

The Role of Women in a Synodal Church: Cultural and Contextual Sensitivity

Klara A. Csiszar

Abstract: The essay delves into the evolving role of women in the Catholic Church, particularly in the context of the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis. This process aims to promote the participation of all Church members, especially those historically marginalized, including women. The essay highlights the theological foundation of the People of God, emphasizing inclusivity and equal dignity for all. It discusses Pope Francis's significant reforms, such as the apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, which encourages women's active participation in decision-making and leadership roles within the Church. The author reflects on her personal journey and experiences in different cultural contexts, comparing the challenges faced by women in Hungarian-speaking and German-speaking regions. The essay also examines the state of theological education and research in Central Eastern Europe, noting the limited representation of women in academic and pastoral roles. It underscores the importance of integrating women's perspectives into theological discourse to foster a more inclusive and responsive Church. The essay concludes with insights from the XVI Ordinary Synod of Bishops, advocating for continued efforts to enhance the role of women in the Church.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS GAINED increasing attention in recent years, particularly in the context of the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis. This process aims to enable and promote the participation of all members of the Church, especially those who have historically been marginalized, including women. The underlying theme of this process is the theology of the People of God, which envisions this people as a participatory community in its mission. With his Apostolic Constitution in 2022 on the reforms of the Roman Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*, women are gaining increasing significance and importance in the definitions of the structural reforms. The document emphasizes the importance of inclusivity and recognizes the contributions of women in various ministries (nos. 10, 11). It encourages their active participation in decision-making processes and leadership roles (no. 131), with the goal of enhancing their visibility and influence within

the governing structures of the Church and thus in crucial moments in the shaping of the Church. This aligns with Pope Francis's broader commitment to a Church where women and men have equal dignity, as well as the recognition of the essential role of women in the Church's mission.

In what follows, I will reflect on the role of women in the Church within the tension of cultural and contextual realities from three perspectives. After a brief introduction, I will explore the contextual differences in this topic between the Hungarian-speaking and German-speaking regions in Europe based on my own biography. In the next section, I will highlight the challenges faced in Central Eastern Europe, particularly in the areas of theology and theological research. Finally, I will formulate some key learnings as a participant in the XVI Ordinary Synod of Bishops as a theological expert, which I hope could contribute to giving greater significance to the role of women in the church in a way that encourages the participation of many rather than deters them.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The challenges faced by women in the Church go far beyond what a single document or even papacy could resolve. These challenges are multifaceted and deeply rooted in theological, cultural, and institutional traditions, as well as in the diversity of contexts. When we speak of the Catholic Church, we implicitly refer to the diversity of cultural and historical contexts that theologians must address. One should continually be aware of the fact that these differences cannot simply be addressed by labeling them as instances of non-simultaneity of contexts.

The Second Vatican Council reexamined the question of ecclesiastical ministries and introduced several significant innovations. The Council abolished the notion that laypersons, or secular Christians, could only perform ecclesiastical service dependent on the hierarchy and subordinated to it. Returning to the perspective of the early church, the Council defines the community of the Church as the People of God, in which all are brothers and sisters. Therefore, laypeople do not act in a theological sense by delegation from the hierarchy, are not subject to the clergy, and can no longer be seen merely as extensions of bishops or priests: "The apostolate of the lay faithful is a participation in the Church's saving mission, which the Lord entrusts to them by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 33). The Dogmatic Constitution repeatedly emphasizes the equal dignity of those who make up the People of God. The conciliar Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity even refers to laypeople as "true apostles" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, no. 6).

The reevaluation of the role of laypeople has sparked a theological debate within the Church, aiming to restore the term *laos* in its original biblical sense as a designation for belonging to the People of God, in which there are no hierarchies or divisions between the ordained and laity. Rather, it expresses the unity and community of the Church and the People of God, encompassing all its diversity.¹ The reinterpretation of the relationships among Christians (both ordained and non-ordained) in the context of the theology of the People of God, along with its legal implications and the rearrangement of ecclesiastical practice, accordingly, remains an ongoing process to this day. This process includes the so-called question of women in the Church, which was already considered a “sign of the times” after the Council. Peter Hünemann, one of the most renowned experts on the Council, assesses that one of the fundamental statements of the Dogmatic Constitution can be found in paragraph 32 of the document. Here the Council Fathers assert the reality of belonging to God’s chosen people realized in baptism, as well as the equal relationships among those who belong to the People of God. This is emphasized by quoting Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”² Women are equal members of the People of God, participating in the priesthood of Christ (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 2, 10), and expressing their faith in the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 33–35). The universal call to holiness and the suitability for it within the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, nos. 39–42) further serve as an important foundation for arranging the relationships of those belonging to the People of God in terms of equality.

The measures that Pope Francis has taken to expand the possibilities for women’s participation in the Church (especially with the invitation of women as voting members of the Synod of Bishops and a clear quota for women participants there, along with the appointment of women to leadership positions within the Holy See, which were previously reserved for cardinals, bishops, or priests) actually aim to broaden the ecclesial roles of lay Christians (both men and women). This represents a long-overdue practical application of conciliar People of God theology.

¹ Peter Neuner and Paul M. Zulehner, *Jöjjön el a te országod*, *Gyakorlati egyháztan*, (Verbum, 2014), 108.

² Peter Hünemann: “Theologischer Kommentar zur dogmatischen Konstitution über die Kirche *Lumen Gentium*,” in *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, vol. 2, ed. P. Hünemann and J. Hilberath (Herder, 2004), 462.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

I was born under the communist regime in Ceaușescu's Romania, a country where, as a child, I had to hide the fact that I attended church on Sundays. Then, everything changed overnight. At eight years old, I witnessed the dictator's execution live on television. Suddenly, it was possible to attend church freely, to attend catechism, and participate in the Mass. The scent of aid from Germany—candies, chocolates, and gummy bears—filled our religious gatherings. At the end of each catechism class, we would go home with a bag full of German sweets. For me, religion and church were not only associated with incredible freedom and joy but also with delightful smells. The Church, particularly in my parish, began their youth work with incredible momentum. All my free time revolved around the church. As I grew, I wanted to contribute to youth work, which not only had opportunities but also provided formation and training. As a young adult, I began to organize camps and inspire children. The coordination of youth work was entrusted to priests who had returned home after studying in Germany and who, in terms of their attire, were one of us—approachable, relatable, educated, and informed.

I consciously prepared to study theology at a state university where, at that time, theology programs for lay Christians had just recently begun. The most appealing aspect of our university training was having teachers who had studied in Germany and Austria. The Church and the theology we studied were about flexibility, momentum, and development, characterized by enriching discourses and a synodal search for paths, making the experience of moving forward tangible and palpable. Even though many of us theology students could envision a pastoral role within the Church, we knew that this was not possible within the Romanian structure. The Church lacked the financial resources for such work, which was reserved for priests. What we could expect was volunteer work.

At that time, we first heard about the ecclesial apparatus, structures, professionalism, and the involvement of women in pastoral work in Germany and Austria. We learned that women were advocating for priestly ordination “in the West,” despite all obstacles. As a young woman with a theology degree eager to work in the Church, I found the demands of “Western” women repellent because I perceived them as dissatisfied persons. They seemed to have everything I could only dream of, yet they were still unhappy. This dissatisfaction, which was increasingly acknowledged by Church leadership, led to a shift from a synodal Church willing to cooperate with enthusiastic laypeople back to a clerical Church. There was a sort of myth that lay employees were the paid enemies of the Church, and they were seen as a source of trouble.

It so happened that at barely thirty years old, I became the Diocesan Director for Pastoral Work in a small Romanian diocese, the Diocese of Satu Mare. Although the invitation was phrased this way when the diocesan bishop approached me about the position, every official communication referred to me as the “referent.” Only during international trips was I regularly introduced as the head of the diocesan pastoral office. It took four years to reach a point where, even within the Hungarian-speaking areas of the country (where the majority of Roman Catholics in Romania belong to the Hungarian minority and maintain a close relationship with the Catholic Church in Hungary), it was accepted that a young female theologian—who, in the meantime, became the first laywoman from the diocese to earn a doctorate—would lead the pastoral office and coordinate the diocese’s pastoral programs. After reporting with a group of pastoral and administrative leaders an abuse of power to the bishop and his reaction, I decided to continue my theological postdoctoral studies in Vienna, focusing on the synodal development of churches in post-communist countries, based on the diocesan synod of the Diocese of Satu Mare.

In the German-speaking region, where I have lived since 2010, I encountered a church filled with incredible opportunities for women that had previously seemed unimaginable. Compared to my earlier experiences in a minority context, I was captivated by the tangible realization of the Second Vatican Council within the German-speaking Church. Here, the theology of the People of God is not just a theory but a reality, where mission is not apologetics but a presence and a means of making God’s love tangible. The Church is a socially relevant entity, where it is still expected to speak out on social issues. This ecclesiastical attitude and the expectations placed on the church were new to me, as was the idea that theology and theological thinking can be shaped in response to challenges and can also actively influence ecclesiastical and social processes. Working in academia, the idea of returning to Romania or Hungary began to occupy my thoughts more and more. While in Austria, at the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Linz, I won a competitive bid for the position of Professor of Pastoral Theology and was appointed as a full professor. In Romania, at the state university where I had studied, it was unthinkable for me to be employed as a university professor. In Hungary, I encountered completely closed doors when I sought to establish myself in higher education. With time, I realized that it was much more advantageous as a female theologian to accompany and support the church-building efforts in post-communist countries from abroad. Living and working there, as well as taking on responsibility as a female professor of theology in that context, was simply impossible. Today, building bridges is not only possible but is also

necessary, as the gap between old democracies and new democracies in Europe is deeper than it ever was during the time of communism within our Church.

THE THEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE AND SOME INSIGHTS³

This overview is useful for two reasons. Firstly, it highlights the state of theological education and research as one of the main focal points for the implementation of the Second Vatican Council, which undoubtedly greatly influences ecclesial discourse, its themes, and the possibilities for addressing those themes. Secondly, it provides a contextual reflection on a geographically close ecclesial reality that discusses the situation of women in the Church in a very different manner.

The theological landscape in the Hungarian-speaking region (Hungary and Transylvania in Romania) is currently quite clear. University-level theological education operates at a level comparable to that of a good university of applied sciences, training professionals for schools and parishes. In Hungary, we refer to two Catholic theological faculties within the university context: the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest and the Gál Ferenc University in Szeged. In Romania, there is also a Roman Catholic theological faculty that offers study programs for theology in Hungarian.⁴ Additionally, two more theological institutions should be mentioned: the Sapientia Theological College of Religious Orders in Budapest and the Bishop's Theological College in Pécs, both of which make significant and important contributions to the theological discourse in the region.

There are many ways that we could choose to present theology in the Hungarian-speaking region; I will do so by sketching a scene of the university theological landscape. This scene briefly highlights who has a place in the university teaching and research system, which subjects are represented and to what extent, what significance can be derived from this, and what prominent research focuses are reflexively linked to the respective faculties of the Hungarian-speaking theological mainstream.

At the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology in Cluj-Napoca (Romania), there is a teaching staff of eleven people, consisting of six

³ See Klara Antonia Csiszar, "Stabilizing Rather than Confronting: Reflections on Theology in the Post-Communist Context," *Lebendige Seelsorge* 74, no. 6 (2023): 378–384.

⁴ János Vik and Klara Antonia Csiszar, "Chancen und Herausforderungen der katholischen Theologie im Kontext Rumäniens," *Pastoraltheologische Informationen* 38, no. 2 (2019): 81–92.

professors or associate professors (five clergy, one woman) and five assistant professors (four clergy, one layman). Among the faculty members, we find two lecturers in biblical studies (one of whom is also responsible for ecumenical issues), two lecturers in dogmatic theology (one of whom is also responsible for patristics), two lecturers in moral theology (one of whom also teaches canon law), and two lecturers in liturgical studies (one of whom is also responsible for church history). Additionally, the teaching staff includes a philosopher, a fundamental theologian (also responsible for spirituality), and a canon lawyer. Notably, practical theological subjects such as pastoral theology or religious education, as well as Christian social teaching, are not represented in the faculty, even though this faculty is divided into two institutes that emphasize practical theology in their names: the Institute for Didactic Theology (for teacher training) and the Institute for Pastoral Theology (for priestly ministry). The Institute for Pastoral Theology offers a Master's program in Applied Pastoral Theology, while the Institute for Didactic Theology offers a Master's program in Pastoral Counseling. Two research focuses should be mentioned here: research on the New Testament concerning the pastoral letters in the ecumenical context (Korinna Zamfir), and research at the intersection of fundamental theology, spirituality, and meaning-centered psychotherapy according to Viktor E. Frankl in the context of theological anthropology (János Vik).⁵

At the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University in Budapest, there are currently twelve chairs: one chair for fundamental theology, two for Christian philosophy, two for biblical studies (Old Testament and New Testament), one for dogmatics, one for moral theology, one for liturgical studies and pastoral theology, one for patristics, one for church history, one for canon law, and one for biblical languages. All chairholders are clergy. It is noteworthy that there is no dedicated chair for pastoral theology. The faculty is highly recognized in the Hungarian-speaking region for its research and teaching in systematic theology and philosophy. Notable research focuses include the research on Hans Urs von Balthasar (Attila Puskás) and on Bernhard Welte (Krisztián Vincze). Additionally, the Postgraduate Institute of Canon Law should be mentioned, which is regarded as the only institute for licentiate and doctoral studies in canon law in the Hungarian-speaking region.⁶

⁵ "Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University in Budapest," rocateo.ubbcluj.ro/hu/professors.

⁶ "Postgraduate Institute of Canon Law," htk.ppke.hu/karunk. There is no platform where the staff is presented.

The Faculty of Theology at Gál Ferenc University in Szeged offers theological training as a vocational education through its seven chairs for both laypeople and candidates for priesthood. All but one of the chairs are held by priests; the chair for systematic theology is even held by the bishop of Szeged. The chair for church history, focusing on the history of orders, is led by a layperson. It is noteworthy that the chairholders are university professors or university lecturers and not full university professors. In the chair for biblical theology, two clergy work together in leadership. The chair for church history is led by a layperson, supported by two other clergy and one layperson. The chair for philosophy is led by a clergy member, assisted by a clinical psychologist and a layperson listed as a Master's lecturer. The chair for practical theology is the largest in terms of staff numbers and is led by a canon lawyer. Additionally, lecturers for spirituality and pastoral theology are listed; however, in one case, the data on the homepage do not clarify the field of expertise of the listed individual. The chair for catechetics consists of a single person. The chair for systematic theology, led by the local bishop in Szeged, includes three other priests who, similar to those in all institutes, also serve as pastors or hold other responsibilities, such as leading the seminary or other diocesan tasks, and therefore only hold their teaching sessions, which is also reflected in their limited publication lists. Two biblical scholars stand out in the Szeged faculty: Attila Thorday works in the area of the New Testament with a pastoral theological focus. He is associated with the editorship of the Hungarian edition of *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* from 1990. The emeritus biblical scholar György Benyik is known primarily for the biblical conferences held in Szeged and for editing the related conference volumes in the Hungarian-speaking region.

In light of the briefly presented situation of the theological landscape at the faculties where theology is taught and researched in the Hungarian language, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Theology has a place at three universities: in Romania at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, and in Hungary at Gál Ferenc University in Szeged and at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest.
2. When examining Romania and Hungary, only one female theologian is found, who teaches and researches as a professor of theology (biblical studies) at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. In Hungary, there is no woman theologian working as a full professor at the mentioned universities.
3. Subjects such as pastoral theology or social teaching do not have stable representation through independent chairs and

specialists but are handled as areas in which many are knowledgeable, particularly canon lawyers and biblical scholars.

4. A majority of the priests working at the universities also have other commitments. Many are additionally pastors in one or more parishes or hold leadership positions in different institutions. Consequently, there is little room for them to engage deeply in research.

Many aspects of the situation of theology in Eastern (Central) Europe, particularly regarding the theological landscape in Hungarian, could certainly have been highlighted. A cross-country study is still pending. However, it is evident that theology in the analyzed region hardly addresses, if at all, socially relevant issues, and that Church development does not receive support from theology. This is exemplified by the fact that the episcopal conferences in Hungary and Romania lack a theological commission, as is commonly seen in Western democracies. Even today, it holds true that theology stabilizes the Church from within and avoids any form of provocation or confrontation that could lead the Church beyond itself to address the concrete questions of contemporary life.

In this context, it is crucial to consider the presence of women in theological discussions and Church leadership. The absence of a robust theological framework that engages with pressing societal issues often sidelines women's voices and contributions. Women in theology can bring unique perspectives and insights that challenge traditional norms and encourage a more inclusive dialogue within the Church. Their involvement is essential not only for the representation of half the population but also for fostering a theology that is responsive to the complexities of modern life.

As Pope Francis has articulated, a purely male theology is "half-hearted," lacking the fullness that comes from diverse perspectives. This highlights the necessity of inclusive theological discourse that embraces women's contributions, ensuring that the Church's teachings and practices resonate with the experiences of all its members. Therefore, integrating women into theological dialogue is vital for developing a comprehensive theology that addresses the needs and concerns of the entire community.⁷

⁷ Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to Participants in the International Congress on the Future of Theology Organized by the Dicastery for Culture and Education," December 9, 2024, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241209-convegno-teologia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/december/documents/20241209-convegno-teologia.html)

POPE FRANCIS AND WOMEN

Not only the briefly outlined Hungarian context, but also many circles within the hierarchy, regardless of the continent, are watching with great concern where the late Pope's reforms regarding the role of women will lead.

Myriam Wijlens, a prominent Dutch canon lawyer and theologian, illustrates how the possibilities for lay participation in the Church, including that of women, have evolved over the past decades.⁸ With this in mind, we outline below, in a few key points, the decisions made by Pope Francis that significantly demonstrate his commitment to addressing the situation of women. On January 10, 2021, Pope Francis amended the first paragraph of Canon 230 of the Church's legal code through the *motu proprio* titled *Spiritus Domini*, which previously allowed only men to hold the ministries of lector or acolyte. It can be argued that for many, the possibility of women's service around the altar was already evident, as we have seen female lectors and Eucharistic ministers. However, the service of women around the altar was, until now, conducted under the third paragraph of Canon 230, thus not recognizing women's ministries as lectors or acolytes in a canonical sense. The amendment made by Pope Francis states: "Lay persons who possess the required age and qualities as determined by the episcopal conference may be admitted to the ministry of lector and acolyte with the prescribed liturgical rite and on a stable basis" (Canon 230, §1; *Spiritus Domini*). This amended canon by Pope Francis previously overlooked the equality between laywomen and laymen when it permitted men to serve as lectors and acolytes while excluding women. Pope Francis made this change precisely in line with the conciliar theology outlined above. This could be the only measure of Pope Francis that explicitly opens a previously closed path for women, which had already been accessible to laymen. Other initiatives by Pope Francis, whether preceding or following this change, aim to open pathways for all lay Christians, regardless of whether they belong to the community of God's people as women or men.⁹

In addition, several other measures initiated by Pope Francis expand the possibilities for women and laymen to engage in Church roles, including those related to governance. Notably, the 2015 amendment to *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus*, which modifies Canon 1673, broadens the involvement of laypersons, including women, in the Church's decision-making processes concerning annulment procedures. According to the amended third paragraph, a marriage

⁸ Myriam Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," *Theologie der Gegenwart* 65, no. 3 (2022): 160–176.

⁹ Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 170.

tribunal must consist of a three-member panel, of which only one member needs to be ordained. The other two judges can now be laypersons, including women, provided they have the necessary qualifications (*Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus*).¹⁰

In 2022, Pope Francis made another significant move with the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, which renews and regulates the functioning of the Roman Curia, continuing the work of his predecessors. It is noteworthy that St. John Paul II appointed a woman religious as the undersecretary of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life back in 2004, thus allowing a layperson to participate in the exercise of the Church's governance.¹¹ Nearly twenty years later, in the preamble of *Praedicate Evangelium*, Pope Francis emphasizes that since every Christian is a missionary disciple according to his or her baptism, laywomen and laymen's leadership and responsible participation in the governance of the Church are anticipated in the reorganization of the Curia. Referring to the Dogmatic Constitution, Pope Francis underscores that the presence and participation of laywomen and laymen in the Church's leadership are essential "for the good of the entire Church" (*Praedicate Evangelium*, no.10).¹²

The document regarding the reforms of the Roman Curia also states that curial institutions receive their mandates from the Pope and exercise them with his authorization. They work in the name of the Pope. This delegated authority, with which the Pope empowers those performing ministries, is practiced during the exercise of his primatial office.¹³ Therefore, any member of God's people can preside over or lead a dicastery or office, depending on the governance authority and specific jurisdiction and function of that dicastery. The document also asserts depending on the nature of the dicastery, laypersons (men and women) may also be appointed as members of curial institutions (*Praedicate Evangelium*, no. 15). On July 13, 2022, Pope Francis appointed three women to the Dicastery for Bishops, who will participate in the process of episcopal appointments. The consequences of these innovations are still unfolding. It is essential to recognize that any person, whether bishop, priest, deacon, or layperson, who performs curial tasks exercises a delegated ecclesiastical authority, which is not conferred through ordination but through a canonical mandate (*missio canonica*).¹⁴

¹⁰ Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 170.

¹¹ Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 170.

¹² Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 171.

¹³ Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 171.

¹⁴ Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 171.

Wijlens refers to Gianfranco Ghirlanda, a canon lawyer, who raises the question regarding these innovations as to whether the governing authority is conferred to bishops through the canonical mandate, while the Pope receives it through divine mandate, or whether both mandates come through ordination. If ecclesiastical authority can be conferred through a canonical mandate, then it can, in certain cases, be delegated to laypersons; if, on the other hand, one receives governing authority through ordination, then laypersons cannot hold positions in the Church that involve the exercise of governing authority, and thus cannot be entrusted with curial activities. Ghirlanda points out that this question is legally relevant considering the theology of the People of God and the equality of Christians established by the Second Vatican Council, yet the question remains ultimately unresolved.¹⁵ However, with the reforms of the Vatican Curia, it seems that Pope Francis addressing this dilemma supports the notion that the reorganization of the Curia can only occur if the canonical mandate is what qualifies a layperson to exercise governing authority, based on baptism.¹⁶

Based on the outlined points, it seems that the theology of God's people, and consequently the idea of equality among Christians, has led to a gradual differentiation in church law from the previously ordained ecclesiastical governing authority. Today, participation in the church's decision-making processes is dependent on a canonical mandate rather than sacramental ordination. Certainly, a different, perhaps bolder path could have been considered, one that rethinks the conditions for ordination and concludes that the reception of the sixth sacrament in Christ should not be contingent upon biological gender but solely on the baptism received in Christ. In the Hungarian context, it is likely that there is still a long way to go before the opportunities for women outlined in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, established well before Pope Francis, are fully realized. A visible sign of progress on this path might be if, for example, the rector of Péter Pázmány Catholic University were to be a layperson, perhaps even a woman, or if the time comes when the Faculty of Theology appoints its first female theology professor or its first female dean. These are all opportunities for women within the Church that have been available for decades and hopefully represent a direction in which the Church in Hungarian-speaking regions can advance.

¹⁵ Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 172.

¹⁶ Wijlens, "Laien und Leitungsvollmacht," 172.

DEEPENED THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON *LUMEN GENTIUM* NO. 37 AND *MISSIO CANONICA*

The conciliar statement in *Lumen Gentium* no. 37 articulates far more than the mere facticity of lay participation; it grounds this participation theologically in the shared communion of all the baptized in Christ's threefold mission (prophetic, priestly, and kingly). For collaboration in a synodal Church, this implies that cooperation is not an administrative necessity but rather an expression of ecclesial nature itself. The women whom Vatican II Council Fathers could not include as full-fledged participants—not merely as auditors but as decisive voices—struggled precisely for this theological recognition. Their fight was not for external participation but for affirmation of their constitutive belonging to the People of God.

This theological connection becomes tangible in the contemporary Synodal Journey: When Pope Francis invites women as voting members to the Synod of Bishops, he is not offering a pastoral-political concession but enacting what conciliar theology already implies—the recognition that the juridical structure of the Church must correspond to its ecclesial reality, in which women are subjects, not mere objects of co-responsibility. The canonical mandate (*missio canonica*) through which women now exercise governing authority in curial offices finds its deepest justification here: Authority in the Church flows not exclusively from sacramental ordination but from baptismal incorporation into the People of God, which is the fundamental source of all Church authority.

THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS ON SYNODALITY

The Synod of Bishops represents a significant development within the Church, which must demonstrate how the unity of papal authority and collegial structure can be realized.¹⁷ This challenge is considered a central task imposed on the Church by the Second Vatican Council. The first regulatory text, *Apostolica Sollicitudo* (1965), laid the foundation for synodality by emphasizing the necessity for bishops to act in shared responsibility for the Church. With *Ordo Synodi Episcoporum* (2006), the structure and procedures of the synods were further clarified to ensure that the voices of bishops are included in decision-making processes and that collegial collaboration is promoted. The most recent document, *Episcopalis Communio* (2018), deepens these approaches by highlighting synodal practice as a means

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, "Das Konzil – Ein neuer Beginn," in *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 21/2: *Das Zweite Vatikanum: Beiträge zum Konzil und seiner Interpretation*, eds. K. Lehmann, J.B. Metz, A. Raffelt, H. Vorgrimler, and A. R. Baltogg (Herder, 2013), 775–786.

to strengthen community within the Church. It calls for active participation from all members of the People of God and emphasizes the importance of dialogue and consultation. Overall, the development of the Synod of Bishops aims to find a balance between the authority of the pope and the collegiality of the bishops, in order to promote the unity and mission of the Church in today's world.

On October 2, in his greeting to the participants of the Plenary Assembly of the XVI Ordinary Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of the development of the Synod of Bishops and the invitation to voting non-bishops, including laypeople:

When I decided to convene also—as full members of this XVI Assembly—a significant number of Lay and Consecrated people (men and women), Deacons and Priests, developing what somehow had already been envisaged for earlier Assemblies, I did so in accordance with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council's understanding of the ministry of bishops: the Bishop, the principle and visible basis of unity of each particular Church, cannot live out his service except within the People of God, with the People of God, leading, standing among, and following the portion of the People of God that has been entrusted to him. The manifestation and identification of this inclusive understanding of episcopal ministry needs to avoid two dangers: first, an abstract approach which ignores the fertile concreteness of places and relationships and the value of each individual; second, pitting hierarchy and faithful against each other in a way that fractures communion. It is certainly not a question of replacing one with the other, urged on by cries like: 'now it's our turn'! No, this is not right: 'now it's up to us laypeople', 'now it's up to us priests'. No. This is not right. On the contrary, what we are asked to do is to operate together in a symphonic style, in a composition that unites us all at the service of God's mercy, according to the different ministries and charisms that the Bishop has the task of recognising and promoting.¹⁸

The Pope emphasizes and situates episcopal ministry within the theology of the People of God. In light of the discomfort that has criticized the presence of non-bishops in the Synod from the beginning, he again calls for unity. He warns against creating divisions between hierarchy and laity, which can fracture communion. Instead of competing for influence, all members of the Church are called to collaborate in a harmonious manner. Overall, the text conveys a vision of an inclusive Church where everyone contributes to the service of God's mercy. The second session also became a training ground for a

¹⁸ Pope Francis, "Opening Address of the Holy Father," Second Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 2, 2024, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/october/documents/20241002-sinodo-vescovi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/october/documents/20241002-sinodo-vescovi.html).

Church where the theology of the People of God is not merely a church doctrine but is experienced concretely. It focuses on striving to find the best answers to life's questions, occurring in all dimensions of church life: in "*le vécu*"—what we live, in "*le raconté*"—what we testify in encounters with others, and in "*le célébré*"—in our communal celebrations.¹⁹ And in all these dimensions, women were prominently present.

Without media presence,²⁰ Pope Francis met with all the participating women of the Synod of Bishops on October 19, 2024, followed by a second meeting with all the laity from the Synod. In his spontaneous address to the laity, he outlined the developmental stages of the Synod of Bishops since Vatican II up to the present day and located the involvement of laypeople based on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council along this developmental path. He emphasized the importance of listening to the voices of the faithful and fostering a collaborative spirit within the church, highlighting that the journey towards a more inclusive and synodal Church is ongoing. This engagement reflects a commitment to ensuring that all members of the Church, especially women and laypeople, have a significant role in its mission and decision-making processes.

The weeks of the two Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops, as well as the months leading up to it, during which Pope Francis assigned specific themes, including those concerning women and ecclesial ministries, plus two study groups²¹—thus excluding these topics from the second session—were accompanied by discomfort, especially among those who believe that the time is ripe to ordain women as deaconesses or even to open the sacrament of holy orders, with its three degrees, entirely to women. However, the topic of women's ordination could not be entirely removed from the Synod. In the few discussions that took place on this topic in various settings, three different approaches to argumentation could be observed. From them, we can learn a lot about how the complex question of the role of women in the Church and their inclusion can be addressed in the future, and which arguments for the ordination of women within the context of the theology of the People of God and ecclesial ministries

¹⁹ Philippe Béguerie, *Sur le chemin des hommes. Les sacrements* (Paris, 1974).

²⁰ "Frauen, Laien, und Leitung," *Domradio.de*, October 19, 2024, domradio.de/artikel/papst-empfaengt-verschiedene-teilnehmer-der-weltsynode.

²¹ "Study Groups for questions raised in the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to be explored in collaboration with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia," Document of the General Secretariat of the Synod, March 3, 2024, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314h.html.

are theologically and spiritually more understandable at the level of the global Church.²²

1. Need regarding the shortage of priests: Even though the need is not primarily a significant theological motivation, history teaches us that often the power of necessity has led the Church to profound reforms. When faced with pressing challenges, the Church has sometimes been compelled to adapt and evolve in response to the needs of its communities.
2. Gender equality: The quest for equality emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive environment where women can participate fully in all aspects of Church life. This aligns with broader societal movements for gender equality and justice. However, we know that this approach to argumentation, particularly regarding the question of women's ordination, is often not comprehensible in most contexts and can lead to irritation. Many communities may view the notion of equality within the Church through different cultural, theological, or historical lenses, leading to resistance or misunderstanding.
3. Existential impact: Similar to how Thérèse of Lisieux,²³ Edith Stein,²⁴ and other female figures in history were existentially affected by their inability to become priests, we hear today testimonies from many women who share their calling to the priestly ministry and their pain that this calling is not recognized by the Church. This existential approach consistently evokes deep concern in listeners, and it has often been acknowledged that these testimonies provoke thoughtful reflection. The stories of these women highlight the emotional and spiritual struggles they face, underscoring the need for the Church to engage with and address these experiences. By listening to their voices, the Church can gain deeper insights into the impact of its policies and practices, ultimately fostering a more compassionate and inclusive environment.

²² Our intention here is not to discuss these observations in detail but to systematically document them for the first time, particularly in the context of the first bishop synod in church history where women participated with voting rights.

²³ Gernot Facius, "Ich fühle mich zum Priester berufe," *Welt*, October 17, 1997, welt.de/print-welt/article643163/Ich-fuehle-mich-zum-Priester-berufen.html.

²⁴ Edith Stein, *Keine Frau ist ja nur Frau. Texte zur Frauenfrage* (Herder, 1989), 120.

A BRIEF TESTIMONY WITH SOME OBSERVATIONS²⁵

The Synod on Synodality recognized that the role of women in the Church and their inclusion must be one of the most significant topics in the coming years.

On October 18, all ten study groups²⁶ presented their work to interested members of the Synod (simultaneously in three shifts). It was planned for the members of the study groups to engage in conversation with the synod members and to show themselves. Naturally, I attended the presentation of Study Group 5 on Friday, especially because I knew I would have to return home, and most questions regarding this matter would come to me. For context, this group is working on the topic of ecclesial office, specifically the question of women, including questions of the diaconate.

The German theologian Thomas Söding wrote in his Synod diary regarding this event: “Due to the high demand, the old ‘new aula’ was used, where synods used to take place. It is designed like an ancient lecture hall with steeply rising rows and narrow seats. About 300 people can fit, 90 were registered, and about 80 were present. At the front, there was an archaic podium . . . There, the Pope sat during previous synods. Now, two individuals were present, introducing themselves by their first names. Both belong to the lowest level of the dicastery. Their message: We want to listen. And: Please, write us an email. The names of the study group members were, contrary to the practice of other groups, not disclosed. They remained secret even now. Many critical questions were asked—without answers. The prefect was not there. Why were other members of the leadership absent? Why was the agreed-upon rule that the study groups should be composed and work synodally not adhered to? Other questions were raised without answers, such as: Why are continental or national bishops’ conferences not allowed to decide to open the celibacy of priests?”²⁷ A few days later, this ominous meeting was reported by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*:

The cardinal informed the world synod that Francis had not tasked the working group with examining the admission of women to the diaconate. This caused irritation because many synod participants had assumed that the women’s diaconate was naturally among the offices

²⁵ The following testimony is part of my own synod-diary that was compiled after the Synod, in December 2024.

²⁶ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Study Groups for Questions Raised in the First Session to be Explored in Collaboration with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia,” March 14, 2024, press.vatican.va/content/salasta/mpa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/03/14/240314h.html.

²⁷ Thomas Söding, “Synode mit Söding,” zdk.de/sms.

to be considered for women. After all, it had been at the center of the debate about offices for women during last year's world synod. Even more upset were many of the approximately eighty bishops and non-bishops who came a few days later for a discussion about the cardinal's report. Fernández had only sent two 'trainees,' said one participant, subordinate staff from his agency. The Archbishop of Belgrade, Ladislav Nemet, reportedly said in essence: He is an archbishop and will soon become a cardinal; why did the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith find it unnecessary to send an archbishop, and who were the two envoys? A cardinal from Asia reportedly spoke of an 'insult.' The two employees from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a man and a woman, had not answered this question or any others, such as who belonged to the working group. "I am Andrew from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" was all that was revealed about them, it was said. Anyone with an 'idea' could feel free to write an email, Andrew reportedly said. The incident caused a stir and forced Fernández to take an unusual step.²⁸

However, the happenings of October 18, that Friday, did not end there. At 11:00 p.m., a letter from Cardinal Fernández landed in our inbox, informing all members of the Synod that he understood our discomfort and consequently, on the afternoon of October 24, all those interested in the work of Study Group 5 could engage in conversation with him; he would personally be available to answer questions for the synod members. He apologized and began his letter with: *I have learned.*

Cardinal Fernández could have underestimated the power of the synod; he realized it himself and invited us to a real exchange. This was not an easy conversation. In listening, it became increasingly clear that Study Group 5 stands with its assigned topic of women perched on very thin ice. We listened to him in the second meeting concerning Study Group 5, and he listened to us. This conversation contributed to my understanding of the state of this issue. For me, it has become clear that the question of women is primarily not a theological question but a church-political question. Everyone who has had to make political decisions in their life understands how difficult such decisions are and how transparency, process protection, work together but also pull apart. The many discussions about the women's diaconate in the synod led me to conclude that I can no longer support a women's diaconate in the form that is already open given the changes in Church law by Pope Benedict XVI. Well, what can a deacon do daily for example in the Diocese of Linz that a woman cannot do? Imagine a woman as a

²⁸ Thomas Jansen, "Bischöfe widersetzen sich dem Papst," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 23, 2024, [faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/bischoefe-widersetzen-sich-auf-der-weltsynode-dem-papst-110065015.html](https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/bischoefe-widersetzen-sich-auf-der-weltsynode-dem-papst-110065015.html).

deacon in the altar area: behind the priest, and so on, as we currently know the liturgical service of the deacon. Then, what about the incardination of the woman as a deacon and the associated “dependency” on the bishop, who can still only be a man? What happens if the husband of the deacon dies, and she is not allowed to remarry? Had the Synod voted on whether women should be ordained as deacons or not, the question would have been answered clearly with a no, thus putting the issue of women’s ordination to rest for the next one hundred years. In church-political terms, it was a wise move to leave the question open and then read in paragraph 68 how the three-tiered ordination office is emphasized, and nowhere in the text is the special diaconate mentioned again (Final Document, no. 68). It seems to be necessary to point out that the process of discernment on the path to decision is a longer one, and the first concrete action will not begin by opening the women’s diaconate. Rather, it will start with Pope Francis appointing the first woman to head a dicastery and that women will be able to hold all kinds of offices worldwide where no ordination is necessary.²⁹ I can imagine that similarly to what happened with *Fiducia Supplicans*, we will receive a letter regarding women. And my hope is that the German-speaking world does not dismiss the document as inadequate if it does not contain what we envisioned. Pathways and the process of discernment require a lot of information, not narrowness but a broad world that must support the voices of many when it comes to a decision for the entire Church.

NO. 60 OF THE SYNODAL DOCUMENT: THE FULFILLMENT OF VATICAN II’S UNFINISHED AGENDA?

The conciliar statements embedded in *Lumen Gentium* nos. 32 and 37 now find explicit, official articulation in Paragraph 60 of the Synod’s Final Document: the demand for the full recognition of women as baptized members with all consequent implications for decision-making and ministry. This is not merely a repetition of what was already known; it represents a new magisterial precision and crystallization of what the Council only began to articulate:

By virtue of Baptism, women and men have equal dignity as members of the People of God. However, women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation and place in all the various areas of the Church’s life. This is to the detriment of serving the Church’s shared mission. Scripture attests to

²⁹ These diary notes were written in December 2024 and do not yet reflect the appointment of Simona Brambilla as Prefect for the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

the prominent role of many women in the history of salvation. One woman, Mary Magdalene, was entrusted with the first proclamation of the Resurrection. On the day of Pentecost, Mary, the Mother of God, was present, accompanied by many other women who had followed the Lord. It is important that the Scripture passages that relate these stories find adequate space inside liturgical lectionaries. Crucial turning points in Church history confirm the essential contribution of women moved by the Spirit. Women make up the majority of churchgoers and are often the first witnesses to the faith in families. They are active in the life of small Christian communities and parishes. They run schools, hospitals and shelters. They lead initiatives for reconciliation and promoting human dignity and social justice. Women contribute to theological research and are present in positions of responsibility in Church institutions, in diocesan curia and the Roman Curia. There are women who hold positions of authority and are leaders of their communities. This Assembly asks for full implementation of all the opportunities already provided for in Canon Law with regard to the role of women, particularly in those places where they remain underutilised. There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue. The Assembly also asks that more attention be given to the language and images used in preaching, teaching, catechesis, and the drafting of official Church documents, giving more space to the contributions of female saints, theologians and mystics." (Final Document, no. 60)³⁰

The synod's Final Document now officially articulates what the women auditors of Vatican II struggled to achieve: that the question of women is not primarily a question of ordination—a framing that too easily narrows the discussion to sacramental categories—but rather a question of complete juridical and ecclesial recognition of baptismal grace as the foundation for all ministries and offices that do not require ordination.

Concretely, this means: The synodal document affirms what the Vatican II auditors fought for—that a woman is not less “Church” than a man; that her voice carries equal weight in decisions affecting the whole community; that she can exercise authority not through delegation from above but through her constitutive belonging to the

³⁰ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission Final Document,” November 24, 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).

People of God, which is the true source of all Church authority.³¹ In this sense, Paragraph 60 completes what Paragraphs 32 and 37 of *Lumen Gentium* initiated: the theological and juridical dismantling of a two-tier ecclesiology in which women were tolerated as passive beneficiaries of a male-led institution rather than recognized as active subjects of the Church's mission.

This represents a subtle but profound shift: from asking “what roles can we allow women?” to recognizing “women are already constitutively present in the Church's fundamental structure; now our discipline and law must finally reflect this reality.” The women auditors at Vatican II intuited this shift; the present Synod documents it.

This shift in paradigm demands a fundamental reorientation in how we theologically understand the role of women in the Church. We are called to move beyond the framework of conceding space or granting permissions to women as outsiders seeking entry into a male-defined institution. Instead, we must reconceive the Church itself as already constituted by women—not as a future possibility but as a present ecclesial reality grounded in baptism. The implications are far-reaching: every structure, every office, every decision-making process must now be examined not from the perspective of “Should we include women?” but from the recognition that women are already intrinsic to the Church's fundamental being. This is not a question of women's rights in a sociological sense, but rather a question of theological authenticity—of allowing the Church's visible structures finally to correspond to its baptismal theology. To think of women in the Church from this new logic means to understand them not as a constituency to be accommodated but as the constitutive presence without which the church cannot fully realize its sacramental nature as the Body of Christ. Such a reorientation is not marginal to ecclesiology; it is central to the Church's understanding of itself and its mission in the contemporary world.

Yet despite this clear theological framework and official magisterial articulation, a fundamental practical problem remains: the implementation of this paradigm shift depends entirely upon the goodwill of those in decision-making positions within the Church—who are, by and large, men. The theological recognition that women are constitutively present in the Church does not automatically translate into structural change. Nor does Paragraph 60 of the synodal document contain binding directives that compel bishops, parish leaders, or curial officials to dismantle the patriarchal mechanisms that have structured the Church for centuries. Women remain vulnerable

³¹ Stefania Falasca, “When Women Entered the Council,” *Osservatore Romano*, September 26, 2020, [osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2020-09/when-women-entered-the-council.html](https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2020-09/when-women-entered-the-council.html).

to the discretionary power of those who control the Church's institutional apparatus. A bishop who remains unconvinced of the need for real change can easily acknowledge the theology while maintaining the status quo. A diocesan leadership can cite budgetary constraints or "pastoral prudence" to delay the appointment of women to positions of genuine authority. The good intentions articulated in magisterial documents do not guarantee implementation; they require the active commitment of those in power to relinquish some of that power in service of the Church's theological authenticity.

This reality places women in a precarious position: they must appeal to, persuade, and depend upon those who benefit from the current system to voluntarily dismantle it. The new paradigm may be theologically sound, but its realization remains hostage to the pastoral choices of male decision-makers. Without institutional mechanisms—binding norms, structural reforms, accountability measures—that guarantee women's participation and decision-making authority as a matter of right rather than benevolence, the gap between theology and practice threatens to perpetuate the very two-tier ecclesiology that the synodal document claims to dismantle. The women auditors of Vatican II were astute enough to recognize this problem sixty years ago; the present Synod documents the theology but does not yet resolve the structural contradiction upon which its implementation depends.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To keep the role of women in the Church and the discussion about it alive, I see it as important to take various sensitivities into account, not only of women but also of men. We need bridge builders who understand the different contexts of the global Church and can mediate between them, thereby performing an important translation work. If one wishes to build bridges and dismantle prejudices, there are several aspects that I, as a woman, take into consideration:

1. Patience grounded in prophetic conviction: My experience is that arrogant, aggressive, and dissatisfied behavior by women (especially theologians) can be counterproductive regarding improving the situation of women in post-communist countries. Humility involves the ability to avoid pride and recognize one's own limitations. Humility helps women not to rely solely on personal achievements but to seek collaboration, understanding, and a collective approach to addressing gender issues. This behavior opens the door for dialogue, dispels fear, and fosters trust between different social groups. When women approach challenges with humility and openness, they can more easily

find common ground with others, which can contribute to achieving shared goals. Additionally, this attitude can help ensure that women's voices and needs are better represented, while building a supportive community where everyone can participate in the change. Without the involvement and willingness of men in the church regarding women's issues, there will either be no change or any change will be unappreciated.

2. Loyalty understood as *sentire cum ecclesia*: Loyalty encompasses the keeping of promises and commitments, whether it pertains to the community, one's own life, or the advancement of women's status. This is especially important for women, as reliability plays a fundamental role not only in personal relationships but also in community life, particularly in advocating for issues such as women's roles within the Church. Women should strive to be committed and stand by their decisions, regardless of challenges or circumstances; however, the manner in which they express this commitment must be constructive.
3. Wisdom rooted in discernment: Improving the situation of women in the church is a complex challenge, and patience and wisdom play a key role in this process. Those who can take on responsibilities as women leaders in the Church must recognize that things do not always unfold as they envisioned or at the pace they hoped. Therefore, it is important for them to remain steadfast in their service without giving up on their goals. Patience can help them persevere, even when changes occur slowly or when they face significant resistance. Wisdom plays a major role in the process of discernment, which is essential before making decisions. Women must continuously weigh their options and differentiate between what they can change and what is immutable, as it is fated. Accepting unchangeable situations and seeking creative ways to navigate within them allows them to maintain a constructive attitude in difficult circumstances, make sound decisions, and avoid falling into the trap of being driven by emotional reactions. Thus, patience and wisdom are tools that can help women effectively advocate for change and contribute to the long-term improvement of women's status within the Church.

In conclusion, the role of women in a synodal Church is a complex and multifaceted issue that encompasses both theological and political dimensions. Pope Francis' efforts to involve women more actively in decision-making processes and leadership roles are a significant step

towards a more inclusive Church. However, it is crucial that these changes are approached with patience, wisdom, and contextual sensitivity to achieve sustainable progress. Women must raise their voices while also building bridges to dismantle prejudices and foster constructive collaboration. Only through collective commitment and understanding can we create a Church that recognizes and values the diverse and unique contributions of all its members. Cultural and contextual sensitivity is central to addressing the specific challenges and opportunities in different regions, thereby shaping a truly synodal Church, where women and men equally contribute to its mission and life. **M**

Klara A. Csiszar is a pastoral theologian and full professor at the Catholic University of Linz (Austria), where she is dean of the Faculty of Theology and vice-rector for teaching and research. Her work focuses on synodal Church development in Central and Eastern Europe and on an integral understanding of mission today.