

ANOTHER CHURCH IS POSSIBLE !

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(CWC Asia Listening Session on **Structures, Transparency and Accountability**, 10 May 2022)

Last week I had been engaging with the World Social Forum held at Mexico City, as a member of the World Forum of Theology and Liberation. *Another World is Possible* is the slogan of the World Social Forum as it creates space for civil society organizations, advocacy campaigns, formal and informal social movements seeking justice, liberation and international solidarity to come together and develop an alternative future through the championing of counter-hegemonic globalization.

When I sat down to gather my thoughts on what I wanted to share today, I felt that the Spirit Sophia, the Wisdom of God who hovers over the oppressive chaos created by the tyrannical systems of power and who enables those attuned to her voice to re-imagine and realize an alternative social order, is inviting us to learn from her ways in today's world. It is then that I felt that we as CWC need to assert that ***Another Church is Possible!***

Why do we need to make this assertion 'Another Church is Possible'? The urgency to rethink Church is evident from all the listening sessions that we've had thus far as CWC.

Listening through the responses of the different groups one thing is evident, that catholic women want change in the way of being church. Though only a miniscule of the multitude of catholic women are raising these concerns, I think we are a decisive voice, a voice that has the potency to bring about change as it is raised from critical considerations on what it means to be Church.

A basic structural problem identified by many groups is the problematic of hierarchy. Since clericalized hierarchical structuring is central to the way of being Church for Catholics, leadership and decision making remain in the hands of clergy. Ipso facto, the laity / women do not find a place in leadership and consequently, there exists in the Church a strong clergy-laity divide.

A critical question that we need to ask before this system of clericalized hierarchy, which is the structural axis defining governance in the Church is: Does the Catholic Church need clerical ordination as the criterion for anyone to occupy a place in its structures of leadership? On the basis of scriptural evidence on, the answer would be a clear No. However, while it is evident on turning the pages of history that the linkage between priestly ordination and jurisdiction is a historical accident, this phenomenon has become so deep rooted in the catholic tradition that it cannot be easily dismantled. Through the theological coating that was given to make the ordination-jurisdiction linkage palatable, the ordained clergymen acquired the status of *Alter-Christus /another Christ*, a notion that got deeply engraved in the mind and belief systems of the ordinary Christian faithful. Because of the sacramental powers which they were vested with, and the sense of superiority attributed to them even by the faithful, clericalism became the inevitable by-product of such clericalized hierarchical structures. Even though clericalism has been strongly condemned by Pope Francis and many voices that want to bring about a radical transformation in the Church, this will never happen unless and until ordination and jurisdiction are delinked, as rightly brought out by some of the groups. And it is apparent that long as

clericalized hierarchy continues to be the mode of governance in the catholic church, we need not expect accountability or transparency or any justice from church leadership for the survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

All the same, it is interesting to note that in the mainstream church, some dioceses are initiating new structures of collaborative decision making with greater representation of persons of all genders without class, age and racial distinctions- as noted by the Australian report presented here. Apparently it looks as though such decisions about creating new structures of inclusion are left to the benevolence of the one who is the head of a diocese or of an Episcopal conference. But for me the question is: Why can't this be the normal way of being Church where the criterion of leadership is not the stamp of ordination but persons imbued by the Spirit of God who are elected by the community? What is evident here is that the issue at stake is structural not just personal. In India we have a saying that if the husband as 'head' of the family is benevolent and with a liberated mind, it is good for the wife and children as they would have space for growth and freedom. If not, you are doomed. A similar situation seems to be happening at the level of the universal Church. Because we have a benevolent head in the person of Pope Francis, there are few appointments of women like Sr Nathalie Becquart or a few other women to important positions in the Church. But, would these appointments make a difference to the exclusive and sexist structures of the Church?

Again, Pope Francis has given another hopeful sign in declaring Synodality as the way of being Church in the 3rd Millenium, and the synodal wave has hit the Catholic Church across the globe. In India over the past few months, any discourse in the Church is connected to synodality whether it is through national and international conferences or any theological journal coming out from religious institutes of formation. It is as though the synodal process is a panacea for all the ailments afflicting the church. Again the question is: Will the Church be different once the tidal wave of synodality has swept over the Church and receded?

The notion of synodality is certainly hope-giving for women and other excluded categories in the official Church. But here again, the difficulty is whether synodality which implies members of the church walking together at all levels of its life and mission is compatible with the hierarchically structured and clerically controlled mode of Church governance? For the Church to tread on the synodal path, it needs to shed its feudal ways, patriarchal diktats and its paternalistic approach that keep the laity particularly women infantilized. The Church needs to move from its mechanistic, cultic, institutionalized structures of being and living its mission to an organic world view that sees everything as interdependent and mutually constituting. If these structural changes are not initiated, the synodal process could remain a mere cosmetic touch up on the ecclesiastical body.

Synodality as I see is a call for the Church to be born again and it cannot happen unless and until its clerical, hierarchical and exclusive structures are dismantled and replaced by structures that are inclusive, and founded on equality and the undeniable potential of every person irrespective of one's gender identity or sexual orientation to represent and mediate the divine.

Hopefully attempts are made to bridge the clergy-laity divide through synodality. All the same,, the present ecclesiastical situation is not that promising as far as structural changes are concerned. As women who dream of a Church that that is inclusive, egalitarian and participatory, how are we to find a breakthrough from this impasse? While pondering on this question, instead of becoming pessimistic, I find hope welling in my heart on identifying three calls.

1. Call to prophecy

When we look through the scriptures or turn the pages of secular history, we find prophecy getting activated when the going gets tough, and there is an urgency for intervention in view of bringing about liberative changes. Prophetic voices discern the ways of God, or to put it in very secular terms, they become the voice of truth, love and justice that challenge the violation of these values within and outside a given system.

Perhaps we are living through a phase in the history of the Church, when prophetic voices needs to be raised with a sense of urgency. Prophecy is disquieting but it is imperative if the Church has to regain its founding vision and spirit. The other day we released a book in India, edited by Astrid Lobo Gajiwala who is here, a Jesuit friend and myself and the book is titled: ***If Not Now When? Disquieting Feminist Questions***. I think in today's Church, our prophetic voice needs to come in the form of 'disquieting feminist questions. Prophecy is not a cheap or comfortable engagement. One has to pay a heavy price for raising a prophetic voice, the risk of getting exterminated, silenced, ostracized or just deleted from the picture. No establishment in the secular or religious sphere is sympathetic to prophetic interventions and that is the reason why very few individuals or organizations dare to be prophetic. Yet there are prophetic icons in our midst who lead people's movements for justice, peace and liberation, for humans and for the earth. Within the ecclesiastical establishment, the survivors of clergy sexual abuse who have dared to speak up and who demand justice are live wires that are awakening prophecy in the Church today.

The prophetic task before us then as CWC is : " to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" as Jeremiah was told even as he resisted this call saying he was too young and diffident. Can we be this prophetic presence within the Church that it can return to the Gospel vision in its structures and ways of functioning.

2. Call to Spirituality

I find an awakened spirituality being the undercurrent that activates a prophetic vocation. Prophecy and spirituality are deeply connected because prophets are attuned to the ways of the Spirit in the world around them, in the unfolding events and in the promptings within their hearts.

Most of the religious establishments have become commercial enterprises selling spiritual products, They seek to bind the spirit and lock up the Divine in male bodies, decorated temples and blind ritualism and the Church is no exception to this. However, the Spirit -Sophia, who is the breath of the power of God and who pervades and permeates all things continues Her work of creating and recreating life by defending the dignity and wellbeing of all. True spirituality implies making the shift from Church centered ritualism to the celebration of life on the cosmic table bringing in the marginalized, the

excluded and all the elements of the earth in an open fellowship. Living spirituality as a dance to the tunes of the Spirit then becomes an anti-dote to the cultic male mediated religiosity. Many of our groups are already joining this dance as the reports indicate.

The challenge before us today as CWC is to flow with the energies of the Spirit, beyond the binaries of the sacred and the secular, the body and the spirit, the male and the female and become co-creators with Sophia in birthing the Church anew.

3. Call to Community

All of us here wish to see the Church as a community of equal discipleship. Some women and men are already creating these communities that are inclusive and open, fluid and life affirming. We have many examples of these in the 'We are Church' movement, WATER and other groups that have initiated a new way of being Church in the world today.

These communities which embody what it means to be the 'Church in the Round', a Church grounded in people's lives become therapeutic spaces that bring healing and growth. Through the assertion that *women are church; indigenous people are church, the poor are church, migrants and refugees are church; divorced, remarried are church, LGBTQI+ are church*, these communities become liminal spaces at the boundaries, at the threshold, making them the right 'setting for a life-changing transition.' In these communities, which become liberative and transformative spaces. power is shared and leadership emerges from below, where people imbued with the wisdom of the Spirit can give lead in organizing the community's life and mission.

Here the Church becomes a communion of communities where people irrespective of their differences find a sense of belonging and partnership becomes real, reflecting the kinship politics of the Reign of God initiated by Jesus Christ. When people become synodal in their personal lives in all its integrity, synodality becomes a lived experience. Then Church becomes synodal Church where Christians truly walk together in spite of their differences, in communion with each other, with other humans and the earth.

Conclusion

To conclude, an imagery that came to my mind as I pondered on CWC birthing a new way of being Church today, is the imagery of Mary Magdalene and her companions walking to the tomb, while it was still dark. We too are walking to a tomb where the Church, which is meant to be the living body of Christ is continually crucified by the abuse of power and is buried and sealed using the stone of dead tradition, and religious imperialism. We walk to the tomb while it is still dark and on encountering the Risen One, we hear the mandate to announce the resurrection to the hierarchically positioned 'brothers', that another Church is possible!

Indian feminist thinker and writer Arundhati Roy wrote: *'Another World is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.'* Paraphrasing her, I am tempted to say: Another Church is possible, it is being born! In a quiet moment, I hear Sophia whispering, can you midwife this birthing...!

Thank you.

Kochurani Abraham: is a feminist theologian, gender researcher and trainer from India. She has a Masters in Child Development, Licentiate in Systematic Theology, and PhD in Feminist Theology. She teaches feminist theology in some institutes of formation, conducts Sexuality-Spirituality Integration workshops and Gender Sensitization programmes for youth and adults. She is a Senior Fellow of Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), she has initiated gender and sexuality education in schools. She contributes regularly to theological journals and is passionate about bridging the academia and the grassroots for a liberative praxis. She is a member of Indian Women Theologians Forum, Indian Theologians Association, Ecclesia of Women in Asia as well as the World Forum of Theology and Liberation.