

AND SISTER... WHAT DO YOU SAY?

BIBLIOTECA VALLICELLIANA, ROME
OCTOBER 2019



VOICES
OF FAITH

WELCOME ZUZANNA FLISOWSKA

Voices of Faith, Poland

For a year now, I've been General Manager of Voices of Faith, here in Rome. Like my colleagues, this year I talked with many men and women, Catholics from all over the world. We listen to them, we exchange experiences. They've shared with us what they lack in the Church and gave the reasons why they love this Church. That has allowed us to see how diverse and alive she is, but also understands her problems.

We are also criticized. We hear that by demanding that women's voices be heard in our Church, that they be welcomed as leaders, theologians, experts, we imitate the world and secular culture. We hear that these are the postulates of feminism and that they are incompatible with Catholicism. But our experience is just the opposite - it is the Bible that teaches us equality. It is in the Bible and in the official teaching of the Church where we read that every baptized person, woman and man, should fulfill their vocation, should proclaim Christ and follow him. The reality is therefore the opposite of what we are accused of: it is ignoring the voice and vocation of women that is imitating a culture contrary to the Gospel. That is a blind following of the world, which for centuries has not taken seriously more than half of humanity.

As during all Voices of Faith events, we want to have a frank, open conversation. We want to talk clearly about the experiences of our communities, our problems and dreams. We want to share our knowledge and talents. It is with regret and disappointment that we see that our invitation to such a dialogue is being rejected by the representatives of church institutions.

On behalf of the Voices of Faith team, I would like to warmly welcome all our guests, diplomatic representatives, partner organizations, religious men and women, journalists and all those who watch us via live-streaming. In particular, I would like to welcome a large delegation of Catholics from Switzerland. Sisters from the Fahr monastery together with the Prioress, their bishop, theologians and laymen, who came all the way to Rome to talk about our Church.





**WOMEN
RELIGIOUS
IT IS TIME
TO TAKE A
STAND**



SISTER SIMONE CAMPBELL, SSS

United States of America

Being a vowed religious is the joy of my life. I treasure our contemplative practice that allows us to sink into the Divine mystery alive in our world. This spiritual life, quite like the first Pentecost, impels us to take the Gospel to where it would not be otherwise. In my life of ministry, I have done social work, practiced law and now engage in political ministry in the United States. I have had the amazing opportunity to live the charism of our Society of the Sisters of Social Service. It is fullness and joy.

My experience is as Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “An authentic faith—which is never comfortable or completely personal—always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.”

I know the truth of this statement. Rooted in faith I hunger to leave this earth somehow better.

I work in a very challenging political time for our nation

and our world. I work to mend our nation’s income and wealth disparity. These experiences nourish my prayer and my prayer nourishes my service. I know that my Sisters gathered here today share that awareness of the Spirit alive in our shared mission.

But, as I turn my gaze from my place of service in Washington DC, to the reality around us here in Rome, I see our beloved Church suffering because of the inability of leadership to see and accept the gifts of the Spirit that are being offered to our



Church in this challenging time. So my faith has led me and I hope us to be more bold and consequently less comfortable as we work to embody the Gospel within the context of our faith.

The Church in the United States and in other parts of the world continues to suffer from the results of the sexual abuse crisis.

We suffer from a polarization woven into our Church from the secular political chaos. The care for migrants and the most marginalized has slipped off the radar of many of our ecclesiastical leaders. There is much lamentation about the lack of ordained priests. Many leaders in our Church are floundering.

If the body of Christ is to be healed, our Church leadership needs to turn their eyes to the gifts of the Spirit that are all around. But it does not appear that they are willing to do this unless we Sisters speak up. We Sisters need to help our clerical leadership to see with new eyes.

In the Gospel, we see Jesus time and again approaching the religious leaders of his time poking and prodding them to greater insights. In the Acts of the Apostles the early disciples engaged their religious leaders seeking change. The Acts of the Apostles makes clear that from the beginning of our Church, women were

leaders in the House churches of the first and second century. Claiming this tradition for our time is essential for the future of our Church. Acting as Jesus did, we come together to prod our leadership to restore the rightful place of women as recognized institutional leaders in the universal Church.

We come today grounded in our prayer, rooted in the Spirit, to call for our Synodal Sister representatives to at least have a vote as do the representatives of the Brothers. It is a small ask, but an important first step. Rooted in contemplative reflection we listen to the whisper of the Spirit that leads us to speak up with a Gospel message of inclusion of all of the faithful. But we don't speak for our own sake. We speak so that the gifts of the body of Christ might be fully realized.



At the 2017 gathering of Voices of Faith, Scilla Elworthy from England, spoke of her study of feminine intelligence. Her study has demonstrated when feminine intelligence is included in any system, the whole system flourishes. Scilla has identified five characteristics that would be of tremendous benefit to the Church structure.

Her studies have revealed that this feminine intelligence includes: inclusivity, listening, interconnection, compassion (empathy that leads to action) and regeneration. In this time of the abuse crisis, prior Church financial scandals and current reported fighting and intrigue within the curia, it would be a breath of fresh air to include this feminine intelligence in the Synod.

And how appropriate to do this for the first time at the Synod on the Amazon Region. In Washington DC I know the Sisters of Notre Dame whose Sister Dorothy Stang was murdered for her effort to protect the Amazon region from exploitation and degradation. Sister Dorothy gave her life for the people and for the land of the Amazon. We Sisters have a responsibility to lift of her voice and make her presence felt. How can the institution turn their backs on the voices of our Sisters who live with the people of this threatened region? How can our Sisters not have at least one vote at the

Synod? And my Sisters, how can we not speak up for the most marginalized people and for our wounded earth? The time is now.

Some might want us to believe that our vows of obedience would keep us from speaking up. However, we know from our study of obedience in the Benedictine tradition that obedience is to listen with the ears of our heart and then act on what we hear. This listening leads me today to say that silence is not an option. The experiences of our sisters and brothers whom we serve need to have us speak of our lived experience. We are the witnesses on this new Pentecost for our people and our earth. The Spirit calls us to speak against all forms of exploitation whether in the Church or in civil society.

So let us speak clearly today of the gifts of the Spirit that we have been given. Let us lift up the insight and wisdom that we have discovered through encounter and prayer. Let us open ourselves to this Pentecost moment. We are sent out of this room to speak of the need of our Church to accept our gifts as part of the Body of Christ. The time is now to be faithful and obedient to the Spirit of God and the memory of our martyrs demands it. This is the authentic demand of our faith.







SHAPING A NEW VISION FOR THE CHURCH

DORIS WAGNER

GERMANY

Something is fundamentally flawed in our Church. The trust in our leaders is eroding. Tensions are rising. More and more people are leaving the Church. Why is that?

At first glance there is no one single issue. There are many. Yet, as soon as you take a closer look, it becomes evident that in fact, there is really one single issue. Take sexual abuse as an example. The abuse has shaken many faithful Catholics to their ground. But when you dig only a little deeper into the matter, it becomes quite evident that what really leads them to lastingly distrust their bishops and leave their Church is something else: It is the systematic cover up of abuse. Mostly, because the cover up has never really been cleared up and there is not much hope it ever will be. Very few bishops

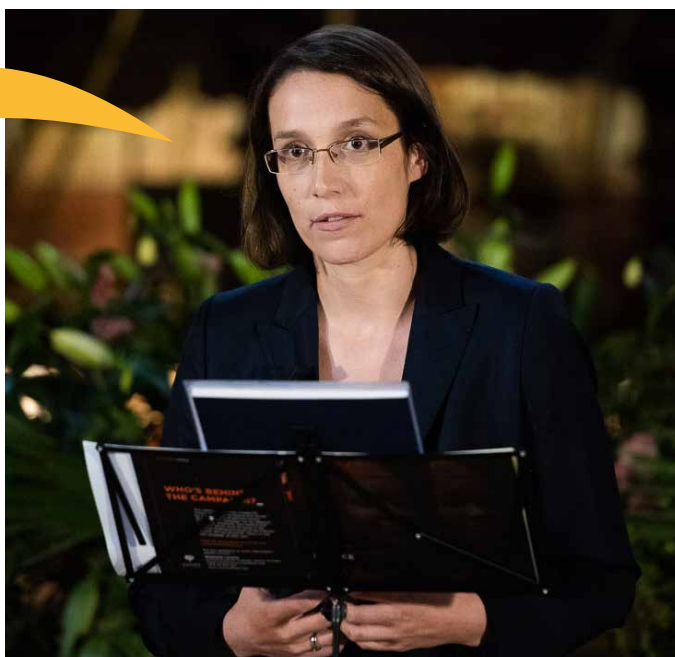
have been held accountable for it. A tribunal that would serve that purpose has never been installed, for reasons that have never been sufficiently explained. And in what other ways bishops are being held accountable is not exactly transparent.

Another example: Women. At first glance more and more women are upset about their systematic exclusion from leadership and decision making positions in our Church. Yet again, you only need to dig a little deeper to see, that what really makes them distrust and leave their Church is more than the exclusion. It is the way in which that exclusion is justified and enforced, despite an impressive range of really convincing arguments to be made in favour of leadership positions for women in the

Church. A perfect example of this was when Sr. Katharina Ganz challenged Pope Francis on the matter during the Audience of the UISG in May this year. She made an excellent point, based on the actual pastoral necessity of our time as well as on the way Jesus treated women. The Pope gave a long-winding answer that ended in the quite disputable claim that the ordination for women was impossible due to divine revelation. There was no dialogue. He simply cut her short with a shamefully condescending and actually weak statement.

You may have guessed it already: That one single issue, that is behind all the other issues is the inefficient leadership of our Church or - to be more precise - it is the dysfunctional and outdated Constitution of our Church.

When we look at our Church, at how positions of power are distributed among its members, when we look at the Church's justice system, at who gets to make major decisions, and who gets to define the Church's teaching and politics - on any matter: That is all tied back exclusively to senior male clergy, just as it has been since the early middle ages. Since then right up until today the Church's constitution is a textbook example of a two-estate-system, in which the clergy are ranking as rulers while we lay people are ranking as peasants.

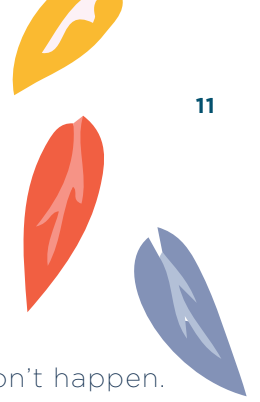


As lay people we simply don't have a right to have a say in our Church. We can't vote, we have no means to get a say in legislation, we cannot appeal to an independent Church court because such a thing does not exist, we have no right of information on most matters, basically we don't have enforceable rights at all. Our role can be neatly summed up as follows: Listen, obey and pay. That becomes even more absurd when you consider that ordained men form only a super-tiny proportion of our Church: Less than 0.1 percent. And to carry this to the extreme, those ordained men need no approval from the lay-people they guide. Because their legitimacy derives solely from their superiors, ultimately from the Pope.

This last point is crucial. Some people believe, the Church has already an excellent instrument to involve lay people in decision making processes, namely synods. I don't believe that, for a very simple reason: Even the decisions concerning synods are tied back to clergy. It is the bishop's decision, if, when and how a synod should be held in his diocese and who is allowed to participate (mostly members of the clergy). And the bishop is not bound to do what the synod voted for, precisely because his legitimacy does not derive from lay-people, but from the Pope. He is not accountable to his people, but to the Pope. So, basically, even synods are just another instrument of power in the hands of our bishops.

To sum it up: The Church is in crisis, because it is pretending that following a medieval constitution with a two-estate-system would be a good way of governing an international organisation of the 21st century with more than 1 billion members. It's a very down-to-earth point that needs to be made here: That simply does not work. We are actually witnessing how that system is failing right in front of our eyes.

How can we regard democracy, separation of powers and a fair proportion of offices held by women as basic standards of good governance, call for them when it comes to developing countries, and at the same time pretend that those principles somehow would not apply to



the Catholic Church?! It's ridiculous. There is a very obvious link between the accumulation of power and the abuse of power. Anywhere, in any nation or institution, a mentality which refuses to share power equally between men and women, between people of various races, cultures and spiritual backgrounds, is not only contrary to our Faith, it is also doomed to be powerless, insecure and regressive, for it finds itself caught up in a constant battle against its own people.

This is why, when we speak about shaping a new vision for the Church, my vision begins with a new constitution, one that allows for a fair participation of all factions of the faithful in decision making processes in the Church. To make that vision come true, we need a Constitutional Reform.

I am fully aware how unlikely such a reform appears to be, yet I am hopeful against all odds. First because it is not my idea. I've adopted it from others. At various occasions in the course of the last year I've heard people speak of a constitutional moment in the Church, including experienced and influential members of the clergy and canon lawyers.

Second, because there is no other way. It is all too evident that a Church that, after all we have gone through in the last decades, still decided to stick to a two-estate-system instead of equality is not only contrary to the dignity of the children of God, it has lost the true sense of its existence and its capacity to be a meaningful and credible advocate for justice and equality in our world. A constitutional reform might be our Church's last chance to get back on track.

There is but one thing we really urgently need to do: We need to stop playing along to our self-declared rulers. Simply stop pretending they would be any closer to God than we are or better informed on God's personal plans or actually entitled by God to dismiss the needs and voices of ordinary people, to dismiss scientific findings, facts and even theological research. In other words: Stop to listen, obey and pay. Stop even to plead and beg and hope our bishops would eventually lead the urgently needed change and give lay people a say and

write a new constitution. That won't happen. We have to start to act ourselves.

Instead of listening to our bishops' excuses and diversions, we the 99.9 % have to speak. Stop the unilateral monologue and start a rich and constructive multilateral dialogue with all of our brothers and sisters. Instead of obeying the wishes of our bishops and waiting for their actions, we have to take on our own responsibility and do what we know is right, everyone for himself/herself and all of us together in a spirit of mutual respect and determination. Instead of paying for the perpetuation of the current clerical system, we have to start and fund people and projects that really deserve our support. Namely, initiatives that transform the Church into a rich and diverse community in which everyone is respected and has a voice, where everybody is treated the same way irrespective of the person concerned, and where the most vulnerable persons are the most cared for.

That is, what I hope for. So that eventually we will also have leaders, men and women, who are representatives of their people and accountable to their people, who are not rulers but servants of their community and credible advocates for equality and justice in the outside world, who are so urgently needed in this moment of history.

IT'S OUR RESPONSIBILITY TOO - CATHOLICS CANNOT WAIT ANY LONGER

**SISTER
CHRISTINE
BURKE, IBVM**

AUSTRALIA

I am an Australian who entered religious life just as Vatican II began and my ministry has been in helping adults deepen their faith. For the last six years, I have lived in the Philippines, where I teach feminist theology to young seminarians and others. In Australia, many Catholics have left the church after the seismic shocks of abuse and leadership failure. Most young people who have been through Catholic schools are absent from our churches. In Manila, young people are present, but the church is even more patriarchal, and major scandals are yet to explode. Both contexts beg for change.

The Holy Spirit, through the voices of women, has been seeking to enlighten church leadership for a long time. Women religious

usually see needs, discern if this is our call right now, and then move to action. If necessary, we put our reasons into words. Today I want to share the story of a woman who did just that. She reflected on her own experience, prayed for guidance, took action, and spoke her truth. Mary Ward, an English woman, is the founder of my congregation, but her story speaks to our current challenge.

400 years ago, Mary Ward challenged the assumption that women religious were incapable of fostering the faith of others. Church leadership required them to be silent, in a cloister, under male control. There is a painting of Mary Ward from the 1940s that was defaced by Nazi soldiers when they took over the convent in Wurzburg, Germany. The

Nazi's scrubbed her mouth out, and echoed the efforts of the Pope and cardinals in Mary's time who tried to silence her belief in the gifts of women. This painting obscures the reality that Mary was a person of joy, friendship, forgiveness and had a deep relationship with God.

In the early 1600s Mary Ward argued that women were not second class but were equally gifted by God. A good education would give them a voice, because women share the responsibility to spread the message of Jesus. She urged her young followers to guard against any mindset which dismissed as inferior. With her companions, she walked from present day Belgium across the Alps to present her case to the Pope in Rome. But she faced a dismissive and powerful system.

Anyone who seeks to change an entrenched culture cannot expect an easy ride. But then, changing a religious culture was Jesus' task also, and he did not have an easy ride!

Despite evidence that her work was successful, a papal proclamation in 1631 suppressed her Institute. It stated that the ideas and actions she was encouraging were "poisonous

growths in the Church of God" and needed to be "rooted out lest they spread themselves further." Mary wanted her group to be international, a female version of the Society of Jesus. This was condemned as "unsuited to their weak sex and against female modesty." Because they dared to do things that "men of learning undertook with much difficulty," Pope Urban VIII annulled their religious vows, and decreed "we destroy and annul them... and command all the Christian faithful to regard them as suppressed, extinct, rooted out, destroyed and abolished." The 200 women who shared her vision were expelled, penniless, from their convents.

Mary Ward obeyed the Pope, accepted his ruling that she and her companions could not be religious. She trusted that God would bring about what God wanted. But she did not give up. She believed her insights about women had come through the Holy Spirit. Mary obeyed the Pope, but she balanced on that tricky tight-rope between loyalty and integrity: she persevered in the truth that she knew to be of God.

A small remnant of her companions kept her flame alive, teaching, but not considered to be religious. A hundred years after her death they were given papal permission to continue this ministry on condition "they may not in



any way acknowledge Mary Ward as their foundress.” Her mouth was firmly sealed. Books and records telling her story were burnt. The violence of the Nazi soldiers imitated the harsh, blind, deaf response of church officials.

Yet the flame of the Holy Spirit is not easily quenched. By the 1800s many groups of women were recognized as active religious. What was unimaginable in the 1600s became standard practice.

Today we have gathered to challenge this same, deeply rooted, clericalist and patriarchal culture. We know that our daughters, nieces, grand-daughters are not waiting around in the hope of change. They have walked away, unable to see how this organization, which fails to recognize their potential, could give them life. If the church loses women, we lose the following generations. Some of us are called to stay and speak our truth, because the rich web of Christian faith is much more complex and rewarding than the clericalism that distorts it.

But we cannot wait in passive silence. We know that women, lay and religious, are not “less than” men. We know that we can lead communities in liturgy, work with others in decision making, create networks of trust. Women are already doing these things! We know we are called to this by God. Creative ways, sensitive to both tradition and today’s reality, are needed to challenge the clericalism embedded in liturgy, in moral teaching on sexuality, in structures.

Pope Francis is calling for a declericalized, discerning, synodal church. Many women religious have already become synodal, have declericalized, discerned new ministries on the peripheries, handed over successful institutions, working alongside lay colleagues as equals. I challenge church leaders to listen to our experience and learn from it.

Recent examples of collaboration and discernment leading to action can be found in the interaction of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious from the USA with the

Curial officials, which averted head-on conflict and disunity; in the Union of International Superiors General in their work against trafficking, establishing Solidarity with South Sudan, and in equipping women from poorer countries in Canon Law; a third example is this Voices of Faith protest against the exclusion of women from voting at the Synod, and more importantly, from all key roles in the official church structure. Each action can build something new.

But something is deeply awry. At the heart of the problem of a patriarchal church lies the way we see God. If our image of God is an old, white, powerful male hovering above the clouds, change will never happen. This graven, patriarchal image has made God ‘unbelievable’ in the scientific era. A ‘white’ God has had a devastating impact on colonized peoples. A ‘male only’ God disillusioned and angers women as they realize how it undergirds the superiority of men.

As theologian Elizabeth Johnson so eloquently argues, “the symbol of God functions”. It affects everything, because it encompasses our deepest beliefs. This ‘old man in the sky’ is not the Christian belief about God. Early Christian theologians, drawing on their own experience of God, elaborated a stunningly eloquent symbol of equality and difference held together by love. They coined the word Trinity. They taught that the Holy Mystery of God is met in three expressions: as the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit, who weaves community through our daily encounters with each other and with every rock, tree and living creature; as a human person, Jesus, who chose to take flesh and live amongst us to show us what the Reign of God was really like; and as the inexpressible Other that draws us beyond our limited horizons. As Holy Mystery, these three flow into each other in love and their love opens out to all people and all creation. As the physicists tell us, everything is connected. Our Christian God is deep Communion, or Holy Wisdom, (a feminine name for God in our scriptures), the Connector or Attractor that holds these three experiences in a circle dance of love. Baptism calls us to join this dance.

So I believe one of the biggest challenges facing us as women and men in the church is to come to know this God, to risk changing our language, allowing a new understanding of Trinity to replace the distorting male-only

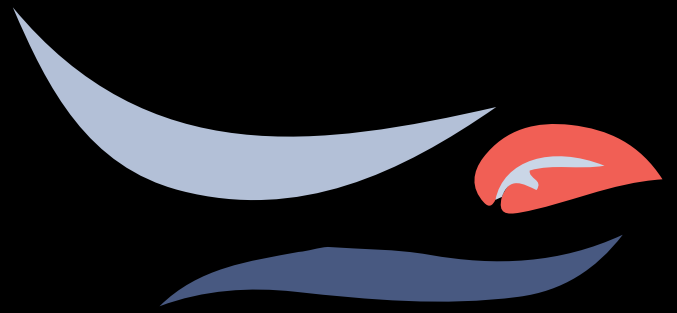


image. Not a God of male power, but God as Love, where equality and difference are held in love. This is the image we must aim to live ourselves, that we must call our church to embody.

If we can be creative, speak out, yet to hold to the core of Jesus' message, the Holy Spirit can use our voices to shake the patriarchal assumptions that undermine Jesus' message.

Mary Ward's courage to speak out AND work for reconciliation was grounded in her relationship with God. Let us pray that, as women, we too can live the image of God we are calling our church to embody.

Changing an entrenched culture is not an easy ride, but it is the one we are called to live out.



WHY ISN'T THERE
ANY “EXTINCTION
REBELLION”
OF FEMALE
CONTEMPLATIVE
MONASTERIES
AGAINST THE
VATICAN'S
INSTRUCTION
COR ORANS?



SISTER DR. MARIA JOHANNA LAUTERBACH, OCIST

BOLIVIA / GERMANY

I am speaking here as a member, not as a representative of a dying little monastery of Cistercian nuns in Bolivia. Take my statement as a personal political opinion about what happens, if religious women don't have a vote in modifications of Canon Law that directly affect them in their daily life.

For more than fifty years, my monastery Ave Maria in La Paz, Bolivia has been running a private high and grammar school for 1900 children of the lower classes in order to give them a chance to go to the universities. We also have a farm outside the city, where we planted more than 6000 trees together with our students and farm employees. We have an agroforestry training program catering to 60 students.

There are only 6 of us, 3 Bolivian and 3 German nuns. Our monastery is fading away for different reasons, internal and external ones. We are old, overburdened, exhausted. In the deeply corrupt society of Bolivia today, where a weak catholic church is treated by the government as something that has to be "de-colonialized", there is effectively nobody supporting or protecting us.

We lost the economic war the Bolivian government has been maintaining for 12 years against private schools. My prioress and I had to leave Bolivia in February, because our long-lasting conflict with the Ministry of Education radicalized. They threatened us with criminal proceedings for the after-effects of having augmented the school fees last year far more than the percentage the government was permitting. The alternative would have been to close the school.

Now, my former prioress and I are living in a Benedictine monastery in Germany,

because we don't want to go to jail for our school. Economically we can't run it anymore, it's too expensive.

Not only the school is dying, but our monastery, too. The decisive factor, why there is really no hope for us, is the Vatican's instruction *Cor orans*, which became applicable Canon Law last year.

Cor orans says that the contemplative nuns are the "praying heart" of the Catholic Church. *Cor orans* is the transformation of Pope Francis' Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei Quaerere* about the contemplative female monasteries into new Canon Law. It was realized by the Vatican's Congregation for the Institutes of Consacrated Life. The changes in the Canon Law are meant to help the nuns to fulfill their very special and precious vocation and to assure the "true autonomy" of their monasteries.

However, for my monastery *Cor orans* is a death sentence and for many others, too.

Why do I say this? Because *Cor orans* includes four main changes in Canon Law which are suspending our autonomy

First, a nun's monastery which has less than five nuns with perpetual vows, now loses its right to elect its own prioress or abbess (see CO Nr. 45). Instead, the priest who presides the election of the Reverend Mother – for instance the bishop, the general abbot or the president of the Congregation – is appointing an administrator with the permission of the Holy See and after having heard the opinion of the sisters. There is no reasonable justification for this severe loss of autonomy. Why, unless they all suffer from dementia, should a small nun's convent be unable to elect their own superior?

Second, *Cor orans* is suspending the economic autonomy of the female contemplative monasteries (see CO Nr. 52f). If the nuns want

CAN YOU IMAGINE AN INTELLIGENT AND VITAL WOMAN AROUND FORTY, GIVING UP HER ENTIRE FORMER LIFE FOR THE SAKE OF WAITING NINE YEARS BEFORE SHE WILL KNOW, IF THE CONVENT WILL FINALLY ACCEPT HER FOR PERPETUAL VOWS?

to realize a transaction that could “damage” the property situation of the monastery, they now need the permission of the president of the congregation or federation they already belong to, or now are obligated to join (VDQ § Art. 9, § 1). If the value of the economic transaction is exceeding a certain amount of money defined by the Holy See for every region, the nun’s monasteries also need the permission of the Holy See.

That means, our monastery doesn’t have any longer the right to decide by itself, to sell for instance a piece of land of its property. We now depend on the permission of people living in Europe and unfamiliar with Bolivian conditions, if we want to invest into a new project to restore our economic viability.

Third, with Cor orans it’s easy for the Holy See to build up an “ad-hoc-commission” and force a small monastery to “affiliate” itself to a bigger monastery of the same congregation (CO Nr. 56 – 59). The affiliation includes to take away the right of the small monastery to educate novices or juniors in their own house (Nr. 60). The small convent is becoming a dependent house of the bigger monastery, which superior appoints a local superior for the affiliated community. Similar things like that already happened before Cor orans, but only voluntarily, not against the decisions of the affected nuns themselves.

Fourth, Cor orans is redoubling the time of monastic formation exclusively for nuns in contemplative monasteries (CO Nr. 268, 275, 279, 287). In spite of four or five years, a female candidate now has to wait and educate herself for nine years, until she can make her perpetual vows, which entitle her to full membership of her monastery and to being part of the decision making processes of her convent.

This is definitely not the “help” we would like to get from the Vatican. Before Cor orans a nine-years-option already existed in order to postpone the perpetual vows for some good reasons. It was helpful to do that in special cases. But now it’s a general obligation, where you need an individual dispense from the Holy See to be able to escape from it.

Can you imagine an intelligent and vital woman around forty, giving up her entire former life for the sake of waiting nine years before she will know, if the convent will finally accept her for perpetual vows? Nine years, before she is becoming a full member of her community able to vote in the decision-making? Nine years, where she is supposed to participate over and over again in spiritual instruction trainings in order to check and accommodate her religious vocation?

With Cor orans on top of all our other problems, I lost my last bit of hope that our little monastery may recover in the future.



Even if there would come somebody and enter, we'll never come back to autonomy again. The newcomer recently would count as a member of our monastery nine years ahead and in the meanwhile some of us among the elder ones will probably die.

As a nun, Cor orans seems to classify myself as an inferior religious human being. Because the most incredible thing about Cor orans is the fact, that it's applicable Canon Law exclusively for the female contemplative monasteries. For the males of the same orders like Benedictines, Cistercians, Carmelites etc., the changes do not apply.

Becoming a monk with perpetual vows is still a process of four or five years. Small monasteries of less than six monks don't lose their right to elect their abbot or prior by themselves. In spite of being only a few ones left, nobody compels them to affiliate to another monastery. They keep hold of their freedom to make economic decisions. Nobody can force them to send their last novice or junior away for the whole time of monastic formation.

The anthropology of Cor orans seems to be really strange. Are nuns really twice as immature as monks in order to need the double amount of formation time?

Why does the Vatican suspend the traditional autonomy of female monastic communities introducing even more inequality between religious men and women?

Cor orans is about "true autonomy" of female contemplative monasteries, defined as the ability to fulfill a set of tasks set by clergy men - without asking the nuns, if they agree and without applying the same criteria to the monks. The authors of the instruction tell us, that they only constructed a legal framework around the proposals, the nuns themselves uttered in an inquiry the Vatican realized in advance. But I can't believe that the majority of the nun's convents wished to get rid of their autonomy.

If "caring" is authentic, it's an offer, which you can deny or accept voluntarily. Otherwise I call it "patronizing" or even "oppression".

We should ask the Vatican publicly to acknowledge the autonomy of dying female monasteries, the possibility of resurrection and the right to have a vote in what will happen with their property.

BREAKING OUT: HOW THE CHURCH LEGITIMISES A CULTURE OF OBEDIENCE AND SUBMISSIVENESS

— Sister Shalini Mulackal, PBVM, INDIA





PHOTOGRAPHER: PRISCILLA DU PREEZ

SISTER SHALINI MULACKAL, PBVM

INDIA

“Who will receive the vows of our sisters?” the Mother General asked Sr. Annie Jaise CMC, who along with her community wanted to have a legal battle against the parish priest and the bishops of the diocese to get back the ownership of their land.

They began a school in 1945. The parish priest was appointed as the nominee manager. In 1971 when a new education act came, the Vicar forged documents and changed the management and educational agency of the school to the Vicar of St. Mary’s Church. When the Sisters came to know about the forgery in 2007, the convent authorities bowing to the pressure exerted by the bishop and the priests wanted to give the land to them.

But the community of 6 members did not agree. They fought for justice, going against the dictates of the bishops, priests and their own Mother General. At the end they won the case. In the process they were cut off from the Congregation. None of the bishops or other religious congregations came to support them. They were left alone. They were labelled as the ‘disobedient’ ones. When the case was over and got back their property, those six sisters were accepted back to the Congregation through a reconciliation process. However, today they are treated as the ‘rebellious’ ones, the ‘disobedient’ ones and are merely tolerated in different convents.

Recently the Provincial made an attempt to hand over the land and the two schools to the diocese. Since she could not do it as it amounted to disrespecting the order of the Supreme Court, she took a decision during the Provincial chapter to close the convent and hand over the property and the two schools to the diocese. But before she could execute this plan, the bishop who was involved in the case got a transfer to another diocese.

The above case brings to the fore the unjust

manipulations that exist between the Church hierarchy and women religious. The hierarchy often exerts pressure and control over consecrated women directly or indirectly under the guise of obedience. Even when they feel that they are on the right, women religious are not in a position to resist because their life is very much dependent on the sacramental life of the Church which is fully in the hands of the ordained ministers. Often sacraments are used as a tool to keep women religious under control. It is not uncommon for priests to refuse to celebrate the Eucharist in a convent if the sisters are not obeying his commands. Moreover, the constitution/rule of each congregation is drawn in accordance with the Canon Law of the Church which is formulated by the clergy with women playing no part in it.

In 1984, some sisters were involved in fighting for the rights of fisher people. At the peak of the struggle for justice, the leaders of the movement thought of using ‘fast unto death’ as a tool to lobby for the rights of fisher people especially the issues affecting their survival. Some sisters volunteered to undertake ‘fast unto death.’

However they were not allowed to go ahead because the Bishops did not want such means to be adopted by religious women. Putting pressure on the provincials they managed to withdraw the sisters from that movement. Those who disobeyed the orders had to leave the congregation.

A few facts about the Indian Church would be in order at this juncture. Though Christianity existed in India since apostolic times, Christians form only 2.3 per cent of the total population. Of these, Catholics number around 19.9 million

forming 1.55 per cent of the total population. There are a total number of 245 congregations of women belonging to Apostolic religious and 9 congregations of contemplative orders. At present there are 93162 apostolic religious women and 863 women belonging to the contemplative orders.

Catholic women religious are not a homogeneous group in India. They are diverse on many counts.

There are women belonging to international congregations and others to local congregations. Those who belong to international congregations are more critical in their thinking and are able to change according to the signs of the time.

But how are these women accepted in a highly patriarchal Church? In 1979, the Presentation Sisters in India decided to change from 'religious habit' to saree which is typically an Indian dress. This was in keeping with the call of Vatican II for inculturation. In some dioceses where the Presentation sisters worked, the bishop of the place refused to give them appointment if they were not wearing the religious habit.

While the Sisters belonging to international congregations have some space for independent thinking, those belonging to the local congregations are fully under the control of the patriarchal church. Often sisters are not even allowed to pray in a way that is more relevant and meaningful for them.

Sisters belonging to international congregations are influenced by feminist thinking and are making changes in their attitudes and also in their governance. They are moving away from a patriarchal world view to a Feminist one and are making changes accordingly. So we hear of participative leadership, Team leadership, consensus in decision making, dialogue as a way of life, etc. Terms like Mother General, General Chapter, Mother Superior, etc. has been replaced by Congregational leader, Congregational Gathering, Local leader, etc.

But as far as I understand this is not taking place for the majority of religious women in India especially those who belong to the local congregations. Their understanding of the vow of obedience is very narrow. It is still pre-



Vatican in the sense that obedience is seen more as a blind obedience to the decisions of the legitimate authority. There is very little personal search for God's will taking place. This is understandable since the women who come to join religious life have already internalized patriarchal value system in which they consider male domination and male-centeredness as normal. Women are taught to accept their inferior position both at home, society and in the Church.

However, the vow of obedience is not meant to create an attitude of subservience or servitude. On the contrary, one commits oneself to do the will of God at each moment. The individual is responsible to seek and do God's will. God's will is manifested to the individual through various ways. One of the ways is through one's lawful authority, provided what the authority wants is not against one's own conscience. Therefore dialogue and discernment become important in living the vow of obedience.

But this understanding of the vow of obedience is not seen among the vast majority of women

religious in India. But there are a few women breaking out.

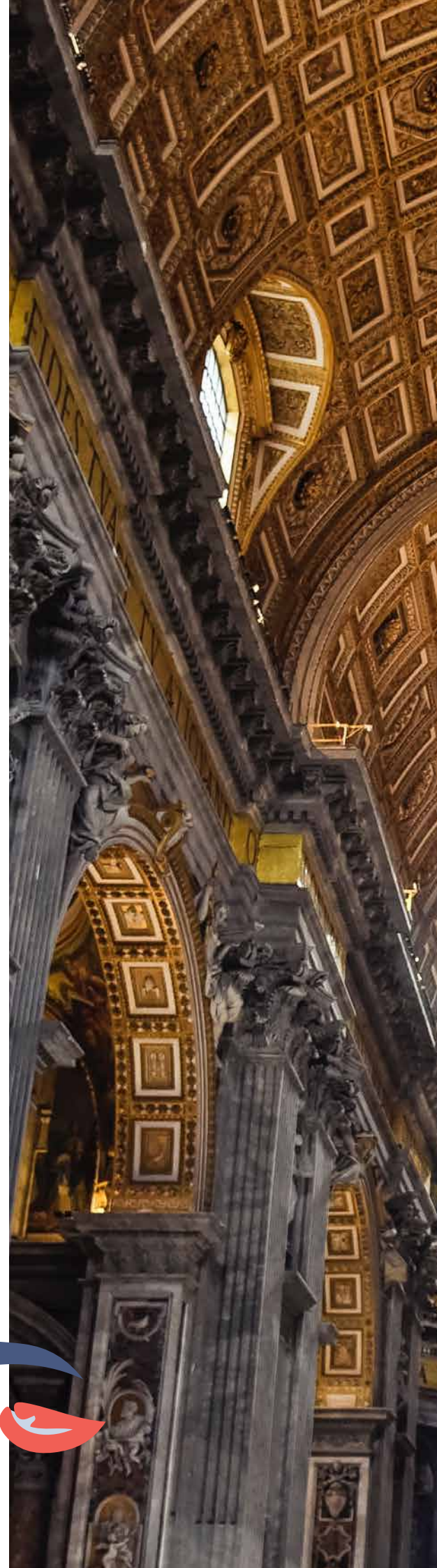
Sr. Valsa John is a case in point. She was brutally hacked to death by a mob of forty armed men on November 15, 2011. A good example of discerning God's will even against the desires of legitimate authority is seen in her life.

Though she was appointed as a full-time teacher in a convent school in 1993, she requested her superiors to relieve her from the school. They were not so willing to allow her to follow her calling. But she was adamant to listen to her inner voice calling her to dedicate her life for the downtrodden. Eventually her superiors allowed her to follow her conscience. She left the comfort of the convent and chose to live among the Tribals of Pachuvara village in 1998. She ate with them and walked the hills with them. Sometimes she even slept under the trees or on riverbeds along with them, after participating in nightlong deliberations. She began mobilising the people of Pachuvara, and other adjoining villages to resist the coal mining project which would alienate them from their land.

She managed to get the people organized, negotiated with the company and got adequate compensation for the Tribals whose land was handed over for the project. Her presence was a threat to the establishment and they planned for her killing with the help of the same people. When she died, the only possession found in her rented room was a bible and the Constitution of India.

For many women religious in India, breaking out of the culture of silence is a herculean task.

It means to come out of one's internalized patriarchal conditioning and to struggle in a hierarchical and patriarchal church for equality, self respect and recognition of their identity as consecrated women in the Church. This struggle will necessarily demand a deeper faith in Jesus and an inner strength to live by one's convictions even if one is denied of the sacramental life of the church temporarily. Creating awareness among religious women towards this is an urgent task. Women religious in India needs to be empowered women in every sense of the word so that they could help their less privileged, voiceless and powerless sisters in the Indian society towards true empowerment.





PHOTOGRAPHER: ZANE LEE

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH FEMINISM IN OUR CHURCH?

SISTER TERESA FORCADES, OSB

SPAIN

We are gathered here in the week of the synod of bishops in Amazonia. I would like to start by quoting from another synod that happened many centuries ago, the 3rd Lateran synod in 1179. This was a synod where it was decided that the abbess of a monastery could no longer forgive the sins of the nuns or hear the nuns in confession. After that, the 4th Lateran council happened in 1215. This reaffirmed what the 3rd Lateran council had said about the prohibition of the abbess to forgive sins, but moved further and said that the abbess and all the nuns of the monastery must confess their sins with a priest at least once a year. So we see those two synods moving towards disempowering women in the church and making them submissive and directly dependent on ordained men.

These two councils of the 11th and 12th century determined what was going to be allowed or not in the church, as these councils often do. But 70 years later, a Saint called Gertrude of Helfta was granted sacramental power that the church a few years before had made forbidden. How do we believe the Holy Spirit acts in the church?

It seems to be that the Holy Spirit does not only act in the church only through the official pronouncements of the church. It seems it might be possible that the church utters official pronouncements that are not sustained by the Holy Spirit.



GRL
PWR

GRL
PWR.

GRL
PWR



And it might be possible that somebody who is not part of those official pronouncements in the church, is being sustained by that very Holy Spirit, without which the mission of the church ceases to have any meaning among us.

Saint Gertrude is one of many women whom the church has preserved up to today. There are hundreds of women the church remembers in an honourable way - remembers what these women did, wrote, what these women initiated socially in our society. Sadly this is not what is the norm happening in our society. I come from a background of science and medicine and graduated in medicine in 1990. When I was studying I heard about something called the Watson and Creek model. This was a model for the way our DNA is structured and Watson and Creek were the two men, I was told in my studies that discovered the structures of DNA. I had no clue at that

time that there was in fact a woman who was the initiator of that discovery, and not only the initiator but did all the research necessary to build up to that discovery. That woman's name was Rosalind Franklin and that woman died in 1958 from ovarian cancer at the age of 39. The science in 30 years completely forgot her - did not pass on her memory, let alone her writing, let alone her private life and inner life. There is not much difference with the church, this patriarchal institution. I stand and reinforce this accusation that our church is a patriarchal structure and that it is in urgent need of change because we cannot, the church cannot give witness in the world of the holy spirit without addressing urgently in the most radical way this issue.


However, I do want to make the point that this church, this institution is one that has been able to preserve some memory, the works, the social initiative of the women

of the past. And that in my experience has not happened in science, has not happened in the humanities.

In this church we do have a treasure - that women, men, bishops, priests have a responsibility and are in a position to make a statement and move forward for what it means to live differently.

Unfortunately the inequality of men and women is not only a problem of the church. We have all heard of the so called crystal ceiling, we have all heard the testimonies of women where discrimination does exist.

During the time of the church dominating european society, the highest achievement was sainthood. Sainthood was the greatest ideal - it was not being a bishop or a priest, but



We now have for the very first time a social idea that points towards a fulfilment that it is forbidden, officially for women.

a saint. This idea of sainthood was open to women. And not only open to women but seemed to be achieved by women in greater numbers than men. However, today there are these dispositions in the canon of the liturgy that says, when you say a litany you cannot say more names of women than men. That happened to me when I did my profession I wanted to have the litany of the saints with all women, because I thought that was a symbol. But they said no that is forbidden and I asked, well can you have a litany only with men? And they said yes that's possible, it's not forced to put women there.

The society where the church was dominating was placing in front of everybody the ideal of human attainment, perfection and fulfilment that was open to men and women. The society of humanism came after that, and it moved away from the ideal of sainthood to intellectuality - the use of reason as being linked to

human dignity. When society moves into this human reason, the prestige of churches, monasteries and religious societies are displaced and the university comes into the centre of the fulfilled human life. And then, surprise - women were forbidden to go to university.

We now have for the very first time a social idea that points towards a fulfilment that it is forbidden, officially for women. Think about how that has played into the consciousness of the inferiority of women in our society, in our cultures?

It has been many centuries of battle to overcome these discriminations, but as you also well know this higher education only comes in the 19th century. You may well

know, as this is definitely the case in my country - we have more students than ever that are women, but the professors - we don't have more women than men, heads of departments - we don't have more women than men, and at the top positions - we don't have more women than men.

So it continues until today, this difference and discrimination of women within greater academia, however in the secular world it is being discussed, debated and steps forward are being made. And for us who are in the church, we have a situation, at least it is my feeling, that we belong to an institution of the roman catholic church that is so behind a society that has moved forward. We need to catch up and run that stretch that is separating us from gender equality that society is trying to achieve and has, to a degree.

We have a structure that is telling the world by its very existence that we are behind on the issue of women. That it's not helping to make visible the roles, expertise and gifts of women in the church. The structure discards rather than makes visible these contributions from voting rights, to preaching the homily, to sacramentality and more. It is so urgent that the church sets its sights to move forward and make equal this institution. I want to call our church into its responsibility, not just to catch up with outside society, but above everything to be coherent with its own history and with its own call to let the holy spirit be active among us.

THE POTENTIAL FOR WOMEN TO BUILD A JUST, PEACEFUL AND RECONCILED AFRICA

SISTER ANNE BEATRICE FAYE CIC

SENEGAL



I did my initial religious formation in France and then continued in my native Senegal. During this period I decided to dedicate myself to be an educator.

I left the nest where I lived and found myself in Congo, on my first mission, in a new foundation.

It was a time of great political change, an epoch was ending, with all the violence that we knew at that time. It was a very difficult time for me too. But it was a very important phase, dedicating myself to a well-defined vision.

I began religious life in Senegal where the majority of the population is Muslim. The context of religious life in this country is very different from that in Congo or Burkina Faso, where I also lived. What is the difference? In Senegal we led religious life in the Church which is really in harmony. Because as a minority we need to be very united in mission and conflict management. Between us, religious women and men, and the institutional Church there is a good understanding, because we must help each other in order to harmonize our mission with the Muslims with whom we have contacts. Our mission there is a necessity, because schools and various social centers offer quality service, which Muslims make use of.

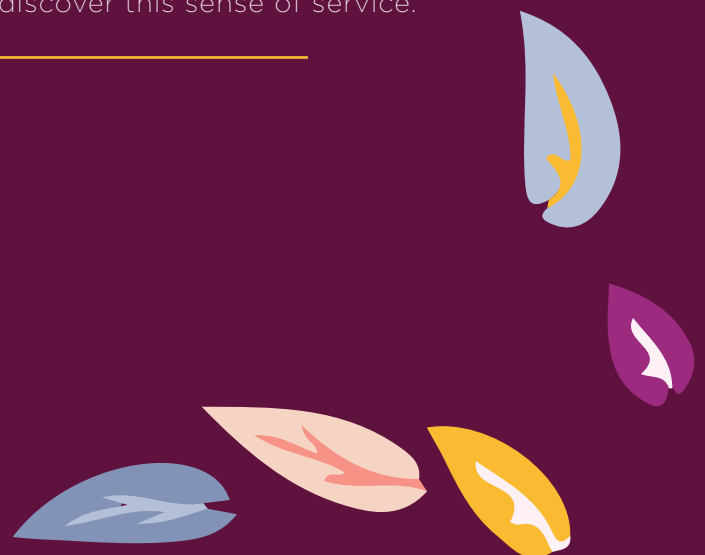
In 2009 there was a synod held in Africa where I participated. All the bishops admitted that the



role of women in the Church is fundamental. They defined women as the backbone of the Church. Women in the synod do not have the right to vote. But during that synod there was a female superior who spoke and said: I ask you this evening, before going to sleep, to make an examination of conscience, to close your eyes and imagine the Church of Africa without women

My experience also tells me that women are the bearers of the mission of the Church, everywhere. Women are always active in the life of the Church, the bishops have recognized this: without women the Church of peace and reconciliation would not exist. Now there is a need to verify the practical results of these declarations. There is a great need to educate women, to create institutions to take charge of their formation in Africa. It is fundamental. If we want to free women in Africa, we need to grant them education. I lived this in my experience: to see my students after years, mature, self-confident, was a great satisfaction. After the theory we must move to action. And the Church must act in this direction.

I am concerned about a problem that is not only Africa's: clericalism, which is in a fundamental way linked to power. All of us who are involved must act, in the first person. I have always told myself that my mission is to serve, to help others. Sometimes there is too much sacredness in our ministry that erases the dimension of what is truly sacred. We must rediscover this sense of service.



ARE THERE LIMITS TO SPEAKING WITH PARRHESIA?

SISTER MADELEINE FREDELL OP

SWEDEN

Do you have faith to move mountains? That is, the dynamic and strong faith which is needed of us women and sisters to make our voices really heard in the Catholic Church today. It is the kind of enthusiasm that was the order of the day when I was a young adult in the beginning and middle of the 1970's. We actually achieved some unity between the different ecclesial communities, partaking in one another's eucharistic celebrations. We actually did give the homily during mass in many Catholic settings. As a Dominican I belong to the Order of Preachers, *Ordo Praedicatorum*, and my principal mission is preaching. Preaching certainly comes in a variety of ways, but there is no valid excuse for us sisters not being able to give the homily.

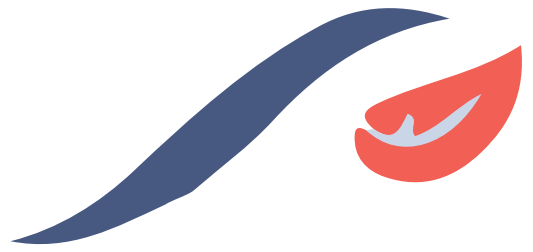
I still consider my vocation to be that of preaching the Word of God and to do that in the form of the homily.

Many women in the Catholic Church, and not least religious sisters, feel enthusiastic about Pope Francis' encouragement to speak with *parrhesia*, openness, frankness and boldness. But how far will this *parrhesia* take us? I meet numerous women, lay and religious, who have become discouraged by years of being silenced and treated as second best. Until the middle of the 1990's not a few of us sisters still had the occasional possibility to give the homily in some parishes. But all of a sudden, the pulpit was not open to us any longer. There are several reasons why this backlash happened, but I would say that a tendency towards legalism, an unhealthy centralism and a new form of

clericalism started to reinforce its way during the middle of the 1990s.

Sometimes we were still allowed to give a kind of homily with the priest introducing us to the pulpit with the words "Now, Sister will share a few words on today's readings with us ..." I don't accept that kind of treatment any longer. Or when I had been asked by the parish priest to give the homily at Sunday mass because the celebrating priest didn't know sufficient Swedish and the latter asked to go through my homily before mass and said that it had to be preached at the end of the celebration. Needless to say, I refused to give that homily and told the congregation why. Of course, I am not alone to have been





ignored, denounced and silenced in my diocese and out of discretion I will only mention some of my experiences. Once they wanted me to answer for my alleged heresy to a group of five priests! I couldn't help my quick answer to that: "Do you really need five priests to defend catholic doctrine against me?" Almost end of story, I only had to meet with one of them! Or when I was assigned the prestigious task to give the speech in the Lutheran cathedral of Stockholm at the annual opening of the Swedish Parliament in 2017 and the Catholic diocese kept absolutely silent about it. To try and make my speech insignificant, the catholic magazine published a homily that the bishop had given at least ten years earlier.

So how far will this *parrhesia* take us? Many of us are prepared to speak with *parrhesia*, but is that enough to change the deep-rooted, male, hierarchical culture that is imprinted in the leadership of the Catholic Church?

Pope Francis' invitation to speak with *parrhesia* has already removed some of the bumps we have had on the way since the hopeful decade after the Second Vatican Council. For example, I suppose that the so called "definitively held propositions" that were put forward in the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in 1994 and made its entry into the Canon Law through the motu

proprio *Ad tuendam fidem* in 1998 must be at least somewhat less definitive if we are really invited to speak with *parrhesia*. The very least *parrhesia* must mean is to be allowed to put forward arguments for alternative propositions without being deemed a heretic!

Encouraging us to speak with *parrhesia*, Pope Francis is at least not afraid of an open dialogue. What is important at this particular moment is that we have got the microphone back, even if giving the homily in the pulpit still seems to be somewhere in the future. However, I wouldn't consider it too bold a suggestion to open the pulpit to religious sisters and lay people to give the homily during mass.

We women, lay and religious, are not only tired of indefensible documents and statements, but above all many of us are bored at listening only to male interpretations of biblical texts, ethics and ecclesial life.

Sunday after Sunday, we are exposed to faith experiences made only by male, or interpreted by an only male priesthood. Not to talk about the exclusive male language in liturgy, prayers, hymns. Yes, there are editions with inclusive language but they are hardly used in parishes. Abuses of all kinds have come to the fore in the Church, sexual abuse, economic abuse, abuse of conscience, of power, and so on. There is also the abuse of the silencing of women's experiences, women's interpretations of life and faith – the silencing of women's voices. There is also the abuse

of an only masculine language.

And you sisters, what do you say? Today, we are focusing on women who have given their lives to the Gospel in a great variety of ways, on women who have vowed their lives to proclaim the good tidings to humanity as a whole. Religious sisters have all through the ages moved mountains, and they still are, because they are filled with a transformative, dynamic faith. But we are not allowed behind the pulpit to give the Sunday homily, to share our faith experiences, our biblical interpretations. We are silenced.

As baptized, we are Christ, but as women we are not recognized to represent Christ, at least not publicly during mass.

There does not exist one single valid argument why this is so. And we are not even allowed, according to Canon Law, to proclaim the Good News in form of the homily during mass. I don't think there are any valid arguments why this is so either. Despite the fact that women – and religious sisters – have been silenced and banned from the altar and pulpit we have still found creative ways to proclaim the good tidings. Sometimes the hierarchical Church has told us women and sisters to take on the Marian face of the Church. Well, let's do that, we want to take on the active, courageous and revolutionary face of Mary of the Magnificat! And let us consign the image of Mary as a passive introvert to oblivion once and for all!

Pope Francis, if you really want to be bold and creative, and invite religious sisters to a meaningful service in

the Church, open the Sunday mass' pulpit to us! Grant us the right to give the homily! In the Swedish Lutheran Church, there is the institution of giving the "venia" to a lay person which means the right to give the homily. It wouldn't take long to introduce that institution into the Canon Law.

We have our role models as women apostles. Mary Magdalene and Junia are just a few, but well known. The pulpit won't just be handed over to us women without struggle. History, whether secular or ecclesial, has taught us that power is nothing that those who have it will share with those who haven't. However, we do not claim power. Power always makes you corrupt. What we want is to be respected and listened to, publicly, behind the pulpit because of our authority. Authority is never something you can claim. Authority is given by others to those who are truly proclaiming good tidings, hope, faith, love and solidarity through both words and action. It is time to give us religious sisters this recognition! That would truly be an act of *parrhesia*, openness, frankness and boldness.

We are all equal, all of us are representing Christ to the same extent and with the same authority. We are living in a world threatened by the collapse of democratic systems, grave economic injustice and climate catastrophe. The Church has something important to say here but I am convinced that it will only be trustworthy if its' representatives are both women and men on all levels. If we have faith, we will move mountains. Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love and fill us with your blowing dynamism!



What we want is to be respected and listened to, publicly, behind the pulpit because of our authority. Authority is never something you can claim. Authority is given by others to those who are truly proclaiming good tidings, hope, faith, love and solidarity through both words and action. It is time to give us religious sisters this recognition! That would truly be an act of *parrhesia*, openness, frankness and boldness.





FIRST STEP TO EQUALITY - SWITZERLAND LEADING THE WAY

PRIRESS IRENE GASSMANN AND
BISHOP FELIX GMÜR in dialogue moderated
by theologian Regula Grünenfelder



IRENE GASSMANN



BISHOP FELIX GMÜR



REGULA GRÜNENFELDER

Bishop Felix

Already for my predecessors, as for me now, the most important thing is to deal with the reality as it is. We live today and not yesterday. Therefore we have to find solutions for today.

In my diocese I try to cooperate with the faithful regardless of their gender: I would like to encourage people who are suitable for ministry regardless of whether they are women or men. In this cooperation, it is very important to give the laymen space to tell them about their problems and needs. It is not me who can tell what the women need. Being a man, I don't want to decide from above, what women need.

Women in my dioceses are allowed to preach, even during the Eucharist. What is important is that a sermon is preached and that the preachers are competent and have a mandate from their bishop. These are theologians, women and men, and of course deacons and priests.

For me it is important that women and men are first and foremost human beings and are treated equally in the status they have. That goes without saying for me.

There are also situations though, in which one can still trace the inequality, for example, in female congregations I would have to assist as a bishop to the election of Superior General, to validate the choice. But this is not the case for male congregations. This I don't understand. The women can vote for themselves and elect their Mother Superior. These are very practical things in which women are taken less seriously than men.

Prioress Irene

Prioress Irene told her story of commitment to gender equality in the Church. I have been committed to gender equality in our Church for some time now, for example I am part of a project group. We have organized a pilgrimage – by foot from St. Gallen to Rome. In our backpack we had the concern that men in the Church should no longer discuss and decide on issues that affect women or the whole Church without women.

I can see again and again how many people in the Church, both women and men, are disappointed. There is also an important sense of powerlessness among them: what can we do in this Church? This is what motivated me to launch in February 2019 the Thursday prayer for equality that should go around the world, in order that this time of change in the Church is accompanied also with prayer. I think it needs



both: prayer and it also needs people who stand up and take action.

In March 2019 we as a community watched the Arte documentary „Gottes missbrauchte Dienerinnen“. We were very touched, speechless by what we saw. For me it was very clear after this film: We, religious women, if we want to receive sacraments, we are directed to priests, to men. Someone may administer the sacraments and someone only may receive them - that is an imbalance. As long as this imbalance exists, our Church cannot be healed and regain credibility.

I dream of a Church in which the baptized live from the power and joy of the Gospel and also let themselves be strengthened and healed from the sacraments. In this Church, women and men are equally entitled to administer the sacraments.

There is such a special role religious communities could play in the process of creating a Church where both men and women are involved in equal footing. On this way we, religious sisters communities, can be pioneers. I am inspired by the Rule of Saint Benedict. In Chapter 62, Benedict writes that if a monastery needs someone to administer priestly services, then the community should choose who is suitable and worthy to assume this service and ask the bishop to give them the mission for it. As we live the Benedictine Rule, what does it mean for us, the Benedictine sisters? As a first step we could think about what we need. When I look at my community, which is getting older, I know that we need the sacrament of anointing of the sick. We could choose a sister from our community, for example the sister who accompanies the older sisters, so that she gets permission from the bishop to administer the sacraments of the anointing of the sick.







CLEANING YOUR OWN HOUSE

A conversation with **SISTER SIMONE
CAMPBELL CCC** and **SISTER MARY JOHN
MANAZAN OSB** moderated by
Deb-Rose Milavec



**SISTER SIMONE
CAMPBELL**



**SISTER MARY JOHN
MANAZAN**



DEB-ROSE MILAVEC

Deb-Rose Milavec (DM)

In 1971 the synod of bishops wrote: *“While the church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognises that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes.”*

As we gather here before the synod on the Amazon, I just wonder to what degree this prophetic 1971 statement is being filled? Has the synod considered the health of our planet and the health of our church when we know that the voices of women will be critical yet women religious will not vote.

Sister Mary John Manazan is a missionary Benedictan sister and noted theologian and author. She has served as president of St. Scholastica’s College as Prioress of the Missionary Benedictan sisters in the Manila Priory. She served as national chairperson of the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines. She is a political and feminist activist who helped develop an Asian feminist theology of liberation and works with a number of organizations that deal with gender issues and women’s concerns. Currently she ministers as superior of the Manila community and as a member of the Priory Council. She will also be serving as a theological consultant at this Synod on Amazonia, so we’re very glad that she’ll be there.

Sister Simone Campbell has served as executive director of Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice since 2004. She is a religious leader, attorney, poet with extensive experience in public policy and advocacy for systemic change. In Washington she lobbies on issues that help mend the gaps in income and wealth in the US focusing specifically on how they disproportionately affect people of color and women. Around the country she is a noted speaker and educator on these public policy issues and she is well known for her famous ‘nuns letter’ which was critically important in passing the Affordable Care Act in the United States, as well as her famous ‘nuns on the bus’ tour.

So as we look at the voice of women religious within the church I want to point out of course the incredible work they do for a plethora of social issues, yet some also see a gap between their fierce passion for justice that women religious enact for women and children in the world and their work for women who suffer within the institutional church and the sexism that’s still present within the church for women. So ladies, first of all do you even agree with that? And if so do you see a need for women religious to respond more fully to the needs of women within the church?

Simone Campbell (SC)

I think that when I was in my rabid feminist phase when I was very angry at the patriarchal church and I could barely live with myself and my sisters could hardly live with me, I had a lot of anger and a lot of engagement. **I finally realized the anger was devouring me and I came to know that I was so angry because I had been an instrument of my own oppression** and that made me mad. But once I made peace and forgave myself then I could enter into a dialogue that didn’t necessarily get seen on a regular basis. I was elected to be the leader of my community, a five-year term and I got elected when my chapter at our decision-making body started our statement with the statement from Vatican II - we are the church, we know it, we own it and we will act on it. My prayer led me to realize that my job was to go to all the bishops where our sisters were and tell the story of my sisters. And then to invite them as Jesus did - come and see. Now I have to tell you that only one of the bishops ever came and saw but every year in my pilgrimage to different diocese I would tell new stories and I came to realize that my role in leadership was to be a missionary for my sisters to make sure that their stories were known. and while that didn’t get seen in the public I think it was a critical piece of work because what I have learned is that you won’t break their heads but you might be able to break their hearts.

Change happens in the heart first and then they have to follow with their head.

Mary Manazan (MM)

I would like to give a historical background to this because before the Spaniards came to our country we women were equal to men. Not only that, only women could be priests, only women. They were called ‘baybayin’. These women were the intermediary between the spirit world and the human world and they were considered the most important persons in the village beginning with the chief, the one that makes the sword and the baybayin. Only women can become a baybayin. If a man would like to do the ceremonies of a baybayin he must wear the garment of a woman. How different it is from today and that’s why I am so much more inspired to really see that my own women of our people that we get back to our legacy of equality. The reason why the women before the Spaniards came, were equal to the men is because our fore parents did not have a concept of virginity, therefore they

did not over-protect the daughter, they were just considered the same as the boys. They had the same freedom of movement, all rights of inheritance etc...Now when the Spaniards came they were so shocked at our freedom and they thought we had too much freedom and apparently we could not go to heaven. So they wanted to educate us and that's what I call the domestication of the indigenous woman. And how did they do that. First of all they educated the mother saying to them you know you should think better of your daughters because they have this crystal ball that if anything happens of this crystal ball they will lose their dignity - as if virginity and dignity are one. And of course they succeeded in domesticating our women. But I always say there is **in every Filipino woman, this memory of a dangerous subversive memory over equality and that is what is inspiring our women's movement in the Philippines today. Because we had it, so we lost it and now we have to have it again.** So as a religious woman and as a feminist theologian it is insight into the gender dynamics that even if we have done something we have not reached all women in the Philippines and for me this is the reason why I am really much more inspired and urged to awaken awareness.

DM

Can you tell me about times when you felt dismissed maybe when you felt other women were dismissed and especially when their voices and actions were prophetic and of great benefit to the people of God. How did you and your communities overcome these dismissals or attacks?

SC

In 2012 the Vatican issued censure against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States and they named two organizations as being a bad influence on Catholic sisters, one of which was my organisation because of our work for affordable health care in 2010. We lobbied Capitol Hill and worked really hard until there was a bill that had a chance of going through. The Catholic Health Association came out in favor of the bill and I wrote a letter for Catholic sisters to sign because many Catholic sisters congregations run health care in the United States. I wrote this letter on a Saturday, got 59 signatures, sent it out Sunday and on Monday the bishops of the United States came out opposing the bill because their staff, who were very conservative and aligned with the republican party in our

nation, gave the bishops bad information. They said there was federal money for abortion in the Affordable Care Act.

Two courts have found as a matter of law, that there is no federal funding of abortion in the Affordable Care Act. We got in trouble because our letter came out after the bishops letter, and the media sided with us and made headlines like 'sisters versus bishops'. It wasn't our intention to do that. It was not my plan, all I wanted was health care for our people. But the result was we got 29 votes of the house representatives that allowed the bill to pass and we now have 24 million people who have health care, who would not have had it otherwise. I had done something good in my life and it brings tears to my eyes right now.

The sad fact was though, we were not out of the woods. One sister told me that the bishop of her diocese said that her Benedictine community could not use parish property to have their social justice meetings because she had signed the letter. Another bishop said the sisters couldn't advertise their vocation day in the diocesan newspaper because she had signed the letter. But here is the mystery of the Holy Spirit. The secular media got a hold of this information and the sisters who could not advertise in their diocesan newspaper had more women showing up for a vocation day than they had ever experienced before. The sisters who couldn't have their social justice meeting on church property were offered a space downtown, and it became a big inner-faith meeting.

I feel so humbled to be used by the spirit in this way, to be able to lift up the needs of our people, to bring joy in the midst of anguish, to know their worth in solidarity and in community, I have to say should we send the Vatican a thank-you note? The challenge is that

anguish sometimes trips me up because it makes me so mad and so hurt, but **what I have learned is fidelity in a contemplative practice to listen to where the spirit whispers can lead us to this new creation.** So yes we were censored, it was said that we promoted radical feminist themes incompatible with the gospel, but I don't think they'd ever read the gospel because clearly it's a feminist organization!

MM

When I was Prioress, I was a member of the association of major religious superiors of the Philippines and we did a lot of strong statement against the corruption in the government. The Bishops Conference did not do anything like that, so one priest told us 'you are going against the bishops' and I said 'no we are not going against the bishops we are going beyond the bishops' if they wanted to follow us, thank you but if they don't we just go ahead anyway.

The major religious superiors in what we called mutual relations - that meant there are five of us from the major superiors and five bishops - we would discuss issues together. There are two issues I put there and that is the sexual abuse of the clergy, because there's a lot of cover-up, they just transfer them to another parish and they get a virgin territory in that parish. I told them if a religious priest has a sexual relationship with an adult okay it might be immoral but it's not criminal. But when there was a real case of a sixteen-year-old girl, it's not only immoral it is criminal and he belongs in jail. But I don't know of anyone who's in jail right now. When I was saying that, one bishop said 'oh but that is such a rare occasion' I almost lost my cool!

DM

I want to circle back to this question, as a woman who is not consecrated, as a woman who works in a reform organization that works for the equality of women in the church, help us to understand what more could be done. What more could religious sisters say or do around action.

SC

I think that the church is in a spiritual crisis and that the leadership is holding on to rules because they don't have a clue about being a spiritual leader. I believe it's up to us women and our friendly men to practice a deep

contemplative life that then acts on what we hear, without fear. When I think of the Holy Spirit I know something from that space it's obvious it just needs to be done and there's no question about it and the important thing is that we act on what we hear. And if we trust that we are the body of Christ everybody has a different part to play and play that part to the maximum. I joke that I've come to realize in prayer that my part in this body of Christ is to be stomach acid in the body of Christ because my part is to break down food or to stir up energy, but your part Deb is to be engaged in creating a future church, your job Mary John is doing it as a theologian and a reflector and a bringer of your culture. Everybody has a part to play and if we play our part in community this will change, but it's up to us to listen deeply and act on it.

MM

I think there are two things that are necessary for change. One is to change of consciousness and the other is a change of structure.

Unless these two are changed then nothing will be changed. With regard to the change of consciousness I think we need still to do a lot of awareness raising not only among women but among men. I have an institute of women studies and we just developed a module on gender issues for men and we are doing this not only for our teachers, we are trying to focus on seminarians you know because these are going to be the priests later on who are supposed to be the spiritual directors of women. Now we are changing the kind of mentality because the priests, the men they are the perpetrators so how come we are not educating them and we are just educating the women?





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