

Kate McElwee, CWC Listening Session, May 18, 2024

Welcome everyone. My name is Kate McElwee, and I serve on the Executive board of the Catholic Women's Council, representing North America. I am also the executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference.

Today's conversation is an extension of our synodal journey and our commitment to sharing authentic stories and experiences of global Catholic women. Today we take up the theme of "Moving Ahead with Women's Sacramental Ministries" in light of the new development of commissions established by the synod to take up some of the "controversial" issues.

While this mid-synod development came as a surprise to many, it does have some precedence as we know, in the lead up to Vatican II, Pope John XXIII established 10 preparatory commissions to lay the foundation of what would become a landmark event opening up the church to the modern world.

[Some claim](#) this is "an important acknowledgement that a different kind of work is needed," referencing a noted critique of the first assembly which some felt lacked theological reflection.

Yet theologians, synod-watchers, and particularly women should - and do remain cautious. And it is that hermeneutic of suspicion, the earned distrust of Vatican processes that brings us here today.

In the listening session my organization hosted this past year, we concluded that for many women this interim time - and perhaps, their entire faith life has been a "prolonged Advent," wandering and waiting in the wilderness for the in-breaking of the newness of Christ into our church.

Truly the **uneven** experiences of synodality around the world, coupled with the extended, and at times, opaque nature of the process reveals we are very much still "on the journey."

For some, this prolonged Advent is a time of prayer and pregnant hope, for others, it is a lonely Wilderness. Yet we found - and this will come as no surprise - that all experience a deep prayer for belonging, healing, and uncomplicated equality.

So while some encouraging signals of greater inclusion can and do break through the darkness and we experienced those gestures in the lead up to October 2023, the urgency to affirm women's full and equal place in the church cannot be overstated.

But here we are, with these ten working groups. Opaque as ever.

A member of the synod's methodology commission said it best [to the NCR](#)... that this "could be a method of excluding properly theological questions from the synodal discussion" when it reconvenes."

That is a bit polite for what we fear could be happening.

Some might suggest this new development incorporates theological foundations that were missing from the first synodal assembly, that this creates an opportunity for deeper reflection and more specific expertise to take up these urgent questions. The new structure is also meant to collaborate

with relevant dicasteries and members of the curia - perhaps a tangible way to make real, concrete changes - and get the curia on board for Pope Francis' synodal agenda.

However, when questions of

- Listening to the Cry of the Poor (SR 4 and 16)
- The mission in the digital environment. (SR 17)
- Theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms.

... Which are just three of the working groups get assigned out of the synodal assembly and into the **hands of an anonymous committee** - of which no members have been made public, nor their meeting schedules, well... we've seen this before.

As my colleague, Regina Franken expressed it is a "well-known **strategy of the Vatican** to prevent reforms by **tying up the energies** of those who want changes in fake reforms, **exploiting them** and their knowledge and then, when the groups are emotionally and financially exhausted, enforcing old and often even stricter and more misogynistic structures in a rollback procedure."

The synod office elaborated working group on "ministerial forms" .. which is meant to delve into some theological and canonical questions related to :

- the specificity of the sacramental munus (capacity);
- the relationship between the sacramental munus (capacity) (especially that deriving from the capacity to administer the Eucharist) and the ecclesial services necessary for the care and growth of God's Holy People in view of mission;
- the origin of ministries;
- the charismatic dimension of the Church's life;
- ecclesial roles and services that do not require the sacrament of Holy Orders;
- Holy Orders as a service and the problems arising from an erroneous conception of ecclesial authority;
- the role of women in the Church and their participation in decision-making/taking processes and community leadership.

They go on to say that: "It is in this context that the question of women's possible access to the diaconate can be properly posed: to this Group is entrusted the task to continue "Theological and pastoral research on the access of women to the diaconate [...], benefiting from consideration of the results of the commissions specially established by the Holy Father" (SR 9n).

This Group will also aim to respond to the Synodal Assembly's desire for "a greater recognition and appreciation of the contribution of women and a growth in the pastoral responsibilities entrusted to them in all areas of the life and mission of the Church" (SR 9i).

In coordination with the General Secretariat of the Synod, the study of these themes is entrusted to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, in dialogue with the various relevant Dicasteries.

It remains **unclear** what to expect when synodal delegates reconvene in Rome this fall and what will be the agenda of the second assembly... And particularly as the work of the commissions is meant to extend beyond the synodal assembly in October into 2025. What will happen in the synod hall?

Is this an extremely clever tactic of the Vatican - to claim broad participation - lay involvement - even women voting! To be able to legitimize a process that ultimately relegates women and their cries for equality back into the shadowy hands of a patriarchy? Is this business as usual to exploit, silence, and control women?

I'd like to raise up the words of Historian and theologian Catherine Clifford, who is a professor at St. Paul University in Ottawa and a Canadian lay delegate to the synod, [who is quoted saying](#), for starters: "you cannot have a synodal church where there are not women participating at every level of the structures and decisional practices of the life of the church, no question."

She says that the study groups' work must be "open, transparent and accountable so that we have more insight into how these decisions are being made." Yet we know that over the past 60 years there have been these "secret studies" that have truly undermined the confidence of the faithful.

So while the Vatican very obviously seems to be putting women, the poor - of whom are mostly women, and other urgent issues "off the table" - I am here to say that you cannot unring a bell. What has echoed in every corner of the world has been heard, documented, and affirmed - we gathered today are a testament to that. So I believe, our work is to simply **refuse** to accept these hijinks.

Furthermore, the expression of women's vocations to ordained ministry cannot be limited to the diaconate. Synodal conversations and reports from around the world affirmed the global call for women's full participation in the life of the church. To neglect that urgency is to abandon the synodal promise of journeying together.

The distress the structures of the church place on women are unbearable, unjust, and a betrayal of Christ. So many women exemplify "wonderful courage despite disappointing and wrong situations," as one of our listening session participants said. We long for the same courage from our church leaders, synod delegates, and Pope Francis.

Women's dignity, equality, and rightful place in the church is not the work of a committee but that of the Holy Spirit. So on this eve of Pentecost, I want to conclude with a short prayer - for our church and for the women who walk and speak a new church into being:

A prayer for Pentecost, for walking with women

Come, Holy Spirit, Come!
Enter the stubbornly locked doors
Of closed minds and hearts
And offer not only peace, but courage.

Let us not be afraid of speaking fiery words
Because you enkindle us with truth.
Make us sparks so we burn for your loving justice.

Let us not be afraid of the winds of change that blow fiercely
Because they reshape landscapes that have become stagnant and unhealthy.
Make us vessels that sail freely in your gales of grace.

Give us your ruach, your holy breath
So we your children may prophesy boldly
And walk courageously
And conspire to create a church
Where all gifts are welcomed.
Where all may minister to your people.
Where your table is long, and crowded,
And all may eat their fill and be satisfied.

Amen.