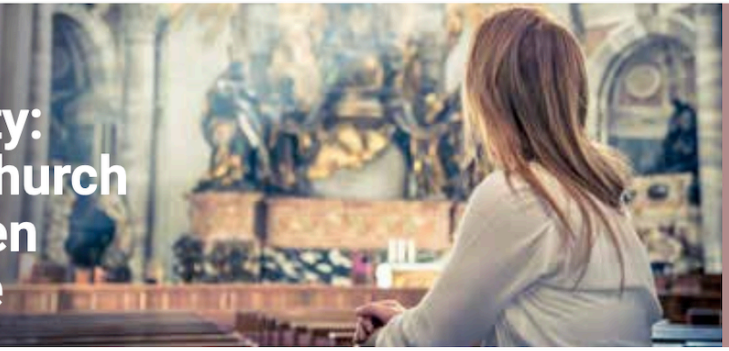
Shared responsibility: Creating a church where women feel at home



The synod priority

"Women: recognising and including women's gifts, leadership, and co-responsibility at every level of church life, as a matter of justice and credibility."

The word

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken away from her." Lk 10:38-42

The context

There's no doubt that women's position in society and the church has improved substantially over the decades. Women exercise more real power and influence now than ever before. Still, we live in a world built mainly by and for men.

Look at your smartphone. It's designed for men's larger hands. Cars are built to accommodate men's larger frames, which is why women are 47% more likely than men to be seriously injured in a car accident. Most trials of drugs are conducted on men, so a doctor often ends up prescribing a medication that's wrong for the female body, which has a different metabolism from men's. Most public buildings lack sufficient bathrooms for women. Unfortunately, we are still living in a world designed for men.

And in some ways, things are getting worse. The last decade has seen a rising misogyny among boys and young men, promoted online and by far-right politicians. Misogyny is about containment and control, putting women back in their place, keeping them there, the insistence that male supremacy is the natural order of things. It's about enforcing strict gender roles. Online propagandists like Andrew Tate preach a message of toxic masculinity, encouraging boys to see women as subordinate to men and to treat them as such.

The result is that women end up spending money and energy keeping themselves safe from men, while being paid significantly less than men. This is the world women live in today.

When it comes to our church, some facts are obvious also. Women not only make up a significant majority of regular church-goers, but they also play the primary role in handing on the faith and in carrying out much of the church's unglamorous work. Think of parish administration and upkeep of churches. And while they serve in a variety of church ministries, such as catechists, liturgists, musicians, singers, servers, readers, eucharistic ministers, and theologians, many women still feel invisible and unheard.

Progress is being made. Women are being appointed to top positions in the Vatican administration, and are taking on bigger roles in dioceses and parishes. But, still, the church remains a clerical, top-down institution, and it's difficult for women - and laymen - to exercise any real leadership. While power is bound up with ordination, that will remain the case. Much remains to be done before women's gifts and leadership are recognised and utilised at every level of church life.

Whether in church or in society, it's still, in the words of singer James Brown, very much a man's world.

The challenge

Jesus lived in a culture where women had no rights. A woman was almost always under the authority of a man: her father, her husband, or a male relative of her husband if she was a widow. This left women in a very vulnerable position. Men could legally divorce a woman for almost any reason. But a woman couldn't divorce her husband. In the Temple, and in the synagogues, women were separated from the men and not permitted to read aloud. It was, in every sense, a deeply patriarchal society.

Jesus' attitude to women was different. Look at how he treated them. How he forgave the woman caught in adultery; how he accepted the Samaritan woman at the well, how he welcomed the woman with a bad reputation who washed his feet with her tears. Jesus recognised women's dignity, desires, and gifts, and always treated them with respect, often facing criticism for doing so. Jesus didn't send women off to the kitchen or expect them to stay apart from the men. He called them first and foremost to be disciples.

Pope Francis repeatedly insisted that women and men share equal dignity and complementarity, rooted in baptism and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and that it is unjust and harmful to waste the potential of half of humanity. He said that women's gifts, leadership, and co-responsibility in the church must be recognised and acknowledged—not only as a matter of justice but also as essential for the life and mission of the church and the world. He urged all of society to respect, defend, and esteem every woman, calling any harm against women a profanity against God.

Jesus opposed the misogynistic culture of his day. He refused to see women as inferior or second-class. The way Jesus treated women offers a model for how church and society must treat women today.

The connection

Baptism is more than a symbolic ritual: it changes our identity. It gives all of us a fundamental equality and common dignity as Christ's brothers and sisters. Every baptised woman and man shares in the priesthood, prophetic mission, and kingship of Christ.