

Women's Voices

Synod Listening Circles

In response to the invitation to form synodal 'listening sessions', 170 women gathered (40 in person, 130 virtually) to reflect on their joys and challenges as Catholic women in the church. They listened to each other's stories and together sought to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit through themes that emerged. After the sessions an online survey was sent to all participants and 98 responded. This report will share the themes that emerged in the listening circles as well as the results of the survey. Correlations will be evident between them.

THEMES FROM LISTENING CIRCLES

RECOGNITION WOMEN SEEK.

1. **RECOGNITION OF ON GOING FIDELITY.** There are many positive evaluations, opportunities to minister and grow in spirituality, enriching membership in sodalities, supportive priests. Yet the limitations expressed here have been keenly felt. The opportunity to give voice to them – and the desire to continue sharing reflections such as these must not be lost. The realities of the experience of Catholic women as expressed here must be articulated to all 'levels' of the church.

2. **RECOGNITION OF EQUALITY.** In the equality of women's creation as made in the image of God (Gen 1:27); in their baptism into the Catholic Church; in their service of the church and the world, they claim equality with all men, including clerics, in the life and service of the church. Vatican II revalorized the laity (all women are laity), whose Baptismal anointing makes us 'priests, prophets and

royalty' within the Christian community, with corresponding rights and responsibilities (LG IV).

Presently patriarchy in the church denies women's equality and full participation and often renders women subservient in parish life practically ('tea ladies'), in pastoral decisions (PPC secretaries), and liturgical ministries (only men as EMHC or boys as servers) and its exclusive language ('brethren'). There are parishes where women do occupy leadership roles in PPC, are EMHC and girls are servers. However although women make up most of the active membership in any parish, they are often taken for granted, dismissed or sidelined in pastoral worship, life and decision making. In planning for these listening sessions, the fact that a category for 'Women' came under the wider topic of 'Marginalized' is further indication of this.

3. **RECOGNITION OF CHARISM.** The Holy Spirit gives charisms to each of the baptized for service of the church and its mission (LG #12). Women want recognition of the legitimacy of their individual charisms to be put at the service of the community. They are constrained from preaching, ministry of reconciliation, and administering sacraments, thus denying the church a rich source for ministry. Those involved in the ministry of spiritual direction or in ministering to the sick are dependent on finding priests to offer the sacramental aspects of healing often requested by those to whom they minister. Some women also have experienced a call to become *sangomas* in ministry to the community which is not validated or recognized by the church as a charism.
4. **RECOGNITION OF CONSCIENCE.** Women want recognition of their right, in conscience, to make decisions regarding their life and

engagement in the life of their families and parish activities. *Gaudium et Spes* states that 'deep within their consciences men and women discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves and which they must obey. Conscience is the most secret core and the sanctuary of the human person. There they are alone with God whose voice echoes in their depths' (#16).

5. **RECOGNITION OF THE BURDEN, SHAME AND ABUSE TO WOMEN OF THE MORAL TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH.** The moral teachings of the church weigh disproportionately on women. Unwed mothers, divorced women, single mothers, LGBTIQ+, all live with stigma or judgment from the church, including its clerics. Men who may be responsible, never suffer the same ostracization. One woman who fell pregnant before her marriage was dismissed as an EMHC while her fiancé was allowed to continue. Women have been denied reception of the Eucharist in situations of unwed pregnancy or divorce.

The church's teaching on artificial birth control must be changed. Adhering to 'Natural Family Planning' resulted in women bearing 4, even 5 children within a space of four years. Guilt continues to weigh on those who use other means of birth control.

6. **RECOGNITION OF NEED FOR FORMATION.** Many are not knowledgeable of their faith. Good theological education and catechetical formation need encouragement and support by and for women. Training of women as spiritual directors and guides should also be supported.

Sodalities are also in need formation as they can become exclusive and their original purpose distorted and reduced primarily to fundraising.

Seminary formation must address the theological, moral and liturgical conservatism and clericalism of young priests which is distressing.

7. RECOGNITION OF MISSING VOICES.

Those who are differently-abled, aged, poor (who are mostly women) need inclusion in church structures and activities. Victims of Gender Based Violence (GBV), especially in cases of rape and teen pregnancy, need support and refuge. GBV must be 'called out' in preaching and supportive structures.

The LGBTQI+ community must be recognized as full and equal members of the church, deserving respect, and allowed full participation in the life and ministry of the church, including the blessing of their unions. Rigid and outmoded understandings of the complexities of human sexuality should be challenged.

Youth are a concern of all mothers who see their children alienated by the church's discrimination, exclusion and its posture of 'gatekeeping'. There are cases where mothers were denied access to Eucharist because their daughters were pregnant before marriage or answered the call to be *sangomas*.

8. RECOGNITION OF THE NEED TO ADDRESS CLERICAL ABUSE AND INCOMPETENCE.

Women who have been sexually abused by clerics need to be heard and compensated. Victims of such abuse can themselves be

ostracized, even by others in the church. Clerics who abuse must be removed instead of relocating them to other parishes and not reporting them to the police. Abuse is a criminal offence! Women must be a part of those boards which address this problem within the church. Victims need to be included in all processes dealing with sexual abuse.

Some means of addressing incompetent, drunk, and/or abusive priests needs to be established. Channels to address this do not exist. A priest bragged to his congregation that he has 'had' 50 - 60 women.

Seminary formation must be reconsidered. It is inappropriate and inadequate. The need to dismantle patriarchy and clericalism is an urgent issue of justice for women and laity. A married priesthood must also be considered.

9. RECOGNITION OF THE CALL TO ORDERS.

Women who are called by the Holy Spirit to orders in the church must be allowed have that call discerned, recognized and ritualized formally within the church. The diaconate for women must be restored. Priestly ordination must be considered. Those women priests ordained in the RCWP must have their excommunication lifted.

10. RECOGNITION OF ONGOING STRUCTURES OF SUPPORT.

Many women expressed the desire to continue to dialogue with other women as in these synodal groups as support for their spirituality, life and ministry in the church.

RESULTS SUMMARY OF THE ONLINE SURVEY: 98 Participants

Only 10% of respondents were under the age of 45; 50% were between 45 and 65; 40% were older than 65. This raises questions and concerns about the absence of youth.

Only 8% felt that their participation as women in the church takes them into consideration and that their opinion is valued. 58% feel ambiguous – they participate but don't make the decisions. 25% seek alternative spaces to live their spirituality. 5 % feel they are no longer a part of the church while the rest are in the church but don't actively participate.

84% think that women can act in the Church representing Jesus Christ as men do and 94 % said that women do not need a mediator to access God.

63% have a role in their parish for example catechist, PPC member; reader; Spiritual director etc

22 have experienced psychological violence in the church; 23 spiritual violence, 44 power abuse and 53 a sense of invisibility and lack of appreciation.

Only 50% of these women identify with a masculine/male image of God.

Women named the following issues as needing urgent attention

- participation and democracy in the church (87%)
- the issue of clericalism (83%)
- the issue of inclusion and equality (83%)
- the issue of sexual and power abuse (90%)
- the issue of violence against women (92%)
- the issue of theology and women in the world today (85%)
- the issue of sexual and marital ethics (83%)

Issues of ecumenical dialogue, interreligious dialogue and church finances were seen as needing attention but as less urgent.

Women identified the following characteristics of the church as patriarchal

- ordained ministries restricted to men (84%)
- absence of women in church leadership roles (83%)
- sacraments provided only by men (71%)
- masculine images of God only (61 %)

Only 15% consider communications in the church as free and transparent.

Only 5% feel the church welcomes the contribution and voices of women

Only 7% feel the church welcomes the contribution of minorities (including LGBTIQ, people with disabilities, and others)

Only 12% feel the church welcomes the contribution and voice of the poor

Less than half said that women participate in decision-making bodies in the parish/diocese; 16% said no while the remainder were uncertain.

Almost 60% think that the liturgy helps 'a lot' or 'somewhat' in deepening their spirituality. However, 36% said the established liturgy either does not help or helps only a little to deepen their spirituality and faith as a woman.

Women identified the most significant challenges for the church for the full participation of women as:

- access to decision-making (87%)
- the need to recognise women's abilities (81%)
- exclusion of women from priestly ministry (74%)
- recognition of their work (62%)
- incorporation of justice and equity in the different ministries (68%)

Key strategies identified that women can use for greater participation in the church included knowing and making visible the contributions of women in the church throughout history (83%); creating support networks (78%) and formation spaces (75%).

Conclusion

The women who took part said that it was significant for them to be formally invited to share their experience of church - something which has been strikingly absent. It was liberating to share their experience with other women who also care deeply about the church but experience significant challenges. Many reflected that it was very difficult for them to decide to take part in the Synod process given the hurt they have experienced and their scepticism that their voices would have any significant effect. They said that it will be traumatic if the conversation and action stops here and pleaded with the church to continue with this exercise. "There needs to be action and change, we can't keep having the same conversation." They see an urgent need for on-going conversation and dialogue at all levels of church with regard to issues which affect women.

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