access to the ordained ministry. It is not a question of genuine and full equality. **BY RENATA ASAL-STEGER**

Some time ago, I came across a quote from the German writer *Hedwig Dohm* (1831–1919). This important representative of the historical women’s movement wrote: „One always feels like a ruminant in the field of women’s issues.“ Dohm puts it in a nutshell. A lot has happened in the political arena in recent decades in terms of equal rights, but not in our church. For them, the quote is still fully valid today.

In our church, the question of equal dignity and equal rights for all and the associated question of the position of women has been unresolved, virulent, and hurtful for centuries. I recall the statements of *Teresa of Ávila*. She lived in the 16th century and accused her time of “rejecting strong spirits gifted for all good things simply because they were women.” Women still do not have equal rights in our church. In the 21st century, Catholic women are still denied important leadership and management tasks because they are women. The same applies to pastoral activities such as presiding over the celebrations of the sacraments and admission to ordained ministry. Today, we still need people, women and men, like Teresa. People who never tire of standing up, raising their voices, and visibly and audibly acknowledging the fact that women are equal and full members of the Church. Only by working together in all ministries and offices can women and men contribute to a renewed church.



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Foto: Roberto Conciatori

Outwardly, the Catholic Church pleads for the observance of human rights and the equality of all people. But within its own organisation, it shamelessly ignores this standard despite the good theological reasons that exist for admitting women to all ministries and numerous vocation experiences of women confirm that “God wills it” (*Philippa Rath*, “...weil Gott es so will.” *Frauen erzählen von ihrer Berufung zur Diakonin und Priesterin*, Freiburg 2021).

Baptism is the basis for the equal dignity of all Christians. The French Baptist theologian *Valérie Duval-Poujol* states this impressively. She was a guest at the European Synodal Assembly in Prague. She said, „There is no blue baptism for boys and a pink baptism for girls. There is only one baptism!“ What more is there to add?

Male Alliance Structures Favour Abuse

As a result of the worldwide cases of abuse coming to light and the investigation into them, the debate about reforming the Catholic Church has flared up once again. Many church members are shocked and outraged by the unbelievable suffering and its extent.

The investigation into this scandal has proven that this is the case: The current structures of the Catholic Church, according to which the ordained ministry, including leadership functions, is reserved for men, favour sexual

abuse and its cover-up. This is one of the reasons why Catholics around the world are calling for equal structures, a new understanding of ministry, and the sharing and control of power. The reluctance to act, the cover-up that continues to this day, and adherence to the existing structures of many church leaders are causing people to turn their backs on the church in droves.

Swiss Peculiarities

Political equality did not fall into our laps either. Our mothers and grandmothers fought for it for a long time. It took a lot of staying power. Switzerland hardly shone as a pioneer here. It was not until 1971 that it became one of the last countries in the world to introduce women's suffrage and thus political equality for women. However, the history of Swiss women's suffrage shows that determination and perseverance can be successful despite strong headwinds. In the Catholic Church, it takes a great deal of stamina.

And yet the Catholic Church in Switzerland has special features and occupies a special position worldwide regarding church structures. Here we have a dual structure in terms of leadership and responsibilities with a pastoral and a state-church leadership line, the so-called dual system. There are significant differences for Catholic women in this dual structure in terms of leadership, competencies, and organisational possibilities.

Under state church law, gender is not relevant for the fulfilment of a management role. Personal qualifications and skills are decisive.

The situation is completely different in the pastoral area of responsibility. Here, women are denied leadership and management positions that require ordination because of their gender. Women's talents and charisms do not play a role.

Lack of Co-Determination in Pastoral Issues

In the area of state-church law, all decisions are made democratically. This is another special feature of Swiss church structures. Even those who do not take on any special tasks in the

church can have a say in the use of church taxes and elect the authorities. This strengthens the support of the churchgoers and leads to greater acceptance of these decisions. This makes it even more questionable that bishops and the Bishops' Conference are solely responsible for pastoral issues. A church in which the faithful can also responsibly shape the proclamation, liturgy, ethical positions, and the organisation of ministries and services would not only be more fraternal, but also more credible and better anchored in society.

After all, we have special rules in Switzerland regarding pastoral care, at least in the German-speaking dioceses of Basel, St. Gallen, and Chur. Here, women can also lead a parish and preach, and some can even baptise. This situation does not bother even more-traditional churchgoers. In some parishes, parish chaplains – non-ordained women and men – stand at the altar during the Eucharistic Prayer as a matter of course. For many Catholics, this is a normal part of church life. And it is for me too.

Men at the Centre – Women at the Back and on the Sidelines

Even if we are envied for these Swiss peculiarities and often boast of being progressive ourselves, this situation is not true equality. Because let's not kid ourselves: These developments have become possible as a result of pastoral need and cannot be equated with equality. I would like to illustrate this with two examples.

First: The diocese of Basel has three diocesan regions. An episcopal vicariate consisting of two people is responsible for each region. The episcopal vicar (a priest) and the person (not ordained) are regionally responsible for pastoral care and represent the bishop in the respective diocesan region. However, the two do not have equal rights. The persons with regional responsibility may not take on any tasks that require ordination.

Under state-church law, gender is not relevant for the fulfilment of a leadership role.

At the ordination of the new auxiliary bishop in the diocese of Basel, I once again realised what a precarious role even women with regional responsibility are expected to play in the Catholic Church. Women were included in the liturgy: One woman proclaimed a reading and another acted as cantor. An effort was clearly made! But there was no question of real equality.

The reality was reflected unadorned in the chancel. Those responsible for the episcopal vicariates did not stand together as a team, but the current canonical order of precedence came into play: The episcopal vicars were placed together in the centre, the women (and un-ordained men) on the sidelines. Images like

this say more than 1,000 words.

Second example: Some time ago, I took part in the establishment of a pastoral area. At the same ceremony, the head of the pastoral area, a theologian, was also appointed. However, she did not stand at the altar like her priest colleagues. Her place was one or two metres further back. None of the men, not even the bishop, brought this pastor to the front! She was left standing at the back all alone. I was in tears. Even today, this memory fills me with sadness, pain, and anger.

Personally, I am convinced that if the Catholic Church wants to credibly proclaim the Gospel in the future, it must no longer deny women equal dignity and the equal rights that inevitably come with it. Equality does not come in instalments. Equality cannot be divided up. Equal rights exist in full – or not at all. This also applies to the Catholic Church. The women's issue can and must therefore no longer be tackled on small steps only.

I'm not giving up hope. But I am now firmly convinced that the necessary change will not come from above but must be brought about from below. As a Catholic and a long-standing state-church authority, I will continue to work persistently and courageously for a credible church, in line with the motto of a campaign by the Swiss Catholic Women's Association: „Equality. Full stop. Amen.“ ■



Debora

© Susanne Janssen, of the cycle „Die großen Töchter Gottes. Starke Frauen der Bibel“, Leipzig: Edition Chrismon, 2018.

African Women on a Synodal Path

Hope for Change

The Catholic Church around the world is on the way to more synodality. Both church leadership and women themselves need to change course as regards the situation of women in Africa. **BY JOSÉE NGALULA**

In all Catholic dioceses in sub-Saharan Africa, a majority of women are involved in parishes and Catholic Action movements. This numerical majority must play a role in the Church's endeavours to respond more and more to the will of Jesus Christ.

Currently, clerics hold the most important ecclesiastical leadership positions in the church. They have all studied theology and should therefore know that the foundation of Christian anthropology is based on Genesis 1:26-27 and Galatians 3:27-28. The differences between men and women in both texts do not establish a hierarchy, but rather a complementarity with equal dignity, like the different and inseparable colours of a rainbow. Nevertheless, these men sometimes advocate the view of the inferiority of women compared to men, particularly manipulating the interpretation of Genesis 2 and some passages of Paul's letters. The people of God trust them and internalise an abbreviated view of Christian anthropology based on their preaching.

However, it is becoming apparent how such clerics can be prevented from veering in their interpretations in the direction of a pejorative hierarchisation. For example, inclusive language is increasingly being used in the liturgy in the respective languages. Pope Francis has amended canon law by decree to allow women to serve at the altar through the ministry of lector and acolyte. The feast day of St Mary Magdalene has been elevated to the liturgical feast of the "Apostle to the Apostles."

In the current world synodal journey, it is therefore important that all those who have authority in the Church – through preaching, catechesis, or otherwise – realise the great responsibility they bear: They must not abuse the trust placed in them by the people of God to interpret biblical texts in a tendentious way, namely in contradiction to God's view of every



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human being whom He has created in His image and likeness.

For Catholics themselves, Christian African women have so internalised traditional misogynistic ways of speaking that they can hardly believe the gospel of their dignity in Jesus Christ. In some circles, Christian women find it difficult to accept that Galatians 3:27-28 states a fundamental principle that ethnic, racial, social, and sexual differences should never determine membership in Christ and the church. As a result, in some places women do not push to participate in parish and diocesan training programmes that qualify them for church leadership positions.

Yet there are signs that could show them that women can indeed hold high offices in the Catholic Church. For example, eight women currently hold leadership positions at the Holy See. Ten years ago, there were only three. At the current World Synod of Bishops on Synodality, women were given the right to vote for the first time. In some dioceses, women are members of the diocesan council, heads of finance, heads of pastoral departments, members of seminary management, or of bodies that appoint pastors.

Being an African woman today in a church that has embarked on a synodal journey means having the courage to break out of traditional prejudices and negative stereotypes that demean women in the church based on theological misinterpretations. It means realising that the identity of the Church willed by Christ is synodal and excludes no one. It means recognising all the signs of hope for change in the Catholic Church and using them for a stronger, forward-looking commitment in the Church. Then the world will no longer be deprived of the contribution of the half of humanity that the female gender represents. ■

Women's Voices From South-Africa

We Can't Keep Having the Same Conversation

In the context of the synodal deliberations, "listening sessions" took place in South Africa, in which 170 women participated. 98 women took part in the subsequent digital survey, mainly pastors and volunteers. The results overlap with the themes that emerged in the listening circles. **BY NONTANDO HADEBE**

Women in South Africa take advantage of many opportunities to get involved in the church, in parishes and congregations, and to grow spiritually. In reality, however, they are always left out. They make coffee and are the foundation of parish life, but they are ignored in pastoral decision making and liturgical services. At the same time, they know that they are made in the image of God (Gen 1:27). The Second Vatican Council paid tribute to the laity, including women: "Incarnate Christ through Baptism, made the People of God, and partakers in their own way of Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal ministry, they exercise (...) the mission of all Christians in the Church and in the world" (*Lumen Gentium* 33). With this in mind, the women formulated their perceptions, convictions and demands during the listening sessions and in the online survey during the synodal deliberations.

Non-Recognition of Female Charisms

The Holy Spirit gives charisms to each of the baptized for service of the church and its mission (LG 12). Women want recognition of the legitimacy of their individual charisms to be put at the service of the community. They are excluded from preaching, of the ministry of reconciliation, and of administering sacraments. Thus, the church is denied a rich source for ministry. Those involved in the ministry of spiritual direction or in ministering to the sick are dependent on finding priests to



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offer the sacramental aspects of healing often requested by those to whom they minister. Some women also have experienced a call to become sangomas (healers and leaders in the Zulu tradition) in ministry to the community, which is not validated or recognized by the church as a charism.

The moral teachings of the church weigh disproportionately on women. Unwed mothers, divorced women, single mothers, LGBTIQ+, all live with stigma or judgment from the church, including its clerics. Men who may be responsible, never suffer the same ostracization. One woman who fell pregnant before her marriage was dismissed as an extraordinary minister of the eucharist while her fiancé was allowed to continue. Women have been denied reception of the Eucharist in situations of unwed pregnancy or divorce.

Neither Seen nor Heard

The church's teaching on artificial birth control must be changed. Adhering to 'Natural Family Planning' resulted in women bearing 4, even 5 children within a space of four years. Guilt continues to weigh on those who use other means of birth control.

Those who are differently-abled, aged, poor (mostly women) need inclusion in church structures and activities. Victims of Gender Based Violence (GBV), especially in cases of rape and teenage pregnancy, need support and refuge. GBV must be 'called out' in preaching and supportive structures.

The LGBTQI+ community must be recognized as full and equal members of the church, deserving respect, and allowed full participation in the life and ministry of the church, including the blessing of their unions. Rigid and outmoded understandings of the complexities of human sexuality should be challenged.

Women who have been sexually abused by clerics need to be heard and compensated. Victims of such abuse can themselves be ostracized, even by others in the church. Clerics who abuse must be removed instead of relocating them to other parishes and not reporting them to the police. Channels to address this do not exist. A priest bragged to his congregation that he has 'had' 50–60 women.

Women need to be part of the bodies that deal with this problem within the Church. Victims must be involved in all processes related to sexual abuse. Ways and means must be found to deal with incompetent, alcoholic and abusive priests. So far, there are no clear structures for this.

Education and Training

There is a lack of good education everywhere – for individuals and for church associations, whose purpose must not be reduced to generating donations. In seminaries, a theological, moral and liturgical conservatism and clericalism of young priests is increasingly evident; this challenge must be met constructively. Celibacy must therefore also be questioned.

The training of women as pastors and spiritual directors needs much more support. Women who are called by the Holy Spirit to ministries in the Church must be allowed to have that calling

exercised, recognized, and formally ritualized within the Church. The diaconate for women must be restored. Priestly ordination must be considered. The excommunication of women priests ordained contra legem in the worldwide

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association “Roman Catholic Women Priests” (RCWP) must be lifted.

The results of the Listening Sessions speak for themselves. They are confirmed by the online survey. Just under 100 women took part in the ensuing online survey.

Only 10% of respondents were under the age of 45; 50% were between 45 and 65; 40% were older than 65. This raises questions and concerns about the absence of youth. Even in South Africa the Catholic Church are losing their young women.

Only 8% felt that their participation as women in the church takes them into consideration and that their opinion is valued. 25% seek alternative spaces to live their spirituality. 84% think that women can act in the Church representing Jesus Christ as men do, and 94 % said that women do not need a mediator to access God. 22% have experienced psychological violence in the church; 23% spiritual violence, 44% power abuse and 50% a sense of invisibility and lack of appreciation.

More than 75% of women describe as ‘patriarchal’ and ‘problematic’ that ordained ministries are restricted to men, sacraments are provided only by men and women are absent in church leadership roles.

Only 15% consider communications in the church as free and transparent. Only 5% feel the church welcomes the contribution and voices of women. Only 7% feel the church welcomes the

contribution of minorities (including LGBTQI, people with disabilities, and others). Only 12% feel the church welcomes the contribution and voice of the poor. Less than 30% experience the established liturgy either does not help or helps only a little to deepen their spirituality and faith as a woman.

With very high approval ratings, the women named the following topics that urgently need more attention from the Church: participation and democracy in the Church, overcoming clericalism, inclusion and equal rights of women at all levels including all church offices, unrestricted access to decision-making processes, the fight against sexual abuse and abuse of power, a renewal of the Church’s sexual and family ethics

Visibility and Networking

The women who took part said that it was significant for them to be formally invited to share their experience of church - something which has been strikingly absent so far. It was liberating to share their experience with other women who also care deeply about the church but experience significant challenges.

Many reflected that it was very difficult for them to decide to take part in the Synod process given the hurt they have experienced and their skepticism that their voices would have any significant effect. They said that it will be traumatic if the conversation and action stops here and pleaded with the church to continue with this exercise. “There needs to be action and change, we can’t keep having the same conversation.” They see an urgent need for on-going conversation and dialogue at all levels of church with regard to issues which affect women. ■

Asian Women-Religious and the Vision of a Synodal Church

Ignorance, Courage, Tradition and Experience

Women religious in Asia have to respond creatively and courageously faced with ecclesial and social needs and challenges. Their experience is shaped by violence, degradation, oppression and exploitation in the Church and Society. **BY SAMUEL H. CANILANG**

The life and ministry of religious women in Asia are shaped by distinctive ecclesiastical and social factors with which they have to deal and to which they react: The church is organized in a clerical-hierarchical way. Christianity is a religious minority on the continent. Totalitarian, sometimes dictatorial and oppressive governments rule in various Asian countries.

Philippines

Women-religious in the Philippines are involved practically in all areas of life: health, education, family life, livelihood, Christian education, human rights, safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, promotion of justice, peace and integrity of creation.

The Conference of Major Superiors in the Philippines coordinates the religious congregations in responding to major and urgent Church concerns and various national problems, such as the pervasive corruption at all levels of government, a culture of impunity enjoyed by the rich and the powerful, extra-judicial killings perpetrated by the national police, massive poverty.

Within the Philippine Church, however, women-religious feel treated like “second class citizens” and source of “cheap labour”. They experience avoidance and rejection by the clergy. A common experience, especially among teaching congregations, is the unilateral and unjust taking away of their ages-long administration of diocesan and parish schools by bishops, usually upon the influence of jealous priests.



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India

In India many religious congregations have numerically large communities. Indian women-religious are major agents of pastoral and social services.

On 1 June 2023, Sister *Nirmalini Nazareth*, president of the Conference of Religious in India, wrote a letter to India’s more than 130,000 Catholic religious women and men, calling on them to join public protests against the increasing persecution of minorities under the country’s pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government: “We can no longer remain ensconced in our comfort zones; our silence and our fear to play a prophetic role, makes us complicit in the many crimes of today.” Explaining the ongoing violence against Christians and other minorities in India, she referred to “the ongoing targeted violence in Manipur on Christians and tribal people, the continued attacks on Church personnel and institutions across the nation, denigration of Muslims, mainstreaming of hate speech, and the plight of protesting women wrestlers.”

In response to her call, some 300 Catholic nuns gathered on a public road in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru on June 5, 2023, holding placards declaring solidarity with a group of female wrestlers, who accuse their politically powerful federation chief of sexually abusing them. Some 200 others, including priests, brothers, and members of the civil society joined them.

Women-religious in India, however, have also become victims of abuse of authority and of conscience, as well as sexual abuse in the Church.

Vietnam

When the communists took over the government of Vietnam, they confiscated all properties of the Church. The relations between Church and state have progressively improved since the Vatican initiated a process of dialogue with the Vietnamese government. Recently, the two sides agreed to have a resident papal representative in Vietnam. Until now, however, the Church is allowed a very minimal participation in the country's social life and human development programs and services. For example, religious are only allowed to run kindergarten schools.

Vietnam is a male-dominated society. Women are expected to be at the service of men. Similarly, the Vietnamese Church is remarkably hierarchical-clerical. Women-religious are treated as assistants or helpers by the clergy. They are, generally, overworked. Nevertheless, women-religious are growing in their understanding of their rightful place and responsibility in the life and mission of the Church. The many young religious-women formed and educated abroad, especially in the Philippines, play a significant role in renewing religious life in Vietnam.

China

The situation of the Church in China is the most challenging, the most irregular, and the most unstable in Asia. The provisional agreement between the Vatican and the Communist government is experienced by Christians as counter-productive. The Church in China is divided between the community which is "registered" – meaning, under the China Catholic Patriotic Association – and the community which is "unregistered" or "underground" – meaning, not recognized by the mentioned association – those who belong to it regard themselves as loyal to the Pope.

Religious women are often visited by Patriotic Association officials and by

local police officers to remind them that "since they do not exist in the eyes of the government, they possess no rights at all," not even basic human rights guaranteed by a normal civilized society. Despite their deplorable situation, underground women-religious courageously continue serving the poorest of the poor: such as the abandoned elderly people in remote villages and people who are mentally and physically challenged.

Myanmar

Myanmar is under a communist dictatorial regime. Myanmar, despite the presence of courageous women leaders, like *Aung San Su Kyi*, is still a male-dominated society. The local Church is largely hierarchical-clerical. Religious sisters are often considered helpers of the diocesan clergy. Yet, they undertake many pastoral and social service initiatives. Given the extremely critical political situation of the country, they have to muster a lot of ingenuity and courage to carry out their works.

A picture that went viral in the social media of a lone religious sister defiantly facing heavily armed police and soldiers, pleading them not to hurt the civilian protesters, illustrate the faith and courage of Myanmar women-religious. As Myanmar security forces cracked down on street protests on Feb. 28, 2021, in Katchin state, Sister *Ann Rosa Nu Tawng* from the Sisters of St. Francis Xavier congregation, knelt down before the security forces, pleading with them not to shoot the unarmed civilians.

Now, what about the Ordination of Women?

"Just shoot me if you want to," she said, adding that "the protesters have no weapons, and they are just showing their desire peacefully." In the course of the confrontation turned violent, but she only suffered minor injuries.

Social and political challenges in male-dominated societies are just one aspect. Added to them there a theological and pastoral one. In Asia, too, women wonder why they are excluded from full participation and from ordination based on their sex.

Approaching this question, one has to examine pastoral and theological perspectives, however, these need to be seen within a wider context. To approach the issue only from a pastoral perspective, that is, to meet pastoral needs, would make women look like stopgaps. That is why fundamental theological reflection is indispensable. Two poles are important here: the Judeo-Christian tradition and the contemporary human experience.

According to the theologians of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, women concerns and

women movements form a sign of the times which cannot be ignored. Many women worldwide are seriously considering their vocation to the ordained ministries. Many say that they are called, that they have received a vocation. This is a locus theologicus.

Many women worldwide are seriously considering their calling to the ordained ministries, and they are convinced that they have truly received a calling. This is a locus theologicus. Who among us can say that the vocation of these women is not authentic? According to the practice of the Church, the answer would be: the bishops. But the bishops are supposed

to help the whole Church, all the faithful, to discern their charisms and their vocations. If one starts directly from the principle that women cannot be ordained, there can be no authentic episcopal confirmation of a vocation of women from the outset.

Theologically, the discussion about the ordination of women often revolves around the principle of representation. *Phyllis Zagano* has repeatedly pointed out that this principle has actually been abandoned. When we search the documents of Vatican II for the expression "alter Christus" you draw a blank.

This expression does not even appear in *Lumen Gentium* 3 or in *Ordinatio*

Sacerdotalis. Instead, the expressions “in nomine Christi” or “in persona Christi” are used. To act in the person or the name of Christ is very different from the principle of “alter Christus”, which means to act as Jesus Christ.

With this principle already dropped, we are now faced with a new problem. Our Pope speaks of the Petrine and Marian principles, and he adds another one, the principle of administration. Which is why he has been appointing women to high

positions in the Vatican. For me, however, this is more of a political than a theological or pastoral strategy to involve women more, without answering the question of women’s ordination theologically. I’m not satisfied, I’m not happy with it. ■



Eva

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The Heterogeneity of Global Challenges

Perspectives from Oceania

The situations of women around the world are complex. In Oceania there are already many women in positions of leadership. However, the Catholic Church has to become more open, participatory and inclusive. **BY SUSAN PASCOE**

The global discernment for the Synod on Synodality, arguably the largest world-wide consultation ever held, elicited a universal call for a more welcoming, inclusive and participatory Church. Within this call certain groups were identified as being excluded, side-lined or choosing not to participate – most notably women, youth and LGBTQI+. However, other people such as those who are divorced and remarried, those in situations of poverty and marginalisation, and people with disabilities were amongst those who feel at the peripheries.

Even when concentrating in Oceania on the situation of women in the Church, we note that women cannot be considered as a homogenous group. The historic, geographic, social, cultural and economic circumstances for women are localised and affect their inclusion and participation in civil institutions. In a universal Church, factors such as teachings, norms and culture have an impact on inclusion and participation in Church on a global scale.

The region of Oceania covers nearly one third of the planet, incorporating Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. It is a series of island states around the Pacific Ocean – some small like Nauru, and some large like Australia. It encompasses cultural, language and ethnic diversity; urban concentration and remote wilderness; disparate levels of wealth and development; and uneven access to digital and information technologies. Especially amongst the small island states, Pacific nations face an urgent existential crisis due to rising sea levels which threaten loss of land and of livelihoods.

The Church in Oceania is organised around four episcopal conferences – the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC), the Episcopal Conferences of the Pacific (CEPAC), the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference (NZCBC); and the Catholic Bishops Conference



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of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (CBCPNGSI). While the Church in countries like Australia and New Zealand tends to be organised around parish and diocesan structures, in some other Pacific countries, alongside dioceses, remoteness and lack of resources have patterned affiliation through informal groupings such as Basic Christian Communities.

The Document for the Continental Stage, which summarised the findings from the global consultation in local churches, was praised in Oceania for naming concerns about women's roles and vocations in the Church. Here women's participation in leadership and decision-making has to be improved, their gifts used. Countries such as PNG felt that the issues were not as acute there, as women have been equally involved in their post-Vatican II We are Church approach, which involves both lay women and men.

One of the challenges in writing about Oceania is the great variation in historic and cultural contexts, and in economic circumstances. In addition, some of the countries in the region are reliant on aid and development from other countries, which creates a power imbalance. It is difficult to generalise when some women in the region live in remote islands on subsistence levels, while others experience affluence in urban settings.

Across the region there are problems with gender-based violence. It is estimated that two thirds of women in the Pacific have experienced physical or sexual violence. Donor countries like Australia include initiatives to end gender-based violence in most of their grant programs. Australia is not immune to gender-based violence itself, but at lower rates. One of the key differences is that countries like Australia have legislated protections for women's rights, safety and equality.

The Australian Church's National Centre for Pastoral Research finds that women are the majority

mass attenders, and hold 65 per cent of all leadership and ministry roles in parishes. The Church is a large provider of health, education and welfare, and significant numbers of CEOs and Board Chairs are women. The canonical governance form, the Ministerial Public Juridic Person (MPJP), has gained appeal in Australia, with thirteen currently approved to oversee the ministries originally initiated by religious institutes. Typically, a MPJP is formed when the numbers of a religious institute are depleted and the congregation wants to ensure its works in perpetuity. These decision-making bodies are subject to civil regulations as well as Church law. It is significant that in its inquiry into abuse, Australia's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that there were weaker levels of governance in parishes and dioceses than in Church agencies, which, because they are simultaneously responsible to both civil and canonical authorities, have adopted more contemporary standards of governance. MPJPs typically have gender balance, and a majority are chaired by women. This form of Church governance is worth further consideration as a viable modus operandi in a synodal Church which values the participation of all.

While the Australian example does provide evidence of a growing involvement of women in governance, executive and decision-making roles in the Church, it does not address the issue of sacramental ministry, which is a touchstone for some women. It is noteworthy that some Australian dioceses have women in Chancellor and Vicar roles, and some make greater efforts to more fully involve women in all levels of the life of the Church. However, there

is not a uniform approach, as was evident when the issue of the roles of women in the Church was sufficiently contentious to disrupt Australia's Plenary Council Assembly in July 2022. The challenges are both cultural and structural.

Lessons from Inquiries

In seeking to understand the circumstances of women in the Church it is instructive to look at the analyses of Church culture and practice from many of the inquiries conducted across the world into child sexual abuse. They have found that systemic factors, such as a culture of clericalism, the canonical

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The weak participation of the laity limits the possibilities for jointly-responsible, synodal approaches.
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norm that vests absolute authority in the person of the bishop, the paucity of checks and balances, the weak involvement of lay people (especially women), and the lack of transparency and accountability, have all contributed to enabling systemic abuse. Many of these same factors also affect the role of women in the Church: in elevating the ordained, clericalism

engenders a relationship of authority-subservience; the weak levels of lay participation dampens opportunities for co-responsible, synodal approaches; and the relatively low levels of transparency and accountability diminishes openness and a sense of mutuality.

In the recently published International Survey of Catholic Women – separate to the global discernment – matters related to the broad context of Church culture were raised by the 17,200 survey respondents from 104 countries. Respondents drew attention to the low levels of accountability and transparency, and highlighted the misuse of power as a central factor in historical and current sexual and gender-based harm. A less hierarchal

and less authoritarian model of church, with greater collaboration, dialogue, and shared responsibility between clergy and laity, was identified as urgently needed. While acknowledging that the respondents were a self-selected group, this is nonetheless a credible insight into the thoughts and feelings of women whose contribution may not otherwise been heard.

Women need More Participation

Looking at some of the issues raised in Oceania on the role of women in the Church, we note that women are not a homogenised group, and that local cultural and economic factors need to be taken into account as they interplay with women's experience of Church. However, it was reported globally that, irrespective of culture, many women feel excluded from full participation in the life of the Church, and consider their gifts are not fully utilised, despite being the main contributors to the life of parishes. Pope Francis' reminder that baptism is our identity card has increased relevance for all of the People of God in the context of the Synod on Synodality.

The challenge for the Church in responding to this cry from the heart of women is the widening gap in women's experiences of participation in civil society in many countries, and their sense of exclusion within Church. This cannot be reduced to a debate on ordination, but needs to found itself in our scriptural tradition: All are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27), without racial, class or gender-based distinction (Gal 3:28). Part of a healthy response is to involve all the baptised more fully in the life of the Church. We are called to be people of courage in a Christ-centred, Spirit-led Church, to celebrate our gifts and acknowledge our blindspots and shortcomings, and to imagine a vibrant Church for all for the future. ■

St. Gallen's Forgotten Daughter

Wiborada, the Priestly Woman

Wiborada of St. Gallen is the first canonically canonised woman in the world. On her 1,100th anniversary, she is being rediscovered as a figure with whom one can identify. **BY HILDEGARD AEPLI**

Wiborada (884–926), the world's first canonised woman, lived for ten years as a recluse near the church of St. Mangen, not far from the monastery of St. Gallen. Recluses had themselves walled into an enclosure near a monastery. They were cared for from outside. They found this way of life an alternative to marriage or a monastic life. This allowed Wiborada to live a life in freedom which is difficult for us to understand today. From her hermitage, she acted as a counsellor for the townspeople, the monks of St. Gallen, abbots, and princes. Until her death, she lived the first name of God (see Ex 3:14): I am she who is here. She was murdered during the Hungarian invasion in 926. She had previously predicted and warned the city and the monastery of St. Gallen of great misfortune. Her warning was taken seriously, and the people, manuscripts, and monastery treasures were evacuated in time. She became the patron saint of libraries. Until the Reformation, her tomb in the church of St. Mangen was a well-known place of pilgrimage. Wiborada of St. Gallen shaped the history of spirituality for over seven centuries.

In the Wiborada Chapel under the church of St. Georgen, she is depicted in a choir painting by *Ferdinand Gehr* together with the other two diocesan saints: St. *Gallus* with a pilgrim's staff, cross, and bear, and St. *Othmar*, with abbot's staff and wine barrel. Wiborada stands between them in the middle. She wears a red stole and has drops of blood on her forehead. An angel places the martyr's crown on her head. As a martyr, she is more important than Gallus and Othmar, so the painting depicts her correspondingly larger than the men. The artist points to the future with his painting: He depicts Wiborada as a priest, wearing a stole and with empty, receptive hands. Only when women and men work together will we be able to carry on the good news of God on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

Temporary Modern Recluses

For some time, initiatives have attempted to rediscover Wiborada and make her into someone with whom one can identify today. In the context of the Wiborada Project 2021–2026 (<https://wiborada.sg>), her cell was recreated at the church of St. Mangen.



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born in 1963, is a theologian working in the pastoral office of the diocese of St. Gallen and a chaplain in the parish of the cathedral. She initiated the Wiborada 2021 project, which will continue until 2026, and was herself a recluse in the first year of the project.

Foto: Claudia Berger

Every year in the Wiborada month of May, five people are locked up for a week each. These men and women make themselves dependent on outside supplies. They live without electronic devices. They open their window twice a day to curious people, school classes, and people looking for a chat or simply some attention. They pray for the concerns that are brought to them.

The experiences of these modern recluses are impressive. The cell is perceived as a paradoxical place: A window faces outwards and enables care and conversation. One points inside the church of St. Mangen. Everyone who has taken part in this project so far reports that they have experienced something of Wiborada's freedom. They were confined to twelve square metres. They lived without running water, a fridge, or a coffee machine. They even depended on other people to bring them food and water for their basic needs. But within these boundaries, they experienced the freedom of being able to be there. To have time. To be available. Secluded, but with the window open for visits.

One of these temporary recluses is Dr. rer. publ.

HSG *Darya Gerasimenko*, lecturer at the University of St. Gallen. As the founder of the HSG start-up Unity Field, she launched the Wiborada Dialogue Day, which brings together those in charge from culture, media, church, and academia. During the first part of the day which is open to the public, Wiborada is presented in terms of her historical and future significance for the city and the region. The second part which is a closed session brings together stakeholders from all socially relevant areas to discuss common decisions setting the course for the future. This form of the discussion is based on the principles developed by the quantum physicist and philosopher *David Bohm* (1917–1992) for successful holistic communication, which are well suited to learning organisations. Aspects that sound familiar and valuable to today's church-trained ears play a central role in here: Perceiving, listening, participating, respecting a common goal, and joint transformation. Thus, the world's first canonised woman becomes a bridge between people at all levels – past and present, private and public, religious and secular, and cultural and social. The memory of Wiborada becomes an opportunity for the future of churches, of the city, and the region. ■

The Poison of Sexism in the Foundations of the Church

Finally Hear the Voices of Women

Women in the church do not want to be perceived merely as decorative accessories of the church authorities or images of Mary. They demand equal participation in church life worldwide – instead of oppression and discrimination. **BY REGINA FRANKEN-WENDELSTORF**

In 2022, the Catholic Women's Council (CWC) initiated a process of online listening and reflection to ensure that the voices of women from around the world are heard. These conversations and discussion points were summarised in the report: "Listen! Listen to Our Voices" and presented to the Roman Synod Office (www.catholicwomenscouncil.org). The many women represented in the CWC network were not interested in cataloguing, judging, or speaking with a single voice. Rather, they wanted their diverse perspectives and experiences to be heard. With many different voices, they proclaimed a common vision: The vision of equal rights and equal dignity for women.

The report shows that many of their experiences and expectations are similar. The demands for equal rights and equality are not modern inventions of privileged regions. They affect all women, regardless of the contexts, traditions, or social environments in which they live. Theologians and historians from the Global South show that patriarchal, misogynistic structures are linked to mission and colonisation and that women everywhere are affected by extreme forms of sexism justified and legitimised through religion. Women put it in a nutshell when they say, "How should we as women defend ourselves against discrimination if we as women are discriminated against in the church?" Or "How are we as women supposed to defend ourselves against a social culture of violence if violence and abuse prevail in our communities and families?" Such statements show that structures in the church that despise women also have an impact on women's everyday lives. During the World Youth Convention, Pope Francis spoke of the Church being tired. The



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Listening Sessions of the CWC, on the other hand, showed that women represent a very lively and energetic church: A church that is frustrated, not tired. Frustrated by the fact that women are constantly judged according to their usefulness to the church and society.

According to priests, bishops, and popes, women have a right to exist only if they help men fulfil their tasks; give meaning to their lives; or, as *Pope Francis* said in his address to the audience of the World Union of Catholic Women, alleviate the fundamental loneliness of humanity, of culture, of man (www.vaticannews.va/de/papst/news/2023-05/papst-franziskus-frauen-weltunion-katholischer-frauenverbaende.html). As *Anne Soupa* once put it, women are not "without a why" in the Church – but men assign them this "why." All the preparatory documents for the World Synod emphasise the importance of women's work and participation in the church. In fact, often the role of women in the church is reduced to toil and serve – in accordance with a romanticised Marian theology of the self-sacrificing, humble woman. As *John Paul II* wrote in his letter to women (29 June 1995): "Her (Mary's) 'dominion' is service! Her service is 'dominion!'" In contrast, priests and bishops who are praised, courted, and honoured with certificates and medals for the work of women are revered and respected. The call for more women in leadership positions therefore rarely leads to real equality in the church, as clerics end up dominating the discourse.

Women's Rights Are Human Rights

The triad of constitution, culture, and church, to which many women refer, can be found in

all countries. Male networks between church, politics, and society determine laws and values regarding the position of women, power, or violence against women. Everywhere, Catholic old boy networks openly advertise their good relations with business, politics, and the law. Their influence extends far beyond national borders. These networks of Catholic groups, bishops, and papal representatives thwart women's rights to freedom and self-determination. They call on parliamentarians to boycott international agreements that serve to protect the life and dignity of women. Headlines such as "Vatican allies itself with dictatorships" or "Alliance of Vatican and Islamist governments joined forces against women's rights" are indications of unholy alliances between the Catholic Church, governments, and organisations that negate women's rights.

Women therefore call for the church to finally recognise human rights in full and take global leadership role in protecting and enforcing them. Women's rights are human rights. The clericalist and feudal behaviour of priests and bishops, on the other hand, leads to the consolidation of a patriarchal image of God as man, king, and ruler. Women's knowledge and experiences are negated, degraded, and disregarded or used for their own purposes under their own name for preaching.

Women's Words Don't Need a Man's Tongue

In response to the decision of the Synodal Path to lay preaching, Curia Cardinal *Arthur Roche* wrote a letter calling for women in particular to enrich a priest's sermon with their contributions. The spiritual property of women, their spirituality and their vocations are thus shamelessly exploited for their own self-promotion and to maintain their own power. But

women's words do not need a male tongue to become true good news. Women demand that their charisms, vocations, and work be recognised as independent achievements. They demand full participation in the life of the church. Particularly in the run-up to the World Synod, it became apparent that women were often unfairly disadvantaged. For

According to priests, bishops and popes, women have a right to exist only if they help men fulfil their tasks.

example, reform-oriented women's organisations were excluded from discussions with the delegates. Other networks were given privileged access as official mouthpieces for bishops. This leads to artificial competition and blocking of various women's organisations. But marginalising, humiliating and misogynistic statements by men do not become just good news when delivered through a female voice.

In addition, women who stand up for women's rights in the church are not only marginalised, but also threatened physically, psychologically, and verbally. As documented in the "Listen!" report, in a survey of 2,286 women in Spanish-speaking countries, over 70 percent of respondents stated that they had experienced sexualised violence in the church and in the church environment, including sexual abuse, sexual harassment, verbal sexualised violence, and psychological and spiritual violence. Some 25 percent stated that they had experienced abuse of power by priests and bishops. And 56 percent spoke of experiences of violence through gender-specific demotion and being rendered invisible.

This issue is omnipresent. Women experience violence in all countries and in every social environment, especially in the religious and family environment. In most countries, the issue is suppressed or blamed on secular society.

Sexualised violence is an instrument of power in a context that demands submission. To this day, the Catholic Church denies women the right to

sexual self-determination. Bishops around the world oppose laws such as the Istanbul Convention, which serve to protect women from domestic violence. Yet studies show that women who experience domestic violence often also suffer spiritual and mental abuse at the hands of church officials.

Furthermore, marginalising and humiliating language in pastoral care and preaching still serves to legitimise domestic violence. However, the "pastoral" reference to the importance of the indissolubility of the holy sacrament of marriage and the Christian commandment to forgive the man is not pastoral support, but complicity with the perpetrator. Referring to the devoted, self-sacrificing role model of Mary, who shares the suffering of women, is not support, but a failure to support.

But women resist. Without resistance there is no hope, and without hope there is no resistance. Women no longer humbly ask to be heard or invited. Women shape the church with their gifts, their charisms, and their vocations. Women join each other in new networks. They recognise that they can bring about change only in community with others and with many different voices. In doing so, they not only focus on their own church, but also recognise that women are also affected by inequality, injustice, and discrimination in other church communities.

In the context of the World Synod, for example, it became very clear that the poison of sexism has eaten deeply into the structures of the church – into every pillar, every beam, and every pew. So far, the damage caused by the poison has been painted over or gilded over. Nurtured and cared for by popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests, it is eating its way further and further into the structures of the church. Women are demanding that the poison of sexism be dug up, disposed of, and destroyed so that in the end the foundation, the rock on which our church stands, is not eaten away by the poison of sexism. ■

Mind Versus Intellect, Service Versus Power, and Unity Versus Diversity

The Role of Theology in the Synodal Process

The worldwide synodal process has brought to light problem areas of the church's culture of debate. Ignorance and rejection of (German speaking) scientific theology and their embedding in a spiritual process are crucial challenges on the way to a more synodal church. **BY REGINA POLAK**

To differentiate and come to decisions throughout the synodal process, it is necessary to include theology. However, what is the role of theology in the synodal process? Which theology should play a role? As a member of the Austrian team at the Continental Synod in Prague from 5–9 February 2023, I perceive two problems confront theology as an academic subject in the German-speaking world.

First, many participants, especially from Eastern Europe, showed a clear aversion to and ignorance of academic theology in German-speaking countries, which essentially includes the reception of humanities and social sciences. Their findings are recognized and received as relevant sites of theological insight. This leads to critical questions about the Church's magisterium. However, the corresponding epistemological and methodological questions were not discussed in Prague. There are consequences, for example, for questions of sexual ethics, the role of women in the church, and the understanding of ministry when scientific findings from research into gender, sexuality, and power in church institutions are not considered. The reality that theology in German-speaking countries has learnt something relevant to theology from "secular" sciences seemed neither known nor appreciated. Moreover, some bishops seemed either unaware of fundamental achievements of the Second Vatican Council or had never properly received them. This situation manifested itself



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repeatedly in strange dichotomies. Thus, for example, doctrine and pastoral care have been brought into hierarchical opposition. The Council's position that pastoral care not only implemented doctrine but also is *sui generis* a place to generate theology which stands in a tense but reciprocal relationship with doctrine, was unknown. The Church's constitution *Lumen Gentium*, according to which "the visible assembly and the spiritual community, the church on earth and the church endowed with heavenly gifts, are not...two different quantities" but "one complex reality" seemed equally unknown. The fact that the Church therefore "grows together out of human and divine elements" (no. 8) was not considered. As a result, there was no room for the "human element," which must always be considered from a perspective of the humanities and social science. The spiritual dimension of the Church was regularly pitted against structural questions, the latter being devalued as illegitimate, merely sociological questions that had nothing to do with the nature of the Church.

The Holy Spirit and Intellectual Rationality Are Not Mutually Exclusive

Second, although an understanding of the synodal process as a spiritual process as seen by Pope *Francis* need not necessarily create difficulties for academic theology, that is what is happening. In the listening circles, the preferred method of communication during the Synod, the focus lies on the thoughts of

individuals listening to each other and on their effort to understand the other's perspective. This is a great method that can break down polarizations and create a space for listening to God's will in the Holy Spirit. However, things in Prague became difficult when

the question of distinctions arose. Distinctions cannot be drawn without theological arguments. The Holy Spirit and intellectual rationality were then perceived as opposites. Conflict understood as a struggle for better argumentation along with

intellectual discourse were hardly recognized as ways of understanding the Divine will. In addition, many participants, including bishops, had no understanding or practical experience with this method. Despite their unquestioned faith, their spiritual life



Judith

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did not always seem to be mediated through theological studies. Recourse to the Holy Spirit also carries the risk of ignoring or obscuring relations of power or personal interests.

Three Steps Toward a More Synodal Church

I propose three things: First, people who have responsibility in the Church need a Christian spirituality based on a strong belief and a solid study of theology. The division between these areas must be addressed. Profound knowledge and sharp intellectuality are sometimes paired with a dichotomous, even childlike spirituality. And sometimes faith and spirituality remain untouched by theological education and simply renounce intellectuality. Nevertheless, spirit and intellect must not be considered opposites.

They stand in an unresolvable but necessary tension from which an adult faith and a profound theology emerge – a theology infused by the spirit and intellectually honest. Accordingly, all those who hold a profession, ministry, or office in the Church should be able to deepen their spiritual life with professional support and receive further theological training. The two sides should be connected. The specific profile of all our professions, ministries, and offices contains this interconnectedness. Theological education and training are demanded here.

Second, all vocations, ministries, and offices in the Church are quintessentially service. Theologically, this is entirely correct (see Mk 10:43). Admittedly, an underdetermined understanding of service as humble subordination and self-abandonment may lead to suppress or spiritually disguise the dimension of power inherent in institutionalised ministries and offices. Women who demand equal rights to participate in church offices are then accused of an

indecent desire for power. Conversely, those who exercise ultimate decision-making power in the Church are under the blanket suspicion that their decisions merely follow interests of power. Because power is apparently an “evil” term for all sides, we need a differentiated theology of power. Despite all the dangers of power (oppression and violence), it should also be seen as a good, as the creative gift of a God who shares His power with us. The Bible, read as a learning story of the people of God in dealing with power, opens numerous possibilities for a differentiated understanding of power. Power is always creative power or a service to empower others – as victims, for example. After all, by virtue of baptism, Christians also share in the kingly power of Christ. Those who bear responsibility must therefore deal with the power given to them on a spiritual, theological, and ethical level. At the same time, no one should be reproached *eo ipso* for a responsible exercise of power.

Third, in the face of polarisation in the Church, the charism of inclusion should be promoted – the word catholic entails the promotion of unity. In Prague, the dominant, mostly unreflected notions of unity were read as uniformity, harmony and freedom from conflict, the elimination of differences, and as subordination to hierarchies. That does not correspond with either a biblical or a Catholic understanding of unity. When people professed unity so often in Prague, that betrayed its precariousness. All participants also spoke out in favour of the inclusion of marginalised groups.

But some of them did not understand that an adequate magisterial and legal framework is needed if inclusion is not to come across as a humiliating embrace.

To achieve real inclusion, we need an interdisciplinary theology of unity as well as a theology of conflict. In his book, “Dare to dream! Emerging from the Crisis with Confidence” (Munich 2020, 103–109), Pope Francis

encourages conflicts in which apparent contradictions are transformed into tensions from which something new can emerge.

Don't Just Argue with the Differences Between the Sexes

Moreover, from a practical point of view, the charism of inclusion entails not only a confession of faith and good will, but also tangible skills. Such skills include the capacity to empower and promote the participation of all, the ability to deal with difference and conflict, the commitment to justice and fairness, legal and structural competences, and a commitment to dialogue and reconciliation that is more than just appeals. These charisms should be awakened and promoted in all those who exercise a ministry, a profession, or an office in the Church. Those who possess these charisms should be entrusted with such ministries and offices. I warn against tackling the tasks at hand primarily based on gender stereotypes.

Let's take this example: Women are supposedly more inclusive or willing to serve because of their nature and should therefore also be given special offices. The premise may be empirically true now because, unlike men, power-conscious or conflict-happy women easily get into trouble in the church. But this is so because it was defined culturally, historically, and sociologically. There is a great danger that separate ministries will be created for women (“Marian” ministries) and that gender roles in the Church will thus be cemented even more firmly. Therefore, the fundamental issues of spirit/intellect, service/power, and unity/diversity should first be dealt with in an interdisciplinary theological manner before answering the women's question. Otherwise, we exhaust ourselves in fruitless dichotomies and battles of the sexes.

If academic theology from the German-speaking countries wants to play a decisive role in the synodal process, it must dedicate itself even more to the problems and topics described here and be allowed to contribute the findings to the debate. ■

There is a great danger that separate ministries will be created for women and that gender roles in the Church will then be cemented even more firmly.

The Path to a Church that Makes a Difference in the World

A Credible Church?

The church is sick. Its symptoms? Sexual and spiritual abuse. The diagnosis? Structural sin. A paradigm shift is needed. **BY TATJANA C. DISTELI**

Immediately before the Leipzig conference, the nationwide [Swiss] study on abuse was published. What a shock! The number of people leaving the church skyrocketed. When ambulances with blue lights and sirens drove past the conference venue, it seemed to me that the church was also lying on a stretcher. Its symptoms? Abuse of those under its protection and systematic cover-ups by those responsible. These symptoms have led not only to a Catholic meltdown in Switzerland, but also to a low point that threatens the very existence of the Church. At the European Synodal Assembly in Prague, it became clear that only the loss of moral authority can lead to the realisation that radical conversion is necessary. Healing can be expected only through honest repentance. Back to the roots, to Jesus' legacy – the unconditional commandment of love. The way there is synodal. And it must now be walked with courage.

In the Church of Jesus Christ, canon law is not the highest norm. It is Jesus' testament: The commandment to love God and our neighbour. We must radically realign ourselves with this commandment. Everything else must be derived from it, including the catechism and canon law. Jesus' vision and mission is that those who follow him create places where people are accepted unconditionally to experience God's unconditional love. His treatment of the completely dependent and powerless women of the time and of marginalised widows and orphans was revolutionary. Consequently, women held church offices right into the fourth century.

However, the inculturation of Christianity into the present has not merely come to a standstill, it has been turned back – resulting in a distortion of the Christian message and the exaltation of a supposed tradition. Instead of joy and inner freedom, acceptance of responsibility and creative power, many have repeatedly experienced fear, dependence, oppression, and discrimination.

The church can represent the gospel credibly only if it first becomes credible internally. Shared responsibility of both genders is a priority. The question of the participation, co-decision-making, and co-responsibility of the other half of



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humanity is existential. It concerns the survival of the church in our society. Only together will we as Christians be credible again. Together, as a church, we will make a difference in society!

The experience of “synodality” as a method of listening and an inner spiritual attitude is the kairos. It is the remedy, a path to ecclesial conversion. The most important thing during the synodal process was the premise that no one should deny the faith of others. The church must have a broad umbrella. No group may demonise the other.

The church needs official experimental spaces. They already exist, as in the Amazon or Switzerland. If Christians in a country recognise the will of God in standing still, then they should stand still. But elsewhere, other, theologically sound steps towards the inculturation of the Christian faith in the respective society must be possible.

If we learn to understand decentralisation and subsidiarity as the richness of diversity in unity, the door to adequate inculturation will be open. Equal rights, participation and co-responsibility, and radical inclusion and empowerment of the laity will quickly follow in many parts of the world. Even people from outside the church will appreciate this. Because we need role models these days.

I have hope for the 2023–2024 synod and I dream that conversion, insight, repentance, and transformation are possible. If we manage to walk the synodal path of repentance, an authentic change on the ground towards a credible, loving, humble, serving church of equals will be possible. I agree with *Tomáš Halík*: This church can then really make a difference in a world in which populism, hunger, poverty, and extremism are on the rise – and in which only 20 percent of countries are democratically governed.

But beware! Only when the wounds inflicted by the church against the supreme commandment of love are healed will we recognise whether repentance has been credibly carried out. We are rightly judged by scripture: “It shall not be so with you!” (Mk 10:43). ■

The Women's Question in the Stages of the World Synod

Zagreb, Prague and Rome

The world synodal process under the heading “Communion – Participation – Mission” is intended to be a common journey of believers and pastors. The central theme in all stages of the synod, and from a South-East European perspective, is the issue of women and the necessary ecclesiological and structural change in the Church. **BY ANA THEA FILIPOVIĆ**

How is the question of women addressed in the various stages of the World Synod? The demand to create communal structures and justice for women ties into the practice of Jesus and the early church, which was later suppressed. At the same time, this demand corresponds to the growing sensitivity of our time for gender equality. Gender equality was first positively received by the church in the encyclical “Pacem in Terris” by *John XXIII* in 1963. The Second Vatican Council continued this trend. It rejected any discrimination based on gender (*Lumen Gentium* 3; *Gaudium et Spes* 4 and 29). It emphasised the need for the active participation of women in the mission of the Church and encouraged their active involvement in various areas of the apostolate (*Apostolicam Actuositatem* 9).

It is therefore only logical that the issue of women should emerge as an important question at the various stages of the World Synod. During the continental synod assembly in Europe in February 2023, 590 delegates from 39 European bishops' conferences met in Prague. Among the 200 people on site were 156 delegates from the bishops' conferences and 44 additional participants invited by the Council of European Bishops' Conferences. A further 390 delegates, 10 per bishops' conference, were connected digitally. Various topics were discussed based on country-specific summaries, including the issue of women. The final document of the Prague Assembly lists seven postulates for more synodality, including “special attention to families, women, and young people” (No. 20). Despite the fact that women make up half of all the People of God, they are only listed amongst the three most important and largely neglected groups.

“The contributions of almost all delegations were also dedicated to the participation of



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women and their role in the church. ‘Many women expressed their pain at being denied participation in the life of the church and spoke of feelings of marginalisation and discrimination. Women play a crucial role in the life of the church, but many men and women spoke of a church that excludes the fullness of women’s gifts’ (Ireland). This is one of the most recurring issues in all the reports and is expressed in a variety of ways” (No. 46). The document links the issue of women with synodal ecclesiology, which is rooted in the dignity and mission of all the baptised (see No. 26). It also addresses the contradiction between the church’s commitment to greater justice in society “and its own inability to convert to greater justice, as demonstrated, for example, by the system of second-class status for women” (online working group in English, No. 38).

In Prague, women’s access to the ordained ministry (the diaconate and priesthood) was also discussed. Opinions on this were divided. Some Western European countries voted that “the question of women’s access to ordained ministry must be thoroughly examined” (No. 75). For others, it was not a significant issue. However, many delegations prioritised the participation of lay people, and women in particular, in decision-making processes at all levels of the Church. This is because “the Church needs the voice, the special leadership qualities and the community-building skills of women” (No. 76). The issue of women was linked to the demand for more participation, for overcoming clericalism and for the promotion of lay ministries so that the entire church would become more synodal (see No. 77).

Different positions were already evident in Prague regarding the concept of a synodal church and the role of women in such a synodal church. This

was particularly true for delegations from Eastern and Western European countries. However, geographic and socio-cultural borders of origin are not the only causes of differences. Different theological and ecclesiological concepts also influence the respective votes on the role of women in a synodal church. The short report of the Croatian delegation, for example, shows that the topic of women in the church does not appear to be relevant at all in Croatia (National Reports. European synodal continental assembly. The Croatian Bishops' Conference, St. Gallen 2023, online: <https://prague.synod2023.org>).

The experiences of the Church in communist regimes slowed down the reception of the Second Vatican Council in Central and Eastern European countries. The awareness of the ability to help shape social life and democratic structures developed only weakly. Political restrictions on the church's public sphere went hand in hand with the church's concern on preserving traditional piety and "popular church" structures. This also included patriarchal or traditional ideas that the genders were hierarchical or complementary. In addition, despite considerable efforts towards conciliar renewal, pre-conciliar theological views can be seen among individual or small groups of theologians, religious, and lay people.

In Croatia, women took positions of responsibility in the church only after the introduction of the first democratic elections in 1990. These are primarily memberships and leadership positions in committees and offices of the Croatian Bishops' Conference, in individual dioceses and in Catholic educational and social institutions. Today, there are also many female lecturers and professors

at the theological faculties of state universities, although mostly not in leadership positions.

The church environment in Croatia remains very traditional. Preserving the Catholic tradition appears to be more important than travelling

It will take wisdom to recognise the diversity of ecclesiastical and socio-cultural contexts, to respond appropriately and not to approach these questions in a one-sided or ideological way.

together. Changes occur more often at the level of a silent distancing from the institutional faith than at the level of church structures. Theology in Croatia is also more traditional. Those who deviate from the mainstream often resort to forms of self-censorship due to negative perceptions. Nevertheless, individuals and small groups at all levels, from the grassroots to the hierarchy, in religious orders and in theology, are open to the new cultural thought patterns. They

are committed to a renewed image of the Church in society, however difficult this may be in view of the polarisation in the Church and the ideological prejudices and confrontations in society.

Most of the participants found the Synodal Assembly in Prague enriching, as it enabled them to listen to each other and get to know each other despite all the differences. Hopefully, the General Assemblies in October 2023 and 2024 also lead to such open dialogue, mutual listening, and reflected changes.

In any case, a synodal church also includes the reevaluation of the role of women. In the Instrumentum laboris for the first General Assembly, the green papers pose the question: "How can the Church of our time promote its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?" It then states, among other things, "In a Church that wants to be truly synodal, these questions must be addressed together, and concrete

responses must be developed together for a greater recognition of the baptismal dignity of women and for the fight against all forms of discrimination and marginalisation to which they fall victim in the ecclesial community and in society" (B 2.3c).

The document emphasises that the continental assemblies "pointed to the plurality of women's experiences, viewpoints, and perspectives and asked that this diversity be recognised in the work of the synodal assembly, avoiding treating women as a homogeneous group or an abstract or ideological topic of discussion" (B 2.3d). Wisdom is needed to recognise the diversity of ecclesial and socio-cultural contexts, to respond appropriately and not to take a one-sided or ideological approach to these issues.

With a view to the necessary common distinction, the Instrumentum laboris asks in the same section: "What concrete steps can the Church take to renew and reform its procedures, institutional arrangement can also be more strongly recognised and involved in leadership and decision-making processes in the spirit of communion and with a view to mission?"

It emphasises: "All continental assemblies call for the issue of women's participation in leadership, decision-making, mission, and ministry at all levels of the church to be addressed with the support of appropriate structures, for this to be more than just a general aspiration." It also mentions the possibility of creating new ministries "to provide means and opportunities for the effective participation of women in leadership and decision-making bodies," as well as the need to "rethink the question of women's access to the diaconate."

It is to be hoped that, as part of a renewal of the leadership culture in the Church, all these questions will be seriously considered, discussed, prayed over, and decided upon so that the Church can become a prophetic sign of God's presence in a world of inequality and marginalisation. ■

There is no Church Without Women

Equality is not a Favour

Including a few women as participants in the synod is not enough. Catholic teaching on the impossibility of women's ordination is untenable in terms of scholarship and an expression of sexism. It must be challenged. **BY MARY MCALEESE**

The global church shows encouraging synodal awakenings; witness the reforming dialogue of the Synodal Way in Germany and the lay-led Root and Branch synod around the world. Catholics from five continents followed the invitation of Pope *Francis* to pray together and discuss co-responsibility and decision-making processes in preparation for Rome stages of the World Synod in 2023 and 2024.

They have turned the Pope's Synod of Bishops into a Synod of the People. And now the question arises: Will the Synod of Bishops remain faithful to the discernment of the People of God?

Things have probably not gone as Pope Francis intended. He tried to muffle the German synod and restrict the agenda of the World Synod to non-contentious topics. The People of God, however, no longer bow before the magisterium. They are dismantling what they perceive as a dysfunctional magisterium and have issued a resounding demand for equality for women, including the ordination of women to the priesthood and diaconate. The voice of the People of God on this subject is unequivocal. If the Synod of Bishops had opened in October 2023 with no concession on this topic, it might just as well have closed up shop on day one. Ironically, the inclusion of a small cohort of women with the right to vote merely highlights the gender imbalance in Church governance and its resistance to the equality of women.

Equality is a right, not a favour. But the women attending the synod were granted co-determination as a favour. However well-intentioned that may be, it is not enough. Women are still not included as members of the Catholic Church with equal rights. At the same time, membership in the Church is shrinking. Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and a vibrant parish life for all the faithful are becoming ever-more inaccessible. That damages the credibility of the Gospel. Unfortunately, Pope Francis still operates out of a compel-and-control model regarding this subject. That can be seen



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in his recent remarks about the exclusion of women from ordination. In his response to the dubia raised by five Cardinals in advance of the Synod meeting in October 2023 that asked for clarification of a list of questions, he said that the teaching is not a "dogmatic definition." It is, rather, a "definitive statement." He said that the exact nature of a definitive statement "is not fully developed," but nonetheless "must be adhered to by all" the faithful. And he insists, "it cannot be publicly contradicted, but it can be studied."

On the contrary, I say, "Holy Father, many of us have studied it deeply and prayerfully and are compelled to contradict it publicly. We have concluded that it is unscholarly, sexist humbug masquerading as threadbare theology. Moreover, dear Holy Father, your little words – 'must' and 'cannot' offend our God-given freedom of expression and conscience."

We Catholic women are tired of men speaking for us. We resent the recent pretentious words of the head of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life which is charged with responsibility for women in the Church that "the activities of women are lay by their nature." I say, "no, they are not. They are lay by misogynistic magisterial decree." It beggars belief that the same Dicastery until very recently published on its Web site the words of *Tertullian* as recommended texts. In AD 230, he characterised women as "the devil's gateway. You [woman] are the unsealer of the forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of the divine law. You are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. Because of your sin that ultimately led to death, even the Son of God had to die."

We women are the ones building the future of the Church – if it is to have a future. And it will have that future only if we are equals in all decision-making: No decisions about us without us! For without us, there will be nothing but an empty space where the Church used to be. ■

More Participation for Women Throughout the Church – Not Only in Latin America

The Need for a Synodal Process of Transformation

The Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean leads the way in synodal participation. Yet challenges remain: Clericalism and the abuse of power and the central question of women's participation point the way forward for the Catholic Church not only in Latin America, but worldwide. **BY BIRGIT WEILER**

The Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) plays an important role in the promotion of synodality in the Church in Latin America. It has stimulated, coordinated, and accompanied decisive synodal processes. An important milestone toward greater synodality was the first Ecclesial Assembly of Latin America and the Caribbean (2021) with its broad-based process of listening to one another (*proceso de escucha*). From the very beginning, it was clear that it was about actively listening to each other, which has a transformative power and motivates people to act accordingly. Two core themes emerged in the synodal deliberations at the diocesan, national and continental levels in Latin America: The lack of participation of women in the Church and the need for more gender equality.

Successful Synodality Requires Structures and a Changed Mentality

With regard to the location of the synodal processes and their themes in the social context of Latin America, it should be noted briefly that in recent decades, important steps have been taken in Latin American societies – with gradual differences – towards greater justice in the relations between the sexes. At the same time, it can be observed that these societies are “in many respects still patriarchal” and marked by “machismo” (Document following the Ecclesial Assembly: „Towards a Synodal Church That Goes to the Peripheries“ [Doc KV], 85). As a result, women in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to experience violence in



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all its manifestations. The number of victims of femicide – the murder of women because of their gender – is alarmingly high.

For decades, the Catholic Church has been committed to the full recognition of the dignity and the rights of women in society. It strongly condemns violence against women. However, it became clear in the synodal deliberations that the Church must also take a self-aware look at relations between the genders in the sphere of the Church. It should listen more to the voices of women who experience injustices in gender relations in the Church. The Church can retain credibility in society only if it works purposefully to overcome these injustices. During the various phases of listening and deliberating on the way to the World Synod and at the first Plenary Assembly of the World Synod in 2023, many women expressed painful experiences of ecclesiastical manifestations of violence (see Doc KV, 86). The knowledge, charisms, skills, and work of women are inadequately appreciated. Men's speech, attitudes, and gestures are often characterized by a macho mentality and dominance over women.

In the Catholic Church, many relationships do not yet reflect the equal dignity of priests and women of faith in their various vocations. However, since the Amazon Synod (2019), the synodal processes have created a greater awareness that this situation can no longer be tolerated on the part of many women and men, including bishops and priests, and calls for change in the spirit of Jesus and his liberating message of the Kingdom of God. The final document of the continental phase of the World

Synod emphasizes for Latin America and the Caribbean how important it is in the church of this region to “open spaces, provide resources, and create pathways for women’s participation to create effective involvement of women in decision-making bodies” (Synthesis Document of the Church of Latin America and the Caribbean, 39). This requires not only a change of mentality in the Church, but also a reform of the Church’s structures. Synodality needs appropriate bodies, organs, and structures that effectively promote and strengthen it (Synthesis Document, 73).

In Latin America, there has been much criticism that clericalism curtails or prevents the development of the charisms of women and men committed to the faith with different vocations. Clericalism, in fact, often leads to disregarding or devaluing the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit gives to everyone in Baptism.

The Question of the Future Is and Remains the Question of Women

In the synodal processes, many members of the People of God became more aware that clericalism is closely linked to the abuse of power. The Synthesis Document of the Church of Latin America and the Caribbean openly speaks of “clerical authoritarianism” and of the “deformation of the priestly ministry through the abuse of power” (Synthesis Document, 87). Both primarily affects women. The same section also expresses the recognition that clericalism and machismo are cultural phenomena in Latin America, in which machismo reinforces clericalism. Both “exclude women from the processes of the discernment of spirits and decision-making.” It is necessary to work consistently on overcoming clericalism and machismo, since both are incompatible with the image of humans and the values of the Gospel. “A culture of working together as brothers and sisters must be promoted.”

Throughout the synodal process since the Amazon Synod (2019), there has been a growing awareness in the Latin American Church that in the local Churches women constitute the majority of the faithful and carry out most pastoral care in the various areas. Without women, the church in Latin America cannot exist. Yet, in many places women are only involved to a small extent in decision-making and in the leadership of the church at the various levels.

The great commitment of women in the life of the church can be observed especially in the Church of Amazonia.

Most of the Church’s presence, especially on the geographical and social peripheries, is provided by women, many of whom are religious. In numerous consultations on the Amazon Synod, the request has already been made to “establish the permanent diaconate for women” (Amazon Synod, Final Document, 103). In the consultations on the working document for the continental phase in Latin America and the Caribbean, many also spoke in favor of the establishment of a permanent sacramental diaconate for women.

A strong theological argument for this is that most of the ministries mentioned in the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, with reference to the permanent diaconate (No. 16) are already performed by women in many communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Regarding the celebration of the sacraments, well-known canonical restrictions are in place. However, in many places, bishops entrust women to lead congregations and perform baptisms and the sacrament of marriage. The faithful recognize and appreciate the great commitment to the faith of many women who, through their lives, bear witness to a Church that is on its way to the people, especially those on the peripheries.

Without women, the church cannot exist in Latin America.

In their pastoral ministries, many women were also committed to a church that is open to all, a church that listens to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth, takes the climate emergency seriously, and builds networks to work in alliance with many other people and organizations for the earth, our common home. Numerous women, who, through their faith, carry out a variety of diaconal services, bear witness to Christ’s great love, especially for those who live in poverty, who are particularly vulnerable and marginalized. They are proclaiming through their deeds that Jesus Christ

has come so that all people may have life and have it abundantly. Their ordination would be an important sign that the Church recognizes the vocation and charism of these women and that they carry out their mission in the name of the Church. Many parishes, which experience the diverse pastoral ministries of women, hope that in the future a sacramental diaconate for women will be instituted in the Catholic Church.

The good working relationship of priests, bishops, and the faithful – women and men – on an equal footing in Latin America and the Caribbean encourages us on the way to a synodal Church. An inspiring example of concrete steps towards lived synodality is the so-called Church Conference of Amazonia.

Many such examples of synodality in action testify to the fact that God’s power of the Spirit, which creates something new, works in many places through women and men with different vocations and in different socio-cultural contexts, who, listening to God’s ruach, together shape a synodal Church with a strong participation of women. In Latin America, too, the question of women is increasingly becoming a question of the future of the Catholic Church. ■

How Talking About God Influences Thinking About Church Structures

How to Live Synodality from a Feminist Perspective

An authentic synodal Church not only requires the structural participation of women but also the fundamental recognition of the equality of all genders. What is needed is a real cultural shift. This cultural shift begins with how we talk about God and the kind of images we use when we talk about God. **BY OLGA CONSUELO VÉLEZ CARO**

Synodality means “to walk together (over the same threshold).” Are we living a synodal Church in this sense? Are we crossing the same threshold together? Is synodality even possible given the current position of women in the Church? On the surface: Yes. But if we look closer, crises and challenges become apparent. Many people, especially young people, are turning away from the Church. Clericalism and sexual abuse are fostering a severe crisis of credibility. Hardly any priestly and religious vocations remain. Sacramental practice is declining. Regarding the situation of women, unanswered questions are accumulating, such as their lack of participation in ministries, at decision-making levels, and in everyday church life. Synodality is not an invention of the present. In the early churches, the only requirement for full church membership was baptism, which had no gendered connotations. It was only over time that this original order was lost, and women were pushed into the background. To survive, the church adapted to the political situation. By doing so, however, patriarchy affected the lived situation of women the most.

The Second Vatican Council was a moment of renewal and departure, a privileged moment of conversion. The Church opened herself to read the “signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4) and updated its own understanding of revelation (*Dei Verbum* 2): God reveals himself in history. There are no longer two levels of reality – the natural and the supernatural – but the transcendent becomes present in the immanent. We are therefore able to capture and understand it. Above all, we can revise the understanding of the Church to anchor it anew in its origin: A Church that is a gift of the Trinity. Synodality



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is therefore also to be understood as a gift of the Trinity. Above all, the Council recalled the pneumatological dimension of the Church. The Holy Spirit animates and shapes the communion and mission of the Church: It is the principle of all synodality. However, if the idea of the Trinity is masculine – a Father God, a male Son, and a Spirit in the form of a dove – the Trinitarian foundation of the Church can hardly open avenues that truly include women. Therefore, a more fitting image of the Trinity must be found, not as an arbitrary adaptation, because God has no gender. All the images we use can serve as a representation of God, though none is identical with Him.

Thinking Differently About the Trinity

Elizabeth Johnson has proposed thinking of the Trinity relationally and dynamically, not statically. This makes it possible to speak of God in various metaphors. We may remember the reciprocity of the immanent and economic Trinity. Throughout the history of salvation, we see that the image of God is male and female, because all human beings are created in his image and likeness (*Gen 1:27*). It is therefore possible to think and imagine God in female categories as well. This enables much stronger involvement of women in the Church and establishes the fundamental equality of the sexes as theologically constitutive. If God’s image is male and female, nothing in the Church is unworthy of representing the Godhead. All this is also vital for successful synodality.

The traditional theology of the Trinity, however, has emphasized the order of Father, Son, and Spirit. In terms of the history of salvation, an inverted sequence suggests itself: The Spirit moves the Son in his mission and is present in creation.

As is known, the word “spirit” in Hebrew is feminine (“*ruah*”) – another reason to see the feminine as suitable for the representation of God. When reflecting on the Trinity, we should therefore think much less essentially and more analogously when talking about God. Speaking of God in female images is also enabled through the biblical figure of wisdom (Wis 8:35), which expresses the presence of God in female images and roles: Sister, mother, cook, hostess, preacher, judge, liberator, and many other roles in which the transcendent power brings order and well-being to the world. The image of wisdom critically objects to patriarchal ideas and habits.

Thinking Synodality from Below

Synodality is a dimension inherent in the nature of the Church and understood as communion. According to *Lumen Gentium*, all the baptized share in the priesthood, prophethood, and kingship of Jesus Christ: All are active disciples of Jesus, called to proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel. This manifests itself in the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, which makes them “*infallibile in credendo*” (*Lumen Gentium* 12). Baptism, then, is the basis and starting point for the equality of all. Pope Francis provides a new image of the ecclesiastical hierarchy when he speaks of the inverted pyramid. He does not abolish the hierarchical structure of the Church but places it where it should always have been – at the grassroots level, to serve the entire People of God and not to be served. In other words, for Francis, synodality is an effective weapon against clericalism.

Within the framework of such an ecclesiology of communion, restoration of the indispensable role of women in the life of the Church becomes possible. *Elisabeth Schüssler* coined the category of “discipleship of equals,” meaning that men and women are engaged on the same level. *Letty Russell* proposed

the category of “inclusive community,” that is, a church gathered around a table in the endeavor to become a house of freedom because the walls have been torn down and all are welcome.

Lumen Gentium 13 speaks of the universality and catholicity of the one People of God. The universality of the Church is expressed in the individual Churches, all of which are in communion with each other and with the Church of Rome. The cultural diversity and cultural richness of the local Churches express the universality of the Church. This is how synodality should exist. But are women adequately represented in this universality and catholicity of the Church? That does not seem to be the case. At the level of church leadership, we see only men. Altars to which only men have access, and decision-making bodies where only clerics are allowed to speak, are increasingly perceived as a problem. A church that does not include women at these levels has no authority to speak of universality.

The Church is founded on the apostles (Eph 2:20). But apostles weren’t just men: Mary Magdalene was recognized as the apostle to the apostles. If their position were truly recognized, it would not only be men in the quorum that would be the successors of the Apostles. In other words, synodality is also an expression of the co-responsibility of all the baptized, with the collegial authority of some, under the presidency exercised by one. But this would require new procedures for consulting the entire People of God. Because what concerns everyone must be dealt with and approved by all. A truly synodal form of the Church is therefore not to

be afforded without reform of themes, structures, processes, and assemblies. Without a structural reform that involves the laity, especially women, synodality would not be an appropriate way to be the Church of the third millennium.

Structural Reforms

To become a truly synodal Church, the mere inclusion of more women (numerically) or appointing some of them specifically is not enough. Rather, they must be involved at all levels and held in the same esteem as men – in leadership and decision-making, theology, and catechesis, ecclesiastical administration, and ecclesiastical offices. For women to participate effectively in a truly synodal Church, many cultural barriers must be overcome. This is especially true

when it comes to the ideas of gender. It is not enough, as Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* 103, to introduce the “feminine genius” into all expressions of social life. Rather, their presence must be ensured wherever important decisions are made, both in the Church and in society. Synodality with a female face means the recognition of female subjects. Structural reforms are needed to

enable women to occupy decision-making positions. Women belong in committees where they can have a say and a vote. We need appropriate structures and processes that guarantee the presence of half of humanity and most of the Church. We need structures and processes that bear witness to the fact that all men and women in the Church live the fullness of their baptism and exercise the same responsibility in the mission entrusted to them. ■

Spirituality and Dialogue

The US Way to the World Synod

The Church in the USA approached the world synod by focusing on a combination of spiritual preparation and a culture of listening. Despite varying speeds in different communities, a culture of dialogue is thus to be fostered. **BY JULIA MCSTRAVOG**

Conversion, companionship and contemplation: the basis for a synodal culture. The 2021–2024 Synod called in by Pope *Francis* is a spiritual formation exercise for the People of God. It is also an ecclesial global consultation project grounded in the experience of encounter and dialogue. Its aim is to cultivate within the Church a default disposition of listening. Finally, it is the latest example of the implementation of the fruits of the Second Vatican Council in the daily life of the Church. How are we trying to cultivate a culture of synodality within the U.S. Church? The focus is upon the spiritual dimensions of synodality, and the formation needed to live in a synodal spirit. We use a trifold framework to get at the spiritual heart of the Synod – conversion, companionship, and contemplation – of which prayer is an essential aspect of each.

This framework focuses on individual conversion toward the will of God in a disposition of prayerful curiosity, creativity, and collaboration, in all areas of life. These attributes are tools for creating companionship and community with Christ and one another along the synodal path that includes encounter, listening, and discernment.

Prayer is an indispensable part of participation in the Synod and moving toward a culture and style of synodality. The synodal path also requires universal contemplation and prayer upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the voices, experiences, and reflections of the People of God, as well as the documents that have been produced thus far.

The documents produced by the Synod to date, at the parish, organizational, diocesan, national, continental, and universal levels are all roadmaps for the future of missionary discipleship and formation necessary to inculcate a synodal dynamism in the life of ministry of the Church. They are documents in dialogue with one another; each one is built upon the discernment of prior documents and helps us to discern what is proper to the local churches and what is proper to the institutional Church.

In the United States, where there are over 190 dioceses, we have worked to create a network of diocesan leaders of the Synod. We convene once a month to share information about the



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Foto: Jessica S. Zurcher 2017

logistics and practicalities of the Synod, but also to share time of spiritual formation for synodality. There is small group time, as well as time to share the fruits of the conversations. Among the most important aspects of this gathering is the space it creates for the U.S. Synod Team to listen to those who are doing the work in the diocese. Their companionship has been shaped and honed the approach toward the Synod in the U.S. They have prompted us and inspired us.

These leaders have participated in writing the regional syntheses, reviewed the US National Document, were delegates to the North American assemblies for the Continental Stage. Two were also voting delegates to the first session of XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2023. They are on the ground doing the work of making the synodal journey a lived reality for their communities, not just another task to check off the list.

The International Theological Commission's 2018 document *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* calls for "clear theological principles and decisive pastoral orientations" (No. 8). The goal of the current synodal project is to bring the Catholic theological tradition of dialogue and the contemplative and pastoral tradition of listening to the Holy Spirit and one another.

Pope Francis called for a synod that is inclusive of the whole of the People of God. No one is to be excluded. This is a seemingly impossible task.

The depth and breadth of the Catholic Church is wide, and the time and accompaniment required on the synodal journey will be long. There are communities that have been walking the synodal path long before Pope Francis announced the Synod; there are communities that have not even begun the synodal journey. The bishops and bishops' conferences tasked with this sacred work are responsible to all the People of God, no matter their place on the path.

The Synod is a "generational project" that comes six decades after the opening of Vatican II, offering an inflection point, a new trajectory, an unprecedented opportunity to live the fruits of Vatican II. Pope Francis has demonstrated that the legacy of his papacy will be the embodiment of dialogue and listening through synodality as a central marker of Catholic identity. ■

Gender Policy and Gender Equality in the Catholic Church in India

Discrimination: Unethical and Un-Catholic

If we are serious about synodality in the Catholic Church, gender equality, which ensures that everyone's voice can be heard, is an absolute requirement. BY JOLLY VASUPURATHUKARAN

Synodality means walking together. This requires a sense of belonging and the willingness to listen to each other, to be open, to receive, to accompany and to discern. This should be done without any distinction based on gender identity or social gender roles. Gender equality is a condition for being a synodal Church.

Shared Dignity, Shared Responsibility

The equality of all human beings is based on equal dignity. All human beings are created in the image of God without hierarchical distinction (Gen 1:27). All human beings are equally entrusted with the care of the created world (Gen 1:28). This gives rise to a vertical and a horizontal relationship: all human beings are destined to communion with God the Creator. All human beings are also destined for fellowship and communication with each other. *John R. Sachs* rightly points out that being human means to be-in-relation, to be “with”. Man and woman being created in the image of God is the basis for equal partnership and shared responsibility. Jesus’ treatment of women expresses his explicit respect. His messianic mission embraces women and men without distinction. Saint Paul’s statement that “there is no male and female, for all are one in Jesus Christ” (Gal 3:28) clearly confirms the unity and complementarity of man and

woman. In the New Testament epistles, it is clear that women such as Phoebe, Prisca, and Junia played important roles in the early church (Acts 16:11–15, 40; Rom 16,5; Col 4,15; Philemon 1:2; Rom 16,7; Rom 16,1–2; Rom 16:6, 12a, 12b, 15; Phil 4:2). Consequently, in the early church, women and men equally shared different aspects of Church’s life, women and men participated equally in various ecclesiastical offices, including leadership. The image of God, the messianic mission and the equal participation of women in the life of the Church constitute the theological standard on the common synodal path.

Theory and Reality

In theory, the Church recognizes the role of women. But the reality of the church is patriarchal, with little or no place for women in the pyramid. In this male-dominated environment, women are often forced to conform to male rules and emulate male role models. But it is virtually impossible for them to go beyond male models or offer any other kind of leadership, even in the ordained ministry. The recent ecclesiastical reforms in hierarchical structures, which allow for greater participation of women in ecclesiastical affairs, can be seen as a sign of a new sensitivity to God’s original plan. In the future, “every member of the faithful will be able to preside over a dicastery or office” (Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, n. 5) Speaking

to the participants in the XXI Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), Pope *Francis* recalled that “mission is service, not servitude”. He urges for and contributes to the greater participation of women in the politics and decision-making processes of the Church.

Gender Policy

In the Indian context, there are examples of women playing a leading role in the Church and in society in the fields of education, healthcare, politics, etc. Domestic and social violence against women from all walks of life, lack of education and non-participation in decision-making processes are nevertheless a fact. The Gender Policy (GP) of the Catholic Church of India states (Okhla, New Delhi, CBCI Commission for Women and Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, 2009): “Violence against women is the most universal and unpunished crime of all. It is linked to the status of women and perpetuated by systematic gender discrimination and societal norms that devalue women. Solving the problem of violence requires solving the problem of gender inequality. Thus, eliminating violence against women demands coordinated and sustained effort at all levels.” (GP 4). The document acknowledges the inadequate representation and participation of women in the decision-making and the consultative structures. The document



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concedes that the potential of women is “yet to be sufficiently tapped” in the administrative and executive roles as well as in theological, liturgical, pastoral, and missionary apostolates of the Church (GP. 44).

The then president of the CBCI, Archbishop *Mar Varkey Vithayathil*, urged that, following Christ, we will be challenged to create conditions to hear the voices of the marginalized, to defend the defenseless, and to review lifestyles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on women. But there is still a clear gap between vision and reality.

A study from 2020 pinpoints major areas where injustice persists: women religious in India receive low wages in ecclesiastical institutions; sisters encounter harassment in their pastoral and apostolic work; there are problems regarding property matters; competence is ignored; sacramental celebration is refused; there is verbal abuse – even from the pulpit. According to the report there is a constant appeal from women religious to be treated with respect. The report affirms that consecrated women are not slaves to be ruled over. The majority of Christian women in the pews of the Church are carefully hidden from the public sphere. *Aruna Gnanadason* explains, “The domestication of women in South Asia has been pretty systematic and they have been, by and large, relegated to what can be termed as ‘housewifely tasks’ even within the Church. The ministries of caring, visiting the sick, educating children, and beautifying the church for worship often fall on women. Their service and spiritual resources are used to the full in the day-to-day life of the congregations, but they are basically confined to what they are told is the ‘security of the Church’ as a structure.” (Church and Gender Justice, Delhi: ISPCK, 2020, 50).

Synodality Needs the Participation of All

The powerful system of patriarchy is the harsh reality that hinders cooperation between men and women in ecclesial partnership. If these aspects are ignored, the discussion on “synodality” will remain an ineffective intellectual exercise. In the context of the World Synod, the question is repeatedly raised as to whom the Church must listen more strongly in the future and how the voices of women, the voices of the excluded and

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disregarded, can be heard better. The working document for the continental phase pays tribute to women as the backbone of the ecclesial community and emphasizes the urgency of increasing women’s participation on the basis of common baptismal dignity.

In addition, the document identifies a discrepancy and a contradiction: Though women constitute

• the majority of the faithful actively
 • participating in the liturgy and
 • Church activities, sadly it is men,
 • a minority, who are privileged to
 • involve in decision-making and
 • administrative roles.

• How, then, can one speak of a synodal
 • Church as long as half of the faithful
 • are kept away from the Church’s
 • decision-making processes? How
 • can a synodal Church disparage the
 • dictum, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* – the
 • voice of the (whole) people is the
 • voice of God? When listening and
 • walking together constitute the core
 • of synodality, how can we ignore the
 • inadequate representation of women
 • and their voices? We must assert that

any “discrimination or bias against the other half of humanity – women – is both un-ethical and un-Catholic.” (*Vimala Chenginimattam*, *Gendered Perspectives in India*, in: *Moral Theology in India Today*, Bangalore 2013, 435).

From the perspective of synodality, gender equality does not necessarily imply uniformity or competition for certain positions occupied by either men or women. Rather, it requires attentive and active listening and interaction by all, regardless of gender, in order to promote reciprocity and diversity. The aim is a holistic development of society and the Church.

Synodality Requires Gender Justice

When the Church closely examines itself, it will find that there are questions of injustice and proportionate justice to be addressed before setting out to engage deeper in matters of theology.

When the dignity of the human being is threatened, this should be addressed by both men and women. If the view of the women faithful who constitute more than half of the believers and often two thirds of the active and practicing, are ignored, gender justice and equality will remain a reality on paper only but will not shape an ecclesial reality. Then the goal of a synodal Church is only on paper. ■



Woman of the Anointing

© Susanne Janssen, of the cycle „Die großen Töchter Gottes. Starke Frauen der Bibel“, Leipzig: Edition Chrismon, 2018.

The Hardening of the Debate on the Issue of Gender

A Dilemma with Consequences

The Roman Catholic Church of the 21st century faces complex challenges: A lack of professionalism when dealing with sexual abuse, an increasing loss of social relevance, and a lack of cultural change in questions of gender equality. In view of the synodal process, it is now once again faced with a decision. Will it harden the fronts or demonstrate the ability to discourse? BY ANNETTE SCHAVAN

In 2012, when the sociologist of religion José Casanova was awarded a prestigious award, the *Theologischer Preis der Hochschulwochen*, for his life's work in Salzburg, he spoke in his acceptance speech about the exodus of women from the church, which began in the 1960s. He described the issues of sexual morality and gender equality as "construction sites in the church for the future" and predicted a serious loss of ecclesiastical relevance if previous responses to many problems were to be maintained. Theological arguments for the establishment of the priesthood exclusively for men could be explained only as a defense against modernity. Previously, "throughout the history of the Church, the masculine character of the priesthood had been a self-evident cultural premise."

No Stringent Concept for Reappraisal After 13 Years

In this speech, as in other contexts, he clearly concludes that institutions that do not value gender equality will sooner or later no longer have an audible voice in this 21st century and cannot provide guidance on the many ethical questions of the world. They destroy their authority and require disobedience from within. Incidentally, this is the same author who wrote a brilliant analysis of "Europe's Fear of Religion" (Berlin 2009). What Casanova and others predicted has now come to pass in Germany. The authority of the Christian churches has reached



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Foto: Laurence Chaperon

an all-time low. In the ranking of institutions that are considered helpful, they ended up in one of the last places. This reality affects the Protestant regional churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church. It motivates those who do not want new answers in the Catholic Church to point to the modernity of the national churches, which cannot prevent the decline. But this is not about modernity at all. Taking the signs of the times seriously means something different than wanting to follow the zeitgeist. Instead, it requires humility that takes seriously the fact that the Church can be prophetic only if it is attentive to the passage of time, a new era, and new realms of experience. Tradition must be open to change if it is to be effective.

Churches today are most likely to be accused of a lack of professionalism, presence, and empathy. The experience of the Covid pandemic has contributed to this situation. And, of course, so has the way the Catholic Church has dealt with the scandals of sexualized violence since 2010. It has shown no clear direction, has no common standards, still leaves questions open, and issues report upon report that describe the past and give the current bishops today a public space to lament the omissions and guilt of their predecessors. For their efforts, they are praised in public – an otherwise rather rare occasion. Even after 13 years, there is still no coordinated and stringent concept of reappraisal that convinces the interested public and, above all, those affected. The Protestant regional churches

also face criticism. (I limit myself here to the Roman Catholic Church, which I refer to as the universal Church.)

What does this have to do with the question of women in the universal Church? The lack of cultural change in the church is what damages its authority in such a way. There has been a significant increase in the number of women in positions of leadership in the church, including in the Vatican authorities. But there is still no woman at the head of a dicastery or a council in the Vatican. However, the Pope's new statutes would now allow for it. This year, a woman has been appointed to head the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. However, so far there is no noticeable cultural change anywhere.

As a church, we are not getting anywhere and are finding less and less public resonance in Germany and in Europe. I am convinced that it is the growing disunity among Christians, the increasing irreconcilability, and the increasingly harsh tone in the universal Church that make us as Christendom appear so weak. The irreconcilability is particularly apparent when it comes to the ordination of women. There is no one who would be able to settle the dispute. No ways found to at least work on common ground, to find another language and to have constructive debates. Many don't want any more debates. They want to cultivate their bubble and enforce the "truths" that are valid there – even in the Vatican. The communion of bishops is only mentioned in the Eucharistic Prayer.

Build Bridges or Deepen the Dilemma?

Let there be no doubt: I have been working in politics and diplomacy for 25 years, in parliaments, ministries, European Councils, international conferences, and finally as Germany's ambassador to the Holy See. I consider struggle and arguments important and indispensable, and I have argued when

it came to weighty decisions. In the end, at some point, a decision was made, and the decision made clear the issue it resolved and how an agreement was possible. In debates in the Church, this ability is becoming less and less clear.

Between Synodal Awakening and Frustrated Resignation

In addition, the question of women in the universal Church links a range of very different topics. The Church has made great contributions to women's access to schooling and education. Pope Francis has been exhorting governments for ten years to enable gender equality and enforce equal pay for women and men. He denounces violence against women and much more. However, when it comes to the access of all the baptized to all the sacraments, irreconcilability grows and leads the universal Church into a dilemma. It's a dilemma with consequences! It cannot be resolved in the dialogue between the Churches in Europe and the Vatican, nor in the dispute between Germany and Rome. The universal Church is present on the five continents and is active in very different cultural contexts. Everyone is looking to Rome – with requests, expectations, threats, and deadlines. Bishops in Germany who are unable to get their own way at home ask for clarification in Rome. Instead of assuming a common responsibility and thus showing the strength of the universal Church, reservations are cultivated. A serious debate on the "admission of all the baptized to all sacraments" would be a key to leading the tradition of the universal Church into a relevant future. Finding ways to unite the universal Church on this issue is a challenging task. Not having the debate because it should not be held

exacerbates the dilemma and reinforces the irreconcilability.

The skepticism of the Churches toward each other is growing. After the Continental Synod in Prague, this was already noticeable in Europe. Rome will not allow the admission of all the baptized to all the sacraments anytime soon. The exodus of women will continue. It has long since ceased to be a question of theological debates. It's about different cultures, politics, and the fear in the universal Church that it could again be the Europeans who decide the outcome. In doing so, Pope Francis has set himself the goal of strengthening the so-called young churches in Africa and his familiar ecclesial cultures in Latin America and making them more influential.

Perhaps the worldwide synodal process will be able to lead to new experiences for many. Experiences that make you more conciliatory and arouse curiosity

about the diversity lived in the universal Church. Experiences that lead to surprises. Experiences that show ways out of conflict and enable communities that are close to the people, with great presence of mind and approachable. Some, however, will also say that it is part of the catholicity of the universal Church that the sacrament of priestly ordination remains with men. Even today, cultural imprints are at work which leads us back

What is meant is the humility that takes the fact seriously that the Church can be prophetic only if it is attentive to the passage of time, a new era, and new realms of experience.

to José Casanova and his analysis. It will therefore be important to keep in mind the diversity of the cultural contexts that exist in the universal Church. The universal Church is set in motion only when the individual Churches take an interest in each other and do not issue warnings against each other. Otherwise, a dilemma will remain – with fatal consequences. ■

On the Necessity of Deconstructing Toxic Masculinity

Emotion Instead of Control

The current logic of male sexuality, which is based on the domination and control of the female body, reproduces a patriarchal order. It is not good – neither for the self-proclaimed heroes nor for the women they oppress. **BY LUIS CARLOS AGUILAR BADILLA**

Coming from the diocese of Puntarenas on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, a very small country on the American continent, I am part of the diversity and hopes of the church in Latin America and the Caribbean. I am the eldest son of a labourer and of a seamstress and housewife. As a child, I was taught how to behave in the patriarchal order that we imbibed with our mother's milk.

Once I grew up, I had to start all over again. As the poem by Argentinian poet Alfonsina Storni titled "The Weight of Ancestors" states: "You told me: I do not weep for my father. You told me: I do not weep for my grandfather. The men of my race did not weep. They were made of steel." As a priest with more than 30 years of professional experience in my home diocese, I have worked for more than 15 years to deconstruct the toxic masculinity in which I was raised. Thanks to Caritas Latin America and the Caribbean (SELACC) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), I have been able to begin a journey toward a peaceful masculinity through workshops.

It is so necessary that we set out together; deconstruct ourselves, our habits, and structures; and build new, more prosperous ones. It is also necessary to recognise, value, and defend the contributions feminism has made for centuries, both as a movement and as a political theory. It is necessary to incorporate feminist theories with scientific precision into academic curricula, university research, theological work, and educational work in general. We should stop conjugating only in the masculine form and endeavour to recover the names and knowledge of so many women who, although often invisible or marginalised, have contributed so much to the various fields of knowledge.

We must think more deeply about masculinity, promote interdisciplinary studies, and develop proposals that contribute to ending the patriarchal paradigm. It is necessary to break with binary logics and abstractions that conceal



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injustices and with a rationality that forgets that men also have emotions and feelings. We must discover and promote the human being as a "relational" subject, a subject that is open to dialogue and attentive to the needs of others. This path will lead to new forms of organisation and work, public administration, decision-making, and a synodal church.

When we embark on such a journey, our hearts may feel a little heavy. But we must not despair. Because the wellbeing of men is in our hands. Hegemonic masculinity must be overcome in all instances that are responsible for the education and socialisation of children and young people, because this is where change happens most effectively. It is important that people are educated from an early age to be able to form strong emotional bonds. This allows their personality to develop more fully and freely, and they learn to resolve conflicts peacefully and through dialogue.

The previous logic of male sexuality, which is based on the domination and control of the female body and its unrestricted availability, reproduces a patriarchal order. Gender relations here are based on power, domination, and violence. This model is particularly promoted through pornography, which has become the most common method of sex education for young people via the Internet, or by prostitution. There is an urgent need to create spaces for affective and sexual communication on an equal footing. Everyone should be able to retain their autonomy and learn to resolve the inevitable conflicts peacefully and through dialogue. To do this, however, we men must overcome our self-image as heroic machos and recognise women as self-determined subjects.

We have a long way to go. The necessary prerequisites must be learnt and passed on from generation to generation. In times of synodality, we must recognise the power of the resurrection and bear witness to true fraternity. We want to do our utmost to achieve this! ■

The “Ecclesial Dream” of Pope Francis

Sobering Distress

In Africa women are rarely listen to. As agents of change and social cohesion and as guardians of tradition, women seem doubly forgotten and invisible. This has to change.

BY ANNE BÉATRICE FAYE

Advocates for women’s ordination rarely come from Africa. And yet women have long been present there: in families and parishes, in consecrated life, in associations and movements, schools and catechesis. They are the main protagonists of the Church’s mission. Nevertheless, they are subordinated. They remain invisible. They merely carry out what superior clerics decide. Many feel ignored and humiliated. They suffer abuse and are not adequately remunerated for their work. There is therefore a need for visible changes in the structures and mentalities of the Church: for an ecclesiology of communion instead of hierarchy. Some groups in the Church are actively working to open up leadership roles in the Church, including priestly, pastoral, and theological roles, to women. After all, gifts and vocations must be recognized regardless of gender. In Africa, however, there is still no broad understanding of gender equality in church service. African churches are still clerical, patriarchal and hierarchical.

A typical experience: On Maundy Thursday in 2023, our pastoral care team met for a meal together. During this meal, the senior priest set a few things straight. I quote from memory what he said: “I am the parish priest here and the only one who decides who in my pastoral team has to do what. I forbid you to request priestly services from my vicars without my knowledge and permission. (...) I have to protect my priests, just as you protect your sisters. (...) Have I expressed myself clearly? (...) Now we will thank God and go to worship.”

Clerical Abuse of Power at the Dinner Table

However, he did not provide any concrete examples or with the opportunity for feedback. That’s why I wrote him a letter after that meeting. I began by thanking him for the invitation to dinner and devotion to the Eucharist. Then I



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described why I perceived his behavior as an abuse of power. I asked him where the ministry and the place of the pastors and sisters involved in schools and colleges, in health care and in family pastoral care should lie. Why should we turn to the parish priest for a Mass, a blessing, spiritual assistance, the Sacrament of Reconciliation or a simple prayer? I advocated for much more teamwork so that we can thrive, learn from each other and value each other. So that our church becomes a safe space for all people. I did not receive a reply to my letter. When the priest summoned me, I didn’t go to see him. So he came to me, justified himself and said that he was afraid of losing his position as a priest because of me. He criticized that I had gone too far when I called his behavior an “abuse of power.” Abuse of power is severely punished by the Church. I asked him if he could give me his answer in writing. I’m still waiting for it.

Two Key Insights from the Synodal Processes

This incident provides the background to my experiences in the synodal process on a continental and world level. I would like to emphasize two points in particular.

First, an admission. In my socio-cultural context, it is not so easy to see oneself as ‘fellow travelers’. It is not so easy to speak plainly to bishops and priests. Especially the faithful, who are not part of the church hierarchy, find this difficult. But it is necessary: in the Church of God in Africa, bishops, priests, faithful and religious should allow each other to meet on an equal footing, and at the same time to have different opinions. Secondly, an observation: far too often, concern for the ecclesiastical institution is at odds with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. The leadership role of the bishop or priest in itself allows for coherent

pastoral action, provided that bishops and priests are open to work as a team. However, this becomes difficult when their leadership actions are too focused on their own person and their authority.

The End of a Culture of Misogyny

The situation of women in religious orders seems to me to be particularly precarious. In recent months and years, I have become aware that we nuns are sacrificing ourselves for a system that devalues us, and that we have deeply internalized this. We are a free, silent workforce who are not represented at the decision-making level. Anyway, that's the situation I'm in. I am the director of a diocesan college in which I accompany more than 700 boys and girls. But I remain an employee of the diocese, with all the subordination that this entails, especially in religious life, often very subtly. In church history, there are numerous examples of churchmen silencing nuns, removing them from elected offices, or dismissing them if they did not comply with their demands. Even today, the constitutions of women religious – that is, of educated, capable, strong, called women – must be approved by churchmen.

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 • • • • •

Although they are pillars in the life of the Church, although canon law has opened the doors wide for women, they are left out of the decision-making process. In addition, they face dramatic challenges such as female genital mutilation, early or forced marriage, and the painful rites of widowhood, all of which profoundly violate the dignity of women and girls. It is true that there is a certain development in the Church's consciousness with regard to women. But in reality, these developments and principles are not yet sufficiently followed up. How, for example, can a synodal process be initiated if the issue of gender justice has not yet been adequately answered by the Church? Fortunately, today there is a strong reaction to the marginalization of women. One of the most striking signs is the growing awareness of their dignity and important role in society and in the Church. The question of what position women should play in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is asked again and again. The feeling of injustice is expressed again and again. What does the Church gain in Africa, what do churches and societies around the world gain if more women become more politically active? Typical female politics can mean promoting

peace and resolving conflicts in a different way to men, choosing means other than violence and war to resolve conflicts, and thus advancing positive values in a deeper sense. Peacekeeping operations might be more effective if women were more involved.

Hearing the Voices of Women

We need to listen to what women have to say about the way they are treated in the Church. It is important to include women in the decision-making process within the Church. They devote themselves so generously to the poor, the sick, to women and to the education of young people, with a fidelity that has sometimes led them to martyrdom. Consecrated women can thus help the African Church to make more transparent the perspective of service by their dedication, self-giving, welcoming, listening, and concrete attention to the little ones and the poor. All this can help to challenge certain mental patterns and organize ecclesial life.

It is no longer a question of a more egalitarian vision of rights or of women being allowed fulfil their roles in the same way as men. What is at stake is an ecclesiology of communion, capable of welcoming and valuing differences, with a view to contributing effectively to the Church's mission as such. ■

Voices from Uganda

The True Synodal Church We Want to See

The debate about equal rights in the Catholic Church is nothing new, but the goal is far from being achieved. Many women in Africa are faced with the special challenge of fighting for participation and equal opportunities against the background of social expectations in a strongly patriarchal culture. **BY HELEN NAMBALIRWA NKABALA**

At the closing of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI addressed women with these words: “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness. The hour in which women acquire an influence, an effect, and a power in the world that has never yet been achieved. That is why, at this moment – when humanity is undergoing a deep transformation – women imbued with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to keep humanity from perishing.”

The Council Promised to Empower Women

Fifty-eight years later, we are asking the same question about the place of women in the Church. That may sound disappointing, but the good news is that the conversations we are having today simply continue what other started. That re-energises us even more to keep the conversation about this critical issue going. We shall neither tarry nor retreat. We don't intend to give up.

I will not delve into the complexities surrounding the historical role of women in the Catholic church over the centuries because many have articulated it clearly. What I want to present here is another voice on the move toward

women having a more active role in the ministerial life of the Church, particularly in the Mass, as a means for the church to realize the actual and meaningful understanding and practice of synodality.

It was not until Vatican II that we could see a total change in the church liturgy and the participation of the lay faithful in the affairs of the Catholic church. The Council promised to empower the laity, including women. Scholars have observed that within Judeo-Christian religions, a heavy patriarchal structure is particularly prevalent in the Catholic Church. It is described as so pervasive that some refer to Roman Catholicism as a sexual caste system in which the structure, beliefs, rituals, and norms are patriarchal despite women's greater participation and contribution to its sustenance and growth.

Only Limited Successes on the Road to Full Equality

Therefore, we cannot underestimate the role women play in the life of the Catholic church despite their continued exclusion from its leadership – its hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons. Interestingly, even when the Catholic church denies certain liturgical privileges to women

– such as becoming priests or deacons and celebrating the sacraments – the church strengthens the importance of motherhood and women as caregivers through its veneration of the blessed Virgin Mary.

I do not stand here to lament, because I know that, compared to today, the situation was worse in the twentieth century. The new Code of Canon Law has positive ramifications for women with qualifications to access positions of church leadership, such as in diocesan consultative and advisory bodies. Here women can actively exercise their leadership skills. I am aware that Pope Francis deliberately proposed a unique methodology that ensures that this synod is celebrated, not as an event, but a process lasting from 2021 to 2024.

This approach ensures adequate time to include the voice of the entire people of God so that the Church can move into the future together. The pope went with the strategic inclusion of women from different parts of the world. In Uganda today we celebrate the appointment of the eight eminent Ugandans as knights and dames to recognize their contribution to the Catholic church. Our own sister, Prof. Dr. *Dominica Dipio* was appointed as one of the four consultors of the Vatican Council of



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Culture in 2019. However, all this success is just one step on a journey towards the greater goal. So, as we celebrate, we do not have the comfort of being able to give up on major pronouncements on issues of gender equality in the Church. Doing so would mean letting down the next generation.

With the intentional process of “journeying together” at the local level through the Synod on Synodality, it is crucial and urgent that necessary changes are made in line with women’s inclusion in church structures.

As an African woman, I know that we are faced with even greater challenges. They are created by heavily patriarchal cultures that want us to remain timid – not to mention the unfortunate task of having to prove our abilities just because we are African and women. It is therefore not surprising that most studies on the issue find African voices either to be faint or heavily muted on the subject. The ambivalence with which African women respond is specific to many contextual issues. But this reality should never be taken for a lack of interest in the subject. Interestingly, as observed by Dominica Dipio, “a full cultural experience is incomplete when it is not structured with women’s voices” (2023). Of course, some argue that the request for recognition by women is a desire for power and not service. That is a red herring to me. All we are asking for is inclusion and equal opportunities for service to all God’s creation. Isn’t the biblical evidence reason enough for us to argue that any domination and discrimination based on gender is a violation of human rights?

Equal Rights Do not Require Structures Specific to Women

Homogeneity or not? I am aware that indeed we are not homogeneous as women, but allow me

ring a bell of caution, that this should not be a subject of debate at this moment. As a matter of fact, if we decide to dwell on the question of homogeneity or ideological differences, we will lose sight of the goal. In my view, what women want is equality in service as God’s creation.

All other issues should not therefore be stumbling blocks now. They may come later.

Women are not asking for affirmative action, but inclusion in service. It is therefore my considered opinion that there is absolutely no need to create new structures for women. Women need only to be incorporated and included within existing structures. Therefore, even when ordination into priesthood still looks like a mirage, for starters let the women, especially

those who have gone through formation, be ordained as deacons. After all, they are already offering diaconal services, albeit without recognition.

Tackle the problem of the Imbalance of Power

It is high time that the church addresses the issue of power imbalance by dealing with issues of gender equality and inclusion for women. Looking at Genesis 1:27, Genesis 5:2, and Galatians 3:28, we are presented with beautiful images of male and female as equal partner in God’s sights.

If that is so – and we know that it is – why must we hold conferences like this to act?

Isn’t the biblical evidence reason enough for us to argue that all domination and discrimination based on sex is an offence against human dignity? And so, the call for the inclusion of women is a justified cause and must urgently be received and addressed as such. ■

Isn’t the biblical evidence reason enough for us to argue that all domination and discrimination based on sex is an offence against human dignity?

Reasons for more Involvement of Women – an African Perspective

Overcoming the Patriarchal Model

Women have actively participated in church life for a long time. But they still face discrimination because they are not integrated enough in pastoral care, mission, and theology. Outdated gender roles and patriarchal models continue to have an effect.

BY MARY NZILANI WAMBUA

For a long time, women were expected to attend to church services and listen to the homily. Today, women are involved and actively participate in the life of the Church. But what is their status? The Catholic Church is aware that women are the cornerstone of families and the first teachers and evangelizers of their children. But women play a part in only a few areas in the Church because women are discriminated against based on their gender. That is a waste of women's talents, and it creates feelings of low self-esteem and worthlessness. Women are afraid of speaking out, for if they do so, they are branded as "feminists," which to many means a bad person, a rebel. All these challenges traumatise women and lead to depression, stress, rejection. But what causes these challenges?

Patriarchal models in Culture and Society

That's the result of archaic laws along with obsolete cultural norms and anthropological conceptualizations. A woman has no value apart from motherhood. She can be married off at a very young age. She may be discarded if unable to bear children. She is, as a rule, denied any significant intellectual and social advancement.

And the church has no suitable mechanisms to combat the scourge of sexual abuse of the lay people and women religious by clerics and laymen. The institution of the church is associated with denial and cover-up instead of being at the forefront of the fight for justice and women's rights.

The word of God calls us to respect women. We read from Genesis 1:27 that men and women are created in God's image. The wise woman was held in respect and consulted in important matters (Prov. 31). The Gospels show us that women were among Jesus' disciples. They are not accidental



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components but active participants (Lk. 10: 38-42) and privileged beneficiaries of Jesus' attention. Jesus supported women whose moral standards were unsatisfactory (Lk 7: 36-50) and the woman who was caught in adultery (Jn. 8: 1-11).

Theology Aids Gender Equality

The primary goal of liberation theology is to free women from being marginalized socially, politically, economically, and religiously – all of which they suffer almost universally. Cultural mores may not be rejected en masse, but it is important to see that they are a product of sinful human nature. Culture must constantly be purified of all elements militating against the dignity of all persons. The same is true in theology and pastoral practice. Forms of language, attitudes, and symbols that clearly harm the humanity of women and that do not reflect the universality of God's liberation of the created order must be avoided and removed from theological and liturgical use.

For a better future for women, it is necessary for all church institutions to integrate the call to synodality into their mission. Structures and procedures must be reformed in favour of women. Women must be included in pastoral care and missionary work. They must be allowed to teach in seminaries.

Philomena Mwaura correctly says that it is not enough to be satisfied with the number of women studying theology. The fundamental question is how women are dealt with in the Catholic Church. What difference do women's concerns make to the process of theologizing? The Church must take seriously and recognize equally the various talents, insights, and perspectives that men and women bring into the Church. ■



Mirjam

© Susanne Janssen, of the cycle „Die großen Töchter Gottes. Starke Frauen der Bibel“, Leipzig: Edition Chrismon, 2018.

Between Systemic Oppression and Liberating Emancipation

Where Women Are – and Where They Want to Be

Clericalism and patriarchal hierarchies run through church structures worldwide. Thus, many women are not aware of their dignity, being created in God's image. What is needed is theological education and worldwide networks for empowerment. **BY VIRGINIA SALDANHA**

Women all over the world wish that the discrimination based on gender in leadership of the Catholic Church be recognized and corrected. Some groups want the admission of women to the current form of the priesthood, others to the diaconate, others still want the current form of priesthood to change while fostering the common priesthood of all the baptized.

However, a majority of women are still ignorant of their role and dignity in the Church. They believe that the clergy are in the place of God. Theological education is very important for women to understand their position in the Church. But theological education is not easy for women to access in developing countries.

The Indian Women Theologians discussed “The common priesthood of Women” at a meeting in 2015. They decided that women should not enter the current form of priesthood because “new wine requires new wineskins.” New visions and liberative insights cannot be contained in old structures. The meeting noted that the existing hierarchal structures of the Church, based on the ministerial priesthood, are a significant deviation from what Jesus envisioned for his community of equal discipleship. After all, in the early Church women shared in decision making and had leadership and liturgical roles in the community (Acts 18: 26, 21:8-9; Rom 16).

The need to explore further and find new ways of growing as a prophetic and witnessing community according to the vision of Jesus was expressed.

In 1991, the Asian bishops had articulated their vision for the Church in Asia and described it as “a communion of communities, where “laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each



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other as sister and brothers”, in a participatory and co-responsible Church (FABC V, January 8, 1991). This led to the creation of SCCs (Small Christian Communities) in Asia. However, the momentum towards that vision was lost to the power of clericalism. The desk in the Office of Laity that promoted training for this vision of the Church is shut down. The Church in Asia went backward to being a patriarchal and hierarchal institution.

The structure of the Church is rooted in patriarchy and hierarchy and modelled on the Roman Empire. So the Priesthood enjoys great power, which has bred clericalism. I define clericalism as an addiction to power. Priests want to be in charge and in control. They continue to exercise a dominating, topdown and not a collaborative style of leadership. Priests see women as mere helpers, not as equal disciples. These are the biggest challenges to women's leadership in the Church.

Women participate in many pastoral responsibilities. But these responsibilities require just following what the priests tell them to do. Women do not make any autonomous decisions. Women leaders in the SCCs did a good job in building community. They represented the majority of leaders in the SCCs and were appreciated. But today these women leaders have become the extended arm of the priest in the community. A woman only carries messages of the parish priests to the community. Women are not encouraged to make independent decisions or use their gifts and talents to minister to the communities.

Emancipation and Education in the Fight Against Abuse

Renewed training of leaders in the New Way of Being Church is absolutely necessary. However,

community leaders receive little training and do not understand the underlying theology. Leaders are randomly chosen, according to the comfort level of the parish priest. Trained leaders are a challenge to the priests. Priests do not like to be questioned; they want absolute obedience.

The majority of the baptized are not aware of their baptismal call to be priest, prophet and leader. They are content with the ritualistic practices where the priest is the centre. Masses, novenas, retreats offered on the internet have reinforced this ritualistic thinking about the Church.

Abuse of power by the clergy can also be seen in their relationship with religious sisters. Some courageous women religious resisted the abuse, but the people support the abusive priest or bishop. Some religious sisters in India have had to go to court to get justice. Sexual abuse of women and children is wrapped in silence. People are afraid to question the clergy about abuse. Those who have dared to speak up are silenced. Silence is coerced and bought. A mother of a child victim of abuse whose case was taken to court was maligned in the community so she had to move to a different parish.

Violence to women is not addressed or even spoken about in the Church today. The Bishops Conference of India brought out a document on gender policy in 2010 – but it remains a dead document, as do their policies to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace. Religious women go to remote villages in India and build a community without any formal recognition of their role.

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When a substantial community is established, a priest is sent in to start a parish. The sister who originally built the community is rendered irrelevant! Some women theologians are teachers in seminaries and are invited to speak on various official fora in the Church. They are able to achieve some degree of awareness, but not enough to make changes in clerical attitudes towards women. If women theologians speak strongly about women's ordination, they risk losing recognition by bishops. Mainly women theologians keep asking the questions about women's role and responsibility in leadership in the Church, after all. The Indian Women Theologians Forum is not officially recognized by the hierarchy nor is Ecclesia of Women in Asia, a forum for Asian women theologians. There are some male theologians who do support women strongly. But they, too, are marginalized by the bishops. Women's studies and feminist theology are not taught in the seminaries. Feminist theology is not even recognized as a subject.

Opposing Structural Marginalisation

Women who do not question but obey the bishops are given responsibility and roles in the Church, but they do not achieve any progress on women's concerns. Thus, some women work in the diocesan curia – in subordinate positions. Many women are catechists in parishes, but most are not even trained. Their work is voluntary. All those who work in the Church in India do it as honorary service. Women do not take up the

study of theology because they cannot get a paid job in the Church for their years of study. Mainly sisters study theology for their ministry. Very few lay women take up the study of theology for the sake of broadening their understanding of the faith. Women who have studied theology tend to question the hierarchy, which makes the hierarchy very uncomfortable.

Women have no authority, autonomy or power in the Church, so they cannot achieve much. My own experience of working in the bishop's conference of India and Asia is an example of this. I wanted to organize a meeting of women theologians in Asia to enter into dialogue with the bishops on issues that the bishops found contentious. The bishops refused to allow me to organize such a meeting. I went ahead anyway and organized a meeting where women theologians spoke about their God experience in life and how feminist theology was seen as 'vital' for changing attitudes and promoting the inclusion of women in decision-making and their full partnership in the Mission of the Church. But only ten bishops attended the meeting instead of thirty.

With the invention of digital platforms like ZOOM, women have been provided with a space where they can have their own meetings, liturgies, discussions and prayer sessions. Earlier, getting a space for these activities was a problem. During the Covid lockdown women began conducting liturgies online. Many found these liturgies very spiritual and energizing. Today women have come together as the global Catholic Women's Council of which I am the Chairperson. It will hopefully help to build and strengthen women's voice in the Church. ■

Giving a Voice to Women with a Vocation

The Long Struggle for Equality

Two publications give a voice to women and their vocation stories and focus the discussion on the struggle for gender equality. BY PHILIPPA RATH

Today, during the Liturgy of the Word, I read my story from our book 'Because God Wills It' as a sermon. At the end of the service, a congregant stood up and said, 'I wish you were able to live your vocation.' And all the congregants applauded. In addition, the story of my vocation actually continues, because on 1 October I accepted a position as a consultant for diaconal pastoral care. This position was newly created as part of other vocations of the Church in the diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart. The decisive impetus for this came from our book and the Synodal Path. Step by step it continues ..."

This testimony of one of the authors of the book "Weil Gott es so will. Frauen erzählen von ihrer Berufung zur Diakonin und Priesterin (Because God Will it: Women Speak About Their Vocations as Deacons and Priests)" (Freiburg 2022) shows that something is moving in our church, albeit very slowly. Women's struggle for gender equality and for the access of all baptized and confirmed persons to the offices of the Church – in short, for the universal validity of human rights in the Church – is bearing its first fruits. God's people are on the move all over the world, varying in vehemence and urgency and differing in the issues that are considered priorities. But

one thing is certain: People at the grassroots level are often miles ahead of the officials. Yes, some bishops are making an honest effort to advance the urgently needed reform projects and to implement the decisions of the Synodal Path step by step. But they are still too few. Far too rare are committed ministers who have the courage to move forward without the backing of Rome, if necessary. The fact that there was only one bishop to speak at our international hybrid conference, "God's Strong Daughters", in Leipzig in September 2023 – and then very vaguely – speaks volumes. Apparently, the beginning of the Roman Synod was too close for voices to have been found that could clearly and unambiguously bring themselves to make a commitment to "women in office." Why is there still – or again – so much fear and so much faintheartedness? Isn't Catholicism broad, open, and free enough to tolerate different positions on important issues and to see diversity and regional differences as an enrichment rather than a threat to unity? In any case, God's strong daughters are unflinchingly on



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the move on all continents to stand up for their concerns. More and more of them now freely admit that they have long since not only lived and worked as priests in their parishes, but are priests, even without ecclesiastical recognition. Others freely express what many others think: Will there still be women in the future who are willing to be ordained into the "church system" if reforms are still so long in coming? Finally, can I not live my Catholicism and vocation more convincingly and honestly outside the Church? The majority do not yet think this way. But the number is growing, and grassroots communities and communities are being formed that live their Christianity in new and different ways.

"Mujeres Sacerdotes – ¿Cuándo? Diálogos en torno al sacerdocio de las mujeres (Priestesses Now! Dialogues on the Female Priesthood)", edited by *Maria José Arana* and *Adelaide Baracco* (Desclée De Brouwer 2023) was published recently. It ties in with its German-language counterpart *Weil Gott es so will* (Because God Wills It) and shows once again that there are women in all parts of the world who are called, who are endowed with charisma and competence, and who are waiting to finally find recognition and be ordained. Both books break

a taboo and give a voice to the women who are silent or have fallen silent over the years. They help liberate these women from anonymity and clearly attribute to them a share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal dignity of Christ, which the Second Vatican Council granted to the entire People of God.

Both books have changed the lives of many people and ensured that the topic of gender equality in the church has now landed where it has belonged for a long time: At the center of church life. This topic will not disappear again until the implementation of fundamental reforms and comprehensive gender equality finally takes hold in the church. Many expectations and hopes are now directed towards Rome and the World Synod. May God prevent those concerned with this topic from remaining speechless and immobile. Otherwise, the much-vaunted unity will give way to further alienation and inner or outer emigration of very many women. ■

Joint Monastic Decision-Making Processes as an Inspiration for the Church of Today

Do What Is Necessary Now!

Benedictine nuns have lived according to the Rule of St Benedict from the 6th century. The Rule is relevant for shared responsibility in a fraternal church. **BY IRENE GASSMANN**

A monastic community forms a church in miniature. We Benedictine nuns organize our monastic life according to the *Rule of St. Benedict* (RB). “Rule” must be understood in the sense of “guideline.” Written in the sixth century for monks living together, it is also the inspiration and basis for women’s communities. I am always surprised at how topical and relevant Benedict’s instructions are – especially regarding a fraternal church in the 21st century.

In the first chapter of the Rule, Benedict lists different types of monks. He favours those who lead a common life under the leadership of an abbot or prioress. Benedict describes this life as the most powerful: Living in community, arguing with one another, and seeking solutions and paths to follow together strengthens both the individual and the community.

Benedict demands a lot from those who manage the monastery. They should set a good example. Doing so achieves more than many words. The monastery leadership must be aware of the difficult and arduous task of guiding souls and serving the individuality of many (RB 2). The abbot or prioress must provide leadership rather than reign over the community (RB 64).

The members of the community elect the leaders.

Each individual member must listen to the Spirit and ask who is suitable for the demanding leadership tasks. All sisters are therefore jointly responsible for the election of the prioress.

Shared responsibility is also evident in the decision-making process for any issue arising in the monastic community. Benedict says, “If there are important matters to be discussed in the monastery, all members should be invited. Everyone should be present, including the younger ones, because God often tells them what is best for the community (RB 3): “As often as any special business must be transacted in the monastery, let the abbot convoke the whole community and himself state what is the matter in hand. And we have thus said that all are to be called to council because it is often to a junior that the Lord reveals what is best.” This instruction is remarkable when we consider that in Benedict’s time the wisdom of the elders counted above all. With this attitude, Benedict brings a new dynamic into the coexistence of a community. He knows the value of the viewpoint of the younger generation and that of those on the margins. They have a different perspective and can thus contribute to renewal and development.



Prioress Sr. **Irene Gassmann** OSB, born in 1965, joined the Benedictine convent in Fahr (Switzerland) in 1986. She worked as a teacher and headmistress at the convent’s own school for women in farming. She has been prioress of the Fahr convent since 2003. She is the initiator of “Prayer on Thursdays” and has been involved in the core team for “Church with Women” since 2014.

We Benedictine nuns orient ourselves almost naturally on these and other directives of Benedict. They give us valuable impulses for our monastic spirituality. We women skip over and ignore only the two chapters on priests (RB 60 and RB 62).

At this point, it should be mentioned that Benedict himself was not a priest. That may come as a surprise today. He founded monasteries, led them as abbot, and wrote a monastic rule that is still relevant 1,500 years later. In his Rule, Benedict exercises extreme restraint towards priests. Was he confronted with the problem of clericalism as an abbot and monk? In any case, he repeatedly emphasises that priests have no special status in the community and naturally take the place they are entitled to when they join the monastery. The consecrated should also beware of arrogance and pride (RB 62). Clear words!

Priestly ministry in Benedictine monasteries does not involve any privileges. You do not have to be an ordained priest to lead a monastery and make decisions. The Rule of St Benedict shows this very clearly. We women still practice this today. Nevertheless, we are dependent on priests if we want to receive the sacraments.

For Benedict, service at the altar is very important. However, when Benedict speaks of

worship in his Rule, he always has the Liturgy of the Hours in mind. Thirteen of the seventy-four chapters of the Rule are dedicated to worship. This marks the priority of the Liturgy of the Hours in monastic life: Nothing is to be preferred to the Divine Office (RB 48).

Only in chapter 62 does Benedict speak about the priests and the service at the altar. He writes, “If the situation requires it, the monastery leadership appoints a proven person from the community to serve at the altar and requests ordination for him” (RB 62). The translation of Benedict’s Rule into simple and fair language by Christoph Müller (Freiburg 2022) inspires and provokes us to rethink service at the altar. Benedict does not recognise any other sacramental acts or ministries that are reserved for consecrated men. The service at the altar, the celebration of the Eucharist, is important, which is why someone must be appointed and ordained from the community if the situation requires it.

Let us be inspired by this proven monastic practice and not wait any longer. For it is clear what the situation of our Church requires today. ■

Building Bridges to a Renewed Understanding of a Theology of Ministry

When Relationships Engender Reflection

The World Synod 2023–2024 must create spaces in which relationships can grow, in which God himself has His say. The limits of one's own perspective can be overcome only in an exchange with others and by reflecting on what has been experienced. Supposedly cemented theologies are thus shaken. BY JEAN EHRET

What kind of theology is needed to recognise God in life, especially when considering the position of women in the church? Theologically, I say to myself that revelation does not happen primarily through texts dictated by God. God's will is revealed in life, in companionship with Jesus, and in an encounter with the exalted Lord, who converses with people as friends (Dei Verbum, 2). Texts provide such experiences a form that has been recognised in the Church as God-given. The term "gospel" also does not primarily refer to a text, but to a proclamation in word and life. Salvation takes place in encounters, in relationships. In other words: In them, the living God communicates with us and who needs in turn to be recognised by us.

That is why it is so important to me that the synod takes place in a protected space in which the participants are able to meet, and relationships can grow. Through dialogue, we can then reflect and contemplate on what we should do today. Of course, these working sessions also require rhetorical, canonical, and diplomatic skills. Theological expertise is also required, but it is not the benchmark. When people come together, many aspects play a role. God "expresses himself" in this discernment of spirits.

Seemingly unmovable fronts and deep rifts make dialogue difficult. At meetings and discussions, one group of opinion ignores another. Those who are of the same opinion confirm each other in their arguments. During our training as secondary school teachers, however, we were taught to involve everyone in the discussion. Exercises in debate, in which you had to defend another person's opinion with which you disagreed, made the pupils see themselves from a different perspective. This requires intellectual



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asceticism and the humility to admit that one cannot grasp the whole from one's own perspective and that one's own thoughts remain contingent.

The Experience of a Double Transformation

Theological rationality develops neither outside of relationships nor detached from affectivity. The topics that we consider, discuss, and deal with are too existential for that. Moreover, we are all shaped by our character, education, environment, tasks, self-image, life decisions, and our entire biography. This subjectivity also applies to our theology. It does not call into question theology's claim to serve the truth through applying various methods. At the same time, theology must be aware of it and use the necessary means reflexively, critically, and creatively to incorporate experiences into thinking and spirituality and thus into the network of relationships between God, the world, and the self. These points are decisive in the discussions on the topic of "women in the church," or rather in the call for women to be honoured by the church in a way that corresponds to their diverse commitment, their responsibility, and, first and foremost, their person. However, I want to go beyond the abstract remarks of principle but would like to look at an example that exemplifies some of the points I have made.

A few weeks ago, I told a confrere that I would be attending the Leipzig conference, "God's Strong Daughters." He asked me if I would read the latest publications and what particularly challenged me in them. My answer was a story. An Anglican vicar friend of mine had invited me to attend her Sunday service before she changed jobs. She wanted me to preach. I accepted the invitation immediately. We already knew each

other from the years of her theological studies. After her ordination, her office in the diocesan education centre of our archdiocese was just a few doors down from mine. The seminarians regularly met my colleague, who wore a skirt and collar. Despite my good intentions, I had not yet been able to visit her at a Sunday service, over which she presided.

At the beginning of the summer, we stood together at the altar. She in an alb and stole and I in an academic gown and rochet, united in listening to the Word and in prayer with the congregation. I did not concelebrate, but I did experience very intensely how she spoke the words of institution. And this is where a different kind of transformation took place: a transformation in my experience, in my thinking.

Rethinking After the Experience

For could I really hold on to the idea that “nothing was happening” on the altar, that no transformation was taking place here? Should I really judge this service as a sham event, a simulacrum, in accordance with Catholic teaching? After all, a representative of the Anglican community was standing at the altar, that is, someone whose ordination is invalid according to Catholic doctrine, and a woman who supposedly cannot validly receive ordination. But to deny my colleague the validity of the sacraments she administered felt as if I knew exactly where God was turning the “tap of grace” on or off. Didn’t the church service I was attending live from God’s devotion to the praying people and their devotion to him? This impression was too strong for me to theoretically adhere to the official position of the church point by point. Thus, I replied to my confrere with this story. He was surprised and paused. He didn’t directly answer my question as to whether he could still claim that “nothing would happen” if a woman presided at the Eucharist. But he remarked, “You’re looking at it from a different perspective.” He became visibly thoughtful. In German, nachdenken

can be explained so beautifully from its two parts: It’s about thinking something after you’ve experienced it.

I felt the same way. In this service, the crucial question was quite complex for me. I asked myself if I should perhaps differentiate between the many individual elements and evaluate them differently: The prayers, scripture readings, sermon, and the Eucharistic Prayer and communion? But my experience is not based on individual elements, but on the big picture: A liturgy in which people encounter God and live Spirit-filled lives out of this relationship. The whole is more than the sum of the parts. So, I can no longer imagine that there is no living communion when a woman presides at a communion service.

Taking It Seriously – The Basis for a Changed Perspective

But I do not conclude from this that the Catholic Church should or even must ordain women. The Anglican Church is currently shaping epochal changes. Some of it is truly admirable. Others make me wonder, for example when people discuss whether the text of the Lord’s Prayer should be changed to make it gender appropriate. It is a major upheaval when a Christian church ordains women. In Western Europe, tradition, including the tradition of withholding ordination from women, no longer has the same value as in earlier times and other cultures. This is not necessarily always an advantage. But because of the experience I have described, I approach the question from a different perspective today. It’s not just philosophy that arises from wonder. So does theology.

How can moments come about that make us rethink things? The acquaintance, the friendship, the mutual appreciation that has developed, the context of Luxembourg society, which is strongly secularised and pluralistic at the same time, contributed to the fact that I met my Anglican colleague in this service not first with a theological prejudice, but first as a person and a Christian. We had already laughed so much together

and talked about our shared Christian faith and the challenges of pastoral work in Luxembourg, that I simply took her seriously. Taking her seriously also seems to me to be something fundamental for the synod and the dialogue, or rather the reflection on women in the church.

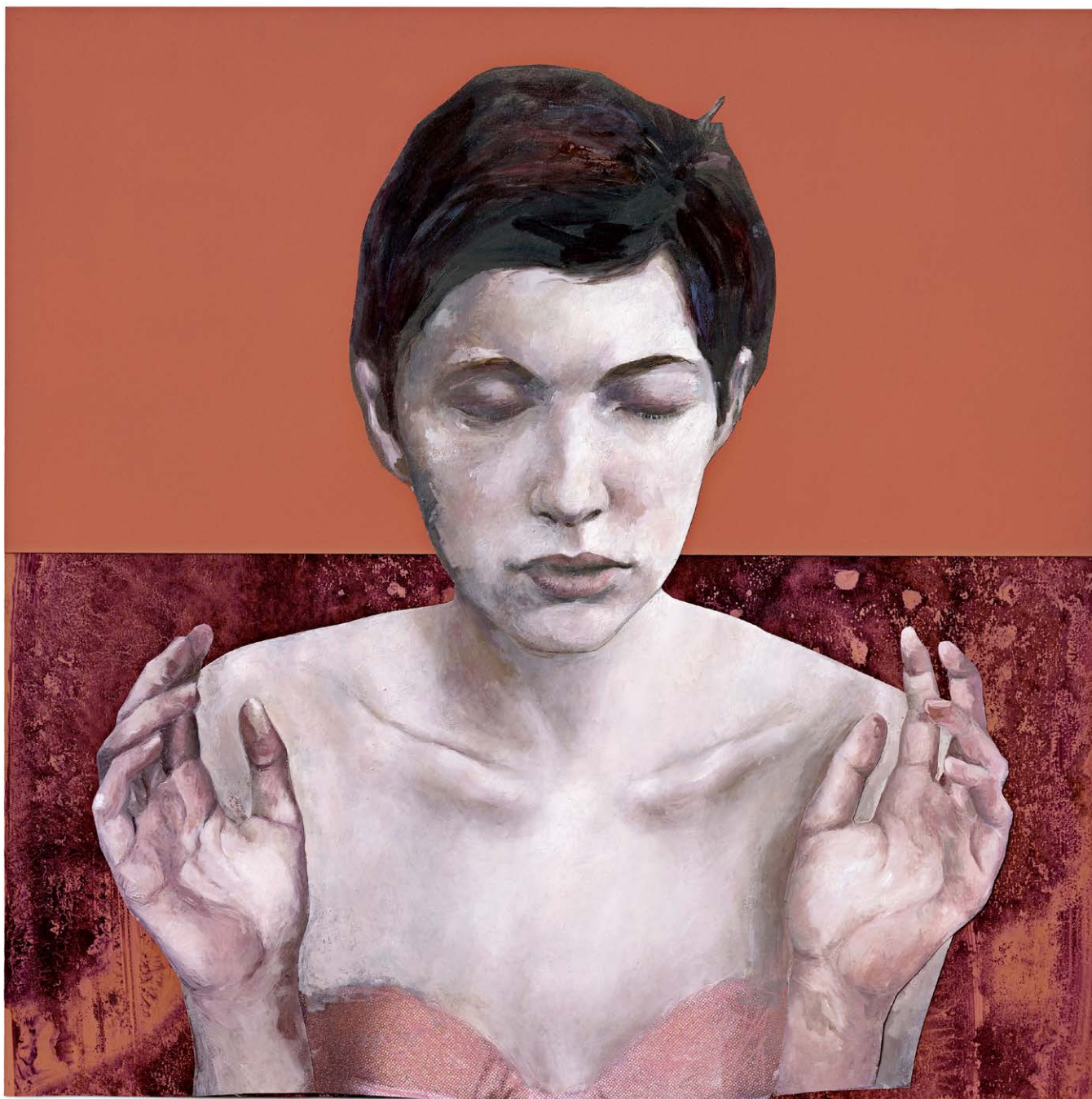
Creating Concrete Encounters in Which God Has His Say

Philosophically and theologically, many factors contributed to the fact that a suspension of judgement, an Epochè came about, that I paused and withheld my judgement. This attitude seems important to me when it comes to taking people into account. It can be taught and learnt, but it must also be practised and the uncertainty it causes must be allowed; it can be actively encouraged, but it can also be prevented. It is an essential factor in turning towards the phenomena.

When lecturing, I like to refer to the internet project „7 billion others“ by Yann Artus Bertrand. He and his cinematographers spent four years (2003–2007) filming around 6,000 people in 75 countries around the world answering the same questions. It is fascinating to listen to these testimonies and to look at the people who share their lives. Students become more sensitive to life and to people – not just to texts and ideas. They also reflect on what they have seen and heard in later discussions. Something happens in them, with them. The film “Out in Church” can have a similar effect. What would an Internet project like Yann Artus Bertrand’s about women in the church look like? How diverse would be the lives, activities, attitudes, professions, ministries, and offices that women fulfil? What questions would be asked? What testimony would become visible that has been hidden until now and needs to be uncovered? What exhibition could be made of the portraits? What theological reflection would it stimulate or deepen?

The large-scale diocesan and continental phase of the Synod already has something of what is evident in Yann Artus Bertrand. The current phase leads further into concrete encounters. This is where God himself can make his voice heard. ■

Did not the worship service live from God’s devotion to the praying people and their devotion to him?



Maria

© Susanne Janssen, of the cycle „Die großen Töchter Gottes. Starke Frauen der Bibel“, Leipzig: Edition Chrismon, 2018.

Why Women Theologians in Italy are Calling for a Better Theology of Ministry

Glass Ceilings and Clerical Alliances

The gender gap in the Catholic Church is huge. We need a fundamental revision of the traditional theology of ministry. We need one that finally and consistently incorporates the reforms of Vatican II and transforms the church in the spirit of the gospel. **BY SERENA NOCETI**

In Italy, too, religious practice is largely female. But women are practically absent from decision-making at diocesan and national levels. A growing awareness of this marginalisation is the reason why many young women grow estranged from the church. As is the case throughout the West, gender roles and cultural change marks Italian society. Women attain higher levels of education than men. They are involved in the world of work and politics, and many hold top and managerial roles. Italian legislation demands equal opportunities. However, since the idea of a male has hardly changed, the division of private and public spheres continues to predominate. The private sphere, with its affective and caring relationships, is primarily assigned to women. The public sphere, with its roles of authority, is given over to men.

The recognition of equal worth does not mean that women truly have the same opportunities to hold leadership positions – in society or in the church. That requires much more sensitivity. Gender-specific stereotypes must be recognized and denounced. Such sensitivity would gradually overcome the patriarchal-clerical structure that dominates the Italian church. We must overcome the widespread reading of a female Marian and male Petrine principle based on the work of *Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Although it has no biblical foundation, it has become the linchpin of the distinction between gender-specific roles in the church.

The familiar glass ceiling for women also exists in the church. Women are urged to work in the areas of education, childcare, and catechesis. But priests always hold leadership positions.



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Only 15 women are directors of diocesan catechetical office directors (out of 226) in Italy. Only in small dioceses do some women hold leadership positions. At the national level, only the office for disability is headed by a woman. The only noteworthy exception is the synod committee of the Italian church, made up half of women.

Estimates indicate that there are more than 40,000 women with a three- or five-year degree in religious studies and around 400 with a degree in theology. Nonetheless, an androcentric and patriarchal culture still holds sway, a culture that does not reflect the relationship between masculinity, power, and the sacred. A high number of presbyters and deacons still lead pastoral organisations because of their clerical status, not because of their competence. Stereotypes about a woman, who, by nature, would not be interested in exercising roles of authority, are still cultivated. Women in the church today do not have the power to decide on the “lines of mystical demarcation” (*Virginia Woolf*) around which ecclesial relations, practices, and structures are conceived and organised.

We need an honest stocktaking of pastoral tasks, of the distribution of power, and of the leadership role of women at all levels. Pope Francis has taken an important first step by appointing women to leadership positions, but Italian bishops have hardly followed his example. But even Pope Francis takes only a pragmatic approach, so that a scheme of concession stays in place. The glass ceiling is not broken. Instead, a trap door has opened from above in the glass ceiling, and some women are pulled upward by a few powerful men. This pragmatic “solution” may even delay an overall reform, because the focus shifts to the good

will possibilities of individuals, instead of addressing the issue at its roots.

What is to be done? Instituted ministries (lector, acolyte, and catechist) need to be promoted and enhanced. That would present concrete perspectives on the leadership of women in the framework of real pluralisation and deconstruct the reductive binomial split of clergy and laity.

Given the inertia of the Italian pastoral system, I also think that in Italy it is necessary to create a system of “women’s quotas” for a time (ten years?), with the request that each diocese hire two or three women in leadership roles. Sociologists warn us that profound changes occur only when the number of women is increased dramatically. On their way to leadership positions, women face many convoluted and complex obstacles. Resistance to a comprehensive restructuring of gender roles is strong.

That is obvious to women theologians in Italy. Women have entered the domain of theology as students and teachers since the first post-conciliar phase. Some have recently held leadership roles. But very few remain in academia. There are only very few women who are full-time lecturers. In major theological associations and faculties, they are perpetually in second place. Access to chairs at pontifical universities is a major structural problem. Italy does not have theological faculties at state or Catholic universities. An appointment based on open competition almost never takes place.

Along with a high level of education and expertise, networking is also essential. The founding of the Coordinamento Teologhe Italiane in 2003 enabled denunciation of existing structural problems and called for an examination of theological, ecclesial, and political questions from the perspective of gender. It made women theologians more visible and fostered collaboration. For the Synod, the Coordinamento delle associazioni teologiche italiane (CATI) expressly called for the ordination of women deacons. Above all, it has enabled a

fruitful interchange between the world of pastoral practices and academic reflection.

In the Church, the idea of women as leaders clashes par excellence with two Tridentine structures– the seminary and the parish. In both areas, clerics operate according to the logic of “homosocial reproduction” – a male-dominated exclusive club structure, with its networks of acquaintances and alliances, that is determined to stabilise the role of clergy in ecclesial identity.

True ecclesial transformation will only succeed when this mechanism is broken. It is not a matter of inventing alternative places or tasks for women, but of a comprehensive reform of church ministry. It’s a matter of sustainably restructuring the interplay of communication and participation. It will succeed through theological competence and the encroachment of women into places previously closed to them, individual empowerment, and the support of lay associations and movements.

Theological Vision of Ministry

Ordained ministry is the decisive factor for leadership in the church. Forward-looking theological approaches to a reform of ordained ministry must be that of the Vatican II, and not the Tridentine theology represented in the encyclical *Pastores dabo vobis* (1992) of *John-Paul II*. Vatican II developed its theology of the ordained ministry by abandoning the interpretation of the priestly nature (*sacerdotium*) as codified by scholasticism and the Council of Trent to open an ecclesiological-pneumatological foundation, as Vatican II did. It anchors the ordained ministry in safeguarding the apostolicity of the proclamation of Gospel and building up the community of the church.

It is also necessary to abandon the concept of two separate and different areas of power, *potestas ordinis* and

potestas iurisdictionis and replace them with the *tria munera* – the three tasks of the church (*munus docendi, pascendi, sanctificandi*). The focus must move from the priest as an individual to a collegial vision of leadership. The relationship

It is not a matter of inventing alternative places or tasks for women, but of a comprehensive reform of church ministry.

between ordained ministry and sacrament, power, and leadership must be redefined. The idea of the priest as a person with all these skills has had its day. The ontological justification of the priesthood, which lies in the idea of the representation of Christ and acting in persona Christi capitis must be

overcome. The clerical career ladder (the *cursus honorum* of ordination and career stages) should be abandoned. And it should have been abandoned with the conciliar renewal of the tripartite ministry, the abolition of minor orders, and the recognition the equal dignity of all the baptized.

Even today, the preservation of faith and the cohesion of the of the ecclesial community, for which the priest is responsible, are based exclusively on the male word, physicality, and experience. This approach reduces the church’s witness to the apostolic faith, which should speak of the universal, all-encompassing kingdom of God and of communion with God and among all persons and peoples.

A first important, possible, and necessary step would be the ordination of women deacons – the introduction of a non-priestly sacramental ministry for women. This is not simply a question of power. It is about the entirety of the ecclesial community from a gender-sensitive perspective. The focus is not on women, but on the relationships between men and women, how marginalizing differences are constructed, and how they can be deconstructed. The solution lies in the transformation of asymmetrical relationships to a participatory church that does justice to the gospel. ■

How Seven Female Activists Challenge the Institutional House of Cards in the Church

Parasols and Patriarchy

Some female activists from “Women’s Ordination Worldwide” were detained for hours by the police after a protest at the Vatican in 2022. Why? BY KATE MCELWEE

In August 2022, Pope Francis had called the world’s Catholic cardinals to Rome to discuss his reorganization of the Vatican’s bureaucracy, which includes for the first time ever the possibility of opening top positions to women. When nearly 200 men meet behind closed doors to discuss the future of the church without women, the irony is just too rich. That is why we, a group of activists from Women’s Ordination Worldwide made sure that women were not completely ignored and forgotten.

Dressed in cardinal red, seven of us walked uninterrupted down via della Conciliazione, the main road leading to the gates of the Vatican, carrying red paper parasols with messages written in white, including, “Sexism is a cardinal sin”, “Ordain women” and “It’s Reigning Men”. From there, our group of seven women processed to one of the main entrances where the cardinals would soon be entering their meeting.

We managed to greet just a few cardinals with our bright presence and simple reminder - your sisters are outside - before the police demanded we close the parasols and produce our identity documents. We were then kettled into a makeshift pen between the colonnades of St. Peter’s Square, getting us out of sight of the

prelates walking in. Women are usually in the metaphorical shadows of the Vatican, but we were trapped there for more than an hour while various levels of security decided what to do with us. Some of the officers were more annoyed that they did not have time for their coffee in the morning - something we had in common.

Then we were finally escorted through the crowds of the piazza toward the police station, but not before stopping for - you guessed it - coffee, under supervision, of course. Finally at the station, we were brought to a hallway on the second floor and were instructed to surrender our phones. We stood in that hallway with two officers and portraits of Popes Benedict and Francis on the wall watching us for another three hours.

Nearing four hours later, we were instructed to sign a few stacks of papers (one officer had to run out and get more paper to be able to print our transgressions), detailing a criminal law procedure for protesting without a permit and how it might escalate, pending an investigation, and were released. Seven women praying with parasols occupied the resources



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of that police department for the better part of a working day. Our confiscated parasols are now evidence in a pending investigation.

What happened to us made sense to me as a feminist Catholic woman. These confrontations are not about parasols, nor even about our specific message. The reality is the police surrounding the Vatican are there to protect an image of patriarchal power. Our embodied presence challenges the institutional house of cards that is built on the exclusion of women.

Not every Catholic gets detained by the Vatican. But they all share the experience of being silenced and excluded from full participation. The Vatican is determined to make the punishment of women a top priority: in St Peter’s Square as well as in canon law:

Since 2007, the attempted ordination of women results in automatic excommunication, since 2010, the “attempted ordination of a woman” is classed as one of the most “grave crimes” in the church, on par with those who sexually abuse children. This wrongful categorization is dismaying.

Pope Francis later approved changes to the Code of Canon Law (Book VI) on offenses and punishments in 2021, failing to correct the mischaracterization of the “grave crime”

of women following their authentic vocations to ordained ministry.

The codification of the “crime” of ordaining a woman is an attempt to criminalize God’s call. It constitutes another form of spiritual violence. It is incompatible with our understanding of God’s boundless creativity, power, and mercy.

Pope Francis’ attempts to open top leadership positions to women at the Vatican - separating administrative and spiritual authority - is overdue. However, the exclusion of women from ordained ministries continues to deprive the church of women’s sacramental leadership and reinforces cultural inequalities.

The Vatican’s proactive denial of women’s equality in the church is one of the deepest wounds in the “field hospital” of the church, and we must call Pope Francis, the pastor, to heed the wisdom of the People of God, who yearn for inclusion and healing.

And if and when a woman is appointed to lead a department at the Vatican, I hope the sun cooperates. If she needs a parasol, she may not make it in. ■

What the Catholic Church can Learn from Civil Society

A Mission-in-Reverse

Women are the backbone of church life – but they usually remain invisible when it comes to decision-making. Civil society has progressed much further. Without women the Church will not be able to rekindle its prophetic power. **BY CAROLINE MBONU**

Women remain the backbone of the Catholic Church all over the world. They nurture life from conception to natural death - a phenomenon that defies quantification. Despite their crucial role, though, women remain excluded from major decisions in church affairs. Women keep the church alive in all dimensions, and yet they are forced to remain in the shadow. This is a grave injustice to the Body of Christ. The underdevelopment of the Church in many parts of the world can be traced to the relegating of women to the periphery rendering them almost invisible and voiceless in major areas of church life. Civil society, by contrast, leads the way in offering women positions of leadership: a true case of mission-in-reverse. Furthermore, some speakers drew attention to the gendered language of most Western cultures that attributes maleness to the Supreme Being, in a way, confers superiority on masculinity, hence, the claim by some of the male priesthood in Catholicism. Hence a male priesthood in Catholicism is seen as fixed. Others, oblivious of the history of the formation of the Gospels and the history of early Christianity, observe women's absence in the chosen twelve apostles as grounds for their exclusion from the clerical office. However, cultures with non-gendered language for the Deity have a different concept of the priesthood; gender is not a category for leading Divine worship at any level. For them, the Supreme Being is Spirit, nongendered. Thus, priesthood in these cultures is not restricted by gender. In this regard, priesthood for women is a theological obligation for the nourishment of God's people.

As a way forward, we recapture the radical welcome, an inclusivity of a Church envisioned by Vatican II. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* underscores the notion of the Church as the People of God. This all-embracing model recognizes the equal worth of members, women, men, and children alike. In other words, the church is constituted not only by the hierarchy, and/or members of religious communities, but by all the baptized. Furthermore, the



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document acknowledges that individual gifts or charisms received from the Holy Spirit at baptism are available to all the faithful, "of every rank," for building up the church.

The exclusion of women from full participation in church life, therefore, is contrary to the spirit of Vatican II. Inclusion is what the Spirit has been saying to the Church for almost six decades. The civil society, in which the church participates, has now become its light, through legislation, leading the way towards the flourishing of every member of the society by sanctioning women's full participation in social processes. The church needs to reclaim its prophetic stance as far as women are concerned if it wants to continue to be relevant in the world.

However, the centuries-old banishment of women to the peripheries of ecclesial life seems irreversible. A significant percentage of women at the grassroots seem conditioned to accept a prevailing theology of oppression as given. Psychologists call such behavior "learned helplessness: when a person is unable to find resolutions to difficult situations even when a solution is accessible."

The visibility of women in key areas of church life needs to be increased if the church wants to move forward. Furthermore, women are challenged to become more proactive in bringing about a holistic existence in the church community. Women, men, and children must come together, walk together,

and listen to each other from the heart in a genuine dialogue so that they can carry out the Mission of Christ. Most of all, women will find a way of helping other women to unlearn "learned helplessness."

I strongly recommend that the Church begins to approach theology from below, from the grassroots to realize its mission in the world. It should educate women in biblical studies, theology, Canon Law, and other Church matters and sensitize women to steer their cause through their voice and action so that, like St. Francis of Assisi, they will join their fathers and brothers to "rebuild the church." ■

Gender Justice in the Churches

The Ketchup Effect

The gospel must not be used to support gender-specific injustices. It is not the Holy Spirit, but patriarchy that prevents gender justice in the churches. BY ANTJE JACKELÉN

My first academic publication was titled “Conquering the Self-Evident and the Will to Touch.” Little did I realize at the time that this title would become a motto which would help me for decades in my confrontation with patriarchal structures. Even in places where equality has come a long way, the self-evident must be conquered again and again. It should be self-evident that men and women serve the church together – especially in leadership positions. But gender equality is still not a matter of course in many places.

Touching and being touched as a matter of course is a good strategy. It combines healthy self-confidence and courageous straightforwardness with empathy. That makes women strong. They do not need to apologize for their existence, gifts, competence, and experience. Highly qualified female theologians and pastoral workers are ready for the priesthood. Not only women long for the ministry to be opened to them, but also men long for it.

About twelve years ago, I visited the Gold Museum in Bogotá on a Sunday afternoon. I had previously preached in a local church. I was wearing a collared shirt. In the stairwell, a man suddenly called after me. He wanted to know if I was a pastor. I replied in the affirmative and added with a smile, “Bishop.” “In which church?” “In the Church of Sweden.” “What kind of church is that?” “An evangelical Lutheran one.” “Lutheran!”

Women’s Access to All Ministries Is a Gift to All of Christendom

He pronounced this word “Lutheran” with, to my ears, unusual tenderness. He himself, he said, was a Catholic priest in Mexico, and he continued, “I wish that women could finally become priests and bishops in our church, too.” We were in complete agreement: Women’s access to all ministries is a gift to the whole of Christianity, not a burden.



Antje Jackelén,

born in 1955, Dr. theol., Dr. h. c. mult., was elected and consecrated as a Lutheran bishop in the Church of Sweden in 2007 after working as a parish priest and in academic theology in Sweden and the United States. She was Bishop of Lund from 2007 to 2014. From 2013 until her retirement in 2022, she held the office of Archbishop of Uppsala and was thus the primate bishop of the Church of Sweden.

Over the years, I have met many women and men driven by a strong ecumenical longing for Paul’s words to become a reality in the church, “All of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. Here there is neither...male nor female, for you are all ‘one’ in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:27f.).

The exclusion of women from the ministries of the church is more difficult to justify than the opposite. Inequality not only calls into question central Bible verses and biblical narratives, but also comes into conflict with Christian baptismal theology. Time and again, in ecumenical discussions, church tradition, hierarchy, or the Holy Spirit are referenced when something is simply not wanted. “The Holy Spirit does not allow us to authorize this or that,” one hears. But it is by no means certain that the Holy Spirit was consulted when the restrictions now being discussed were first introduced.

It is not the Holy Spirit – feminine in Hebrew, neuter in Greek, and masculine in German – that stands in the way of gender equality. The reason women still do not have equal rights is patriarchy, not the Gospel. To claim otherwise is to distort the facts. When “the world” demands full equality for women from the church, we should not see this as a criticism of Christianity. Rather, it is a salutary confrontation with the fruits of centuries of preaching the Gospel. Due to the current crises surrounding the priesthood and episcopate, change is more necessary than ever. Clericalism is not the solution. As the Catholic theologian *Werner Jeanrond* says, “If the current leadership model is no longer fit for the proclamation of the Gospel...it must be changed” (The Tablet, 17 December 2022).

Instead of patriarchal hierarchies, we need more *sensus fidelium*, more transparency, and a genuine community in which consecrated women and men exercise responsibility together with lay people. In single-sex environments, however,

stereotypical caricatures of the opposite sex can take root undisturbed. Without a lively relationship with the “other,” prejudice and ruthlessness easily creep in. Equality needs concrete experience and a good memory. Past achievements are

quickly forgotten. The stories of the women and men who fought for full equality before us need to be told – out of respect, as an encouragement, and as a defense vis-à-vis the current global pushback against gender equality.

Concerning gender equality in the churches, I hope for the proverbial Swedish ketchup effect: You squeeze and shake the ketchup bottle, but nothing happens at all – and then suddenly everything comes out at once. ■



Maria Magdalena

© Susanne Janssen, of the cycle „Die großen Töchter Gottes. Starke Frauen der Bibel“, Leipzig: Edition Chrismon, 2018.

The Ordination of Women in Germany's Protestant Churches

Proclamation Rather Than Silence

A lack of male candidates and the qualifications of women made it possible: Women are now being ordained in all regional Protestant churches. BY DAGMAR HELLER

The introduction of women's ordination in the regional Protestant churches of Germany was by no means a matter of course. The difficulty of ordaining women in these churches has its specific origin in *Martin Luther*, who referred to St. Paul and his ban on women speaking in public. At the same time, in Luther's opinion, women could and should interpret Holy Scriptures to one another in private. They are responsible for their children in the same way that the holder of a spiritual office is. This view is based on Luther's conception of the various estates: A woman is defined by the man: Her socially accepted place is in the home.

In the 17th century, people came to realize that women had held religious positions in New Testament times – the prophetess *Hannah*, for example. She proclaimed the gospel by relating the prophecies of the Old Testament to the child Jesus. When the question was raised about how this proclamation related to Paul's commandment of silence, the answer was that God could also work in an extraordinary way. Women remaining silent in church therefore remained the rule. However, divine exceptions were still considered possible.

The topic came to the fore when women gained access to academic theological training. Trained women theologians have been around since the 1920s. However, theological arguments in favour of women's ordination were developed only very gradually. In the area of the Old Prussian Union, a decree of 1927 stated that women could be ordained as vicars after having passed a second examination. However, they had to leave their ministry after marriage and their role was clearly defined as auxiliary.

The discussion reached an initial climax in the Confessing Church during the Second World War. During the war, the military called upon more and more pastors. The employment of women in congregations became unavoidable. This situation posed a problem, however. On one hand, it was clear that parish ministry could not be withheld from women as a matter of principle. On the other hand, Paul's ban on women speaking meant that one still felt obliged to observe it. The idea of a *sui generis* ministry arose in connection with the idea of different charisms. The



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argument of necessity was also considered as a solution.

The discussion intensified once again in the 1950s and 1960s. In the meantime, the commandment for women to keep silence could no longer be accepted. Paul was now understood in his cultural and sociological context.

The regulations of 1927 were not given up until 1961, when, in the regional church of Hanover, all areas of pastoral activity were opened to women there, at least in principle. The obligation for celibacy still applied. If it was deemed pastorally necessary, if a congregation agreed, and if it was foreseeable that a marriage would not significantly impair parish duties, a married woman could now take on a parish ministry. Gradually, parish ministry was completely opened to women in all regional Protestant churches.

Ultimately, historical circumstances determined the opening of the pastorate to women: The shortage of pastors during the war and the academic theological training of women.

Theologically, the decisive insight was a contemporary reinterpretation of the commandment of silence, which could now be contextualised historically. A desire to resolve the contradiction between modern findings on equal rights for men and women on the one hand, and Paul's instructions on women's silence on the other characterized the theological discussion.

In contrast to Catholic and Orthodox debates, the idea of the *repraesentatio Christi* through the priest and the argument that Jesus called only men to be apostles hardly played any role. The Protestant debate differs because ordination is not understood as a sacrament in the Protestant

churches. Ordination focusses on the proclamation of the word. The commandment of silence was therefore initially more important than the question of the *repraesentatio Christi*. Under both perspectives, however, the question of whether women had different tasks or different talents than men due to their biological constitution was significant. Therefore, one of the most important insights on the Protestant side is that the pastoral office requires no biological prerequisites. ■

Gender Equality Without Compromise

Breakthrough for the Gospel

Reforms in the Catholic Church can no longer wait – neither regarding equal rights and an authentic interpretation of the Gospel, nor in view of a crumbling ability to connect with current social discourses. **BY KATHARINA GANZ**

The international conference on women and ministry in Catholicism at Leipzig brought the voices of the global church to the fore in an impressive and, at the same time, depressing manner. God's strong daughters, and some sons, testified about the great suffering and urgent pressure for change on all continents. The women's issue is important for the global church and can no longer be dismissed as a marginal phenomenon. It's all about credibility, truthfulness, and justice.

Women leave the church because they no longer trust it to reform itself. Sometimes even women religious are forced to leave their communities because they can no longer be members of the Catholic Church – or want to. They experience themselves as second-class citizens in the church. They are unable to continue the balancing act between their general powerlessness and the empowerment of women along with the critical questions their contemporaries raise.

An authentic church must apply the standard of the Gospel to its own organizational forms. The Good News of Jesus cannot legitimize disadvantage and discrimination, sexism, and misogyny. However, the ongoing exclusion of women and people of diverse genders from ordained ministries is increasingly perceived and interpreted as such. The Church risks losing touch with contemporary social discourse unless it moves forward on these crucial issues. The question of women is about the existing

power relations and interpretative sovereignty within the hierarchical constitution of the Church. In the world synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021, baptismal dignity is supposed to be taken seriously as the common foundation of being a Christian in today's world. However, it remains inconceivable how this can succeed without also reconsidering the conditions for admission to the ordained ministries based on the common priesthood of all believers. The question of ministries remains a theological question. If women feel called by God and Jesus Christ to ministries that have so far only been open to ordained men, the Church must examine these vocations seriously. Otherwise, it will reinforce



Sr. Katharina Ganz

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Foto: Katharina Gebauer

the suspicion and accusation of maintaining one-sided patriarchal and clerical power structures.

Human rights cannot be realized only in part. They are to be applied in full – and in the church. If they are denied to some, the church makes common cause with oppressive and autocratic systems. The challenge for the global church is to make the structural vulnerability in asymmetrical gender relations visible. There can be no compromise when it comes to gender justice.

The revolutionary and liberating potential of the Gospel needs help to break through into all times and contexts. The breakthrough is impossible without recognizing that doctrine and tradition are themselves contingent and subject to historicity. The Church must take seriously the scientific-theological findings on the further development of the theology of ministry. The processes initiated by the World Synod provide an opportunity to expand existing networks worldwide and to work on and deepen the topics brought to the table until the final conference period in autumn 2024.

Finally, the motto of "God's Strong Daughters" itself suggests a common thread for further steps:

God: Although He remains unavailable and mysterious, He reveals himself and can be experienced. Academic theology, spiritual traditions, and liturgies can open us to God's sources and inexhaustible riches.

Strong: Dynamic processes set forces free in the people of God – as a narrative community, a celebratory assembly, and through new,

empowering practices. The power of God's Spirit can bring forth a new "we." This is the hallmark of a synodal church, as described in the *Instrumentum laboris* for the first session of the World Synod (see IL, A 25).

Daughters: The word is stated in the plural because women are colourful and diverse. They are rising and empowering themselves, seeking allies and becoming capable of speaking to live out their manifold vocations, competences, and charisms.

Something is moving. I, for one, trust the gospel and still have hope that there will be far-reaching changes and radical reforms. We need to stay on the ball now. ■

Experiences and Expectations of the World Synod

After October 2023 Is Before October 2024

The opening of all ministries to women was clearly addressed during the World Synod 2023. The synthesis document did not adequately express the discussion. Concrete steps must now be developed to maintain the momentum of the synod into the autumn. **BY HELENA JEPPESEN-SPUHLER**

Before the Amazon Synod in October 2019, the “Voices of Faith” initiative organised a conference in Rome with women religious from all over the world on the issue of women’s voting rights at synods of bishops. Talking to the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops was not even an option at the time.

Four years later, for the first time, lay people with voting rights, including 54 women, took part in a synod of bishops. It was only a minimal expansion, but, according to many bishops, it significantly changed the atmosphere. The broader representation of the people of God and the new methodology of round-table discussions brought dynamism and energy to the assembly.

Statements and reports on the experience from all continents showed the diversity of the global church. They also showed how far apart the ideas of a church in line with the Gospel are. Nevertheless, all topics were discussed openly. The abuse crisis and dealing with its systemic causes were a recurring theme throughout the four-week consultations.

The discussion of the role of women was one of the strongest and most courageous moments of the synod assembly. Even bishops found it shameful that the Synod was not half made up of women. In her theological-pastoral reflection, Sister *Liliana Gloria Echeverri*, Co-President of the Women’s and Men’s Religious Orders of Latin America and the Caribbean, described how much women are hindered or sidelined in their pastoral and intellectual work.

Compared to the inspiring statements and group reports during the synod, the synthesis document pales regarding the role of women. In the Synod’s deliberations, women’s access to all sacramental ministries was an explicit topic. The synthesis document, however, mentions only the diaconate. It is feared that the admission of women to the diaconate would not be the first step toward opening all ministries but would mark the end of the debate on the ordination of women [to the priesthood]. This would once again relegate women to a servant role. The letter from Cardinal Secretary of State *Pietro Parolin* to the German Bishops’ Conference in November



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2023, in which he declared the ordination of women to be non-negotiable, further reinforces this concern.

For the second session of the Synod in October 2024, it has been announced that the “access of women to the diaconate” and other “issues of great importance” that “must be dealt with at the level of the whole Church and in collaboration with the dicasteries of the Roman Curia” will first be submitted to the Pope. He decides which ones are to be included. Subsequently, international commissions are to “work in a synodal manner with the Curia in a coordinated ecclesial dynamic” and report to the Synod in October 2024.

However, the synod’s energy and momentum must not be allowed to fizzle out now. To reduce the risk of the process leading to a dead end,

three points are important:

First, the church can become truly synodal only with the inclusion women. The role of women, their participation in decision-making, and their admission to all ministries are not specialized theological issues, but questions of principle. A general awareness of this important principle must be created. The equal status and equal worth of all the baptized must have ecclesiological, canonical, liturgical, and pastoral consequences. This is the only way for the Church to do justice to its mission. Only then will its commitment to human rights be credible.

Second, the energy and dynamism of the Synod, together with diverse pastoral experiences and theological insights, must be used to develop concrete steps that can be taken in the short and medium terms. Horizontal networks between continents and cultures and vertical networks between all levels of the Church increase the chances that they will be realized.

Third, it is necessary to clarify and differentiate what can be decided and promoted at which level of the Church’s life. The urgent needed for decentralization requires creative proposals for processes and structures to make synodal decisions at all church levels of the Church. Everyone needs to be involved, especially women. The process must remain open to further developments that God’s Spirit will encourage the church to undergo in the future. ■

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