

## **Situation of Women in the Church\_Europe**

I am very glad to be part of this meeting today. To talk about the situation of catholic women in Europe is to speak for many different countries, cultures and traditions. Therefore, I would like to focus on topics from the questionnaire that I think are topics in many countries and regions. As probably everywhere in the world, also in many European country's women are mostly doing work voluntarily in the communities.

In my community, women have organized a bazaar for a partner parish in Latin America for over 30 years. At the end of his ministry service, our parish priest traveled to the partner parish and was honored and awarded by the twin city and the diocese for his fantastic commitment and the amount of work he had put in and for all the good work he has done for this partner parish.

Women voluntarily organize most of the parish life, but they are always dependent on the goodwill of the pastor and the bishop. They determine which tasks women are allowed to take on in the parish, which women's groups or communities they tolerate in their parish, in their diocese.

But no matter where, the fruits of the labor, always come to the priest, the bishop.

- **The service and hardship belong to women.**
- **The dignity and honor belong to the consecrated man.**

At least in the German-speaking countries, we know the concept of the paid permanent parish and pastoral officer. They are the ones who coordinate the work in the community, help the socially disadvantaged, who work in hospitals and retirement homes and keep community life alive.

In doing so, however, they must always make sure that their work is not perceived as an independent, self-responsible work, but only as a support for the valuable work and the ministry of the priest.

In the end, he is the one who gives the anointing of the sick or celebrates the first Holy Communion with the children, while women often stand beside next to the children's benches and not with the priest at the altar.

Although the studies and the training are often the same, in the end only the man receives the corresponding sacramental dignity, through ordination as a deacon or priest, and thus a much higher salary than the woman. Women who work full-time for the Church are therefore discriminated in a double sense, and they experience that their commitment and their work, even their Christianity, is less appreciated than the work of a man.

- **Women assemble, protect and guard the "sheep" for his salvation, they prepare the way for his salvation, they set the table for his salvation ..... the bishops, the priests - for their benefit, for their reputation.**

Over and over again we hear also in the Vatican that it is a waste of the gifts if women if are not appointed to leadership positions.

For many, this was initially a great step forward towards more equality. For this purpose, the positions in the leadership of the dioceses are often shared. Equality? Equal responsibility? In the statement of the Archbishop of Munich, it was stated that even if the Vicar General and the Head of the Office act on an equal basis in the management of the diocese, of course the ordained man naturally has official supervision of the Head of Office. And as so often, a picture says more than a thousand words and episcopal explanations. At the presentation of the abuse report in Munich, it was up to the Vicar General to speak the words of appreciation on behalf of the bishop. The head of the office, on the other hand, had the task of receiving the reports and thus bearing in the truest sense of the word the burden.

Sr. Anna Schenck (CJ) as Head of Office of the Bishop of Augsburg defined her task in the first interview as follows:

"I hope that I (...) so that Bishop Bertram Meier can exercise his office with blessing way and for the benefit of the people in the diocese. (...)

- **Women participate in the priestly ministry by making their gifts available to him..... the bishop, the priest**

And in theology? Too often, even today, young female theology students hit the glass ceiling, too often professorships are advertised only for consecrated men, against to the wishes of the students, against to the wishes of the faithful. Professors who almost always

put the needs of candidates for priesthood and male students first, who in their selection of studies and teaching content almost exclusively present patriarchal often misogynistic structures as good Catholic teaching tradition and who prevent any independent, gender-appropriate or interdisciplinary research on behalf of their bishops as guardians of the faith. Under the title "Church as an employer – almost no one wants that anymore", a magazine in Germany recently pointed out that theology today is often only studied as part of a teacher training course, i.e. as a teacher.

But not only bishops and priests are responsible for the discriminatory structures, often women are also responsible.

Paolo Lazzorin - President of our affiliate Organisation Donne de la Chiesa wrote a year ago: *"And if some, thanks to male kindness, are allowed to enter the spaces of knowledge or ecclesiastical power, they are afraid to create too much access for others, (...). In this way, the most obedient and functional women accumulate positions, taking care not to question anything, and in this way they become weapons in the hands of men who want to weaken the fight for equality."*

- **Women protect as gatekeepers, the structures and the gates of the churches, .....  
to protect the power of bishops and priests.**

But there is also another situation, a different world of experience.

In academia, more and more young women are joining together in theological networks. Networks in which women understand theology as an open science, interdisciplinary and without gender-typical assignments. Science as described, for example, at Catherine of Siena College of the University of Roehampton, as:

*"Supporting those who are trying to understand and analyze how the gender issue affects individuals and communities in the context of religious belief and practice."*

- **Women who see themselves as gate openers who ensure that the gates of the churches open wide for all people – for equal rights and equal dignity.**

An increasing number of women, women's associations and monasteries are doing without a man as spiritual director, but are looking for their own form of spirituality and appointing a woman as their spiritual director.

Thus, more and more women claim the term pastoral or spiritual director for themselves.

- **Women who care about community and who promote spiritual growth and not just shepherd bishops' sheep.**

There are also numerous changes at the community level . Many women are forming initiatives without asking for permission.

Initiatives that create their own paths beyond the preconceived and top-down community and assembly culture. Many of them are using social networks to make themselves heard.

Initiatives that used the Internet to break the bishops' monopoly on information and their media power. Again and again, women from eastern European countries, but also from the Nordic countries and rural regions, write: "It is good to hear about these initiatives and to network with them, even if our pastors would never allow such a group. So we can at least network via the Internet and find new ways to live our faith."

- **Women who prepare the way for a Christian living on behalf of Jesus and who focus on the sense of faith of all believers**

Initiatives that have started to offer prayer circles, devotions and services online. For example, the Swiss initiative Junia, which regularly invites to Junia services or invites for the Thursday prayers.

Or women groups and religious communities that have found their own forms of spirituality during the Corona period. "With the rupture and disappearance of the familiar (..) emptiness arose first and then space for discourse and for common search." This is how ten nuns put it in a report on the Easter experience in 2020 and Paola Lazzorin adds: "The return to Mass is a joy, but if it would lead to making the People of God spectators again (...), it would be a sin (..) We women do not start all over again, we move forward. "

- **Women who set the table in communion with Jesus Christ and who thus celebrate community spirit.**

Women who move forward by founding and initiating initiatives that do not overlook the cover-ups and the abuses of children, women and religious sisters.

Such as the founding of Rete L' Abuso , whose founding members include Donne de la Chiesa and Voices of Faith or the founding of "Umsteuern! Robin Sisterhood". Women who tell their story about spiritual and sexual abuse to encourage other women and to show that they are not alone, that they are not isolated cases, such as in the book "Telling as Resistance".

- **Women who do not let those affected bear the burden, but walk the path together with them so that the dignity of all people is granted.**

But not only new initiatives change the image and feelings of women in the Church.

Campaigns such as the 'Day of the Deaconess' on 29<sup>th</sup> April, are now experiencing a new publicity and networking internationally with other initiatives. Women who are no longer willing to wait until they are graciously given permission by church superiors, but who feel called by God to be at his service. Women who are joining together to commemorate and celebrate with many vocations of women. Such initiatives are supported by books such as those by Sr. Philippa Rath, in which women tell their vocation stories and in which men, priests and bishops show solidarity with them.

- **Women who place their vocation, their gifts and their charisms at the service of all believers, who set a powerful example of Christianity and thus express their faith.**

Often accompanied by women who no longer saw a future for themselves in the patriarchal Church.

More and more often, these initiatives are carried out by women who used to be the volunteers of priests and bishops.

They are the ones who initiate and support actions. Who, like Anne Soupe, do not prevent themselves from applying for a bishop's seat in Lyon (France) challenging the sexist, patriarchal and discriminatory system.

They are women from the middle of the church!

Women who have learned in their lives what community means, real community between sisters and brothers, community in all its different cultural and social forms.

Women who know that real freedom in the sense of Christianity, in the sense of Jesus, does not mean to remain in traditions and encrusted cultural structures, but to free themselves from them in order to live self-determined with Jesus and all sister and brothers.