

Women: Protagonists in a Synodal Church?

Catherine E. Clifford

Abstract: The presence of women at the recently concluded Synod of Bishops and its renewed attention to their participation in the life of the church marks the reopening of a conversation that has languished for decades. This essay examines the Synod’s reflections on contemporary Catholic women’s experience against the horizon of their role in the Second Vatican Council, the council’s teaching, and its reception. Today no less than sixty years ago, women ask to be recognized as equal members of the baptized Christian faithful, genuine protagonists in the life and mission of the Church.

AMONG THE MOST PRESSING ISSUES CONFRONTING THE global Catholic Church today are those surrounding the participation and contributions of women at every level of ecclesial life, both in their capacity as baptized Christian faithful and in their response to the call of new ecclesial ministries. This essay explores how the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” described as a “further reception” of the Second Vatican Council, marks an important step on the path to the recognition of the agency and co-responsibility of women in the life of the Catholic Church on the grounds of their baptismal dignity.¹ It begins by revisiting the global consultation process begun in October 2021 in preparation for the Assembly of the Synod, which gathered in Rome over two month-long sessions in October of 2023 and 2024. An historic series of listening sessions, which sought to ascertain the sense of the faithful—the Spirit-led discernment of the baptized people of God—helped to surface the ecclesial culture, practices, and structures that stand in need of a synodal conversion. We will consider this expression of contemporary Catholic women’s experience against that of women auditors at Vatican II, the council’s teaching on women, and

¹ XVI General Ordinary Assembly, First Session, “A Synodal Church in Mission Synthesis Report,” October 4–29, 2023, synod.va/content/dam/synodassembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report_IMP.pdf. All subsequent citations from this text will be abbreviated as Synthesis Report and placed in parentheses.

early synodal conversations on the participation of women in the life and ministries of the Church in the immediate wake of the council. Discussion of this last point draws upon examples from the Church in North America, the context most familiar to this writer. When placed against this horizon, the reflections of the Synod emerge as the revival of a conversation that was interrupted or derailed more than a generation ago. Today, as at the Second Vatican Council, Catholic women continue to seek the full recognition of their dignity and equality as members of the baptized Christian faithful. Their participation in the life and mission of a synod has no other source than their incorporation into Christ and into his ecclesial body.

Both the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) and the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2023–24) stand as historic examples of the participation of women in structures of Church governance at the highest level. In the former, an ecumenical council gathering as many as 2540 bishops, twenty-three women served as official auditors with neither voice nor vote; in the latter, fifty-four women among the 365 official delegates were accorded the same right to speak and vote as the episcopal delegates. At the two sessions of the Synodal Assembly, which met in Rome in October of 2023 and 2024, women made up half of the ten non-episcopal delegates chosen to represent each of seven geographic regions, and half of those designated by the international organizations representing institutes of consecrated religious (five delegated by the International Union of Superiors General). Several others were invited by the pope. A further seventy-five women served in various roles as theological and canonical consultants or facilitators for the process of conversation in the Spirit. As we shall see, in both instances, women’s dignity as members of the baptized Christian faithful formed the basis for their participation in these synodal bodies. This consciousness of an agency rooted in baptism would inform the teaching that emerged from both ecclesial events.

LISTENING TO THE EXPERIENCE OF CATHOLIC WOMEN TODAY

To frame our reflections, it is important to return to the Working Document for the Continental Stage of the synodal process, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent,” published by the General Secretariat in October 2022.² That document sought to summarize the “hopes and

² General Secretariat of the Synod, “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent: Working Document for the Continental Stage,” October 2022, nos. 5, 7, synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf. All subsequent references to this document will be indicated in parentheses and abbreviated as “DCS” with the appropriate paragraph numbers.

concerns of the People of God from across the globe” that emerged through the consultation of the local churches and were contained in the reports submitted by 112 episcopal conferences of the Latin Church and fifteen Eastern Catholic Churches. As such it is said to reflect the emerging *sensus fidelium*, the discernment or sense of the Christian faithful (DCS, nos. 5, 7). Within the context of a general “call for a conversion of the Church’s culture,” the document notes, “A critical and urgent area in this regard concerns the role of women and their vocation, rooted in our common baptismal dignity, to participate in the life of the Church” (no. 60).

As if to underline the extent and the gravity of this challenge, the document devotes more space to the question of women’s participation in the life of the Church than to any other topic. It is striking to note as well, the universality of women’s experience reflected in the repeated assertions of the text: “From all continents comes an appeal for Catholic women to be valued first and foremost as baptized and equal members of the People of God. There is an almost unanimous affirmation that women love the Church deeply, but many feel sadness because their lives are not well understood, and their contributions and charisms not always valued” (no. 61). Or again, “In different forms, the problem is present across cultural contexts and concerns the participation of lay women as well as women religious,” and “Almost all reports raise the issue of the full and equal participation of women” (nos. 63, 64).

The report notes that the prevalence of “sexism” and “discrimination” often leads to the exclusion of women “from meaningful roles in the life of the Church” and to the failure to provide a just wage for their work (no. 63). While women make up the majority of those participating in the prayer of the Church, they are excluded from structures and practices of discernment and decision-making. This sad irony is summed up eloquently by the report from the Holy Land, which observes, “In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard. Yet they are the backbone of Church communities, both because they represent the majority of practicing members and because they are among the most active members of the Church” (no. 61). At a fundamental level, this lack of equality constitutes “a stumbling block for the Church in the modern world,” where the Church ought to be a model for “the unity of all humanity” intended by God (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 1).³ The issue takes on even greater relief in today’s

³ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Georgetown University Press, 1990), 849. All subsequent citations of the documents of Vatican II are taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically.

polarized world where the dignity and equality of women are under sustained attack, as we witness a rapid decline in civility and the respect for the most basic human rights.

Theologically, the opportunity to participate in the synodal process has contributed to an important reawakening of the people of God—especially among women—to the fundamental equality they share with all other members of the Church by virtue of baptism. Thus, the Working Document for the Continental Stage could affirm, “Practices of lived synodality have constituted ‘a pivotal and precious moment to realize how we all share a common dignity and vocation through our baptism to participate in the life of the Church’” (no. 22). The aim of the entire synodal process has been to ensure that this baptismal dignity not remain an abstract concept or merely a matter of interior consciousness, but that it become a “felt identity” shaped through an interaction with the concrete structures and practices of a truly synodal Church.

WOMEN AUDITORS AT VATICAN II

Admittedly, the inclusion of women at the Second Vatican Council was something of an afterthought. Several laymen had been invited to attend as auditors in the fall of 1963, from the middle of the second session. The first women were only invited in the third and fourth sessions of 1964 and 1965 thanks largely to the initiative of Cardinal Léon-Josef Suenens, who considered it inappropriate that the council conduct its work in the absence of any representation by women, who count for half of all humanity.⁴ Of the forty-eight official auditors, twenty-three female auditors—thirteen lay women and ten women religious—were chosen for their experience in the leadership of international organizations for laity and religious.⁵ Initially, Pope Paul VI indicated that the women auditors might assist at those sessions where the bishops would discuss “matters of special interest to the life of women.”⁶ The women’s response to his invitation was unequivocal. As members of the Church, the whole of the council mattered to them, and they intended to attend all of the General Congregations! While none of the auditors had the right to vote on council proceedings, six men were invited to address the bishops on matters pertaining to the

⁴ *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, Cura et Studio Archivi Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani, 6 vols. in 33 tomes (Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–1999), II/3, 177 (hereafter abbreviated as *AS*).

⁵ “Index Auditorum,” in *AS Indices*, 953–954.

⁶ Rosemary Goldie, *From a Roman Window: Five Decades: The World, the Church, and the Laity* (Harper Collins, 1998), 70.

laity, ecumenism, and social and economic issues.⁷ The voice of women would not be heard directly in the *aula*. Although an effort was made to have a woman, Barbara Ward, address the assembly, the initiative was abandoned due to the opposition of several council fathers.⁸ Nonetheless, it would be inaccurate to suggest that women had no influence on the documents or proceedings of Vatican II. The speeches delivered by male auditors were prepared together with all the auditors, thus drawing from the input and expertise of the women present. Several women auditors served as consultants to subcommittees drafting the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (e.g., Rosemary Goldie, Maria del Pilar Bellosillo),⁹ and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (e.g., Luz-Maria Alvarez-Icaza Moreno).¹⁰

The original schema on the lay apostolate, presented to the council fathers in 1962, in its general description of the lay apostolate, included two articles on men (*De Viris*) and on women (*De Mulieribus*), respectively. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, it described the vocation of laymen largely in terms of their participation in society or in professional life, where they “are builders of the earthly city,” and “have the special duty of working to imbue the structures of society

⁷ The French philosopher Jean Guitton and the Italian president of the Standing Committee of the International Congresses for the Promotion of Apostolate of the Laity (COPECIAL), Vittorio Veronese, addressed the council fathers on the fourth centenary of the Council of Trent, December 3, 1963; Patrick Keegan, president of the World Movement of Christian Workers, spoke on the schema on the Lay Apostolate, October 13, 1964, *AS* III/3, 220–222; James Norris, president of the International Commission on Migration, on the problem of poverty, November 5, 1964, *AS* III/VI, 298–301; Argentinian Juan Vasquez, president of the International Federation of Catholic Youth Organizations, spoke on November 10, 1964, during debate on schema XIII, the basis for the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, replacing the intended speaker, Maria Pilar Bellosillo, *AS* III/7, 78–82; and the Togolese Eusèbe Adjakpley on October 13, 1965, *AS* IV/4, 328–330. The speeches of Guitton and Veronese do not appear in the *Acta Synodalia*. An English translation of Guitton’s remarks can be found at “Vatican II: 50 Years ago Today,” *Catholic News Service* (December 13, 2012), vaticaniiat50.wordpress.com/2013/12/03/text-of-french-writer-jean-guittons-address-to-council/.

⁸ Alberto Melloni, ed., *Vatican II: The Complete History* (Paulist, 2015), 214.

⁹ The *Relatio* for the second schema of *De Apostolatu Laicorum* notes the important contributions of both lay men and women, in particular the representatives of the Standing Committee for International Congresses of the Apostolate of the Laity (COPECIAL), whose Executive Secretary was the Australian Rosemary Goldie, and the Council of International Catholic Organizations (OIC), whose president was Maria de Pilar Bellosillo. See *AS* III/3, 386.

¹⁰ Regina Heyder, “Women and the Council,” in *The Oxford Handbook on Vatican II*, eds. Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (Oxford University Press, 2023), 315–330. See also Marinella Peroni, Alberto Melloni, Serena Noceti, eds., “*Tantum aurora est*”: *Donne e Concilio Vaticano II* (LIT, 2012). José and Luz-Maria Alvarez-Icaza Moreno were leaders of the Latin American Christian Family Movement.

with a Christian spirit.”¹¹ In contrast, while stating that all of this applies equally to women, the paragraph devoted to the vocation of women emphasized their “domestic” role and “especially” their responsibilities “in the family.” These two paragraphs were dropped from the second, heavily revised version of the schema presented in 1963.¹²

Bishop Alexander Carter of Sault Ste-Marie, Canada, a member of the commission for the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, lamented that the initial draft was too “clerical,” and that while several lay men and women had contributed to its elaboration, they had arrived too late in the game to have any serious effect.¹³ This situation improved greatly in the subsequent sessions of the council where the auditors met weekly to study and comment on the draft schemata, and several contributed more directly in subcommittees drafting material for both the Decree on the Laity and for the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. In those exchanges women auditors made it clear that they did not welcome the drafters’ attempts to define their “special” vocation in rigid terms or to romanticize women using poetic language.¹⁴ They understood, perhaps intuitively, as more recent theological reflection has cautioned, that associations of women with beauty or with the bodily functions of motherhood “leads one away from God,” since such beauty is too often “associated with the physical as opposed to the spiritual” or is regarded, at best, as something “fleeting, ephemeral, and ornamental.”¹⁵

The women auditors at Vatican II fought to be regarded as *Christifideles*, members of the baptized Christian faithful, full ecclesial subjects with all the rights and duties that flow from the dignity of their baptismal vocation. In the end, the council documents used both gender inclusive and generic masculine nouns to describe the Christian: “*credentes* (believers), *fideles* (the faithful), *homines* (men, humankind), *baptizati* (the baptized), *universi discipuli Christi* (all disciples of Christ), *filius Dei* (sons/children of God), *Ecclesiae filii* (sons/children of the Church).”¹⁶ Regina Heyder observes, “This was entirely in line with the wishes of the women auditors.”¹⁷ Indeed, the auditors of Vatican II, women and men together, had a profound awareness of the dignity of their vocation as baptized Christians. From

¹¹ AS III/4, 682–683.

¹² AS III/3, 368–384.

¹³ AS III/4, 136.

¹⁴ Rosemary Goldie, “La participation des laïcs aux travaux du concile Vatican II,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* 62, no. 1 (1988): 72.

¹⁵ Susan A. Ross, “Women, Beauty, and Justice: Moving Beyond von Balthasar,” in *Journal of Society and Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 80.

¹⁶ Heyder, “Women at the Council,” 325.

¹⁷ Heyder, “Women at the Council,” 325.

baptism flowed their participation in the life and mission of the Church. The council would affirm that the basis of their fundamental equality—by virtue of which every Christian comes to share in the offices of Christ as priest, prophet, and king—is to be found in the grace of baptism. The women of Vatican II were effectively asking to be recognized as full ecclesial subjects and genuine protagonists in the life and witness of the Church.¹⁸

Even prior to the recognition of women as fully initiated Christians and agents in the life of the Church, Pope John XXIII pointed to the fundamental equality of all women by virtue of their creation in the image and likeness of God. His final encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, published in April of 1963, noted the improvement of economic and social conditions that was accompanied by a growing awareness of the dignity of all human persons. This was the age of civil rights where women, in the growing consciousness of their “natural dignity,” were on the front lines of the struggle against discrimination, defending their right and duty to participate more fully in political, social, and cultural life (*Pacem in Terris*, no. 41).¹⁹ John XXIII’s teaching on the fundamental equality of women and men would be taken up in the council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, which underlines how the principle of equal rights flows from the essential equality of all persons in the orders of creation and redemption:

Since all men and women possessed of a rational soul and created in the image of God have the same nature and the same origin, and since they have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality which they all share needs to be increasingly recognized. . . . But every type of discrimination affecting the fundamental rights of the person, whether social or cultural, on the grounds of sex, race, color, class, language or religion, should be overcome and done away with, as contrary to the purpose of God. It is a matter of deep regret that these personal rights are still not universally recognized and respected, as when women are denied the choice of a husband or state of life, or opportunities for education and culture equal to those of men. (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 29)

¹⁸ For a reflection on how these insights ground the canonical rights and duties of the Christian faithful, see Piero Antonio Bonny, “The *Christifidelis* Restored to His [*sic*] Role as Human Protagonist in the Church,” in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives, Twenty-five Years After (1962–1987)*, vol. 1, ed. René Latourelle (Paulist, 1988), 540–566.

¹⁹ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*: “On Establishing Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty,” no. 41, at: vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

During the final stages in the of redaction of the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, Bishop Paul Hallinan of Atlanta, Georgia, submitted a set of written observations that strike today's reader as remarkably prescient. Noting that women in society "bear the scars of inequality" in many ways and experience the need for greater recognition of their equality in the social order, he asked, "in all honesty, whether the Church has always acted as a true leader in this matter, in accordance with the will of Christ, who clearly manifested his expectations for the Church in words and deeds." Indeed, he averred, "The history of the Church tells of the constant struggle to liberate women from inferiority." Despite the Church's veneration of "great holy women," its defense of women's role in the family, and its devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, it has been "slow to condemn the oppression of women and to claim for them the right to vote and economic equality. Above all, the Church was very slow to recognize the possibility for women to choose a vocation other than that of a mother or religious sister." Hallinan, a competent liturgist, could not fail to notice that the calendar of saints designated women merely as "martyrs, virgins, and that completely indeterminate and negative of designations: 'neither virgins nor martyrs.'"²⁰

Bishop Hallinan was one of the few council fathers that drew attention explicitly to the inequality of women in the life of the Church and pleaded for an ecclesial practice that would match the eloquence of its discourse. He proposed that women be included in the liturgical offices of lector and acolyte,²¹ and that those "having completed the appropriate studies and received the necessary formation should be admitted to the order of the diaconate so they might proclaim the Word of God to the people and administer the sacraments that are

²⁰ *AS IV/2*, 754–758.

²¹ Pope Paul VI opened the instituted ministries to lay men in 1972, in the Apostolic Letter issued *Motu Proprio, Ministeria Quaedam*, vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19720815_ministeria-quaedam.html. It was only in 2021 that Pope Francis modified the Code of Canon Law to admit women to these ministries. See: "Apostolic Letter issues 'Motu Proprio' *Spiritus Domini*," vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html. The rationale provided by Pope Francis for this decision is to be found in a deepening understanding of the baptismal vocation in relation to new ecclesial ministries: "Accepting these recommendations [from 'a number of Assemblies of Synods of Bishops'], a doctrinal development has taken place in recent years which has highlighted how certain ministries instituted by the church are based on the common condition of being baptized and the royal priesthood received in the sacrament of Baptism; they are essentially distinct from the ordained ministry received in the sacrament of orders. A consolidated practice in the Latin Church has also confirmed, in fact, that these lay ministries, since they are based on the sacrament of Baptism, may be entrusted to all suitable faithful, whether male or female, in accordance with what is already provided for by Canon 230, §2."

appropriate to such an order, especially Baptism and Eucharist.”²² He urged further, that competent women serve as “teachers and counsellors in theological matters” and that “a large place” be given to them in the lay apostolate, opening “every opportunity” for lay and religious women to place their gifts at the service of the Church. Hallinan considered the role of the women auditors at the council “only the beginning” of a process of working towards the increased participation of women at every level of ecclesial life.²³

THE BAPTISMAL WARRANT FOR AGENCY IN THE LIFE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The insights of the lay auditors concerning the equal dignity of the Christian faithful and Hallinan’s urging greater participation find an echo in the council’s teaching. In chapter two of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, the council develops its thinking on the whole Church as the people of God in the new covenant prior to its reflection on the diverse vocations of the faithful that follow in chapters dedicated to the hierarchy (chapter III), the laity (chapter IV), or consecrated religious (chapter VI). Within the context of God’s salvific will “to sanctify and save men and women not individually and without regard for what binds them together” God has “set them up as a people” (no. 9). Baptism is the seal of this new covenant and the founding sacrament of this new people. “Believers in Christ have been born again . . . not of flesh but of water and the Spirit (John 3:5–6); and they have been finally set up as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people . . . once no people but now God’s people’ (1 Pet 2:9–10) (no. 9).” As members of this holy people every baptized Christian “has been given the dignity and freedom of sons and daughters of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in a temple” (no. 9). This fundamental equality is reiterated in the same constitution’s discussion of the laity, “men and women” who “contribute to the well-being of the whole church” (no. 30):

There is the common dignity of members from their regeneration in Christ . . . There is, therefore, no inequality in Christ and in the church, with regard to race or nations, social condition or sex . . . (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). If therefore, in the church all do not walk the same path, nevertheless all are called to holiness and have received an equal faith in the righteousness of God (1 Pet 1:1). And if some are appointed, by the will of Christ, as teachers, dispensers of the mysteries and pastors for the others, yet there is a true equality of all with regard to the

²² *Acta Synodalia*, IV/2, 756.

²³ *Acta Synodalia*, IV/2, 756.

dignity and action common to all the faithful concerning the building up of the body of Christ. (no. 32)

Every member of the Christian faithful shares in the saving mission of the Church by virtue of this baptismal mandate (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 33; cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 3). Further, having received the anointing of the Spirit, they are endowed with the sense of faith (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 12, 35), an innate capacity to understand and discern the truth of the Gospel. The Spirit guides them in their daily witness of faith and enables them to contribute to the common good of the Church. It is baptism that grounds the duty to participate in consequential ways in what we now call “synodality,” a neologism unknown to the Second Vatican Council, but one that reflects a deepening awareness today of the indispensable practice of relying on the wise counsel and competencies of all the faithful in the structures and practices of discernment and decision-making in the life of the Church.

A much-neglected passage of *Apostolicam Actuositatem* points to the necessity for pastors to work in a collaborative manner, reminiscent of the early Christian community, with the women and men they are called to serve and who constitute the primary presence of the Church in the world (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, nos. 2, 13, 29). Pastors are urged to “acknowledge and promote the dignity and the responsibility of the laity in the church; they should willingly make use of their prudent counsel; they should confidently entrust them with offices in the service of the church and leave them the space to act” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 37). By working in this synodal way, the council contends that the laity will be “strengthened” in the “sense of their own responsibility” and their “enthusiasm . . . fired.” For their part, when pastors are aided “by the experience of the laity, [they] are able to make clearer and more suitable decisions both in spiritual and temporal affairs” (no. 37). In the vision of Vatican II, this synodal collaboration, which takes seriously the contributions of women, who count for more than half of the baptized Christian faithful, enables the whole Church to “more effectively carry out its mission for the life of the world” (no. 37).

In its discussion of the various fields of action, from the church to family life, to social affairs at the national and international levels, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity urges, “Since women are increasingly taking an active part in the whole life of society, it is important that their participation in the various fields of the Church’s apostolate should also increase” (no. 9). Here and elsewhere, the model of collaboration is that of “those men and women who assisted Paul in the preaching of the Gospel (Acts 18: 18, 26; Rom 13:3),” his

co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord (no. 10; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 33).

These assertions may not appear revolutionary today. To understand them fully it is worth recalling the social context of the 1960s, where women had only recently attained, or were still in the process of solidifying the rights to vote, to own property, and be treated as something more than a minor before the law. It was only in 1948 that the equal dignity and rights of women and men was first enshrined in the United Nation's Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In North America, the women's liberation movement began to promote the principle of equal pay for equal work—a goal that has yet to be met in many Western economies. In both the Church and society, women were coming to be regarded as having equal dignity or as autonomous self-determining subjects. Vatican II's recovery of an understanding of the dignity of women as full subjects and agents of the Church's mission and witness grounded a set of newly acknowledged rights and responsibilities (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 37) and opened the gateway to a rapid expansion of women's participation in a variety of new roles and forms of pastoral ministry. The Council recognized that the formation of competent lay persons for the apostolate required access to centers for the study of scripture and theology (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 32). And though most would work for the transformation of temporal affairs in the world, an increasing number might now be appointed "to carry out certain ecclesiastical offices" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 33). Thus began a trend that saw many consecrated and lay women pursue degrees in theology, including courses in pastoral and spiritual formation.

FROM VATICAN II TO THE 21ST CENTURY: CATHOLIC WOMEN IN NORTH AMERICA

In the immediate wake of the Second Vatican Council, and in the face of the rising presence of women in centers of theological education²⁴ and in new lay pastoral ministries, North American bishops saw the need to confront a host of questions relating to the full participation of women in the life and mission of the Church, not unlike those anticipated by Bishop Paul Hallinan. Responding to the request of Catholic women, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) organized a colloquium on the role of women in the Church and society during its plenary assembly in April of 1971. That meeting generated a series of recommendations that were largely

²⁴ For an overview of the advent of North American women in theological education see Mary Ann Hinsdale, *Women Shaping Theology*, Madeleva Lecture Series (Paulist Press, 2005).

embraced by the conference and would shape conversations in the decades that followed which were characterized, contends Darren J. Dias, by a “synodal” dynamic.²⁵ Among them were pleas to “declare women full and equal members of the church,” for the removal of canonical barriers of the participation of women in ecclesiastical offices including ordained ministries, for a more consequential presence of qualified women in decision-making bodies, and for an increase of respect for the dignity of women among members of the clergy.²⁶

At the 1971 Synod on “Justice in the World,” Cardinal George Flahiff, CSB, Archbishop of Winnipeg, conveyed the request of Canadian bishops for the establishment of a commission composed of bishops, priests, consecrated and lay women and men to study the question of women’s participation in ordained and new emerging ministries in the Church in light of their “nature,” “gifts,” and “competence.”²⁷ The Synod’s recommendation to study women’s “share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church”²⁸ led to the establishment of a Study Commission by the Holy See in 1973 and to an extensive study by the CCCB, beginning in 1975, on the actual participation of women in ecclesial life across Canada.

In his 1972 *motu proprio*, *Ministeria Quaedam*,²⁹ Pope Paul VI opted to limit the implementation of the instituted ministries of lector and acolyte to men, especially those seeking ordination. In response, the President of the CCCB wrote to the Vatican Secretary of State to indicate that Canadian bishops “declined to implement these ministries until the restriction [on the admission of women these offices] is

²⁵ Darren J. Dias, “Expressions of Synodality: Remembering the ‘Green Kit,’” in *Une théologie pour une église dans le monde, Mélanges internationaux offerts à Gilles Routhier*, ed. Philippe Roy-Lysencourt and Yves Guérette (Presses de l’Université Laval, 2025), 329–347.

²⁶ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *With Respect to Women: A History of CCCB Initiatives Concerning Women in the Church and in Society, 1971–2000* (CCCB Publications, 2000), 12.

²⁷ CCCB, *With Respect to Women*, 40.

²⁸ Synod of Bishops, “Justice in the World” (1971), nos. 42–43. Notably, the Synod report does not repeat the Archbishop’s request for an examination of women’s participation in diverse forms of ecclesial ministry.

²⁹ Paul VI, *Motu Proprio: Ministeria Quaedam*, August 15, 1972, vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19720815_ministeria-quaedam.html. It was only in 2021 that Pope Francis would modify the Code of Canon Law, canon 230.1, to open the possibility for women to be admitted to these ministries, with his *Motu Proprio: Spiritus Dominus*, January 11, 2021, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html.

removed.”³⁰ Over the next decade, conversations concerning the participation and agency of women in the life of the Church would be increasingly constrained by magisterial teachings that reiterated the “constant tradition” concerning the inadmissibility of women to priestly ordination.³¹ Following the publication of a series of regional studies documenting women’s experience at the grassroots level, the CCCB’s Commission on the Laity made a commitment to continuing dialogue with women. At its 1984 plenary, the conference adopted a series of recommendations including a commitment to: combat injustice against women in the Church and society; eliminate non-inclusive language from liturgical texts;³² provide all those exercising an ecclesiastical office with “an official, pastoral mandate;” establish diocesan scholarships to support women in theological education; ensure that women are represented on parish, diocesan, and national ecclesial bodies; and establish a CCCB commission on women in non-ordained ministries.³³

A series of educational materials was produced in response to these and other recommendations. Its primary aim was to enable “Christian women and men to become more aware of their baptismal role in the church.”³⁴ The “Green Kit,” entitled *Women in the Church, Discussion Papers*, was proposed as a resource aimed at fostering further reflection on the lived experience of the place and image of women in the Church, on liturgical language, on the equality and co-responsibility of women and men in the Church, and on women’s participation in new ecclesial ministries. In the end, it met with a limited reception, with less than half of Canadian dioceses undertaking serious study or indicating its impact on diocesan pastoral planning.³⁵

³⁰ Letter from Archbishop Jean-Marie Fortier to Cardinal Villot, February 18, 1976. Cited in Dias, “Expressions of Synodality,” 339. See also, “Editorial,” *National Bulletin on Liturgy*, no. 53, 99.

³¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Declaration *Inter Insigniores* on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood,” (October 15, 1976), vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.

³² At the same time, the USCCB explored the use of inclusive language in the Liturgy of the Hours, the Lectionary, and other ritual books: “US Bishops Review Inclusive Language,” *Origins* 14, no. 44 (1985): 715, 717.

³³ Dias, “*Expressions of Synodality*,” 341–342. At the 1983 Synod of Bishops, CCCB delegate Archbishop Louis-Albert Vachon made an intervention requesting the establishment of a permanent structure for dialogue between men and women and a firm commitment to confront those aspects of the Church’s institutional life that are “unjust and demeaning” to women and to foster “the recognition of women as having the same full membership status as men”; see “Male and Female: Reconciliation in the Church,” *Origins* 13, no. 1 (1983): 334–335.

³⁴ CCCB, *Women in the Church, Discussion Papers* (CCCB, 1984), 3.

³⁵ Dias, “Expressions of Synodality,” 342.

Although space does not permit a full discussion here, one might trace a similar evolution in the United States during this same period, where the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) undertook a broad series of grassroots consultations in a synodal style involving over seventy-five thousand women and leading to the elaboration of a proposed pastoral letter. Following a series of revisions in response to Vatican pressure and an increasingly divided episcopate,³⁶ that text failed to obtain the required two-thirds vote to pass as an official pastoral document of the conference. Instead, the document was published as a committee report³⁷ and referred to other episcopal commissions in the hope that it might serve as “the basis for action and further study and dialogue.”³⁸

Throughout the 1990s, discussion on women in the Church was increasingly overshadowed by an expectation of strict conformity to Roman magisterial teaching on the non-ordination of women and the

³⁶ See the dossiers on the international consultations of US bishops with Vatican authorities, May 28–29, 1991, “Concerns Expressed About US Bishops’ Draft Pastoral on Women,” *Origins* 21, no. 5 (1991): 73, 75–79; and on the USCCB plenary of November 17, 1996: “Document on Women’s Concerns Debated,” *Origins* 22, no. 25 (1992): 417, 419–423.

³⁷ Ad Hoc Committee Report on Women’s Concerns, “One in Jesus Christ,” *Origins* 22, no. 22 (1992): 489, 491–506. For the various drafts of this document: [First draft] “Partners in the Mystery of Redemption: A Pastoral Response to Women’s Concerns for Church and Society,” *Origins* 17, no. 45 (1988): 757, 759–784; [Second Draft] “One in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Response to the Concerns of Women for Church and Society,” *Origins* 19, no. 44 (1990): 717, 719–736; [Third Draft] “Called to Be One in Christ Jesus,” *Origins* 21, no. 46 (1992): 761, 763–774; [Fourth Draft] “One in Christ Jesus,” *Origins* 22, no. 13 (1992): 221, 223–238. See also: Women’s Ordination Conference and Bishops’ Committee on Women in Society and in the Church, “Dialogue on Women in the Church: Interim Report,” *Origins* 11, no. 6 (1981): 81, 83–91; “Report on the Dialogue: The Future of Women in the Church,” *Origins* 12, no. 1 (1982): 1, 3–9. For documentation on the Hearings for the Pastoral on Women: National Board of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, “LCWR Board Urges Change of Course,” *Origins* 14, no. 40 (1985): 651, 653–656; Loretta Knebel (Catholic Daughters of the Americas), “Loyal to the Tenets of the Church,” *Origins* 14, no. 40 (1985): 657–658; Women’s Ordination Conference, “A Parable on Deaf High Priests,” *Origins* 14, no. 40 (1985): 659–661; Mary Ann Schwab (National Council of Catholic Women), “Feminine Gifts,” *Origins* 14, no. 40 (1985): 661–663; Dolores Leckey, “Is a Pastoral on Men also Needed?” *Origins* 14, no. 40 (1985): 664; Polly Hessel and Nancy Beaudry (National Marriage Encounter), “Marriage Encounter Testimony,” *Origins* 15, no. 16 (1985): 241, 243–245; Helen Hull Hitchcock (Women for Faith and Family), “Women for Faith and Family Testimony,” *Origins* 15, no. 16 (1985): 245–248; Marie Loy (North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics), “Is this Pastoral Letter Feasible?” *Origins* 15, no. 16 (1985): 249; Jean Alice McGoff (Association of Contemplative Sisters), “Reflections on the Life of Contemplative Sisters,” *Origins* 15, no. 16 (1985): 250–251; Mary Elize Krantz, SND (Consortium Perfectae Caritatis), “Testimony of the Consortium Perfectae Caritatis,” *Origins* 15, no. 16 (1985): 251–256.

³⁸ Ad Hoc Committee, “One in Jesus Christ,” 489.

theological anthropology contained in Pope John Paul II's 1988 Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, On the Dignity and Vocation of Women.³⁹ Dias notes that this influence, combined with a "breakdown in collegiality," meant that the bishops' priorities were shaped "less and less by the concerns of the people consulted in the various studies and dialogues."⁴⁰ By the turn of the century, Vatican authorities essentially rebuffed the efforts of North American bishops to integrate inclusive language into the prayer of the Church through the introduction of a new set of principles for the translation of liturgical texts.⁴¹

Nonetheless, the number of consecrated and lay women pursuing degrees in theology and canon law, and taking their places in new ecclesial ministries, canonical tribunals, diocesan curias, and university and seminary chairs of theology has continued to grow. For decades now the number of qualified and salaried lay pastoral workers, over eighty percent of whom are women, has outpaced the number of active priests in American dioceses. For the most part, however, they have not been supported by their local churches in the process of vocational discernment, personal and spiritual formation, or theological and pastoral training. Many are poorly remunerated and work in contexts of precarious employment. Their new ministries have yet to be fully integrated in a stable or meaningful way into the structures of the diocesan church, conveying the sense that their gifts and contributions are not valued.⁴²

Summing up the experience of Catholic women in the years from Vatican II to the pontificate of Pope Francis, Susan A. Ross observes, it has been "a mixture of new opportunities and challenges along with bitter disappointments and closed doors." Official Catholic teaching, while it affirms women's equality, remains at an "impasse," she writes, by continuing to consider womanhood largely "in maternal and

³⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*: "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women," (August 15, 1988), vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html. Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: "On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone" (May 22, 1994), vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html.

⁴⁰ Dias, "Expressions of Synodality," 344.

⁴¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, "Instruction *Liturgiam Authenticam*: On the Use of Vernacular Languages in the Publication of the Books of the Roman Liturgy," vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgiam-authenticam_en.html; see *Origins* 32, no. 1 (2001): 17, 19–32.

⁴² For a careful study of this evolution in the American Church see Zeni Fox, *New Ecclesial Ministry: Lay Professionals Serving in the Church*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Sheed and Ward, 2002); Zeni Fox, ed., *Lay Ecclesial Ministry: Pathways Toward the Future* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

subordinate terms,” emphasizing women’s obedience and their “responsive natures.”⁴³ And while many have assumed new catechetical, educational, and pastoral roles, they are often regarded as “‘stopgap’ workers who are needed until there are more men to take their place.”⁴⁴

Dias recounts the history of early “expressions of synodality” in Canada reflected in grassroots consultations on women’s participation in the life and mission of the Church as a “cautionary” tale.⁴⁵ Failure to listen to the experience of Catholic women and to welcome their aspirations to act as full members of the baptized Christian faithful has led to a dissonance between official Catholic discourse and the living faith of Catholic women who continue to encounter the presence of sexism in the structures and practices of the Church. Even those who contribute in substantial ways as catechists, educators, and pastoral care givers, do not experience themselves as having genuine agency in those spaces of discernment and decision-making that have consequence for the Church’s life and mission. This dissonance is reflected in the various continental reports from the consultation process that preceded the deliberations of the Synodal Assembly in the autumn of 2023 and 2024, as we saw above. Against this broader horizon of the Second Vatican Council and its reception in North America, we can better appreciate how the Synod is not addressing entirely new questions but is rather picking up the threads of a conversation that began more than a generation ago and was then regrettably pre-empted or deferred.

THE XVI GENERAL ORDINARY ASSEMBLY AND THE BAPTISMAL DIGNITY OF WOMEN

Today Catholic women continue to call for the recognition of their full dignity as members of the baptized Christian faithful and seek to exercise the agency that flows properly from that sacramental source. Pope Francis called attention to this fact in launching the synodal process in October 2021, when he insisted upon the baptismal foundation of the necessity for bishops to consult all the Christian faithful and acknowledged the marginalization of women:

This is not a matter of form, but of faith. Participation is a requirement of the faith received in baptism. As the Apostle Paul says, ‘in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’ (1 Cor 12:13). In the Church,

⁴³ Susan A. Ross, “Joys, Hopes, Grievs, and Anxieties: Catholic Women Since Vatican II,” *New Theological Review* 25, no. 2 (2013): 30, 37.

⁴⁴ Ross, “Joys, Hopes, Grievs, and Anxieties,” 31.

⁴⁵ Dias, “Expressions of Synodality,” 329–330.

everything starts with baptism. Baptism, the source of our life, gives rise to the equal dignity of the children of God, albeit in the diversity of ministries and charisms. Consequently, all the baptized are called to take part in the Church's life and mission. Without real participation by the People of God, talk about communion risks remaining a devout wish. In this regard, we have taken some steps forward, but a certain difficulty remains, and we must acknowledge the frustration and impatience felt by many pastoral workers, members of diocesan and parish consultative bodies and women, who frequently remain on the fringes. Enabling everyone to participate is an essential ecclesial duty! All the baptized, for baptism is our identity card.⁴⁶

THE FIRST SESSION

The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the first session of the General Assembly, under the heading of “Co-Responsibility in Mission,” invited delegates to reflect on the question, “How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?”⁴⁷ It acknowledged that while “the Continental Assemblies were unanimous” in celebrating the faith, participation and witness of lay and consecrated women, they were nonetheless compelled to “call for deeper reflection on the ecclesial relational failures, which are also structural failures affecting the lives of women in the Church.”⁴⁸ The consultation of the first phase of the Synod was unequivocal concerning the necessity for a synodal Church to address the question of women's participation in positions of responsibility and Church governance, based on a “greater recognition of women's baptismal dignity and rejection of all forms of discrimination and exclusion faced by women in the Church and society.”⁴⁹

The Synthesis Report from the first session of the Synod, summing up points of convergence, matters for further consideration, and concrete proposals on a host of issues, devotes an entire section to the question of “Women in the Life and Mission of the Church” (no. 9), where it is the most extensive section under the heading “All Disciples, All Missionaries.” This text merits close attention, for it stands as the most substantial and sustained reflection on the

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod,” October 9, 2021, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/documents/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html).

⁴⁷ XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “*Instrumentum Laboris* for the First Session: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” October 2023, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/06/20/230620e.html, B.2.3.

⁴⁸ XVI General Ordinary Assembly, *Instrumentum Laboris*, B.2.3, a, b.

⁴⁹ XVI General Ordinary Assembly, *Instrumentum Laboris*, B.2.3, c.

experience of women in all the official documents of the Synod. The greatest portion of the text is devoted to points of convergence, many of which center upon the equality that flows from baptism. These reflections are laid out against the horizon of the document's vision of co-responsibility in mission: "The sacraments of Christian initiation confer on all the disciples of Jesus the responsibility for the mission of the Church. Laymen and laywomen, those in consecrated life, and ordained ministers have equal dignity. They have received different charisms and vocations and exercise different roles and functions, but all are called and nourished by the Holy Spirit to form one body in Christ (1 Cor 12:4–31)" (Synthesis Report, no. 8b).

The report grounds the equality of women and men in the Creator's plan reflected in Sacred Scripture, affirming: "We are created, male and female, in the image and likeness of God. From the beginning, creation manifests unity and difference, bestowing on women and men a shared nature, calling and destiny, and two distinct experiences of being human. Sacred Scripture testifies to the complementarity and reciprocity of women and men, and to the covenant between them that lies at the heart of God's design for creation" (no. 9a). During this session several delegates expressed reservations over the language of complementarity. For them, this language is redolent of Pope John Paul II's "Theology of the Body"⁵⁰ or Hans Urs von Balthasar's gendered archetypes, both of which tend to portray women as nurturing mothers or receptive partners who follow the lead of men. The theology of von Balthasar, which claims to exalt the role of women in its identification of the Church with a "Marian principle," rests on an exclusively masculine image of God, failing to respect the limits of metaphorical language.⁵¹ This tension reflects the challenge of reaching consensus on an appropriate anthropological framework for speaking of human sexuality and created sexual difference. The self-understanding of women, including the significant contributions of women scholars on these questions, has yet to inform official expressions of Church doctrine. It is therefore of no little significance that the language of complementarity would not be repeated in the Synod's Final Document.

⁵⁰ Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Pauline Books and Media, 1997).

⁵¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Who is the Church?" in *Spouse of the Word: Explorations of Theology II* (Ignatius Press, 1991), 143–191; "Women Priests? A Marian Church in a Fatherless and Motherless Culture," *Communio* 22, no. 1 (1995): 164–170; "Mary-Church-Office," *Communio* 23, no. 1 (1996): 193–198. Joseph A. Komonchak is critical of Balthasar's feminine archetype of the Church as an approach that is not apt to deal with the empirical reality of the Church as a group of people who are "real subjects," women and men with genuine agency; see *Who Are the Church?* (Marquette University Press, 2008), 12–15.

The Synthesis Report appeals to the witness of the New Testament, where Jesus “considered women his interlocutors,” “welcomed them as his disciples,” and “entrusted the announcement of the Resurrection on Easter morning to a woman, Mary Magdalene” (no. 9a). It also reminds us that “In Christ, women and men are clothed with the same baptismal dignity (Gal 3:28) and receive equally the variety of gifts of the Spirit” (no. 9b). Yet, it notes, this baptismal dignity has yet to be fully realized in the practice of the Church, as “women spoke of a church that wounds” through “clericalism, a chauvinist mentality,” and of “sexual abuse and the abuse of power and authority” (no. 9f). These forms of sexism are said to damage the witness of the whole Church and call out for “conversion” and “structural change” (no. 9f). In perhaps the clearest repudiation of sexism and discrimination, the Report avers, “Where dignity and justice are undermined in relationships between men and women in the church, we weaken the credibility of our proclamation in the world” (no. 9g).

Finally, the assembly “asks that we avoid making the mistake of talking about women as an issue or a problem. Instead, we desire to promote a church in which men and women dialogue together, in order to understand more deeply the horizon of God’s project, that sees them together as protagonists, without subordination, exclusion and competition” (Synthesis Report, no. 9h). One might hear in this a plea to put an end to an ecclesial culture where women and women’s roles are defined by men, or where women are alternately patronized and derided. Women want to speak for themselves and ask to be taken seriously as co-responsible members of the Church, fellow disciples of Christ.

The proposals advanced in the Synthesis Report and later echoed in the Final Document sound very much like those made in the consultation of North American women decades ago: that women “participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry,” including in “positions of responsibility in the Roman Curia” (no. 9m); that women employed by the Church receive a just wage (no. 9o); that they have access to theological education and be integrated into “seminary teaching and training programs” (no. 9p), or serve as canonical judges (no. 9r). In section 8, which is devoted to “mission” and precedes these reflections on women, the report observes that many of the lay faithful are carrying out important “ministries” in the absence of ordained ministers. On the other hand, in many places, priests “do everything themselves and thus the charisms of the laity are ignored and underutilized” (Synthesis Report, no. 8f). In both cases, though it remains unsaid, these ministers, both unrecognized and underutilized, are likely to be women. In response, the report calls for a reorganization of pastoral structures to better “recognize, call forth,

and animate lay charisms and ministers, inserting them into the missionary dynamism of the synodal church” (no. 8l). Finally, the Synthesis Report proposes that “liturgical texts and church documents” be more inclusive, by employing “words, images and narratives that draw more widely on women’s experience” (no. 9q).

THE SECOND SESSION

Given the complexity and weight of these issues and the need for the Synod to retain its principal focus, which was to reflect on *how*, in practice, the structures and procedures of ecclesial discernment and decision-making at every level might come to reflect a more inclusive and participatory culture of synodality,⁵² the general concern for the participation of women in ecclesial leadership, including the possibility of the restoration of women’s diaconal ministry, was entrusted to one of ten Study Groups established by Pope Francis during the intersession.⁵³ For this reason, much less space is allotted to the experience or the participation of women in ecclesial life in the Final Document of the Synod signed by Pope Francis at the conclusion of the second session. The reader must consider that women are implied throughout the Final Document whenever it insists on the necessity of fostering greater lay participation.

Nonetheless, we find there, in several densely worded paragraphs (particularly in paragraphs 52 and 60), an important restatement of the concerns expressed throughout the synodal process. Once again, the principal theological warrant given for the recognition and participation of women in the life and mission of the Church is chiefly baptismal. Indeed, the Final Document roots its entire reflection on the constitutive nature of the Church as a synodal community in the

⁵² See, General Secretariat of the Synod, “*How to be a Synodal Church on Mission?*,” March 14, 2024, synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase-2-the-discernment-of-the-pastors/towards-the-2024-assembly/how-to-be-a-synodal-Church-on-mission.html.

⁵³ General Secretariat of the Synod, “Study Groups for Questions Raised in the First Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be Explored in Collaboration with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia,” March 14, 2024, synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase-2-the-discernment-of-the-pastors/towards-the-2024-assembly/study-groups-for-questions-raised-in-the-first-session-of-the-xvi-assembly.html. The area of the life and mission of the Church assigned to Study Group 5 is described as “Some theological and canonical matters regarding specific ministerial forms” (5). For a fuller accounting of the tensions surrounding the work of Study Group 5, see Colleen Dulle, “Cardinal Fernandez Faced Tough Questions at Synod Meeting on Women’s Ministries,” *America*, November 20, 2024, americamagazine.org/faith/2024/11/20/study-group-5-women-deacons-fernandez-249326; and “Transcript: Cardinal Fernandez’s Meeting with Synod Members in the Workings of Study Group 5,” *America*, November 20, 2024, americamagazine.org/faith/2024/11/20/transcript-study-group-5-cardinal-fernandez-249325.

sacramental bond of baptism, source of the agency and co-responsibility of the whole people of God: “Every baptized person is called to be a protagonist of mission, since we are all missionary people” (Final Document, no. 4).⁵⁴

Fittingly, the bulk of the Final Document’s reflections on the participation of women in a synodal Church fall within the section devoted to “The Conversion of Relationships,” where it is acknowledged that any such conversion must include the “renewal of relationships between men and women” (no. 50, cf. no. 52). Echoing the voices of women raised through the consultative phase of the synodal process, it notes that women “from every region and continent” shared experiences of pain and suffering arising from the failure to recognize their fundamental dignity or to welcome their many gifts. Even so, it affirms, “Inequality between men and women is not part of God’s design” (no. 52). Building on the divine plan for the created order, baptism initiates us into a “new creation in Christ” where that equality in difference is grounded in the order of grace. Sexual differentiation is to be considered “in the light and the dignity of baptism” and the communion of men and women lived out in a relationship of “equal dignity and reciprocity” (no. 52). Absent is any language that might suggest an essentializing of sexual difference or that would define women in terms of “complementarity,” Marian archetypes, or the functions of motherhood which tend to infer an ideal of passivity or submission. Remaining on the plane of baptismal dignity and equality may reflect a lack of agreement concerning an appropriate language to describe the reality of sexual differentiation. Yet it also suggests that what women are asking for in a synodal Church is simply to be taken seriously as equal subjects in a Church where responsibility is truly shared by all.

The two-day retreat in preparation for the second session of the synodal assembly concluded, notably, with a penitential vigil celebrated in St. Peter’s Basilica that included a confession for the sin of failing “to recognize and defend the dignity of women,” and remaining silent in the face of their exploitation and abuse.⁵⁵ It was therefore painful for women present at the Synod to see paragraph 60,

⁵⁴ Pope Francis and XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participations, Mission. Final Document,” October 2024, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf). Reference for subsequent citations of this document will be given in parentheses within the body of the text, and abbreviated as “Final Document,” followed by the appropriate paragraph number.

⁵⁵ XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Second Session, “Penitential Vigil Presided over by Pope Francis: Requests for Forgiveness,” October 1, 2024, [synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/penitentialv/forgivenessr/Veglia_RichiestePerdono_Eng.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/synod/assembly2024/penitentialv/forgivenessr/Veglia_RichiestePerdono_Eng.pdf).

which begins from the affirmation of the equal dignity of women as members of the people of God, receive more negative votes than any other article of the Final Document, with 258 votes in favor and ninety-eight against.⁵⁶ Observing that women “continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation and roles,” it does not hesitate to reaffirm that “this is to the detriment of serving the Church’s shared mission.” Noting the prominent roles of women in the New Testament, including Mary Magdalene, “first” to proclaim the Resurrection, or Mary the Mother of God, who was present at Pentecost and who “followed the Lord” together with many other women, it asks that more of their stories be told in the selection of readings for the prayer of the Church, and that the language used in “teaching, preaching and catechesis,” including official Church documents, be more gender inclusive (no. 60).

Today, paragraph 60 observes, women, who “make up the majority of churchgoers,” serve in important leadership roles in the families, communities, and parishes, in schools, hospitals, works of social justice, theological education, and in the administration of diocesan and Roman curias. The Assembly then asks, “for the full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in Canon law,” in the awareness that there are many regions of the world where these possibilities remain “under-explored.” It notes, further, that “the question of women’s access to diaconal ministry remains open” (Final Document, no. 60). Where some commentators interpret the high number of negative votes on this paragraph as a sign of opposition to the restoration of women’s diaconal ministry, they tend to neglect the arc of the entire paragraph. Could their votes reflect instead a lingering opposition to all forms of women’s leadership—yes to baptismal equality, but an inchoate resistance to women in any leadership roles? It is impossible to know this for certain, since each paragraph was voted on in its entirety. However, given the rather generalized experience of sexism encountered by women from around the globe, it would seem more likely that the resistance is broader and deeper than the simple matter of women in ordained ministry.

References to the participation of women in the life and mission of the Church in the remainder of the document are found in its repeated pleas for “greater opportunities for participation” in all participatory bodies for discernment and decision-making (Final Document, nos. 77, 106), as well in the many “new forms of service and ministries” that are developing in response to changing pastoral needs (no. 77). The Assembly asks that going forward bishops be accountable for

⁵⁶ Jorge Enrique Mujica, “Synod on Synodality Concludes: These Are the 11 Most Rejected Proposals,” *Zenit*, October 10, 2024, [zenit.org/2024/10/26/synod-on-synodality-concludes-these-are-the-11-most-rejected-proposals/](https://www.zenit.org/2024/10/26/synod-on-synodality-concludes-these-are-the-11-most-rejected-proposals/).

fully implementing structures of participation in their local churches, including in the reports they make during *ad limina* visits to the See of Rome, where they might be asked to “specify the portion of men and women” in those bodies (Final Document, no. 102). Finally, as if to counter the unspoken resistance to women reflected in the dominant clerical culture that Pope Francis and the synodal exercise have sought to counter, the Final Document makes several pointed requests for the participation of women as peers, formators, and educators in centers of seminary and theological education. Indeed, it contends that a synodal style of formation where women and men, lay and ordained learn and work together is an essential preparation for collaboration in ministry and for the development of the culture and interpersonal skills required to serve in communities of shared discernment and mission (nos. 143, 145, 148).

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to present the principal reflections of the XVI General Ordinary Synod on the experience of women in the Catholic Church today and on the urgent need to foster their full active participation as baptized ecclesial subjects and protagonists in the life and mission of a truly synodal Church. To appreciate more fully the urgency of this call, we have sought to place the deliberations of the Synod within the broader context of the Second Vatican Council and its reception, including the hesitant response to women’s participation in a wide variety of burgeoning ecclesial ministries. It is striking to note the extent to which the concrete recommendations contained in the documents of the Synod echo those made more than a generation ago that have yet to be met by serious action.

Sixty years after the close of Vatican II, Catholic women continue to seek the full recognition of their baptismal dignity, and for this recognition to be reflected in the structures and practice of ecclesial life. Their lived experience of new baptismal ministries begs for a more adequate theological grounding and a more consequential integration into the ministerial structure of the local churches. In our day, as bishops have repeatedly noted, the significant contribution of women to the pastoral life of the Church invites a renewed consideration of whether those who already carry out certain diaconal functions may not be “strengthened by the imposition of hands” and incorporated into a restored permanent diaconate (cf. *Ad Gentes*, no. 16). These are not new questions, but they have been revived by the Synod with greater urgency. There is a long road yet to travel before Catholic women experience themselves as true protagonists of the life of the Church and its mission. As the documents of the Synod note

repeatedly, at issue is the very credibility of the Church's proclamation and witness. **M**

Catherine E. Clifford is professor of systematic and historical theology at Saint-Paul University, Ottawa. She served as a North American delegate to the XVI General Ordinary Synod of Bishops and as a member of the Commission for the Redaction of the Final Document. She has continued to serve as a Consultor to the General Secretariat of the Synod and as a theological advisor to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for the Implementation of the Synod.