

LISTEN!



WOMEN'S VOICES FROM AROUND THE GLOBE

PRESENTED BY THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S COUNCIL

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PRAYER

Wake us up to what needs doing,
And what needs undoing.
Wake us up
To what must be let go,
And what to draw closer.
Wake us up to what enlarges love
And what diminishes it.
In all parts of our life,
Disturb and wake us up!

— Joyce Rupp

**GOD OF OUR DREAMING
MAY WE BE GUIDED BY
TRUTH**



INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Women's Council (CWC) is a global umbrella group of more than sixty Catholic organizations working for the recognition of women's full dignity and equality in the Church.

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

Heeding Pope Francis' call to synodality, CWC embarked on a process of virtual listening sessions and discernment so that the bishops might hear the voices of women from around the world. Commencing on International Women's Day 2022, we make this journey with the foundational reminder that women around the world are working for equal dignity and rights as a matter of justice and well-being.

With this focus, we sought to listen to the voices and experiences of Catholic women across the globe, and particularly how they are faring in diverse regions. To do so, theologians and leaders from each continent presented at various sessions to stimulate listening, prayer, discussion, and discernment on the following themes:

- **Situation of Women in the Church:** led by women of Latin America, Spain, and the Caribbean.
- **Power & Participation:** prepared by women of Europe, and coordinated by leaders from Germany and Switzerland.
- **Structures, Transparency & Accountability:** prepared by women of Asia, and coordinated by leaders from India.
- **Sacramental Life:** led by women of Australia and New Zealand.
- **Resistance & Hope:** led by women of North America.



**THE VOICES OF
WOMEN FROM MORE
THAN 60 WOMEN'S
ORGANIZATIONS
AROUND THE WORLD**



This document is a summary of more than ten hours of listening sessions coordinated and enriched by women, including theologians, across the continents. Our collective discernment created the opportunity for rich encounters and deep listening of women in different contexts to pray, dream, and envision a more life-giving Church together.

Our synodal journey is not a linear path, and yet we walk together in this complexity and hope.

Despite our differences, we share in the belief that the full participation of women in the Church's institutional and sacramental life is the single most effective sign that the Church's leaders are committed to building a truly Synodal Church.

**WOMEN IN THE CHURCH NEED A
VOICE.
HEAR OUR VOICES.**



THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

LATIN AMERICA, THE CARIBBEAN AND SPAIN

2,286 women responded to a virtual survey carried out in December 2021–January 2022, and others participated in approximately 60 workshops held by some communities and/or women's groups.

The majority considered their participation in the Church to be ambiguous, as they have no decision-making power and are essentially volunteers, receiving no remuneration.

Of the women surveyed, their participation in the Church includes:

- Catechetical work: 41.9%
- Pastoral ministry: 46.9%
- Assisting liturgical celebrations: 33.9%
- Community leadership: 9.6%

A small percentage (3.8%) hold other positions such as Eucharistic minister, choir member, or as a member of their parish council or local Caritas groups.

Only 4.4% felt "fully involved."

Shockingly, most women surveyed had experienced violence, and less shockingly, a sense of invisibility.

2.4% have left the Catholic Church, while others are actively seeking alternative spaces to experience their faith and spirituality.

AFRICA

Catholicism is the largest Christian denomination. Our Kenyan sisters speak of society resting on a 3-legged stool: the constitution, culture, and Christianity. While the constitution speaks of equal rights for women, culturally, women cannot inherit property. Patriarchy, hierarchy, and "male supremacy" within Catholicism compound this inequality. Women are often victims of gender-based violence and femicide. There is high unemployment, low marriage rates, and the majority of babies are born to unwed mothers.

The home, and often the Church, are dangerous places for women and children.

Women expressed feeling used by the Church and excluded by a romanticised theology of Mary. Their ability to be agents of their own spirituality and creators of their own spiritually-nourishing groups is limited by an internalised patriarchy and oppression. However, greater access to education, women are challenging patriarchy, refusing to conform to cultural requirements, and promoting equality more vocally, even though ostracisation may be the result.

ASIA

Christians are the minority of the population in most Asian countries (with the exception of the Philippines and East Timor). Patriarchy is rife in the churches. Women suffer verbal, spiritual, sexual, and psychological violence, intensified by clericalism and the abuse of power by clerics in the Church.

Communities, independent of clerical control, are developing to provide women with alternative spaces to experience, express and develop their spirituality; to promote the study of theology; and to care for victims of the Church, and domestic violence. Being a minority, women work with women of all faiths on social justice issues.

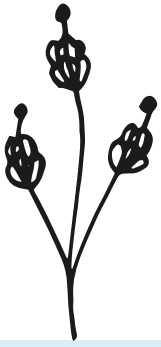
EUROPE

Women are treated and seen as assistants, who simply support the work of the parish priest. Similarly, their theological study and contributions are valued less.

Many are moving away from the Church and forming groups (virtual and physical) that provide sacred spaces for sharing and prayer.

NORTH AMERICA

Racism, in the form of discrimination, segregation and stereotypical attitudes, is experienced in the American Church by Black Catholic women and Hispanic Catholic women. They are oppressed institutionally and marginalised by gender, language, race, culture, and immigration status. Gender-related violence is a serious issue. Many women have left the Church because of the lack of recognition of equality, lack of trust and support, and a disconnection with preaching that is often insidiously harmful to women.



“Una Chiesa circolare, una chiesa comunionale come profilato del concilio vaticano secondo dove non esistano minoranze di ogni genere, dove ciascuno possa sentirsi accolto e partecipe a tutti i livelli.”

POWER, PARTICIPATION & REPRESENTATION

When women from across the globe speak of their experience of the Church, the most common term used is *frustration*. Women are frustrated by the abuse of power, clericalism, discrimination, sexism, and fear they experience in Church settings. Worldwide, the absence of women at decision-making levels and their exclusion from ordained ministries are seen by women as the biggest forms of discrimination and injustice.

Power, as practiced by the Church, marginalises women. Since the time of Emperor Constantine in the early 4th century, civil power and the Church through the ages have formed a symbiosis on which the Church has built its status and its dominance. People have not objected when power is misnamed as service, but in reality it is an abuse of authority and position.

Leadership positions are reserved for ordained men. Lay people need the permission or commissioning of a cleric in order to act in the name of the Church. The current structure is based on the model of an absolute monarchy of a bygone age, with the Pope at its head. Canon Law protects the institution, not individuals. Patriarchal images of God as male, king and lord reinforce the status quo.

“Verpflichtenden synodale Strukturen vor Ort in den Diözesen und weltweit, die gleichberechtigt “Laien” / Frauen einbeziehen und sie an allen Entscheidungen beteiligen.”

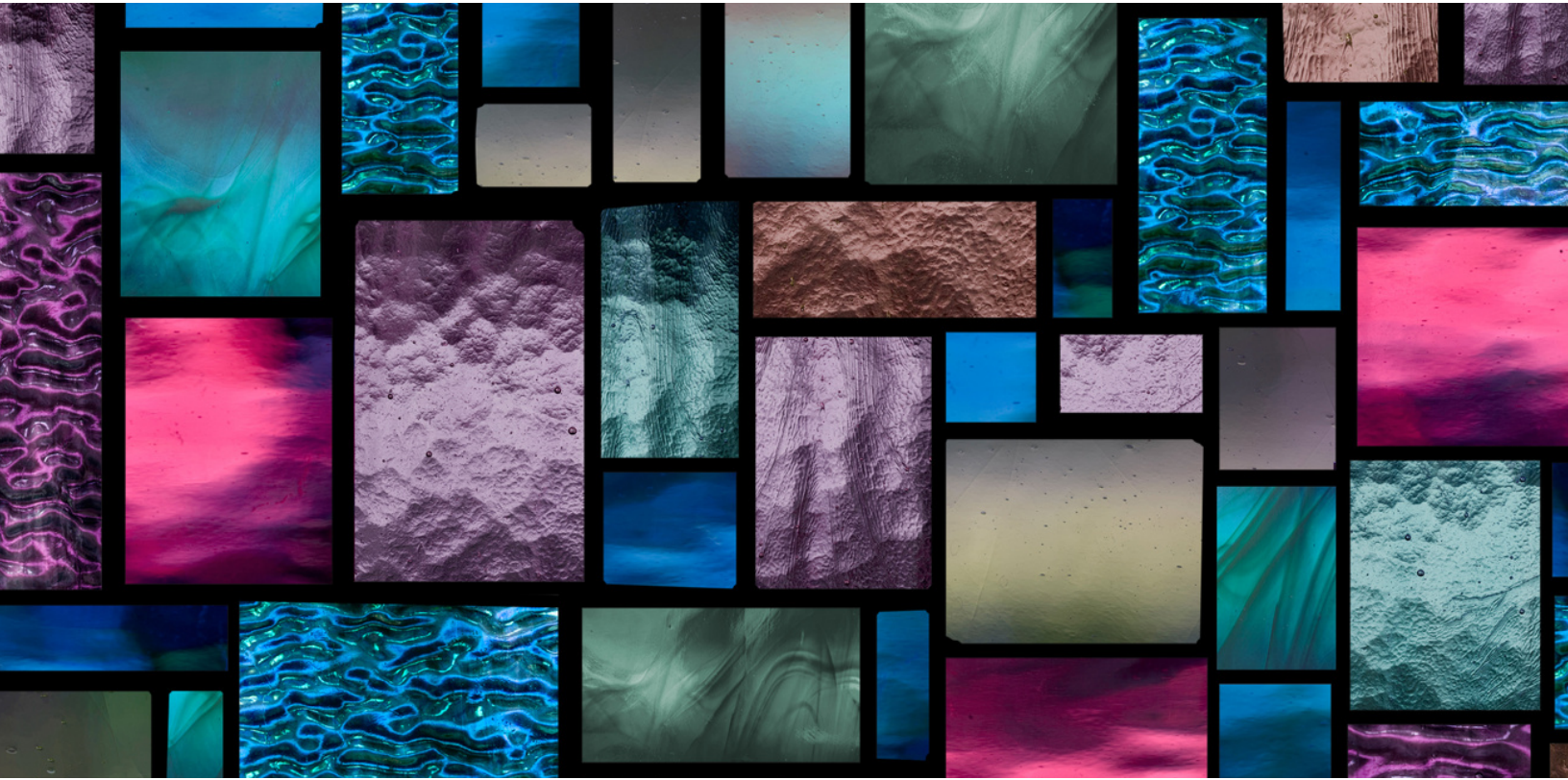
POWER, PARTICIPATION & REPRESENTATION

All over the world, women and power are still seen as an antithesis, contradicting the “natural order.” Colonialism and the implementation of patriarchal structures often go hand in hand – to the disadvantage and harm of women, indigenous peoples, and people of other faiths. This has caused an imbalance in equal rights and dignity to the present day.

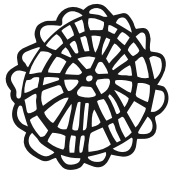
There is a lack of lay, especially women’s, participation. Women feel invisible as they have no decision-making power. If given positions in the Church, most often they are not considered equitable leadership positions, with ordained men still in charge. On the local level, women are seen as supporting the work of the parish priest and bishop who determine what happens and who can do the ministry. Prohibited from preaching or administering the sacraments, the Church is denied their gifts.

However, there is an inconsistency in practice around the world. In many areas women are not allowed to read during the liturgy or are seen as unworthy to distribute communion, while in other regions women lead Churches, comfort believers, baptise children, and celebrate services.

Many women have left the Church because of the lack of recognition of equality, lack of trust and support, and disconnection with preaching that is especially harmful to women.



STRUCTURE, ACCOUNTABILITY & REPRESENTATION



The Church is characterized by hierarchical, feudal and pyramidal leadership, in which decision-making is in the hands of an all-male clergy. This has led to the Church experiencing a strong clergy-laity and gender divide. Because of the deeply ingrained notion of priests as “other Christs” within the clerical class and the laity, priests gained a culture of superiority and the laity were kept in an infantile position. However, with increased education, the laity are waking up and wanting their clergy to relate as brothers to all the baptised and to be men of deep spirituality and accountability.

The clericalized hierarchical structure of the Church led to the widespread failure of the Church’s authorities to respond with justice and compassion to the survivors of various forms of abuse and brought many members of the community to sever their link to the Catholic Church. The institutional Church largely protected criminal priests and bishops but slandered advocates and silenced the victims. Accountability and remorse by the bishops mostly take the form of penitential services in which priests and bishops together with parishes, with victims of abuse present, ask God for forgiveness. This shields bishops and priests from acknowledging their guilt and facing the consequences of the abuse. The survivors of clergy sexual abuse who dare to speak up and who demand justice are courageous prophets in the Church today.

“Rilevare, dire, diffondere, togliere il velo dalle innumerevoli azioni non trasparenti da parte del clero.”



STRUCTURE, ACCOUNTABILITY & REPRESENTATION

Purely male Catholic networks and connections between Church, politics, and society still determine discourse, especially when it comes to questions of abuse, exploitation, and the position of women in the Church. In some countries, networks censure reports and documentaries that highlight such treatment. This prevents the guilty in Church and politics from being named, and thus prevent the rights of women and vulnerable persons from being enforced. Survivors of abuse ask for independent truth commissions as was done in Australia with its Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

People around the world are initiating new ways of being Church, by establishing communities that are inclusive, open and life affirming. These communities embody what it means to be a Church grounded in people's lives and become spaces that bring healing and growth. Power is shared and leadership emerges from the grassroots, where people imbued with the wisdom of the Spirit can give lead in organising the community's life and mission.

There are some positive examples of ecclesial structures that foster accountability, transparency, and inclusion at the parish and diocesan levels in Australia, Germany and other countries. New structures of collaborative decision-making with greater representation of persons of all genders without distinction of class, age, or race do occur in some parishes and dioceses. However, at the whim of a new parish priest or bishop these are suppressed.

The criteria for leadership positions should not be ordination. Leaders need to be people imbued by the Spirit and educationally qualified as discerned by the community. For the Church to tread the synodal path, it needs to shed its feudal thinking, patriarchal dictates and paternalistic attitudes.



SACRAMENTAL LIFE

People encounter the extravagant generosity of God's presence and grace far beyond the clerical, hierarchical and "male" expressions that lack a feminine presence and spirituality.

Women articulated broad understandings of sacrament as an experience that opens one to encounter the sacred Presence of God.

Yet, the institution's narrow focus on the Council of Trent's defined seven sacraments impoverishes the sacramental life of the church.

In some contexts, priests exercise power through "gatekeeping" the reception of the sacraments, rather than inviting the community to share in their celebration.

Disconnected from the lived needs and experience of the faithful, the sacraments often fail to offer an experience of the boundless living presence of Christ.

THE EUCHARIST

No longer the inclusive table of friendship that was celebrated in early Christian communities, the Eucharist has become a symbol of exclusion.

The Mass, the context where communion is usually received, is also perceived as an "exclusive" ritual with mediocre preaching, and liturgical language and music that is often racist, colonialist, or sexist,

The language denies, excludes, or symbolically diminishes the metaphor of the feminine face of God.

Too often the ritual takes precedence over the sacramental: more time is spent administering the sacraments than promoting spiritual experiences that open and deepen encounters with God.

BAPTISM AND FIRST COMMUNION

Women long for the baptismal promise of equality to be realised.

Today, many parents regard these experiences as "cultural acts," rejecting the doctrine of original sin, the myth of Adam and Eve, and a feudal notion of God.

PENANCE

Women spoke of their experiences of patronising, discriminatory attitudes or inappropriate behaviour during confession as a reason they no longer seek reconciliation through the Church. Others feel God does not need the intermediary of a male priest to forgive sins.

HEALING (ANOINTING OF THE SICK)

The main work of Jesus, along with teaching, was healing. The fact that only a priest can administer this sacrament frustrates non-clerical chaplains who do the groundwork. Non-clerics experience a call when asked by people to accompany them in grief, in separation, in happiness, or at the threshold of death but they are forbidden to administer sacraments. Pastoral care is thus separated from sacramental celebrations rather than being an organic whole.

The institutional Church is ignoring where healing is needed most -

- those who have been abused by its members, and the healing of our planet Earth. Many priests are willfully oblivious to the presence of God in people's suffering and that of planet Earth.

MARRIAGE

There is a great pain among LGBTQ+ Catholics and allies that so many are excluded from having their partnerships and marriages recognised, blessed, and celebrated equally by the Church. The loss of the Church's refusal to fully embrace the LGBTQ+ community is incalculable.

Within marriage, the Church's inequalities are replicated, and patriarchal and oppressive practices leave a marriage open to domestic abuse. Many women expressed fear or shame about leaving an abusive marriage, and often were told by their parish priest to remain in a violent household.

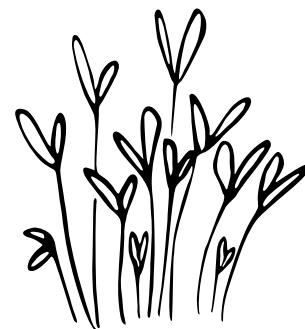
HOLY ORDERS

Likewise, the exclusion of women from ordination, rooted in patriarchal and misogynistic theologies, is an incalculable loss for the Church.

Women know they can represent Jesus Christ - one does not need to be male - and yet they are denied the possibility of ordained ministry. People long to be ministered to by women, to hear them preach, and share in their gifts. Yet many, including male priests are torn: they want to experience inclusive, woman-led Eucharistic celebrations, but they fear episcopal repercussions.

It is not an exaggeration to say that most women are deeply frustrated because their vocations are undervalued or dismissed. Many seek new sources of spiritual nourishment.

“What the Ruah has united, let the patriarchy not separate.”



RESISTANCE & HOPE

Claiming our Catholic faith as women – in our wholeness – is often an act of resistance. Given the difficulties caused mainly by the ecclesiastical hierarchies, it is crucial not to lose the call of the Spirit, to raise our voices and bring our questions to make the reign of God a reality. Diverse movements of women all over the world are acknowledging the signs of the time: an inescapable invitation to unite and create networks of communities to work for equality. Women can play a crucial role in helping to restore trust and credibility in the institutional Church and truly bring about God’s love. We continue to be involved and unafraid to claim our faith as Catholic women.

To recover a Church that truly reflects the gospel of Jesus, women have been resisting and engaging in numerous ways such as: campaigning for the full equality and dignity of all people; engaging in prayerful demonstrations or actions; refusing to participate in Church services; writing to Church authority figures; having control over the theological voices we want to hear by using non-Catholic venues; establishing networks for women; creating prayer, educational and meeting spaces for women; having the courage to raise one’s own voice. People of all genders are seeking women as spiritual directors and exploring their own feminine, inclusive form of spirituality. They are creating their own paths outside of the preconceived and top-down community and assembly cultures. Many of them are using social networks to make themselves heard.

While some choose to work for renewal through involvement with their parishes, other women engage in intentional and inclusive eucharistic communities that are revisioning what it means to be Church. For many it has become impossible to participate in an institution that is not transparent, clings to unjust structures, and promotes theology and dogmas that are not keeping pace with scientific discoveries about the universe and the human person. Through the assertions that women are the Church, indigenous people are the Church, the poor are the Church, migrants and refugees are the Church; divorced and remarried folks are the Church, LGBTQ+ people are the Church, these communities become liminal spaces at the boundaries, at the threshold, making them the right ‘setting for a life-changing transition.’ Real Christ-like freedom does not mean remaining attached to man-made traditions and cultural structures that belong in a past age, but to be free to live self-determined lives with Jesus and all our siblings.

Even in our collective discernment, the women of CWC find themselves in different places their synodal journey, depending on context, culture, language, or experience. We celebrate this diversity and tension, yet walk together in a shared hope for the dignity and equality of women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To recover the Community of Jesus of Nazareth, which contradicts the current functioning of the Church, and to strengthen the co-responsibility of all members, we recommend the Church:



- **Unmask ideologies and theologies that wrongly justify sexism, racism, classism, and all forms of oppression or domination by**
 - Acknowledging the links between colonialism, patriarchy, and the structures of the Church today, and work to dismantle them, so that all may equally and joyfully participate in the life of the Church.
 - Embracing new technologies and methodologies that allow for greater access, communion, and participation.
 - Listening to and including women not only in decision-making processes, but also in the actual decision-making. Ensure processes are transparent and accountable to the baptised. Involve parishioners in selecting their pastors.
 - Filling leadership positions and committees professionally and not arbitrarily, and limit terms of office to a specified time period. Ordination is not proof of competence in all areas. The abuse of power and imbalance between men and women can be avoided through collaborative leadership.
 - Creating a structure and an environment that enables the Church to become a global leader in upholding and modelling comprehensive human rights, particularly those that protect women against violence, extremism, and limits on her freedom.
 - Renewing Church structures and canon laws to protect the rights of all members of the Church, regardless of gender or sexual identity, and not just the rights of priests and bishops. We must eradicate clericalism.
 - Allowing full participation in the life and ministry of the Church of all those who identify as LGBTQI+.
 - Recognising that the health of the Church depends on the healing of those who have been abused by its sins. The Church must call practice zero tolerance of any form of abuse and deliver justice to survivors. For sacraments to be real and life-giving, Churches need to be safe places.

“The universe unfolds in God, who fills it. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul but also to discover God in all things.” (Laudato si’, 83)

RECOMMENDATIONS, CONTINUED

- **Give primacy to the Gospels, enlightened by Scripture scholars of today so that we might all live as Jesus modelled and taught.**
 - We long to be "the faithful... [who] met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God." May no one be excluded from the table.
 - Embrace the charisms, contributions, and vocations of women and take concrete steps to facilitate their full participation in the life of the Church, including greater access to theological education, training, and formation.
 - Celebrate an expansive understanding of sacramentality as experienced in so many ways every day. Sacramental life is being aware of, responding to, and living out the presence of God in the world. We must deepen our metaphors and language for the divine and its mystery so that no person, regardless of gender or sexual identity is excluded. We must include the wisdom, spirituality and notions of sacramentality of First Nations’ Peoples, and those historically oppressed communities.
 - Build Gospel-centered communities that are inclusive, participative, and welcoming of all people at the celebration of the Eucharist.
 - Further develop a "sacramentality of care" so that we as Christians might better attend to the unprecedented inequalities of our time, and proactively address the devastation of the Earth due to climate change.
- **Acknowledge that the Church is not just the clergy, but all the baptised, the Body of Christ.**
 - Transform the priesthood that promotes men alone as "another Christ" and eradicate clericalism through a renewed theology of priesthood. This must include shifting or abolishing any seminary training that furthers clerical thinking and isolates priests from communities. Make celibacy optional.
 - Open up spaces to allow God to ‘speak’ or be revealed through sincere encounters and accompaniment, particularly for those women who experience "voicelessness" or "invisibility" in their Church, those called to ordained ministry, and those members of the LGBTQ+ community.
 - Acknowledge that women are also sacraments, and they need different forms and spaces.
 - Open all ordained ministries to women.

CONCLUSION

REAL CHRIST-LIKE FREEDOM, BASED AS IT IS ON TRUTH, DOES NOT MEAN REMAINING ATTACHED TO MAN-MADE TRADITIONS, CULTURAL STRUCTURES, AND DOCTRINES THAT BELONG TO PAST AGES. IT MEANS TO BE FREE TO LIVE SELF-DETERMINED LIVES IN THE COMPANY OF JESUS AND ALL OUR SIBLINGS.

We seek a spiritual awakening in the Church – a shift from hierarchically-centred ritualism to a celebration of life around the cosmic table bringing in the marginalized, the excluded, and all the elements of the earth in an open communion.

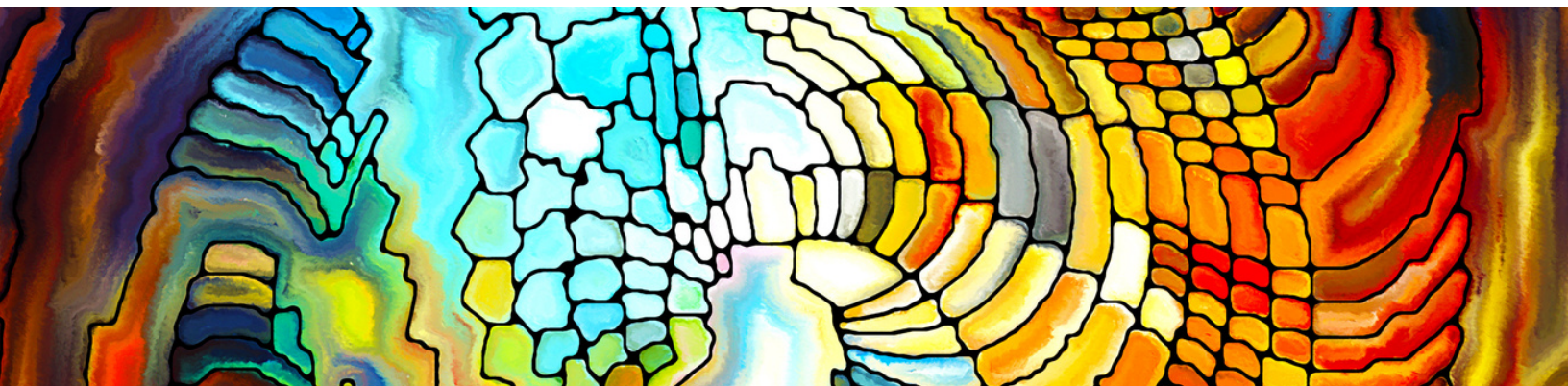
We seek a Church that breathes and co-creates with the energy of Sophia Spirit, that is beyond the binaries of the sacred and the secular, the body and the spirit, male and female, and births the Church anew.

We seek inspiration from theologians and scholars and so many inspiring women who have gone before us.

We walk with Jesus of Nazareth, Sophia Spirit and the many companions who share our hopes along the road.

We assert that this renewed Church is possible! As Mary Magdalene and her companions walked to the tomb in darkness, we too walk with hope to the tomb where the Body of Christ is buried today and encountering the Risen One, we hear the mandate to announce the resurrection to the hierarchically positioned 'brothers', that another Church is possible!

*Another Church is possible, it is being born!
Can you midwife this birthing...?*





The Catholic Women's Council (CWC) is a global umbrella group of Roman Catholic networks working for the full recognition of dignity and equality in the Church.

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