



Manifesto of the Catholic Women's Council

We, as women in the Catholic Church, have a vision of the Church as a community of equals, patterned on the communitarian example of the early Church, where all the baptised were equal in Christ. In the words of St Paul, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)

The Catholic Church, as we know it today, is a far cry from the community mandated by Christ, and reflected in his choice of women such as Mary of Magdala and sisters Martha and Mary to be his friends and disciples. Mary the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist were chosen by God to be the first to announce the Good News of the Incarnation to the world, and Mary of Magdala was chosen by the risen Christ to be the apostle to the apostles – the one who was called to witness and proclaim the Resurrection.

The Catholic tradition has honoured the lives and writings of many women saints, mystics and vernacular theologians through the centuries, but this still falls far short of the full and equal inclusion and representation that we see in the Gospels and the early Church.

Instead, the historical development of the institutional church has been marked by the consolidation of hierarchical powers, laws, doctrines and scriptural interpretations that have placed power in the hands of a small group of ordained male leaders, to the near total exclusion of women as authoritative teachers, leaders and partners in the building up of the Church.

The exclusion of women's insights and experiences has resulted in an institutional hierarchy which is remote and detached from the ordinary lives and struggles of women, even as that same hierarchy enacts rules which seek to control the most intimate aspects of women's bodies and relationships.

This culture of celibate male domination is a source of oppression not only for women but for all who lack adequate representation and respect, including children and LGBTQI persons. In patriarchal cultures organised according to gendered systems of economic and social caste, class and race, the presence of a ruling male elite in the Catholic Church lends legitimacy to patriarchal structures and undermines attempts to create laws and institutions which respect the full equality and dignity of women.

As a result, instead of evangelising cultures that have been oppressive to marginalized groups, the Church has integrated these cultures of oppression into its structures and has failed to give to all people the "fullness and abundance of life" (Jn.10:10) that Jesus promises.

The full impact of clericalism with its abuses of power and lack of accountability is revealed in the growing number of reports from around the world which show the extent to which sexual and other forms of abuse have been exacerbated by the dysfunctionality of the modern Catholic hierarchy. At a time when the Covid pandemic has had a serious impact on Mass attendance and reception of the sacraments, and when many women have already left the Church, the revelation of yet more scandal and abuse at the very heart of the institutional Church will further damage Catholic life in contemporary society.

Yet it need not be so.

This time of crisis is also a *kairos* moment for the Church – a time for a new beginning with a new vision of what might constitute a transformed normality in the post-Covid world. Many women are daring to dream of how things might be different in future, as they reach out to each other through a vast global network

of online communities to share their visions and hopes, their struggles and prayers, to envision and model new ways of being Church in which all are welcomed, all are heard, all are included.

Women are gathering theological, ecological, and spiritual resources to create communities where they are able to fully embrace and express their dignity and equality, working together for a more just and sustainable future.

Women form the backbone of the Church in terms of church attendance, contribution to parish ministries, children's catechesis, grassroots activism and social outreach. In different parts of the world, on all continents, where there is a shortage of priests, women are actively involved in keeping parish communities alive and active, ministering and providing pastoral care to the faithful with no formal status in the Church.

In a proposal supported by 180 bishops at the Synod on Amazonia, our sisters in that region said that it is "urgent for the Church in the Amazon to promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner." We still await an effective response to that appeal.

The closure of churches due to the Covid-19 pandemic has inspired women around the world. Light is being shone on how women are taking creative initiatives with regard to organising online liturgies, retreats and prayer groups, while maintaining practices of prayer and liturgical observance in their homes and communities.

Women have been at the forefront of ensuring that pastoral care is extended to those most affected by the economic and social consequences of the pandemic, including those who are poor, those who are hungry and homeless, refugees, and elderly and vulnerable people experiencing high levels of fear and loneliness.

At the same time, measures to contain the spread of the disease have turned the home into a prison for those most at risk of domestic abuse and violence. A statement issued by UN Women in April 2020 said, "With 90 countries in lockdown, four billion people are now sheltering at home from the global contagion

of COVID-19. It's a protective measure, but it brings another deadly danger. We see a shadow pandemic growing, of violence against women.”¹

While the Catholic Women's Council (CWC) laments the silence of the Church's leaders on these and other issues affecting women and children, we also see this as an opportunity to move into the post-Covid future with a new determination to witness the joy of the Gospel by enshrining at the heart of our Catholic institutions, families and communities the dignity, the freedom and equality that Christ offers. This calls for speaking out against all forms of gender-based violence and abuse, and for the full and visible inclusion of women's ministries, skills and abilities within the institutional Church. Only then will we present a credible face – the face of Christ incarnate in each human life – to our wounded and struggling world.

We are particularly aware of the vital role played by consecrated women (nuns and sisters), who outnumber ordained ministers in the Church and are yet excluded from all decision-making structures and processes. For example, even when some non-ordained religious brothers were granted a vote at recent Synods of Bishops, this was not extended to the religious sisters who were present. Women's religious orders are at the frontline of the Church's pastoral ministry and work for social justice.

They are well-represented at the UN, and they are pioneers in global efforts to tackle human trafficking and to address the challenge of the refugee crisis. Working alongside priests and brothers, they provide health care, education and social care for many of the world's poorest communities, and they are often the first to arrive and the last to leave in times of crisis, war and trauma.

Yet still, as Pope Francis himself has acknowledged, they are often treated as little better than slaves, and the Church has yet to acknowledge the extent to which women religious are vulnerable to sexual predation by bishops and priests.

¹ Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women issued a statement, dated 6th April 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic> . Accessed on 9th October, 2020.

We are also aware of the need to regain the trust of parents, if a future generation is to grow up experiencing the love and mercy of God which constitutes the essence of our Catholic faith. The Church's identity and mission have been damaged by decades of authoritarianism and clericalism, while horrifying stories of abuse and cover-ups continue to emerge.

It is very difficult for our children – our daughters in particular – to believe that the Catholic Church embodies the freedom, dignity and joy that Christ promises to humankind. Many parents today are understandably reluctant to entrust their children to a sacramental process presided over by a clerical culture which has been shown to be complicit in the abuse crisis.

We believe that the full participation of women in the Church's institutional and sacramental life is the single most effective sign that could be given of the determination of the Church's leaders to learn the lessons of the past and face the future with a spirit of renewal.

With that in mind, we do not wish the failures of the past to set the agenda for the future. We look to the Gospels and draw on the life and example of Jesus Christ and early Christian communities to offer here some suggestions for dialogue and engagement between women and representatives of the Vatican.

These are concrete steps which could be taken now to show that the post-Covid Church will be a beacon of hope and healing for the world:

- The hierarchy should enter into public dialogue with women who represent the cultural and existential diversity of Catholic women around the world, following Pope Francis's guidelines for dialogue in *Amoris Laetitia* (#54,136)
- Open all seminaries to women and laymen so that all are equally able to study theology and scripture and participate fully in the process of doctrinal development. This would also strike at the roots of a clerical system which begins with the elitism of seminarians training for the priesthood.
- Consult women theologians and biblical scholars when writing official teaching documents, and reference their work.

- In accordance with the commitment of Bishops made at the Synod of Amazonia to “confer ministries to men and women in an equitable manner,” ordain women to the diaconate.
- Open up an informed theological dialogue about women and the sacramental priesthood.
- Ensure that women are represented in equal numbers and have voting rights at all future Synods of Bishops.
- Amend canon law to allow for the election of women as cardinals, as has recently been done with regard to the ministries of acolytes and lectors.
- Ensure full and equal representation of women in all Vatican dicasteries and departments to ensure that their skills and insights inform all decision-making processes, perspectives, experiences and insights to bear upon the outcomes of all offices and departments in the Church.
- Adopt a policy of inclusive language for all liturgical occasions.
- Ensure that training in homiletics raises awareness of the cultural and social expectations of women in modern society with regard to issues such as inclusivity of language, respect for the diversity of women’s roles, professions and vocations, and trains preachers to acknowledge the key roles played by women in many biblical stories, particularly with regard to the Gospels and the early Church.

Let us as the Catholic Women’s Council continue on our pilgrimage across the world in raising awareness, opening up conversations, highlighting research and biblical texts, praying together, and networking with other like-minded groups to show our solidarity and strength as Catholic women who will continue to use our voices for equal rights and equal dignity in this Church!