



“Let Her Voice Carry”

SYNOD INTERIM REPORT APRIL 2024

Prepared by the Women’s Ordination Conference

Introduction

Since the first session of the Synod on Synodality ended in October, our members and constituents have expressed the feeling of being in a prolonged Advent, wandering and waiting in the wilderness for the in-breaking of the newness of Christ into our church. For some, it is a waiting of joyful hope; for others, the waiting of the grumbling Israelites in the desert. For most, it is clouded by a hierarchy whose individual whims and preferences lead to an uneven local experience of synodality even as synod members praised the deep spiritual experience of the “round tables” in Rome. As one of our participants put it, *“Yes, the synod is wonderful; unfortunately, at my parish the word has never been uttered.”*

In keeping with our commitment to the synodal process, with which we have engaged wholeheartedly and with integrity from the beginning, we hosted two virtual listening sessions for our community, for which 145 people registered, and offered an asynchronous independent feedback form for those who could not attend. We used the Conversation in the Spirit model, and prayed with Roman 12 and Isaiah 61. The *sensus fidelium* that arose from our listening sessions was a general agreement with the synod report that “it is urgent to ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry,” coupled with frustration that such urgency has yet to be realized—not just since the start of the synod, but for some, for an entire lifetime. *“I’m 80, and my church has not used all the gifts that women bring,”* one participant said.

The main themes of our respondents come under three categories: **Hope**, **“Holy Grumbling,”** and **Hierarchy**. We expand on each of these categories in the following pages.

Hope

Many participants expressed a sense of hope at this moment in the life of the church, even if that hope was in tension with other, more difficult emotions. One respondent said their feelings were a *“mix of hope and lament...we are caring for ‘the soul of something’ as Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson says.”* Many expressed that they find in the synod process itself a cause for hope—in particular, the inclusion of the 54 women as voting members of the synod. By extension, several expressed gratitude for and hopefulness as a result of the papacy of Francis.

Listening session participants frequently mentioned small faith communities where they experienced the changes they wished to see in the church at large, including women in leadership, LGBTQ+ inclusion, a stronger emphasis on social justice, and non-hierarchical structures. Such communities are often described as peripheral, as in the words of one participant: *“The place where I experience success is as a person joined with others on the periphery.”* Another participant reflected, *“that notion of periphery and center is very interesting to me, because I also think we’re the future, we’re the center of a future evolving church.”*

“Holy Grumbling”

In one session, a participant compared the feelings of her women’s bible group to that of the Israelites in the desert, grumbling about their conditions. She suggested that perhaps there is a need *“to grumble in a prayerful, peaceful, effective way,”* noting that God heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Many people resonated with this idea of *“holy grumbling,”* alluding not just to discontent but a real hunger for a church that better nourishes their faith.

“If Eucharist is the true presence and Jesus actually came to minister to the marginalized, then why does the church institute so many rules that make it very hard for the marginalized to receive Jesus and Jesus’s mercy and compassion?”

The listening sessions revealed an exasperation with the slow pace of change in the church, particularly as regards the role of women and the ordination of women: *“People are getting tired of waiting. We’ve been waiting for decades and decades and decades. We need Francis to move on this.”* Another participant said she longed for women *“to be recognized for our gifts, talents, and training, and all of the things that we know that God knows that we’re capable of.”* Another woman added: *“It’s hard for me to think how the church can continue to call itself a Catholic Community when it excludes women.”*



One participant, a woman working as a hospital chaplain, shared a story that felt worth quoting in full:

"I have worked as a chaplain for almost twenty years and have had many disappointing experiences with priests and with Catholic patients, who both do not have an understanding of women's capabilities in ministry...A few weeks ago a family of a dying patient asked for a priest, but when I called the priest he said he had already been there a couple of weeks ago, and "What did this family want? For him to come and sit at their bedside?" I began to cry on the phone, and said "Yes, that is exactly what they want." I told him I will go and provide that and tell them that you will not. The family could not understand why the priest would not come. To encounter those kinds of moments over and over again when there is somebody standing right in front of a patient or a family member that could provide what they're looking for... I think that the church and its people could be served in ways that are really needed right now."

Furthermore, a common theme of discontent was the sense of exclusiveness that people felt the church exudes, particularly towards women and LGBTQ+ people. As one person put it, *"I have a gay daughter and it's been very hard at times for her to feel welcomed or even safe."*

When discussing the loss of young people in the life of the church, many understand why their children *"run away"* from the institution: *"None of my kids are Catholic; they would not belong to anything that's so discriminating."*

Hierarchy

At the local level, many of the successes our participants shared depend on the *"permission"* of men in leadership: an open pastor who welcomes women preaching, a *"friendly bishop"* who allows for open dialogue. Too often the full expression of women's baptismal dignity is limited by the imagination and biases of men in power. Often this is rooted in complementarian thinking or a reliance on a *"westernized interpretation of John Paul II's Theology of the Body"* which our participants described as *"difficult,"* irrelevant, and an extension of the church's campaign to deny women access to ordained ministry.

One participant lamented the *"hypocrisy in the manner that U.S. dioceses are 'implementing' the synodal process."* Another woman described her attempts to engage in dialogue being met with uncharitable resistance: *"I've tried to have fruitful conversations with my priest and it's just been horrible; they just shut me down and tell me I should go to confession for thinking women could be deacons. It's just heartbreaking."*



Clericalism or “*exclusiveness*” emerged again and again in our sessions, from the lack of inclusive language and images of the Sacred, to the failure of the Vatican to welcome the contributions of contemporary women theologians, to ostentatious clerical regalia that further separate the clergy from the laity. As one participant said, “*The people leading the church aren’t speaking for the people.*”

The “*continued clericalism of younger men called to priesthood,*” as well as the “*rigid*” nature of many bishops, leads people to look beyond the institution for inspiration and hope. As another participant said, “*Patriarchy has always been a problem in the Catholic church...but it is the women that are the reason I’m still Catholic.*” Echoed by another: “*The things that have been inspiring to me throughout my life have been the men and women who have Catholic ideals and live by them, which are often not the people in leadership.*”

Conclusion

The uneven experiences of synodality amongst our members, 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. All experience a deep prayer for belonging, healing, and uncomplicated equality.

While encouraging signals of greater inclusion can and do break through the darkness, the urgency to affirm women’s full and equal place in the church cannot be overstated. The distress the structures of the church place on women are unbearable, unjust, and a betrayal of Christ. So many women exemplify, as one participant said, “*Wonderful courage despite disappointing and wrong situations.*” We long for the same courage from our church leaders, synod delegates, and Pope Francis.

About the Women’s Ordination Conference:

Founded in 1975, the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC) is the oldest and largest organization working to ordain women as priests, deacons, and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic Church.

A feminist voice for women in the Roman Catholic Church, WOC is a grassroots-driven movement that promotes activism, dialogue, and prayerful witness to call for women’s full equality in the church.

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