



SISTERS... UNVEIL YOUR TRUTHS!

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY
8 MARCH 2021



VOICES
OF FAITH

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CHANTAL GÖTZ

VOICES OF FAITH

Thank you for being with us today, to hear and listen, to learn and connect and above all, to be inspired to take action, wherever you are. That is the intention of missio Aachen and Voices of Faith. We are committed to act on behalf of women who are both victims and survivors of what seems to be a never-ending crisis of abuse in the Catholic Church.

Voices of Faith supports the good works of the Catholic Church and

all its people who work for its mission. For over 22 years I have worked together with religious sisters in the field. I have to admit that I reached a point in my work when I gave up all hope that religious sisters would ever break their silence and speak out about the lives they were living as consecrated women in the Church. Far too many were, and still are, resigned in silence to a role of submissive servitude. They are treated in many places across the world with disrespectful and overbearing authoritarianism from cardinals, bishops, priests and sadly too their own community superiors.

Three years ago, in the summer of 2018, I reached a critical moment. I found myself seriously questioning how I could remain a member of my Church, but equally how could I leave? Sexual abuse cases somehow seemed to be dominating the news. And we will all recall the case of the religious sister in Kerala, India accusing her bishop of having raped her several times. This courageous sister was simply not believed. That felt for me like the desperate last straw.

But it was my dear friend Astrid Lobo, the first woman to



produce a gender policy for the Indian diocese of Mumbai, who pleaded with me to stay and to take up the abuse of religious women as a public advocacy issue. And so it was in the autumn of 2018, that Voices of Faith turned its focus on the sexual abuse of women religious in the Church for the very first time. We invited three female speakers, who had experienced abuse and who overcame their silence and spoke the truth about what had happened to them, the truth that the hierarchical Church has swept under the carpet for decades. At this event, you could have heard a pin drop as the sisters spoke.

It still resonates clearly with me how at that time many people tried to deter me by saying that the abuse of religious sisters in the Church was none of my business. My response was, well maybe you are right. But I also know that those who could and should take responsibility to uncover the abuse, to speak out and put an end to it are not willing or simply unable to do so. We are willing and able to provide a platform for the voices of those who simply have no voice. Since our first Voices of Faith event, we have taken significant steps forward. Just look at these brilliant sisters today, who are ready to voice their concerns not only because they love their religious life but because they equally know, deep in their hearts, that change is needed in the Church they love.

The new partnership between missio Aachen and Voices of Faith aims to ensure that the work and lives of religious sisters are no longer hampered and constrained

by stagnant Church structures and practices that do not allow women's charisms and multiple gifts to fully flourish.

Together with all of you we have to ensure that religious sisters – who form the very backbone of our church life and communities – are free from all situations that lead to any kind of abuse, be it spiritual, sexual, psychological, financial or the all-pervasive abuse of power or conscience.

All of us, no matter where we are, can inform ourselves and raise awareness about the abuse of women in the Church. There is really no excuse for anyone not to.

Dear religious sisters, the campaign we have launched **#sisterwhatdoyousay** is for you. Make it your campaign! We are all eager to listen to what you have to say.

We need to hear about your struggles, but equally about your dreams.

Do not stay silent anymore. Your words need to transform us into action.



SISTER MADELEINE FREDELL

SWEDEN

A prophet is badly treated, persecuted and even stoned in biblical scripture tradition. They get due tribute long after their death, hardly ever before. Women, raising their voices, often suffer the same fate, not only in the past, but often even today. Biblical prophets and women claiming equality in Church and society are honored when dead. During their life they are at best ridiculed, often totally silenced and even persecuted.

Jesus saying “no prophet is ever accepted in his own country” comes in different ways in all the Gospels. The evangelist Mark has the most brutal version, “a prophet is despised only in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house” and he concludes that Jesus couldn’t work any miracles in Nazareth. It seems that the closer we are to a prophet the more likely we will despise her or him. Jesus shows that the opposite is true as well. The further away we are from the prophet, culturally speaking, the more we will accept the prophetic message. The prophet Elijah was successful in relation to a widow outside of his land, in Sidonia. And the prophet Elisha obtained healing of the Syrian, Naaman. The group Jesus was preaching to wanted to throw him off a cliff.

We all have this kind of experience in our families, religious communities, parishes and even in our countries. Maybe, we are not

threatened to be thrown off a cliff. But in some contexts, we can be exposed on social media in the most defamatory ways. Why is this so? Why is the prophetic message so threatening?

Jesus seems to take it as a deplorable fact of human behavior. He knows that it is his fate to be misunderstood, to be persecuted and even killed. And this despite his message of liberation, justice and love.

This leads me on to ask if we really want to be free and to live in equality with everybody else? I mean, a totally just and equal life with all peoples. I doubt it. With freedom and justice come responsibility for my sisters and brothers. The widow at Zarephath was saved from famine. That gave her the responsibility to share with those in need around her. The Syrian, Naaman, was healed and that gives him the responsibility to bring healing to others regardless of religious or ethnic belonging. With justice and equality comes responsibility.

For me, as a Dominican, a woman preacher, it is my responsibility to be a prophet for women’s voices

in the Church as well as in society. Both entities are deeply patriarchal, structurally and mentally. I am called to reveal these structures and culture in a prophetic way. And I must also realize that to be prophetic in a system of persisting patriarchy is at best to ask for trouble. "A prophet is despised only in his own country, among his own relations and in his own house." But I have a responsibility towards a number of sisters, religious and lay, all over the world, to make it possible to hear their stories and interpretations in the pulpit. The whole people of God have a right to hear women's voices, in the pulpit and during Sunday Mass. Our responsibility is to transform the structures and culture of the Church - and society.

We might be despised now. We will be honored after death. We must obtain the needed reformation now.



SISTER JULIE GEORGE

INDIA

Obedience is a positive and creative force; it allows us to make mature decisions in regards to our lives and ministries. The proper understanding and practice of the vow holds a very relevant and creative meaning for women religious in relation to their ministry and their role in the Church as well as in their community and personal life. Superiors refusing to speak out of fear against injustice done to their communities and to their members is not obedience, but it is merely an act of conformity to authority, fearful of the consequences of disobeying.

Obedience meant freedom from domination and blind submission to authority and freedom for a life based on equality and interdependence. The general attitude of the hierarchy towards religious sisters is that of domination rather than collaboration and cooperation. This situation has not changed over the years and matters are swept under the carpet in the name of obedience to the will of God, so that there won't be any criticism of the manner in which issues are dealt with.

Many women religious feel that our agency to make decisions gets diminished once we enter religious life. A distorted concept of obedience and dependence on permissions encourages infantilism.

When it comes to Church and religious women, the rules are made arbitrarily by the hierarchy and insist on their observances. Especially the diocesan congregations and pious associations of women have no voice of their own. They just have to follow the orders of their bishop and the priests. Many parish priests tend to see women religious as handmaids, meant to carry out orders and fall in line with their vision of what Christian life in the parish should be. When opposed, the negativity on the part of the priest expresses itself in harmful criticism from the pulpit, refusing to celebrate Mass for the sisters or administer the sacraments.



In the Church institutions often the qualification and competence of women religious are not recognised in work situations where priests are appointed as the head, even though they do not have the necessary experience for the given job. Here too, the sisters under obedience work for the Church's mission.

Low wages for sisters working in Church institutions is another area of serious concern. For the past few years, religious women are voicing out their right to decent pay but often it is brushed aside or taken for granted that the religious women are called to serve and under the cover of service the superiors are silenced.

Women religious in India continue to confront grossly patriarchal attitudes by Church leadership. In many places sisters have been invited by bishops to render a particular service needed in a place with the confidence that the congregation would be able to render the service required and was provided with land. Now the ownership of land has become a contentious issue and if the sisters are unable to pay the current market value, they are asked to leave the place. The service of the mission which was the primary

goal in inviting a congregation to invest its resources has become the secondary matter, as compared with land ownership. Again under obedience and the fear of conflict, sisters leave the place and give up all their rights. There is a welcome change that some congregations are daring to challenge the system.

The vow of obedience is abused by authorities to suit their gains with the consent of the superiors. We have seen women religious superiors colluding with abusers in clergy sexual abuse cases and persecuting the survivors. This tendency is seen mostly in the local congregations but even the international congregations too bow under the order of the male hierarchy and sideline their own sisters. The superiors are obliged to the hierarchy and are willing to follow orders, rather than be true to their charism, vision and ministry. These attitudes have led to the tendency to dominate and to favour those who accept the status quo while those who question the injustice are seen as troublesome, even if it is a prophetic search for relevance in a changing world. Therefore uncritically binding religious women by religious vows is actually enslaving them in the name of God's Will.





SISTER MUMBI KIGUTHA

KENYA/USA

Abuse in any system stems from power imbalances, those who have it and those who don't. And power is not just about elected leaders but also those who wield power in terms of seniority, influence, association etc.

Abuse from the hierarchical, patriarchal church is rampant in Africa, but so does abuse within the ranks of female religious life. How? A superior constantly singles out a sister for constant condemnation based on hearsay, coached in the words of "some sisters have expressed concern about a, b, c?", thus abrogating their personal responsibility and hiding behind this anonymous collective. Such a superior is not helping the sister but rather engaging in gaslighting. Another superior arranges with a priest to investigate a sister by talking to her professors and classmates in her university behind her back.

That superior is engaging in abuse of her power and cannot excuse her behavior as concern but rather than as a petty and personal vendetta. The victim of all these stops trusting, gets isolated, suffers from low esteem and depression and lives in constant fear.

This and much more happened to me. I'd like to say I was an exception to the rule, however I am only one of many religious sisters on the African continent who have and continue to face similar or worse experiences. A leadership that uses hearsay and gossip to govern has failed colossally.

I am blessed with a supportive family and thus could make the choice to leave, and eventually find a new congregation, but many feel they have no such option because of a limitation of choices outside of religious life. The average woman joins religious life soon after high school. Many come from families that are not financially stable, which is part of the reality of life in Africa. Whether or not she gets educated, to what extent and in what area, is a function of the superiors and these decisions are often shadowed by limited resources, congregational politics, personal bias, ethnic discrimination etc. A sister in her late 20s onwards, without any concrete formal education and marketable skills will be hard-pressed to make a choice to leave religious life due to the challenges that await her. Many stay deeply traumatized but feeling that they have no other choice. However, pain that is not transformed is transferred and we see cycles of abuse getting established, with sisters abusing lay workers and clients in their ministry sites, or by former victims

when eventually they make it to the other side of finally professed membership and leadership.

Other forms of oppression include using anonymous evaluations of temporary professed sisters to literally tear down people psychologically. Evaluations based on subjectivity where members are free to speculate and cast judgement on other sisters' personality, behavior or speech are morally wrong and in equal measure utterly ridiculous. The burden of maintaining peace and surviving is placed on younger members in formation and temporary vows in whatever community they find themselves, despite several superiors' abusive behavior being open knowledge in the congregation. Do we truly account for the jealousy, maliciousness and slander that is rife in convents and congregations? Do we own some blame for some of the transactional sexual trysts that occur between sisters and clergy or lay men, when sisters cannot access their basic needs like toiletries, yet some of their peers in the same congregation are living a luxurious life which is either a product of support from outside sources or because of access to funds due to their ministries?

We cannot afford to keep silent anymore, whether as victims or witnesses. There are very few African

sisters who can claim ignorance of this pervasive issue. Religious life is not and shouldn't be about survival of the fittest. There needs to be safeguards against abuse within congregations and ensuring that there is accountability for such actions. Safe houses should be established for women who choose to leave, where they can receive therapy and support as they transition back to a world they left when barely adults. A financial fund is needed to provide educational and vocational support to ex-religious. The wound needs to breathe so that we can heal.



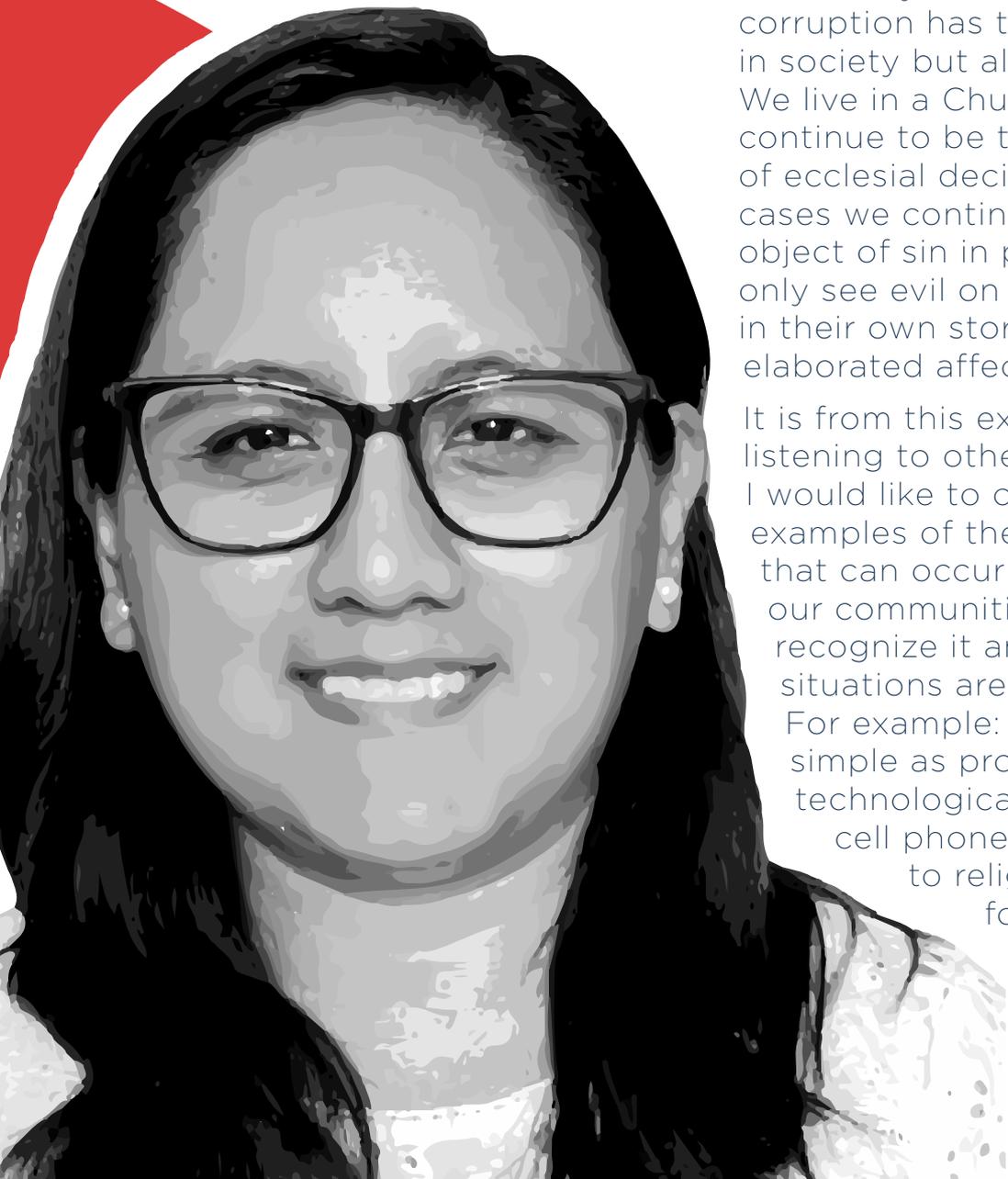
SISTER EVELYN ARRAYA

PERU

Good morning everyone, I am Evelyn Arraya, a religious sister of the congregation of the Sisters of Charity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Peru. I am grateful for the invitation to participate in this moment of reflection, and as a young religious I would like to speak from my own experience and the challenges that still exist and must be changed.

I have been living in community for 14 years, with the conviction to continue fighting for a Church of “shared table”, in which there is no distinction, nor categories that crush the rights of others. I continue working to empower myself, to be a consecrated woman within the Catholic Church, which in Latin America continues to be very “patriarchal”, where clericalism is seen everywhere, where specifically corruption has taken space not only in society but also in the Church. We live in a Church where priests continue to be the protagonists of ecclesial decisions, and in some cases we continue to be seen as an object of sin in perverse minds that only see evil on the outside and not in their own stories and in a badly elaborated affectivity.

It is from this experience and from listening to other religious that I would like to comment on some examples of the abuse of power that can occur inside and outside our communities, so that we can recognize it and make sure these situations are never repeated. For example: sometimes it is as simple as prohibiting the use of technological devices such as cell phones or social networks to religious who are in formation stages or by convincing the person that some punishment or sanction is placed,



such as the prohibition to talk to someone, because “it is the best for her”. Also, this abuse occurs a lot in the spiritual accompaniment of religious in initial or ongoing formation, where the priest is seen as a “divine being” who knows what is best for us, overriding our critical conscience.

Likewise, the vow of obedience that we commit to can be misunderstood and used by people for their own benefit, which we call “blind obedience” that occurs in places where they make use of the vow emitted by the consecrated women to be able to annul their own freedom, will and critical conscience.

Therefore, as long as the vow of obedience does not help us to feel free, a disguised abuse is being generated, which we can make visible in experiences such as accepting a request from someone even knowing that it goes against our principles and values or in not feeling listened to in the face of something that does not seem coherent to us. Another example occurs in parish environments, when we perceive that priests do not take into account our proposals or points of view and impose their ideologies, making us believe that they are the ones who are right and have the

power to decide what is best for everyone.

When experiences like those mentioned above or similar happen, I recommend you to analyze the situation objectively, if necessary seek people to help you do it, convince yourself that these situations can not continue because we become indirectly complicit in it and facing the fear that sometimes prevents us from speaking out, dare to denounce and as women followers of Jesus Christ go “against the current” of a violent culture that has been normalized for years and in many cases is justified by dumping on us feelings of guilt and submission.

Finally, I would like to add that it is time! To realize that the abuse of power is disguised in various forms, so we must raise our voices and assume our prophetic role of announcing and denouncing that which takes away dignity and freedom, to leave fears behind, to empower ourselves as consecrated women, to recognize that we can no longer be accomplices. We know it is not an easy task, there will be times when we feel alone or when they try to convince ourselves that it is useless to work on it, but it is time to work together to bring the Gospel to life!



SISTER PATTY FAWKNER

AUSTRALIA

Even though it's been described as the Christian jewel, obedience has always been problematic. Recall the Christian-raised Nazis whose Nuremberg defence was "we were only following orders". Personally, I don't feel that I've ever been wounded directly by my vow of obedience. I don't have any horror tales to tell. But like so many, I've struggled with an immature understanding and theology of obedience.

I would try and get my own way as a school-girl by saying to my mother, "But Mum, Sister said". Mum replied, "I don't care what Sister says." I was shocked, because in my mind "Sister" was the ultimate authority, ahead of God. But Mum's relativising human authority has served me well. As children we loved a television show called "Father knows Best". That notion continues in the Church today. I was appalled when Pope John Paul II said we were forbidden to even talk about women's ordination. This infantilizes people.

One of the most significant impacts on my understanding of obedience came when I studied Feminist Hermeneutics with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and did my thesis on a feminist reading of the Rule of Benedict. I discovered that obedience, like humility and silence, is a gendered virtue. Women more than men are urged to be obedient, humble and silent, virtues

which continue to be used as tools of female oppression. Women disproportionately suffer coercive control, sexual exploitation and violation of their human rights. How many women have endured rape in marriage, in clergy-endorsed obedience to husbands?

Feminist hermeneutics deconstructs by asking critical questions; it also reconstructs by re-interpreting sacred texts, remembering her-story, not only his-story, and by using creative imagination leading to transformative practices.



As a woman who follows the Rule of Benedict, I reclaim the root meaning of obedience: to hear, to listen. I try and “listen with the ear of my heart,” the opening words of Benedict’s Rule. Our congregation has moved from a paradigm of obedience seen as unquestioning subservience, domination and power over, to a paradigm of mutuality, adulthood, servant leadership and power with.

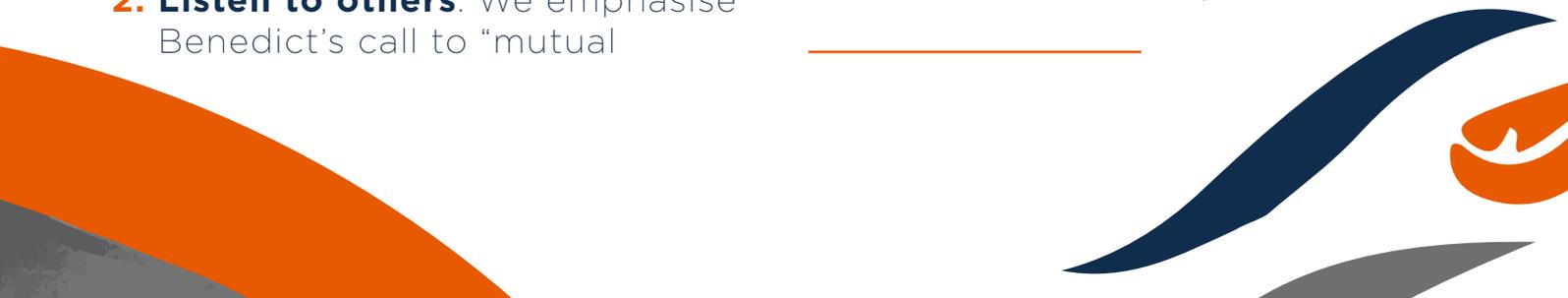
Our Sisters live in small communities. Thirty-six years ago, we abolished the role of the local superior, thus calling all community members to co-responsibility and adulthood. Male congregations continue to find this incomprehensible. “Who will take a sick brother to the doctor?” one incredulous Brother asked me. Who indeed! We have discovered an obedience which calls us to:

- 1. Listen to yourself.** Women must first listen to their own experience as the primary source of authority.
- 2. Listen to others.** We emphasise Benedict’s call to “mutual

obedience” where we listen to and obey each other. We continue to explore participative structures of discernment and consultation, where unity rather than uniformity is valued, where diversity of opinion is sought rather than quashed, where we know all have a piece of the wisdom. Religious women have been practising synodality – which means walking together – long before Pope Francis.

- 3. Listen to God.** Obedience will only be re-imagined and transformed if we re-image God. Rather than seeing God as an autocratic taskmaster, we call upon God, the unconditional lover, the co-sufferer, she who understands, the one who listens to us. We follow Jesus who emptied himself in loving obedience to his Abba. Obedience calls me to empty myself of my ego, my preferences, in loving service and obedience to others.

The Church has much to learn from religious women’s practise of obedience. More than anything, the Church must learn to listen, despite Cardinal Sarah saying last year that “the Church is not made to listen; she is made to teach.” The Church would flourish and better fulfill its mission if it listened to more than 50% of its membership – to women.



SISTER MARY LEMBO

TOGO

Jesus Christ made the will of his Father his nourishment (Jn 4:34). He prayed, listened to God his Father, our Father, and lived out his will to love and save every person.

Consecrated women profess the vow of obedience to imitate Jesus Christ who obeyed God his Father. It is a desire, a choice and a constant effort to conform their lives to God's will. To do what is pleasing to God and to serve their brothers and sisters in the Church.

Regina Protmann (1552-1613), our founder's motto was, "As God wills". Through her life, she teaches and encourages us to live in communion with God, doing what pleases Him, what He wants and expects from us. What God wants and expects from the human person is his salvation, his fulfillment, his happiness. We, Sisters of St. Catherine of Alexandria, by our consecration to God, through the evangelical counsels, especially the vow of obedience, we offer him our freedom and our will, so that he may help us to want and decide what pleases him.

We live this vow in dialogue, discernment and collaboration. We express our desires, our wishes, our intentions and we listen to the desires, the wishes of our leaders according to the project of the mission that the Lord entrusts to our congregation within the local Church where we live. Through

dialogue and prayer, we come to discern what may be God's will for each sister and for the congregation.

Sometimes, however, this dialogue is lacking. Some leaders subtly or violently impose their vision, their desire, on other sisters. They manage the authority entrusted to them by depriving other sisters of useful information, space and time to express themselves or by refusing to give the sisters the opportunity for formation. This blocks the sharing of opinions, inspirations and initiatives that can enrich the congregation. The service of authority lived with imposition, arouses fear, frustration and is an obstacle to perceiving the motions of the Holy Spirit, to welcome and discern the will of God.

The unilateral management of power and authority in community, in the congregation, and within the Church, deprives the vow of obedience of its Christian meaning.

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the cultural value of respect helps to live the vow of obedience. However, the insistence on this respect, which can become an exaggerated submission, does not contribute

to true dialogue. Elders or those in authority have the last-word, decide. Younger people or members of the communities remain silent or must remain silent out of fear, out of false modesty even if they have different opinions. The example of the omerta on cases of abuse is one of the inappropriate interpretations of the vow of obedience, or of respect for the elders, for persons in authority, so as not to sully their reputation, so as not to tarnish the image of the Church. And yet the Church is already tarnished, Jesus Christ is disfigured by the evil committed not by the expression of evil.

We invite and call upon the People of God (lay people, seminarians, consecrated persons) for a pastoral urgency, for initiatives of awareness, education, formation, prayer and conversion to the Lord and to serve Him freely with respect for the dignity of each person, whether or not they have authority.



MARY MCALEESE

FORMER PRESIDENT OF IRELAND

On this day dedicated to women all over the world, I want to introduce you to a poem that is not about women and that was written by a man. But it could be about women and in particular it has a lot that we Catholic women need to hear. The poem is called 'From the Canton of Expectation' and it was written by Irish Nobel Laureate the late Seamus Heaney. More than any single thing I have ever read this poem brilliantly charts the start of the journey to equal citizenship of a politically oppressed and dispirited Catholic people in Northern Ireland beginning in the middle of the twentieth century.

They were treated as second class by their government and its laws, excluded from jobs, excluded from voting. That government was made up entirely of Protestant Christians who fervently believed they were doing God's righteous work.

Seamus describes the mood of Catholics at the time as living under "high banked clouds of resignation". They were stoical in the face of "the humiliations we always took for granted". There was no "call

to action" for these were people ruled by the "guardian angel of passivity", fearful of rocking boats, accepting of their lot which they did not expect to change in their lifetime. But it did change, and what changed it was the arrival of free second level education and the massification of third level education- for all- regardless of religion regardless of gender. In the case of Catholics it was teaching priests, nuns and brothers who opened the doors of opportunity to new generations. I was one of them. My parents had left school at fourteen and fifteen and they carried with them that deference and sense of powerless inferiority when they encountered an educated priest or politician. But their educated children now belonged to the generation Heaney describes as "intelligences brightened and unmannerly as crowbars". They created a "new age of demands". They "banished the conditional forever". The idea that there was something noble in enduring one's lot, they "made anathema". Now they would use their brainpower to take metaphorical crowbars to the many obstacles on the road to equality. And they did, through peaceful protests and scholarly analysis and a new rights based politics.

A self-righteous government resisted them with violence and the rest is a long miserable thirty year history at the end of which came an



international agreement- the Good Friday Agreement, which recognized the full equality and parity of esteem of all citizens and which promised an end to sectarianism. Meanwhile however it was becoming clearer and clearer that Catholics had another oppressor in the form of their own Church's teaching and structures with their systemic self-righteous exclusion of women. And there it was again- the guardian angel of passivity holding back the hankering for change, dampening debate, insisting only certain people had the God-given right to voice opinions and those people did not include women or the men including, especially including the priests who supported their right to be heard. The forces of resistance were also the forces of governance. They seemed to hold all the cards. There was no space, or so it seemed, for challenge. We would have to stoically

accept that we would always be second class, always spectators to the thinking and developing of the intellectual and spiritual life of our Church.

But, and this is where Seamus Heaney's poem gets prophetic, for the intelligences brightened and unmannerly as crowbars have become a critical mass which has



turned away from the Church because they can, because it is their human right to do but still there are those who stay because they believe there is a truth that needs to be crowbarred out from under the centuries of misogynistic thinking that insidiously inhabits theology, canon law, religious and priestly formation, catechesis, hierarchical systems, church structure....

Heaney says "what looks the strongest has outlived its term. The future lies with what is affirmed from under". And now I am going to paraphrase him a little changing the gender of his final stanza:

"I yearn..... to know there is one among us who never swerved from all her instincts, told her was right action, who stood her ground in the indicative, whose boat will lift when the cloudburst happens".

The guardian angel of passivity has made cowards of too many in our Church especially among our clerical leaders. They and we know our Church has made many mistakes, backtracked on erroneous doctrine and beliefs many times. Its failure to fully value and empower the voice of women, the talents of women, the seniority and experience of women is quite simply a scandal in a Church of 1.2 billion, six hundred million of whom are women. Left to their own devices in their clerical bunkers they may not have noticed that their boats are beached. Their tide has

gone out. The cloudburst is going to happen, is happening, just not where they are. It is where we are, where two or more are gathered in Christ's name and where we insist in his name on our full equality as children of the same God and our right to stand our ground. God grant us the courage to take a crowbar to the cowardice which is the legacy of the guardian angel of passivity.

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THURSDAY PRAYER FOR EQUALITY

READ BY SISTER PHILIPPA RATH (GERMANY)

God, our Father and Mother,
we are all aware of the situation in our Church. Acts of injustice occurred and continue to occur. Power was and is abused. "However, among you, it should not be so" said Jesus.

We ask you for your mercy.
- Kyrie eleison.

By means of our baptism, women and men are equally valuable members of the Church. If they work together in all duties and offices, they can contribute to a Church that moves forward renewed into the future.

We ask you for strength and confidence. - Kyrie eleison.

People come to God and to one another with their desire for peace, community and relationship. A credible Church is open to all people regardless of their background, nationality or sexual orientation. This Church is present for people whose life decisions appear to be misguided and it welcomes them with their bumps and bruises. It does not assess or judge but, instead, trusts that the power of the spirit is at work even when, according to our own human understanding, this seems improbable.

We ask you for strength and confidence. - Kyrie eleison.

Looking forward with confidence requires a great deal of trust, especially in these times in which we are lamed by fear and narrowness and in which the future seems grim. Trust is also required if we are going to take new paths and make decisive changes that can bring about more good than would be possible by simply maintaining the status quo.

We ask you for strength and confidence. - Kyrie eleison.

God, our Father and Mother,
Trusting that you are with us on the way, we continue on with and in the Church, following in the tradition of all the women and men who went before us who were enlivened by and acting in the fire of the spirit's power; women and men who believed and lived before and for us. St. Scholastica trusted in the power of prayer. We want to go forward step by step in the same way as she did: "Go forward as you can, sisters and brothers!" Watch over us. Be with us always until the end of the world. For this we pray, now and forever. Amen.



FATHER DIRK BINGENER

MISSIO AACHEN

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers and for the testimonies you have given here about your life, your worries, your desires and your faith. I was very touched by it, which brings me to the topic of what missio does and who we are.

Missio Aachen is an aid organization in the Catholic network of around 120 Pontifical Mission Societies worldwide. We support the work of local Churches in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Women religious are among our most important project partners in our partner countries. They are the backbone of the growing Church in the global South. Their work strengthens the potential of so many people on the margins of society. International religious orders and especially local, young religious orders are doing extraordinary things here.

That is why it is important for us to also address the issue of abuse of women religious by clergy in the universal Church.



Our approach is about learning from the experiences and expertise of the affected women religious in our partner countries and develop measures for prevention and help for the affected in coordination with them. To this end, we launched a survey that was published last year.

In total, we received 101 completed questionnaires from ten countries in Africa, eight in Asia and one country in Oceania. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents attach high to very high importance to the relevance of the topic of abuse of women religious by clerics. They call for the de-tabooing of the issue of abuse against women religious in their local Churches and in the societies in which they live. They want this “culture of silence” to be broken and the suffering of the women religious affected to be acknowledged. Events like today seek to redeem that.

When asked how missio can help them, one of the most important answers, besides the need for networking, psychological and legal support, was that women religious need education and training to develop their own strategies against outdated clericalism and patriarchal structures that lead to the many forms of abuse. What this also means is that the bishops and priests in their home countries must be sensitized to the dire consequences of abuse against women religious and that the

training of seminarians be reformed accordingly.

We take up this concern. We want to support this education and training. This should especially benefit religious orders and women religious who do not yet have international connections and who do not have the means for this empowerment. We are therefore always on the lookout for allies and partners with whom we can work together to help and support these women religious.

So I am happy about the collaboration with Voices of Faith and this event for International Women’s Day and I hope that we will find new forms of cooperation on the issue of education and training.





CALLS TO ACTION
& INITIATIVES
SUPPORTING
WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT



SISTER PHILIPPA RATH

GERMANY

Today gives us another opportunity to stand up for the equal participation of women in all offices of the Church. We want to finally put an end to centuries of discrimination. We women - and in this I quite explicitly include us women religious - are no longer willing to remain silent. We are no longer willing to suppress our God-given vocations and talents. We are convinced now is the time for change. Now is the time to trust in the Holy Spirit power and, with its help, to boldly break new ground.

The **#sisterwhatdoyousay** campaign that Voices of faith launched together with missio Aachen shows us far too many charisms continue to lie fallow, far too often clerical power continues to be abused, far too many women in the Church continue to be muzzled.

For me, a first step in finally making the largely unsayable sayable was the book "Weil Gott es so will - Frauen erzählen von ihrer Berufung zur Diakonin und Priesterin" (Because God wants it that way - women tell of their vocations to be deacons and priests), which was published on 1 February 2021. In it, I have published 150 life and vocation testimonies of women, among them 15 women religious from the German-speaking world, who know they are called by God, but cannot live out their vocation in our Catholic Church, because they are women.

Many of these women would like to be priests or deacons, others do not want to be integrated into the existing system of the men's church, but would like a new kind of church, away from the hierarchical to a diaconal church that is close to the people and accompanies them on their paths. The approaches to rethinking Church are as diverse as the women themselves.

Our book has received an overwhelming response - in the media, but above all from many women who share a similar fate and who also suffer from continued discrimination and exclusion. I received hundreds of approving and encouraging letters. And very soon I realized we have to widen the circle. We must now collect vocational testimonies from women all over the world. Because in all countries and continents there are women who are called by God and whose spiritual power is withheld from the Church and the congregations.

Dear women around the world, together with Catholic Women's Council and Voices of Faith, I invite you today to send us your vocation stories. We will publish your texts on the Catholic Women's Council website. You are welcome to write anonymously or with your name abbreviated. Your life testimonies are of tremendous importance to our work for gender justice in the Church. The more of you who participate, the greater will be the worldwide awareness of how overdue a change of course and renewal in the women's issue is. This, I am convinced, is a question of survival for our Church, which we love so much, but which we also suffer from so much. God bless you!

Email testimonials to
info@catholicwomenscouncil.org



REGULA GRÜNENFELDER

GERMANY

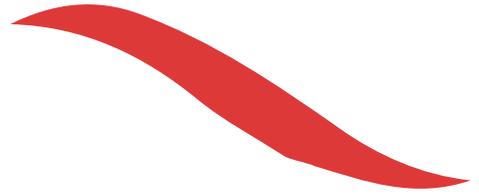
The #Junia initiative dedicates ourselves to the question of sacramentality in the context of the Catholic Women's Council. I am a Swiss theologian. Many of my colleagues, women of course, baptise, preach and conduct funerals on behalf of the bishops. Some female parish leaders assist at weddings. The situation is different with regard to the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Penance and the Anointing of the Sick. Complicated new words are created for what theologians and religious sisters do within the framework of church agreements.

In the past, colleagues wrestled with the question: "Who am I to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance or the Anointing of the sick with a dying person?!" Today, in view of what is necessary for people and for the Church, the question has turned around: "Who am I to deny a sacramental celebration to a sister, to a community?" The focus must be on the pastoral question: "How can the Church be present for the people?"

We think that we need new forms of assignment. We think that the members of a parish and the bishop together need to assign women to celebrate the sacraments. We are happy that the female parish leader in Amazonia celebrates the Eucharist and in Indonesia they conduct funerals.

Enough are called, dedicated, proven and competent human resources for the necessary sacramental services. Enough women who experience their vocation in prayer and work. On our website you will find reflections and arguments and above all women who make their vocation public. Feel free to browse and participate in your own way.

WEBSITE: www.juniainitiative.com



SISTER YUSTA TESHA

ZANZIBAR

The religious sisters are the consecrated people set apart in the Church and are the collaborators in achieving the Mission of Christ here on earth. As members of the body of Christ they are to be loved and respected as people who through their religious consecration their first duty is to pray for the sanctification of the Church.

In Africa, culture is part of the Church and as religious we cannot part from our culture as we choose to become religious. The culture has a lot to do with our religious life as far as respect and obedience is concerned.

The Bishops are to be highly respected and in many cases no questioning them. Experience shows that in some ways obedience has been misused by the Church. Authorities towards religious sisters in many aspects taking advantage of the poverty and dependence.

Religious sisters are abused in a way that they depend financially on the Bishops. In order to stop this abuse:

- 1.** The sisters need to be empowered financially, spiritually and intellectually in order to reduce dependence on bishops in our day to day needs
- 2.** The sisters should have their own projects run by the sisters themselves without the interference of the bishops.
- 3.** The allowance given to the sisters working in different departments in the diocese should be able to cater for the basic needs of the sisters and be able to save something for their old age.

Therefore we request you and other organizations to speak for religious women and support them financially as they struggle to become self-independent through different projects such as having their own institutions, schools, hospitals and acquisition of land with title deed.



We request our donor organization to stop asking recommendation letters from the bishops when the sisters submit proposals. Any grant should not pass through the bishop/diocese. Money that passes through the diocese takes longer to process to reach the intended person thus, delays the implementation and reporting of the project.





VIRGINIA SALDANHA

INDIA

Streevani was started in 1982 in Pune, India by the Late Divine Word Priest Englebert Zeitler and the Late Dr. Frances Maria Yasas, as a research institute for women. Realizing that empowerment of women is one of the most urgent tasks of our times, Streevani continues to be committed to educating women through conferences, workshops and consultations in order to empower women to become equal partners in the Church and society.

Streevani is managed by the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS) who work for the empowerment of women in the Church and Society. In August, 2010, Streevani organized a consultation on Gender Relations in the Church. In 2010 the first story of abuse in the Catholic Church in India had just been broken in my diocese by a young lay woman. I wrote an article on the abuse of women in the Church based on my experience of hearing stories of women religious in India and Asia.

Streevani, immediately responded and organized a consultation using the Gender Policy of the Catholic Church in India that was just published at that time. Relevant questions on abuse of women in the Church were raised during the consultation. This consultation was followed by two more consultations on the subject. Each consultation delved deeper

into the subject of abuse of women in the Church. Sisters, priests and even a few bishops were invited to attend the second and third consultations. Books were published with the papers presented at these consultations. A lot of awareness was raised.

Streevani's Director at that time was Sr. Helen Saldanha followed by Sr. Julie George SSpS who was also a lawyer, so Streevani was able to respond to legal questions of abuse and violence done to religious women and women in society. Streevani networked with Catholic women's groups like the Indian Women Theologians Forum and Satyashodak a resource group of women in Mumbai to organize the consultations and then to present the bishops with a draft policy for dealing with abuse of women in the Church.

A legal NGO Majlis headed by a Catholic woman also helped in drafting the policy as it was based on the law that was passed by the Indian government in 2013. The draft policy was presented to the Catholic Bishops Conference of India in 2014, but was only accepted in 2017. Streevani continued to organize four more consultations targeting especially religious women as religious women are groomed to be submissive, accept abuse silently and never question clergy or hierarchy. At the last consultation held in 2019 just before

the pandemic, I found the difference the consultations were having on women religious. There were many who spoke up boldly and strongly, and a strong statement was sent out to the Church in India from the consultation.

After the first three consultations, we (the lay women and Streevani leadership) found there were sisters who began to speak up and question their abuse, but the leadership of women religious are still caught up in the patriarchal church structures and these sisters did not get the support they needed to get justice. Some sisters left their congregations others just remained silent.

In 2018 when a Sister had the courage to speak up and name her bishop as her abuser, she faced a lot of opposition from her congregation and received no response to all the complaints she made to the different bishops. So the group formed with Streevani after the initial first three consultations, were brought together again and we named ourselves "Sisters In Solidarity" (SIS) and reached out to the sister survivor. She had five brave sisters from her congregation who supported her and remain loyal to her to this day.

Together with Streevani, SIS offered these sisters spiritual, moral and financial support to carry on even as they were marginalized in their congregation and by the local Catholic Church. We took up matters with various Church authorities to keep the small group together so that they could support the sister. Today the case has

come up for hearing in the district court. We have got together a legal team to support the sisters to face the trial together with the various witnesses. The sisters have also been given financial support to pursue studies to keep their minds occupied.

The example of an organization like Streevani is indeed a wonderful example of how religious sisters can be empowered by women in the Church – both lay and religious.

WEBSITE: **www.streevani.com**



REGINA FRANKEN

GERMANY

Starting with the discussion about abuse in Germany about 10 years ago, there were also more and more women reporting spiritual and sexual abuse. A milestone was Doris Reisinger's book and the two Voices of Faith conferences in 2018 and 2019.

These first events and reports were very important for us because they gave women the feeling: They are not the only ones and they are apparently not alone. In September 2019, around 120 women met for a conference to talk together about their experiences, to exchange ideas and, in the end, to express their wishes and above all, also express their demands to the German Bishops' Conference and the religious congregations.

One of these demands was the establishment of a web-based platform with a central contact point, as affected women were

always being referred to new contact persons.

In December 2020, this platform went online with the goals:

- 1.** To inform about the various forms of abuse against women and women religious. The victims themselves decide whether they consider what they have experienced to be violence.
- 2.** To offer initial consulting for women in an internal forum. This area is particularly important because women can exchange their experiences with counsellors in a protected space and together they look at what the women need. There is also counselling on what women can do to defend themselves against abuse and its consequences in the church and in religious communities.

The project is financed by the German Bishops' Conference and was set up by the Office for Pastoral Care of Women of the German Bishops' Conference. The platform is so important because this is the first time that abuse against women and religious women has become publicly visible and because it can also be used to demand consequences.

After 6 to 12 months, there will be an evaluation to see what has been accepted, what requests have been made and what is missing or which areas still need to be addressed.



We have already experienced, for example, that the social and canonical area should be expanded, i.e. that women should also receive social, financial and legal assistance. But all this will be discussed in the coming months and reported back to the German bishops and the religious congregations. The project is therefore to be seen as an evolving pilot project in which it is always possible to react to new aspects.



SISTER CHRISTINE PINTO

PHILIPPINES

Just like in the many places of the world, the Philippines also has its stories of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. The Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines, has conducted formation courses for renewed servant leaders on safeguarding children and vulnerable adults with the mission of having a Filipino nation where people enjoy the fullness of life.

It was in the early 2000 that AMRSP started a program for the pastoral care of victims of sexual abuse by clergy and religious. For us Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines, we had a shelter for abused women and children called “Bahay Lila” Bahay- house and Lila - Filipino word for the women color lavender or violet.



Violet is associated with Lent, the passion of Jesus, and we can associate this as well with the suffering of women and children.

But Lent does not end with the story of Jesus' passion but with resurrection. So with Bahay-Lila it was supposed to help them reclaim their dignity and journey with them towards empowerment. So we were working with an NGO, the Women Crisis Center where they were the ones who would refer to us the women and children who would need a refuge, a safe space. These would be victims of sexual abuse, domestic violence, prostituted children, etc.

However, Bahay Lila has been closed for more than 10 years now. We no longer had funds to maintain the house because we needed 24/7 personnel which included a house mother, counselors or psychologists. There were expenses for food, utilities, maintenance of the house among others. What we do now, would be to look for other places where we can temporarily house victims that come to us for help.

This is one support that we may need or there can be groups that help us once again open the center.

We encounter victims of abused women and children even among

religious sisters, our parents and students, members of school communities. Thus, formation among Sisters is very important. With our advocacy for women empowerment in our congregation, we have to equip ourselves with the skill to be able to mentor single mothers, abused mothers; to journey with them in the healing process; to be able to pick up the pieces and live on.



DORIS REISINGER

GERMANY

In September 2019 I met Ute Leimgruber, a theologian and professor in Regensburg, at a conference in Siegburg, Germany. The topic of the well attended conference (co-funded by Voices of Faith) was violence against women in the Catholic Church. We were wondering why research on clerical violence against adult women was still extremely meagre, even though there is plenty of evidence. Both of us were familiar with Maura O'Donohue's reports on widespread abuse of nuns and with a study carried out by US psychiatrists according to which 30 percent of the interviewed nuns had experienced sexual abuse after entering religious life is. We were also very aware of structures and theological peculiarities in Catholicism that contribute to, facilitate, legitimize, or at least do not prevent abuse of women.

Finally, Ute was ready to launch a research project and I was more than happy to participate. We were facing a number of difficulties and turned them into our guiding questions and subprojects. In the end the project turned out to be a kind of interdisciplinary ground research consisting of an analytical part, a historical part and the creation of a specialized AI-based literature database. However, the heart of the study is doubtlessly an interview and data collection project that is generously and gratefully funded by Voices of Faith. In view of the meager empirical basis to date, there is an urgent need for the collection and evaluation of further, scientifically reliable data, especially in the form of interviews with women religious. It is key that the insights gained from these interviews are methodologically and empirically secured in order to



present reliable research results. So, we are extremely happy that in the coming months, a survey method and a questionnaire will be developed, with the help of which women religious across various countries can be surveyed in a targeted and scientifically secured manner in the coming years. Thanks to Voices of Faith!





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