

8. Women Creating a “Synodal Third Space” by Educating Seminarians on Synodality

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EWA as a Synodal Third Space: Language Changes and Develops

To explain my hopes around synodality: I was a novice at the time of Vatican II. I was privileged to be given a chance to study theology when I was in my thirties, and then to work for almost twenty years in an archdiocese committed to putting the priority of baptism and its implications for faith and church leadership into practice. This means I approach the possibilities indicated by the synod with some passion, as the hopes of those days find a new vehicle.

My background has been in adult faith education, working throughout the late 1970s and 1980s in an adult faith education team for the Archdiocese of Adelaide in Australia. It was a team of men and women, ordained and lay, committed to fostering a sense of the church as the “people of God.” We reviewed our lives and mission together, wrote handbooks for parishes, consciously worked to be a team. From the mid-eighties onwards, our archdiocese also had a leadership team: the archbishop, a priest, a religious sister and a laywoman—also committed to team collaboration, working from an articulated vision of a church based on baptismal equality, reviewing their outreach to the parishes, and planning together for the next steps to achieve this vision. So, at many levels, leadership was shared and leadership as service was honoured.

Some years later, I was asked to provide leadership formation for laywomen being asked to take on leadership roles in their parishes—the result of diminishing numbers of vocations to the priesthood and religious

life. So in many ways synodality was in my blood stream before I used the word. However, this deep engagement in the process also means I am aware of the vulnerability that accompanies new moves in a church mired in clericalism. Those like me who have been on the road for a long time know the disillusion that comes when a new parish priest or bishop eliminates emerging possibilities. Many who had found ways of linking their faith to active mission walk away when they experience a return to clericalism.

“Ecclesia of Women in Asia as a synodal third space” is putting new language around an attitude that has animated the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) since we began in Bangkok so many years ago—without knowing the term “third space.” I was welcomed—although “Australia” rather stretches the term “Asia.” EWA emerged because women in Asia realized that they needed a place to theologize, to hear each other into speech. At that first meeting, we agreed that a better theology would emerge if pastoral practitioners and theology lecturers actually talked with one another. Allowing ourselves to hold differences in tension, avoiding dualism and polarization, recognizing local cultures and creativity while not downplaying the impact of colonialism, EWA became a place of honest sharing. These ideals go to our roots. I situate this chapter based on experience rather than theory and hope it can find a place in this “third space.”

Synodality is a term that captures my earlier hopes in a new way. Synodality describes the style of being church which was articulated at Vatican II and draws on the early history of the church. Under Pope Francis, church officials have begun a process which calls all Catholics to rediscover the essence of the Christian vocation. It is hoped this stress on baptism as the greatest sacrament will enable Vatican II to again give direction to the mission God entrusts to all of us.

At the heart of this synodal call is a challenge *to listen* to other perspectives, *to explore roles* within the Christian community so that all can participate, and *to reorient our preoccupation* from caring for (or protecting) the church institution to reaching out in care towards our

broken world. It is reported that Cardinal Bergolio, in an intervention before he was elected pope, said that Jesus is knocking at the door of the church and trying to get out! This theme continued throughout his term in office. In the words of Pope Francis: “Have we been stuck all too long, nestled inside a conventional, external, and formal religiosity that no longer warms our hearts and changes our lives?”¹ In other words, as he noted then and often since, we, as church, have become too self-referential.

Bringing “Synodality” to a Seminary Context

This chapter draws on my experience in recent years. I was missioned by my congregation to the Philippines at age 71 to support in the formation of our younger members who were there for formation and further study. Twelve years later, I am still here, very aware of the privilege it is to be in another culture and to live in an inter-cultural community.

When I came to Manila, I knew I had to find a place where I could make some contribution to the wider church. After asking a few times if the men at a nearby seminary had been given any exposure to feminist theology, I was invited to teach an optional course *Listening to the Voices of Women*, from 2015 to 2017. Some years later I was approached to teach Ecclesiology II—which was subtitled *Ministry*. In 2022 and again from 2023 to 2025, I have taught both Ecclesiology I and Ministry. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ecclesiology II was offered online. I can categorically state that trying to teach thirty men you have never met face-to-face is not conducive to what I call good education! But in 2023 when ordinary classes resumed, I retitled the Ministry course: *Ministry in a Synodal Church*. These twenty or so students were third year seminarians, but synodality was certainly not a well-worn concept for them. A few had some small experience through working with enlightened parish priests;

¹ Philip Pulella, “Pope Decries Church Conservatives Encased in ‘Suit of Armour,’” *Yahoo News*, January 6, 2022, news.yahoo.com/pope-decries-church-conservatives-encased-121132620.html.

most had heard references to it but had not had much exposure to what it might ask of them in ministry.

These Ministry students had taken Ecclesiology I (taught by someone else), which was, naturally enough, a study of the theological basis of church. An interesting dialogue took place when the relevant person approached me to teach the first ministry course. I asked him what they had covered in Ecclesiology I: what did I have to build on? He said, “Oh the main emphasis of Ministry (Ecclesiology II) course is the development of the roles of deacons, priests, and bishops.” I responded that that was hardly wide enough in a synodal church and was given the warning that synodality will not work in this country because “in the Philippines people will always do what the priest says” (one might think experiences of the church in Ireland and Poland would put paid to that hope!). However, he was happy that I teach it in whatever way I thought was needed, so synodality became a key reference point in our course. At the same time, for me, brushing up on the development of ordained ministry over the centuries put the church’s fixation on celibacy and monarchical structures into high relief, which in itself provided interesting background to the work that students needed to do to understand the significance of synodality today.

Student Background

These courses involved students from many Asian countries. Perhaps a third of the students were from the Philippines, but the courses also included significant numbers of students from Vietnam and various countries in Africa and a few from Myanmar and Indonesia. With the invitation to teach Ecclesiology I in August 2023, I was now faced the challenge of instilling the basics of ecclesiology with a synodal orientation in a smaller group of about twenty mainly Vietnamese and Filipino students, (this first group was composed of those who had managed to reach Philippines before the COVID disruption), with a few extra students from Myanmar, Indonesia, and Timor Leste. Later larger classes included

students from Congo, Cameroon, and mainland China.² Students were from various congregations, most preparing for priestly ministry. All were male, except last semester I had one young Indonesian sister in the class. As I look back, the various groups tend to merge in my memory, so this chapter draws the combined experience of five different courses in either Ministry or Ecclesiology.

For every student, English was a second, third, or fourth language. I had to respect that. Recommending books or long articles would not achieve much. Videos worked quite well and having a PowerPoint with captions as a guide to what I was saying, and which I could put online for them afterwards, meant that they could follow more easily, despite my accent, and they could also review via the PPT. All these students are from countries which have been colonized by Europeans, for the benefit of Europeans. In so many areas, the impact of this has been devastating. We celebrated five hundred years of Catholicism in the Philippines, but it was introduced along with Western culture, at great cost to the local peoples—costs which continue to bedevil this country and the countries of other participants.

In most Asian countries, the culture and even more so the church is patriarchal, and for the most part, this patriarchy is yet to be challenged. For varied reasons, in most Asian and African countries sexual abuse has not been “outed” by any independent inquiry, so it remains known but not dealt with. This contrasts very strongly with Australia, where a government inquiry has forced the Catholic Church to face the reality and the shame and seek ways to rebuild the very fragile trust that survives. In Asia and Africa, the power of the priestly caste is relatively unchallenged. I am from Australia, but my ethnicity is European. I am female. I knew that both of these distinguishing marks can make it difficult to win the confidence of young men from other cultures. Luckily, I am also old! My

² In this I was greatly assisted by Fr. Richard Lennan, an Australian theologian who is head of ecclesiology at Boston College. He generously sent me his full reading list and guidelines to his course there.

age probably saved me, because both Asian and African traditions have respect for age.

The Synodal Process

Many will know the diagrams which outline the progress and process of the synod.³ The entire church was summoned. Parishes and dioceses were commissioned to gather responses and forward these to the central Synod office. How this was done varied greatly. (I know one parish where no parish meeting was called, but the clergy—perhaps assisted by a few laity—answered what they thought the people would say.) Nonetheless, many areas did gather small groups together and seek to hear what they thought the Holy Spirit was calling us, as church, to do today. By early 2022, the collected diocesan responses from every corner of the globe had arrived in Rome, where the Synod office faced the huge task of preparing this material for the next step. In October 2022, a group of theologians and facilitators met in Frascati, Italy, and distilled these responses down into the continental reports and drafted “‘Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.’”⁴ Continental groups of bishops and lay people met to read through, reflect on, and respond to the collation from their particular area. One can imagine that there were significant differences across continents, especially across Asia and the Pacific. But there were also common concerns which emerged from every continent and every country. The Vatican office on synodality had also prepared leaders who could facilitate mixed groups of laity and clergy, using the basic method of conversation in the Spirit. One response from many was surprise: the material had not been “vetted,” and significant areas of discontent had been voiced and recorded.

But in the classroom, for most of the students, the concept of synodality had not impacted their understanding of their mission as future

³ Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, no. 3, synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html.

⁴ General Secretariat of the Synod, “‘Enlarge the Space of Your Tent’ (Is 54:2): Working Document for the Continental Stage, October 2022, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continental-EN.pdf.

priests. In late 2023, a Filipino priest reported that at a retreat for priests earlier that year, synodality was only mentioned in one comment with the assertion that it would cause problems! So, it is little wonder seminarians had had little exposure.

The first task was to situate their experience, so I asked each student to tell the class about a burning issue in their country. Those from Myanmar, Vietnam, and places like the Congo were alert to their often violent and painful realities. Some from the Philippines were more generalized, because they take for granted the widespread acceptance of Christianity, as if all people are entitled to practice so openly. Many did recognize the dehumanizing poverty and the widespread extra-judicial killings. This quick overview provided a backdrop for them to understand each other a little more and realize there will be significant differences in how they can implement synodality. Students assert that conversation about real issues does not necessarily loom large in most classes. Admittedly, they come from different congregations and do not know each other well. Often, they get over this fact by using the generic form of address “brother.” I do not think that addressing students via titles is good preparation for them approaching others as equals or seeing their role as one of service. I decided that I would follow an Australian custom of using Christian names, without any handles on them. I have done this in a few courses and found them responsive to such a personal address.

Content

In both Ecclesiology and Ministry, the beginning point is the Gospels and early church, and of course the building blocks are from Vatican II. Most women theologians have been exposed to feminist readings of the early period of emerging Christian communities for over forty years, drawing on the classic explorations of theologians like Elizabeth Johnson, Sandra Schneiders, and Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. Most seminarians had not even heard of feminist scripture scholars, let alone been exposed to their readings of Gospel scenarios and Pauline possibilities. I think this reflects lecturers who maintain a deep suspicion of women, suggesting that where

a person stands has an influence on what they see! It was good to hear Timothy Radcliffe note at the beginning of his retreat to the synod: “I am white, I am a male, from a country that benefitted from colonization, and maybe that disqualifies me before I start.”⁵ One way around this was for me to begin each class with a scripture reading, often the Gospel of the day, lead them to become still, and then raise an alternative view of that passage if it was appropriate. One said in his evaluation: “I have learned a different way of opening a session.”

Mary Magdalene as an apostle took on new possibilities for them—and I think, seriously, most had seen her as a repentant prostitute till they watched Elizabeth Johnson’s talk on Mary Magdalene. The possibility that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus might have been a husband and wife team (after all, Mary the wife of Clopas had stood at the foot of the cross . . . would he have set off home with someone else when his wife had been through such a traumatic experience?) had not dawned on most male scholars, and artwork over the ages has reinforced the likelihood that the two disciples will be seen as males.

Perhaps one of the strongest learnings I have taken from this opportunity to teach Ecclesiology I and II is that for many younger people, if an event did not happen in their country or in their lifetime, a lot of effort is needed to bring it to life! So much of the history of the Catholic Church is Europe-centered. For young people growing up in Asia, ordinary historical markers (Vatican I, World Wars—even more so the French Revolution or the Enlightenment era) ring few if any bells, although their countries have borne the impact of these forces on the church. Even more recent events, like the EDSA revolution here in the Philippines, are easily forgotten—as voting patterns have shown. When it comes to Vatican II, the 1950s is a foreign country! Very few can imagine a church where Catholics were forbidden to enter non-Catholic churches and where all masses were in Latin, and mortal sin and hell were the focus

⁵ Timothy Peter Joseph Radcliffe, “Synod Retreat Meditation: ‘Hoping Against Hope,” *Vatican News*, October 4, 2023, vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-10/retreat-day-1-radcliffe-first-meditation.html.

of so many missions and retreats. To introduce them to the newness of Vatican II requires both a big overview and attention to details.

When it comes to looking at the development of official ministries through the ages, what stood out for me was the distorting imbalance of the increasing stress on celibacy, from roughly 500 CE, when monastic clergy came to be seen as the ideal disciples and missionaries. It helped me see what a huge task is ahead of us. For fifteen hundred years we have drummed into people the higher importance of celibate life, thereby limiting the self-worth and mission possibilities of the 99 percent who choose otherwise. Just think about “vocation”: we have limited this word, failing to affirm the high vocations of parenting and other forms of service to others. The outstanding figures of holiness are Popes, bishops, priests and religious.⁶ Overwhelmingly male, overwhelmingly celibate, and now we say *all* are called to holiness? How do we support this 180-degree turn around?

Building a sense of the value of ordinary life and the mission embedded in living that life in response to Christ’s call will take time. Many think that ministry and mission must involve liturgical or other in-church responsibilities. The lady who sweeps our street does something to build up the reign of God by her friendliness as well as her efforts to ensure that we do not feel we live in a rubbish dump. How do we help her see that her role is already one of service? How do we help others recognize her gift to the well-being of the community? As a church we are much better at publicly recognizing religious sisters, or doctors and lawyers, than building up the “little ones” whom Jesus saw as ones who will enter the feast! In the Philippines, this is shown often in those parish gatherings where the sisters and priests are served at a different table, while outside, the ones who have done all the preparation mingle holding a cardboard container of food.

For the students, I think the most challenging aspect of an historical overview of the development of early church was seeing the slow development

⁶ “Saints by numbers . . .,” *Questions from a Ewe*, April 19, 2014, questionsfromaewe.blogspot.com/2014/04/saint-by-numbers.html.

of any ministry labelled “priestly.” Presenting the possible presence of women at the Last Supper and suggesting that this was not an ordination ceremony was also confronting, as was the assertion that household tables and not altars were the normal place for Eucharist for the first centuries. The leaders of household churches, if one listens to St. Paul, were often women.

The emphasis on institutional ministries rather than charismatic ones is an issue named in the final document from the first session of the current synod.⁷ I do not necessarily mean “Pentecostal” charismatic, but every religious congregation has the sense that the spirit of their founder contains a gift for the church. Many founders challenged institutional church perceptions of mission and holiness. Mary Ward, who founded my congregation four hundred years ago, suffered for advocating active ministries for women religious. In 1617, she gave a talk to younger women in her group. A priest had said they would be unable to persevere in apostolic work because they are “but women.” Her response still speaks to us today: “In what way are women so inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man?”⁸ Her congregation was suppressed, the women turned out into the midst of the Thirty Years War in Europe, and Mary was condemned and imprisoned by church authorities. The Bull of Suppression, from Pope Urban VIII in 1631, announced that her vision of women in apostolic work was “most unsuited to their weak sex and character, to female modesty and particularly to maidenly reserve . . . and because they have in fact grown . . . we totally and completely suppress and extinguish them, subject them to perpetual abolition and remove them entirely from the Holy Church of God.”⁹

⁷ Synod of Bishops, “XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops First Session (4–29 October 2023) Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission,” October 28, 2023, no. 10.e, synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

⁸ Ursula Dirmeier, CJ, ed., *Mary Ward und ihre Grundung* (Aschendorff, 2007), 359.

⁹ Urban VIII, *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis*, quoted in Mary Wright, *Mary Ward's Institute: The Search for Identity* (Crossing Press, 1998), 190–193.

Mary Ward died in 1645; after such a strong condemnation, it was not until 1909 that the ban on claiming her as our founder was removed by Pope Pius X. While many founders did not endure her fate, most saw a need that was not being attended to and “found ways.” Most ministry with people at the edges of society has been done by those from the non-institutional sector of the church. Think of those who work for education, health, justice, and the environment, against trafficking, as journalists against corruption etc. The non-ordained take the lead in the ministry beyond church walls. Even at Vatican II, the contribution of religious congregations to the real work of church was almost completely ignored. The importance of laity was recognised when the focus of church was moved to the “people of God,” but even when the awareness of “serious error of the split between faith and life” was named, the mission of ordinary folks was not greatly unpacked.¹⁰

In exploring the Vatican II roots of synodality, even these students noticed that the issue of the exclusion of women from most ministries in the church was not mentioned. Contrast this with today! This helped build an awareness of how context impacts our understanding of our faith. From all continents, this synod has called for a re-thinking, a balance—only by recognizing the gifts of women and lay men, in official religious congregations or in married or single states, will the church be able to move forward. The sense that “we are the church” has a long way to go before it is front and center of our thinking. We as baptized can also foster this dualism by talking about “the church” in a way that separates ourselves from the criticism. We are all responsible! We have to move from limiting our understanding of “church” to institution rather than community.

From 2023 onwards, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”¹¹ was accessible as a reference point, alongside the document on the theology of

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43.

¹¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent.”

synodality.¹² Talks by Pope Francis against clericalism were a great resource—although I do not think he has realized he is saying much the same as women theologians have said for forty years: we call it patriarchy, he calls it clericalism, but at least his words are strong!

There are many wonderful videos which show the engagement of laity in this synodal movement. Listening to world-respected theologians like Massimo Faggioli, Raphael Luciani, Nathalie Becquart, and Elissa Roper; key ordained theologians like Ormond Rush, Richard Lennan, Thomas O’Loughlin; and bishops like Card. Ambo David, Vincent Long, and Shane McKinley shows this is not a fringe movement! I think some students found it amazing that five hundred-plus laity were online listening to talks and gaining new insights while they sat at theology schools in ignorance. This was a good launching point for suggesting to them that they need to keep learning or they will quickly fall behind in their understanding of where the Holy Spirit is leading us. I was able to draw from websites from Australia, Scotland, and the USA, where many laity have voted with their feet and left the church, so those who remain are committed. It is very different in Vietnam and Myanmar, where there are restrictions on webinars and a culture that does not encourage equality, as well as the more pressing pressures of grinding poverty and fear of government or military. The Philippines could do a lot more in this line, but I fear not much effort has gone into webinars that raise critical questions. The accepted preference here for liturgical and devotional practices increases the emphasis on priestly importance. Both culture (respect, don’t question) and the lack of demarcation between religion and society tend to mean that parish Facebook sites encourage “Father you are wonderful!” type responses rather than a critical exploration of ideas.

¹² International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” March 2, 2018, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

Raising the Difficult Issues

I found most students, when given the opportunity to talk of their experience, have seen ‘little kings’ in operation in their parishes or dioceses. One Vietnamese student said: “I always knew I did not want to be a little king, but this is the first time anyone has talked about another way to approach the role of priest.” I think the fact they themselves named the problems of patriarchal and clerical leaders (little kings) made it much easier to discuss alternative ways of leadership without sounding like I was against the priesthood! In fact, working with these young men was a call to conversion for me: as a woman in a women’s congregation, it is easy to allow criticism of the structure to become dismissive of those who are part of that structure. Their responses constantly called me to great care and service of them. Another said: “By first discussing the original sense of what priesthood is, service, I became aware of what we are and we are supposed to do. The tendency for many priests today is to be drowned by power and authority, forgetting that their call is for them to serve.”

It was a grace that the Ecclesiology I class in 2023 took place at the very time the synod session was meeting in Rome. I was able to get them in small groups to look seriously at the *Instrumentum Laboris* and address some issues that were being discussed in Rome: clericalism, women’s roles, LGBTQ+, regional differences.¹³ This enabled them to hear varying points of view but also gave opportunities for minimal “conversations in the Spirit.” I think it is without a doubt that the LGBTQ and women in ministry issues were most confronting. In the Philippines, the existence of LGBTQ people is accepted, although, I notice, they are sometimes made the butt of jokes. However, the African approach is different: a *sotto voce* comment “at home we burn or imprison them” summed it up. Attitudes are totally divided on that issue: local culture rather than the Gospel is seen

¹³ See XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html, B1.2, B2.3, B3.1.

as the first reference point, and that needs to be challenged in a way that does not presume that either side has all the answers.

When the possibility of women deacons or any form of ordained ministry for women was raised, even as cautiously as in the post-synod chapter, fears emerged. “People won’t accept it,” “If we change something like that, everything will be up for grabs,” “We have to go slowly or we will lose people.” I think those from Vietnam and the Philippines, who are used to cultural Catholicism, were sobered when I told them that out of my fourteen nieces and nephews, none go to church! They are committed to justice, are great parents and family members, but they do not attend church. Their children are growing up without any lived experience of a faith community, apart from the family. The church has already lost so many people.

In an early class on feminist theological voices, one Filipino student said up front at the beginning of the course: “Well, if women are ordained, I will leave the priesthood, because it would be downgrading the priesthood.” I was much moved when at the end of that course he came to me and said: “I was wrong, wasn’t I? It would not downgrade the priesthood!”

While those issues can easily become discussion starters, the theological base of synodality in the mystery and relationality of the Trinity was also a theme that many found stimulating. The oneness of the relationship and communion in the Trinity and yet the clear distinction between the three, and the recognition that we are being called into the life of God through this process of deepening our relationship with God and with each other, I hope encouraged students to grasp a little of the deeper journey into which we are being invited.

Student Responses to the Notion of Synodality

I think that overview gives a sense of what I was attempting to teach. To turn to student responses to a way of teaching which calls them to think and to think seriously about the people they are there to serve. A number appreciated that “Everything that has been discussed . . . are real things and not just theories.” A number mentioned that having small group

discussions allowed them to hear different points of view and grow in being able to listen. One appreciated the openness to be able to speak without being judged: “My personal experiences with the church are not invalidated.” Another said: “a great opportunity for us to see the church’s true state, especially when it is going through many trials.”

Yet this open discussion of the failures of the church was challenging—in societies that do not openly raise questions, especially challenging church practices, I think it took time for some to feel free: “Sometimes, I feel bad, learning negative things about what is happening in the local churches. These feelings allow me to realize that I am part of the bigger church, not just as baptized but as a participant. I am a participant in the history of the church.”

As I mentioned above, I think for most of the students, this course was their introduction to synodality. Their responses include: “Synodality rewired my thinking about how important everyone is in the light of doing mission, participation, and community. The importance of openness to the goodness of one another . . .”; “This course helped me a lot widen my understanding and knowledge about leadership in the church, which is service and not kingship.”

A number mentioned appreciating respectful listening, silence to reflect, and also the grounding of their ministry in the life and action of Jesus: “By staying feet flat on the ground, as Christ did, our ministry can be a good way to make the face of Christ shine in the world today. Hence, I must admit that my greatest learning in this class is to always ask this question when faced by issues and concerns. What would Christ do if he is faced with such issue?” Another said: “This course is helpful for me in my journey as a future missionary and leader, to not consider myself superior in the community or the one to make decisions; it helps me to be humble by the example of Christ and be the servant of the community. In my leadership, I have to listen to others and make decisions together; this is the objective of the synodal church.” In some ways the class became a “third space”—where ideas could be explored and actions considered.

I think the course gave students the opportunity to think through existing attitudes and think into both possibilities and pitfalls in their future ministry. This is evident in their observations: “Before this course, I had almost no factual knowledge of synodality or what could be done concretely when we talk about a synodal church. As a seminarian and future priest, I started with the fear of losing authority among the parishioners. My conviction was that after the synodal journey, the priesthood will be deprived of its meaning and value. However, during the course, I was able to let away my fears and understand that the synodal church will always care for the priests and all other lay faithful as children of God.” Another one: “Through this course, God was leading me to an examination of conscience on how to be more practical when it comes to witnessing my being Christian or pastoral leader. God is also leading me to an evaluation of my mission as human being and a Christian (not just as a priest); “This subject taught me that church has its obligation to listen attentively with the heart to those people who are marginalized, not listened to, somewhat outcasts to the Church. As a seminarian undergoing formation of becoming a pastor to a flock in the future, I am asking myself now of what kind of priest I will become?”

An African student recognized his change with regard to women: “This subject has helped me to learn and unlearn a lot of things . . . It took me time to adjust my understanding of these new perspectives of the church, especially the participation of women in the activities of the church. This is because, in my culture, women are considered inferior to men and so, unworthy to render public service to the church. However, at the end of this course, I can say that this journey made me a new person and gave me new eyes, especially concerning women’s participation in different church activities.” Another student said: “Welcoming the preaching of the non-ordained in a church that is to be Synodal will be a great achievement in the church.”

What can be drawn from this about seminar formation? One student pointed out that the senior student always gets the best room! He was explaining that they are oriented towards clericalism in many hidden ways:

the importance of being at the top of the tree. I think serious and facilitated “conversations in the Spirit” involving all those involved in priestly formation—teachers, formators, and students, as well as parishioners both male and female, would produce some interesting ideas about what could change. The Boston College project on diocesan seminary formation could be a required background reading!¹⁴ But clearly more women are needed as lecturers, so that the medium becomes part of the message. I think women are also much freer in addressing issues around homosexuality, and can avoid the “don’t ask, don’t tell” hypocrisy which riddles so much of the discussion.

What is All This Saying to Us as EWA?

Since EWA is a collective of women who are committed to realizing a vision of the church as a community of equals, I am convinced that members of EWA can play a proactive role to facilitate this change. An important area in this regard is clergy formation, and for this we need to take whatever opportunities present themselves to help shape the attitudes of young men aspiring to priesthood. These men are crucial to the possibility of change. The synod final paper stressed that seminary formation needs to be rethought, and that women need to be involved in the selection processes.¹⁵ That means, I hope, that such institutions will be calling for greater involvement of women. My years of frustration with church urged me to back off from teaching would-be priests and concentrate on classes with young women in another institution. However, the actual teaching experience has led to my conversion, because

¹⁴ Boston College Seminar on Priesthood and Ministry for the Contemporary Church, “To Serve the People of God: Renewing the Conversation on Priesthood and Ministry,” *Origins* 48, no. 31 (2018), bc.edu/content/dam/bc1/schools/stm/about/BCPriesthooddocument-Origins-27Dec2018.pdf.

¹⁵ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document,” synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

one feels the value of having some small influence on those who will be in positions to encourage change in others.

We are among the few women in Asia who have had opportunities to study theology. EWA has focussed on connecting theology and real life. Pope Francis is calling for this, and I do not think many men lecturing in theology know how to do it. So, if an opportunity arises, grasp it! Alongside seminary education is the need for education of people in the pews. My main ministry in Australia was in adult faith formation. Without doubt, the groundswell of lay interest in the synod comes from those who want their children or grandchildren to have a church to belong to. I think whichever group we work with, the life and teaching of Jesus must be our focus, because in my experience, from that common base conversion can happen. To start with hot-button issues means losing half the audience, because of already existing polarization.

Secondly, I think we should be advocating for seminary education in facilitation. Trainee priests spend months learning the movements needed to celebrate Eucharist. As far as I know, there is no semester-long course on facilitating small groups, on ways to encourage participation, on simple steps to appreciate the contribution of others. Surely this is an essential in a synodal church. Along with learning how to enable discernment in groups, I think we should be calling for this as a critical in seminary formation.

The third take away for me is that if one can enlist the Holy Spirit as a “guard on one’s lips” (the psalmist says something like that), the very fact that a woman is teaching is in itself facilitating change. I knew I would lose them if I alienated them, so I was glad one said, “There wasn’t the priest bashing I feared might happen.” If we come on too strongly, I think they cancel what they are hearing, but change happened in me when I saw they were ready to grow: not all of them, but most showed a readiness to change, and I think the fact it was a woman teaching them was very significant. I had to avoid “sniping,” and that was salutary for me! I had to become more synodal! I had to let go of some of my anger to be alongside them. I wanted to help them be better leaders of their communities, so while I kept

insisting on honest evaluation of how the church has failed, I found myself supporting them towards a “best practice.” I think for many this also involves helping them to see that critical thinking is not disloyalty. One can question positions, theories, people—even older people—without denigrating. This is rather un-Asian, but it is required if change is to happen.

A fourth thing for us as women theologians is that we are the change. I often explain that fifty years ago, I could not get a theology degree in a Catholic institution in Australia. Catholic theology was only taught in seminaries, where I was disqualified from participation. We cannot underestimate the change that has happened where now so many theology students are lay and many are women. Women who have forged their way as theologians and striven for equal place in theological societies know that this is never handed on a plate. An unrecognized fact for many in the institutional church is that women and lay men studying theology usually do so later in life, at their own cost, alongside real life demands of family, work and community, without the many services (and servants) that remove the lives of seminarians from the ordinary. Many religious, and many married and single people, continue their engagement with learning well beyond the first degree.

The synod report noted the under-engagement of priests and bishops in the process of synodality so far. They are going to be struggling to catch up. Are there points of intervention where we can offer to assist in parish meetings and such places, in the hope that priests will pick up some understanding on the side? Sometimes I think we are not going to be invited unless we offer and offer again!

Finally, what can we do to expand the conversation? I would love to see EWA begin a mini-series of lectures, where Asian women talk about these things. Can we call on some of Asian and Indian women who were at the synod, to share their perspectives, experiences? This would probably need careful choice and good preparatory questions, as I do not know the orientation of many who were there, but those I do know have a lot to offer and by speaking out of these many cultures could raise possibilities more directly than I can.

All this being said, there is another critical way we as EWA women can contribute to synodality: recognizing the current ministry of women as everyday members of the church community. Most Catholic women are not going to study theology or take up front roles in institutional church life. However, almost every mother helps her child see the world through eyes of wonder, encourages children to forgive each other and her husband to actually listen to the children, ensures that important days are remembered and celebrated in small yet meaningful ways, is aware of the needs of neighbours. These are ways of building community, encouraging participation, and are actually core to mission of Christians in our world. If we could start writing, speaking about these ordinary actions as central to a synodal sense of mission, we could help change a mindset which often fails to recognize the reality that Christians have to preach always and occasionally use words! As women who have had the opportunities of further education in theology and pastoral outreach, we can build up among all the baptized the awareness that mission is not restricted to in-church activities, but happens by them going about their daily life and being Christ for others. That is the message that transforms.

Conclusion

This article has shared the experience of one woman, attempting to expand the boundaries of some young men who are preparing for leadership in the church. By indicating the content of such an approach and the responses, I hope that others may be encouraged to step forward and offer their support in local settings. Priests are key figures in the process of changing church culture. They are essential if this this call to conversion is to succeed. But we are also another key: we need to speak up and find ways of changing the culture.

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