

Living Vocation Despite the Obstacles: Catholic Women in Leadership

Avril Baigent

Abstract: The Synod on Synodality highlighted a paradox: Whilst the Church has taken positive steps towards engaging women in positions of responsibility, women across the world have spoken of obstacles to living their calling and participating in Church structures. Using a collaborative roundtable methodology, six authors of this special edition reflect on their experiences of living vocation as a lens through which to explore why progress remains elusive despite apparent advances. The roundtable identifies obstacles operating at multiple, mutually reinforcing levels, including masculine and clerical imaginaries of vocation that struggle to conceive of women’s calling beyond religious life and married life; the difficulty in accessing paid formation opportunities; the precarity of lay employment; and the lack of recognition for women’s contributions. The authors argue that overcoming such obstacles requires starting from the equal dignity of baptism for men and women and will involve serious labor, new resources and imagination. Failing to do so does not just risk the vocation of individual women, but, as the Final Document of the Synod Assembly states, “is to the detriment of serving the Church’s shared mission” (no. 60).

Among the clearest voices to arise from the Synod process are those of Catholic women.¹ The national syntheses and the Working Document of the Continental Stage captured experiences of inequities of power, mistreatment

AI Disclosure: I used Claude AI to help identify overlaps and redundancies in order to reduce the transcripts from 25,000 words to their current length. I also used it to test key themes in order to produce an initial structure and to check that the framing material made sense of the roundtable.

1 All the official documents of the Synod process can be found on the Synod website at synod.va/en/resources/documents.html. Unfortunately, the titles are not always consistent internally. The key documents referenced in this article are: General Secretariat of the Synod, “Working Document for the Continental Stage,” General Secretariat of the Synod, October 27, 2022, synod.va/en/the-synodal-process/phase1-the-consultation-of-the-people-of-god/the-continental-stage/resources-and-tools/documents.html (also known as “Document for the Continental Stage,” and “Enlarge the Space of your Tent”); XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “Synthesis

(particularly of women religious) and the sidelining of women's voices within Church structures, as well as the social realities of violence and impoverishment.² As the Final Document of the XVI Assembly (FD) says: "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" (no. 60). It would seem an urgent task of the whole Church, therefore, to identify, analyze and overcome these obstacles. At the same time, it is possible to see women in senior positions in dioceses, on trustee boards of Catholic organizations, and running theological institutes. Why speak of obstacles when such examples exist?

By inviting and honoring multiple perspectives, the Synod listening has highlighted a paradox. On the one hand there have been significant (albeit small) steps towards the greater engagement of women, including the opening of some significant roles in the Vatican to women,³ the presence of female voting members of the Rome Synod Assembly,⁴ and the two study groups convened by Pope

Report: A Synodal Church in Mission," Office for Synod, November 2023. synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf, and Pope Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document," October 26, 2024 synod.va/en/news/final-document-of-the-xvi-assembly.html.

² The difficult conditions of women religious working in church structures was highlighted in many national syntheses and the "Report from Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life" and referenced in the Working Document for the Continental Stage, no. 63.

³ Including Sr. Natalie Becquart, XMCI, the first woman undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, and the first woman to be a voting member in a Catholic synod; Sr. Simona Brambilla, MC, the first woman to head a Vatican dicastery, the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life; and Sr. Raffaella Petrini, FSE as president of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State and governor of Vatican City State (the first women to hold this post).

⁴ At the Rome Synod Assembly, fifty-four women were appointed to be voting members, with women also included in the list of expert theologians and facilitators. Women present included (in addition to those in this Special Journal Edition) Sr. Leticia Salazar, ODN, Chancellor of San Bernardino Diocese; Sr. Josée Ngalula, RSA, first African woman appointed to the International Theological Commission; Dr. Estela Padilla, Executive Secretary of the Office of Theological Concerns at the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC); Sr. Mary Teresa Barron, OLA, President of the International Union of Superiors General; Margaret Karam, President of the Focolare Movement; Professor Klára Antonia Csiszár, University of Linz; Professor Kim Daniels, Director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University and member of the Vatican Dicastery for Communication; and Sr. Anne Béatrice Faye, CIC, theologian and consultant to the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue.

Francis to study the female diaconate.⁵ Yet, as this article will demonstrate, the lived experience of even the women present at the Rome Synod Assembly, both experts and voting members, is of obstacle after obstacle. Women's contributions go unrecognised, access to formation is problematic and usually unfunded, lay jobs are precarious and canonical structures exclude women from decision-making bodies.

Highlighting this paradox offers a multilayered analysis of the experience of women leaders in the Catholic Church. It is necessary both to recognise the factors that have enabled some women (religious and lay) to reach positions of leadership within the Catholic Church, and to catalogue how this has been problematic. This roundtable article experiments with a more synodal, collective way of writing.⁶ It harnesses the lived experience of five of the authors of this special edition—together with myself, six women who were present at the Rome Synod Assembly—to reflect on their sense of vocation to illuminate the nature and quality of these obstacles and why progress in overcoming them is so elusive.

The experiences of the roundtable authors are supported by two sources. The first source is the voices of women emerging through Synod listening itself, variously captured through local, diocesan, national, continental and institutional processes, and summarized in paragraph 60 (as well as other places) in the Final Document already quoted, as well as threaded through the text (for example paragraphs 52 and 77). The Working Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) offers a number of relevant themes. Women's participation in the structures of the Church is not only a Western or middle class concern:

⁵ There were two commissions set up by Pope Francis, in 2016 and 2020. Female members included Sr. Mary Melone, SFA, rector of the Pontifical University Antonianum, the first woman to head a Pontifical University; Marianne Schlosser, Professor of Spiritual Theology at the University of Vienna and a member of the International Theological Commission; Sr. Núria Calduch-Benages, Professor of Biblical Studies at the Gregorian University in Rome and a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Dr. Phyllis Zagano, award winning author and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Hofstra University; Barbara Hallensleben, Professor at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, one of the first women appointed to the International Theological Commission by Pope John Paul II and a member of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity.

⁶ As with most things synodal, this is not a new form of academic writing. Examples include Christian Smith, Brandon Vaidyanathan, Nancy Tatom Ammerman, et al., "Roundtable on the Sociology of Religion: Twenty-Three Theses on the Status of Religion in American Sociology—A Mellon Working-Group Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2013): 903–938, and Avril Baigent, Marcus Pound, Tricia Bruce, Stephen Bullivant, Alana Harris, and Robert Orsi, "Lived Catholicism: A Roundtable Discussion," *Ecclesial Practices*, 9, no. 1 (2022): 9–27, doi.org/10.1163/22144471-bja10033.

“Almost all [national synthesis] reports raise the issue of full and equal participation of women” (no. 64). As the Report from the Holy Land stated “Those who were most committed to the synod process were women, who seem to have realized not only that they had more to gain, but also more to offer by being relegated to a prophetic edge, from which they observe what happens in the life of the Church” (DCS no. 61). The Synthesis Report of the First Rome Assembly offered concrete proposals to increase the active contribution of women, including improving access to theological formation, resolving labor injustices, and ensuring that liturgical texts reflect the realities of women’s lives (nos. 9.o, 9.p, 9.q).

The second source is the 2025 World Union of Catholic Women’s Organisations (WUCWO) survey, “Women’s experiences in the Synodal Process,” which included the responses of thirty-two female Rome Synod Assembly participants.⁷ These responses offered a more nuanced understanding of the positions in which women both exercise roles of authority and experience obstacles. As one wrote, “Deep views of the roles of women in the Church and society are the main barrier [However,] personally I’m assisting three bishops.” Respondents felt they were taken seriously only when taking on a role that had been defined by men and asked, “Not to talk about the ‘role’ of women, but rather about the place given to us by baptism.” Despite participation being central to implementing the Synod, respondents were concerned that, “many church organizations still have entrenched patriarchal structures that can inhibit women’s full participation in decision-making processes.” Threaded through the responses were concerns about power and leadership: “implementation [of the Synod document] be a matter for the authorities (bishops and priests): this excludes women.”

These themes contributed to the roundtable project in significant ways. Firstly, they showed that obstacles were experienced by a broad group of senior women, and not just the co-authors. Even this group of senior women had experienced the obstacles referred to in the Final Document. Secondly, because of their experience and position, the WUCWO participants were able to offer some thoughts as to the nature of these obstacles and how progress might be made. Finally, the snippets received via the WUCWO survey suggested that a longer-form exploration might yield deeper insight.

This article draws on both the voices of women around the world, and the specific experiences of those attending the Rome Synod Assembly to frame four topics for the six co-authors: their experiences

⁷ World Union of Catholic Women’s Organisations and World Women’s Observatory, *Women’s Experiences in the Synodal Process*, 2025, worldwomensobservatory.org/en/_files/ugd/d3cde1_d545ebec39574d879fd604c833ac6007.pdf.

of living vocation; key obstacles; experiences of leadership (including those at the Synod Assembly) and practical next steps. The Roundtable conversation was carried out over two zoom calls, and subsequently edited for length and clarity.

QUESTION 1: WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCES OF LIVING OUT YOUR VOCATION?

Avril Baigent: The opening sentence of paragraph 60 of the Final Document states, “By virtue of baptism, women and men have equal dignity of members of the people of God. However, women continue to encounter obstacles in attaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation, and place in all the various areas of the Church’s life.” To what extent is this your experience, in your work or vocational life in the Church, and what is your own sense of calling?

Susan Pascoe: When I started thinking of vocation, what comes to mind is particular moments in my life, but actually, it is about being Christian, treating other people with dignity and respect, irrespective of their background and disposition and abilities and so on. When I was in senior roles, even before the sexual abuse stuff, it always seemed to me incredibly important that people could come to work and be safe psychologically and physically. I worked a lot for government, as well as the Church. For me, it was the same, irrespective of the settings.

I went to a local parish school, then to boarding school. At around age sixteen, I felt I had a vocation, I applied and told to go to university first and then come back. Well, I did not go back, so that might have been a wise mother superior! Following a career in Catholic education and governance, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) appointed me to the group reviewing the governance of the parishes and the diocese, a recommendation of the Royal Commission. I was also appointed by the ACBC to the group reviewing the structures and processes that had been set up to deal with safeguarding and professional standards within the Church.

Responding to these requests felt like living out my vocation. It seemed most overt in relation to the request from the Synod Secretariat to be involved in the Synod on Synodality. And it is partly because it was an explicit call to assist the global Church, but also, frankly, incredibly time-consuming. In those first couple of years, it was at least 50 percent of my time. When you respond to the request there is not necessarily a deep understanding of the time involved. For those living in the Vatican, it is their life, all they do, but not for a layperson. But, at the same time, it felt for me like a privilege, and does still,

because I am still very supportive of the implementation. So it still does feel like a calling, living out my life as a Catholic.

Catherine Clifford: I was one of the first lay women in pastoral ministry in my diocese. I had no women professors until my doctoral studies. I had no models and could not imagine myself as a professor, or having a full vocation in theology, let alone in pastoral ministry. I had a wonderful pastor, and I had a wonderful experience of team ministry. And in my essay, I write about how, through the 1980s, the Canadian and American bishops began a series of what I would argue were synodal conversations with women across North America.⁸ Rome was so nervous about this, they shut it down. They called the U.S. bishops to task on this, and that document never received the two-thirds votes. It was revised, and so it was eventually just published as a study document.⁹

And then we see in the 90s, this pushback from Rome, trying to make very clear the distinction and subtext, the superiority of the ordained ministry, that would not be accessible to women, and then came out in 1997 with a terrible document on the participation or collaboration of laypersons in the ministry of the ordained, which takes this framework and says, if you are not ordained, you may not be called a chaplain, a minister, only ordained persons do pastoral work.¹⁰ So, today, in Canada, there are few women in pastoral ministry in parishes. They are not properly paid, there is no stability, there are no benefits, and these ministries have not been integrated in a stable way into the permanent ministerial structure of the local diocese. If you find a friendly priest who wants to hire you, you are only safe until he moves. And then they can throw you out! And on the other extreme, our bishops have been content with volunteers who have minimal formation. Now, because there are financial pressures, they say, well, we could not imagine another financial structure to provide what's needed: vocational discernment, accompaniment, support for theological education, and accompaniment in pastoral formation. Lay people are on their own.

Women in ministry in Canada today gravitate primarily to institutional ministries with stable salaries and benefits. So they're military chaplains, hospital chaplains, chaplains in secondary schools,

⁸ See Catherine Clifford, "Women: Protagonists in a Synodal Church?," *Journal of Moral Theology* 15, Special Issue 1 (2026): 28–30.

⁹ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Women in the Church: Discussion Papers* (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1985).

¹⁰ John Paul II, "Instruction on Certain Questions on Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priest," *Liberia Editrice Vaticana*, 1997, vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_con_interdic_doc_15081997_en.html.

but they are not very prominent in our diocesan structures. There are exceptions, you know, women chancellors and things, but these are late second career, and women who have some financial stability that allows them to do this.

So, our models of ministry and our structuring of the local church has not caught up with, or supported in a serious way, the participation of women in leadership and ministry.

Avril Baigent: And your own sense of vocation and your own sense of your own calling, how would you describe that?

Catherine Clifford: It has been a long and circuitous road. Because I did not have women models, it took me a long time. I spent a number of years in a couple of religious orders, also trying to discern my vocation there, and I found that, even in religious communities, there was not a lot of support for a woman who wants an intellectual career. The message I got was, I was lacking in humility, or that I would have to do this on my own. I know other religious women who will say they are like the square peg in the round hole within their own religious community. It is a hard place to be, a lonely vocation. But also a very rewarding one. I am very happy with where I landed.

Renée Köhler-Ryan: To me, vocation has two dimensions. One is that I have felt very much called to be a wife and a mother, called to the sacrament of marriage. And the other one is that I have definitely felt the calling toward academic life, that that is where God has been pointing me toward to use the gifts that He has given me. And that [calling] happened at a fairly early age—at least there was sort of a gentle push. I had not thought about university very much until a family friend came by, and said to me: “well, when you go to university . . .” I said, “Oh, do you think I could do that?” And he said, “Yes, absolutely, which university do you want to go to?” Most of my mentors from a fairly young age were men encouraging me, which I think might be a little bit unusual. But that’s been my experience all along.

Christina Kheng: I would answer this question from the general Asian experiences that I have encountered, and then from my personal experiences. In most of Asia, so far, women tend to be pigeonholed into certain areas of the Church’s life. So, when it comes to higher-level leadership there are only a few examples where a woman is heading the diocesan pastoral institute or a commission at the diocesan or national level. A larger proportion are leaders of grassroots-based communities, schools, and parish ministries. A relatively small number are teaching in seminaries and theological institutes, including

myself. So, most church leadership roles in Asia are predominantly held by the clergy. I think the religious women have spoken up in many conferences that I have attended, regarding the lack of recognition and support they sometimes experience for what they are contributing, being taken for granted, and a lack of inclusion in decision-making. It will take time for things to change.

For myself, I think I also had quite a roundabout kind of route to get to where I am. I look at my own journey from a faith-based lens, and I know that it's all God's grace that I am where I am. But I would say that, on the whole, I have had good opportunities, support, and acceptance from all levels in the Church, especially from the religious but also from the diocesan hierarchy. It comes in terms of recognizing and asking for my help in consultancy, in accompaniment, in leadership training as well, even accompaniment for bishops in what they hope to do in their diocese. And then also, support in terms of getting funding for my studies, such as from Jesuit-related institutions.

But on the downside, I always still encounter surprise, for example, when I go to a certain diocese and they realize, this is a laywoman giving a leadership workshop to a group of clergy. It is not resistance, just surprise and maybe some hesitation; but in the end, it always turns out well. And I would say, especially since the Synod, I have been doing my work with greater ease. People are getting used to seeing laypersons, including women, teaching or leading a session attended by bishops, clergy, and religious.

Maria Cimperman, RSCJ: When I look at my own time and vocation, I realize how contextual things are. I grew up in the United States with women faculty in grade school, high school, and college. I had scripture faculty, moral theology faculty, women with doctorates. I saw women as heads of institutions. I saw women in leadership, so for me, I just presumed those things happen. Women were reading. In religious orders, women were also preaching. It was moving to hear all that had gone before, including the stories of suffering that the people before me had to undergo. As I was growing up, women religious were not only in a classroom or a hospital, but also doing civil rights law, and were social workers and physicians. I was blessed in growing up with a sense that so much was indeed possible.

In one of my first years teaching at Oblate School of Theology, during the Week of Christian Unity, I was invited to preside over a prayer service. I sat in the presider's chair. For women religious, when we're in our own spaces of prayer, we sit in all these places. A few of the women at the prayer service afterwards came up to me and said, "I was almost in tears, because I've never seen this. I've never seen a woman preach. I've never seen a woman preside." So, when

facilitating at the Rome Synod Assembly, I was very comfortable, whether you were the Cardinal Prefect or the twenty-two-year-old, to hold the space, ask you to stop speaking when your allotted time was up by saying “thank you” kindly yet firmly, and create silence and space for the next person to share. I realized later that it is really the blessing of my religious life upbringing. I had come from something that allowed for that.

Avril Baigent: When I was growing up, I was encouraged to be active in my faith by my best friend, who was a Baptist, by my family and by my parish priest. I was the youngest Eucharistic Minister in my parish by about sixty years. By the time I was eighteen, I was discerning a vocation to the religious life, but when I went to university and met my husband to be, I realized that was not for me. I was left unsure of what to do as I had never encountered a lay woman employed by the Catholic Church in the UK. I had no image of what it might be like for a woman to live a vocation except through religious life. And while in religious orders I can see roles such as being counsellors and provincials and superiors, there is no career structure for a lay person, no obvious entry point. This raises a profound question. As a lay person you are living a vocation that is overlaid with the precarity of a job. And, as Cathy says, if you get a change of priest or bishop, your job might not exist anymore. What does it mean to be a woman of vocation, called to work in the Church, if you are not doing that job any more? At whose let are you living out your vocation?

Christina Kheng: I think you have hit onto something valuable there, which goes back to the concept of charism. When God gives a charism, God does not give up, even though many doors can be closed. That’s been my own experience, that many other doors open because it’s a divine charism that needs to be expressed. I have learned quite early on that we are creating the path as we go along, because if we try to look for jobs or for existing roles or places to occupy, they simply do not exist. But if we follow our charism, somehow, or other, it bears fruit and gradually gets recognized. It is always hard for me to describe to people what I do, and some people question whether I have a real job in the traditional sense. But I find that whenever I follow my charism, then I feel at home. I’m contributing at my best and being the truest version of myself.

Avril Baigent: From these vocation stories, it is clear that there are multiple obstacles at play. Firstly, imaginaries of vocation: How do women imagine themselves as people of vocation, and how do the imaginaries of others—family, friends, the parish, employers, a

religious community—impact what choices women make? Secondly, what access is there to education and formation, and who pays for it? Thirdly, what roles are available, and what roles do mentors and role models play in accessing them? Fourthly, how are women recognized for the work they do, and to what extent is it expected as voluntary, or seen as licit? These factors all repay further exploration.

QUESTION 2: THE KEY OBSTACLES PREVENTING WOMEN FROM LIVING THEIR VOCATION

2.A: The need to re-imagine vocation for women

Renée Köhler-Ryan: We have a really masculine model for the Church right now. What would it be like if we balanced it out a bit? In the piece that I’ve written for the journal there was a conversation in the first Rome Synod Assembly (2023) with Cardinal Ouellette, where he said, “The Church is too masculine. I don’t know what we need to do, but we need more of the feminine.”¹¹ When we think in terms of good governance, often we go to corporate structures. But instead of looking at patriarchal models of organization, why not a more matriarchal model of organization? So you could actually have the four-year-old running into the middle of a meeting, and people would not be saying, “What is this child doing here?” But instead, “That’s life, and now we continue.” To me, that would be a more maternal, feminine approach, and I think that we are often missing out, because we do not do that enough.

Maria Cimperman: When I started at the Oblate School of Theology, I was the only woman teaching moral theology, and a colleague told me that some of the seminarians coming from certain places only know sisters as the housekeepers and the cooks, and I will be teaching them moral theology, Catholic social thought, and theology of human sexuality. At that point I simply said, “Well, I am not going to clean for them, nor am I going to cook for them, but I will certainly be asking much of them in terms of theology.”

Catherine Clifford: I think we suffer from a terrible lack of imagination. Even in churches that have begun to ordain women, the first ministries that those women historically occupied were often helping ministries with children and to do social work. We still have, I think, an image or a caricature of what women’s work is.

¹¹ See Renée Köhler-Ryan, “Between Critical Feminist Theology and the New Feminism: Where to from Here?,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 15, Special Issue 1 (2026): 101.

Susan Pascoe: I think the Church shares deep-seated conceptions of the role of women, as confined roles to particular spheres. Of course it is changing. The project that I am involved in at the moment, which is looking at formation for lay governance, is considering Canon 129, which sees governance as confined to the ordained, leaving no space for lay men or women, despite our baptismal clothing. This is an area to be further explored. The Church is also criticized in relation to conceptions of womanhood, motherhood and the roles of women in the society, but that critique needs to consider the context in which they're living. Gender inequality is rife in many countries.

Christina Kheng: I would add to that, because I find that, in Asia, at least, a lot of women even censure themselves. So, both men and women, clergy and lay, have, in an unexamined way, adopted historicity as normativity. So, just because women have not been in leadership, women are not ordained, both women and men, both clergy and laity, think that it is a sin to even talk about ordaining women. Maria mentioned something about things that are unspeakable, and this is one of the unspeakable and unexamined things.

And a lot of women and sisters also would censure you if you ever suggest talking about the ordination of even women deacons. And they've probably never themselves examined more deeply the theological or anthropological assumptions and philosophies about that.

Avril Baigent: I find that so fascinating, the self-censoring, and the image of ourselves that others may have. I remember when I was working in a parish in the early 2000s, and somebody came in just before Mass and said, "I would love it if we could pray for my mum who's really ill at the moment." And I just picked up the bidding prayers and added the name, and he was shocked. He said, "Are you allowed to do that?"

Now, I think that's a clerical/lay thing as well, but, you know, the fact that this young woman in her twenties just wrote a name on the bidding prayers was very shocking. That was not in his image of what any of us were allowed to do.

Renée Köhler-Ryan: There is a power structure in the Church and often priests see recognizing vocation as a power thing, which is where I think it is quite dangerous. If we could go back to the Pauline model of saying that everyone has their gifts, and everyone has something to give to the body of the Church, which is what makes the Church what it is. And that theology is very much there in what we were doing at the Synod. But to breathe more life into that, so that we are not talking

about church structures as pyramids, inverted or otherwise, but instead gathering together around the table. And we are there with Christ, and we are all bringing everything that we have to that table. That is what I find frustratingly missing from the current conversation.

I am not in favor of the female diaconate for the sociological same reason that I am not in favor of female priests. I think that that is more of a clericalization of the problem. Instead, we need a real appreciation of what the diaconate actually means: to be of service. So we can flip it around. How is it that women are distinctively of service in unique ways that men cannot be? I am not sure that we have delved into that enough, sociologically, and theologically, to understand what the contribution of women is as women. Maybe some women are called to be deacons, genuinely, but I fear that what it would do is further ingrain the structures that we have instead of seeing the opportunities and recognizing difference in a fuller way.

Avril Baigent: Re-imagining vocation for women would impact many aspects of the Church's normative culture, including examining expectations of the usual roles and behaviors of women in a range of Catholic contexts. This would have to include how expectations and assumptions can restrict women's expectations of themselves and even lead to self-censure. These expectations also arise in secular societal norms, different in different parts of the world, which might lead to importing patriarchal business models and organizational structures, instead of looking for more matriarchal and communal theological modes of living. At its best, re-imagining vocation for women rejects a narrow definition of vocation drawn from male, clerical models to allow space for more imaginative outcomes.

2.B: Uneven Access to Formation

Maria Cimperman: I've been thinking about paragraph 60 in the Final Document, the line that states that many of the roles that are already available to women are underutilized. Yet someone recently reminded me that for some ministries it is ecclesial leadership that must grant these roles. A conversation is needed regarding who chooses and how persons are chosen. Secondly, when I hear, "Yes, you could be a chancellor," I wonder if we are setting persons up for failure if they don't have necessary education. Additionally, who knows about these opportunities? Christina, reflecting on what you said about knowing what your charism is and your call, it is as if you're pregnant with possibility, but how does that gift get used? I think we all have to support one another, women and men. If somebody asks, "Can women preach?," let us create the conditions for this to happen.

Renée Köhler-Ryan: Formation opportunities for women are not as available as they are for men, precisely because of the ordination requirements for formation of men. So, for a woman to undertake philosophical theological formation, they have to commit resources in a way that men do not, proportionally speaking. If you take a group of lay men, a few may have had some years of an all-expenses-paid seminary education and also have the option of becoming permanent deacons (also paid for). Just speaking purely economically, in order for a woman to undertake that kind of formation, she needs to be accepted into a place of formation where others are being trained and then she needs to find the financial means, or a scholarship to do so. So actually, there are far fewer pathways there for women.

During the Synod, there was discussion, particularly in the African churches, that women were not allowed to be in the classrooms where men were being trained for the priesthood. So, unless you set up another faculty that is only for the training of women, they either cannot train or they have to go overseas. I think we are luckier in Australia. The Archbishop here insists that the seminarians have to do their philosophy training at our university, so that they are there with men and women who are not training for the seminary. And then they do their theological training in the seminary, but then coming back and forth to the university. There are different models to chip away at that clericalist understanding, which I think is affecting women's opportunity for formation.

Avril Baigent: I did a Masters in Pastoral Liturgy at Heythrop College in London, and there were four Catholics on the course. One was an ex-Anglican priest who had been paid for because he was contemplating becoming a Catholic priest. The second was a young man who had had six years at seminary and had stopped just before he was ordained priest. His bishop said, "Do whatever you want, we'll pay for you." The third was a woman in her 50s who had done twenty-five years of catechesis in her parish; she was paying for herself. I was exploring what vocation might be for a layperson called to work in the Church, and I was paying for myself.

Catherine Clifford: My own experience of theological education is across a span of almost twenty years. And it began in the 70s when we see the first generation of women with doctoral degrees begin teaching. So, in the mid-80s, I went to Europe, and it was like going backwards fifteen years. In late 70s, I was one of two women in a seminary classroom with forty-four men. When I go in the mid-80s to Switzerland at the University of Freiburg, in a class of two hundred students, there were about five lay women. And they look at us like we are some kind of strange animal, like, what are you doing here?

What are you going to do with your diploma? But things had changed dramatically by the time I get to my doctoral studies in the 90s in the Faculty of Theology at St Michael's College, Toronto, and there were many strong women there, who had been teaching for about ten years. So there's a context there.

Avril Baigent: Uneven access to formation was named as an obstacle for women in the Synthesis Report of the First Synod Assembly. As we have discussed, access can be limited because of lack of financial support, or even because the only courses locally are reserved for seminarians in training. Opportunities and expectations have improved over time, and there are good models of lay people and seminarians training together. Nevertheless, uneven access to high quality formation leads to questions concerning the support and career tracks needed for women in senior roles.

2.C: Access to Mentoring and Role Models

Susan Pascoe: I think one of the reasons that many of us were able to go into careers and assume leadership roles was that we had been educated by religious women. We had seen these women just doing it all. They taught all day in schools, then they supervised boarding schools at night. I feel a great sadness, really, that so many of the religious orders are coming to completion. But where are the role models? For example, we would want to see more women in leadership roles in the Vatican, and that's happened slowly. In our Australian dioceses, women are increasingly taking leadership roles.

Renée Köhler-Ryan: I think that that is such an important point. Until you actually see it being modelled, it is really hard to imagine doing it. And the fact that we are losing that really strong witness of women religious means that it becomes harder to imagine what women's leadership in the Church looks like, unless we pivot and name where women's leadership is happening, and where it can happen, and really encourage it in a way that is not about a power play.

Catherine Clifford: It is thanks to men that I even did graduate studies in theology, because men, my teachers, saw the gift that I had and, and encouraged me to go on and supported me, and found the scholarships so that I could do graduate work in theology. So I would never, as a single lay woman, have imagined going to Europe to study, but these guys made it happen for me. I am very grateful to some good men who have been good mentors.

Maria Cimperman: More than one of us have mentioned mentoring and people walking alongside you. I think another piece is somebody who notices you and also invites you. Cathy, the bishops voted for you to be part of the Synod Assembly, right? Christina, somebody knew you, and knew you could do facilitation, and you were a theologian, and so here you are. And Avril, year two, we needed a facilitator, and somebody brought your name up. We need new ways to include women. When a woman is on a committee or commission, on a three-year rotation, we do not need to rotate the one woman out and have another woman replace her. We need to add another woman. It would be a more feminine, inclusive and adult learning model, in which we can continue to learn from one another and walk together—with everyone.

Avril Baigent: A strong thread running through this conversation is the need to imagine what is possible for women in the Church. Role models, including those of religious sisters who headed many Catholic organizations that would otherwise have been led by men, help create the imaginary of women in leadership. More specifically, mentors (oftentimes senior men) have provided ongoing support and encouragement for those breaking new ground. Maria is right, though, that those who are now in senior positions need to advocate for women, and be creative in the ways we invite and include.

2.D: Exclusion and Lack of Recognition

Catherine Clifford: It's very popular right now to be a raving misogynist and get away with it. I think we have to acknowledge how many Christians and members of our churches contribute to this. One of the things that struck me at the Synod is all the rigorous theological reflection done by Catholic women in constructive feminist theology is unknown to the men at the Synod, because they've been forbidden to read it in their seminary. I have the experience of students who come to us in Canada from Asia and Africa who've never read African women writers or Asian women writers. And I teach a course in feminist theology, and it is very middle of the road, focused on a constructive engagement with the tradition. It is a revelation to them.

We need to be very mindful that this is a challenge. In this context, the Synod is saying: We need to pay attention to women's voices. We need to include women's participation at every level and all decision-making bodies in the Church. We need to have inclusive language in the liturgy, everywhere in the world, in every language. My goodness, if we actually put that into practice, it would be revolutionary.

Susan Pascoe: Look at the involvement of the women in those small Christian communities, or in pastoral life in so many countries. They are very significant in the Pacific, but we learned more about them in Africa and in parts of Asia during the Synod. There's leadership. These women who are keeping faith alive in small communities, people who may only receive the Eucharist a couple of times a year, but in between, they're gathering people. This is leadership, but it receives little recognition.

Renée Köhler-Ryan: I can give you an example of this, actually, as well. I helped to write a liturgical brief for a church that was then renovated. It is gorgeous. At the opening, every single man who had contributed was mentioned, but I was not mentioned at all. And it was only on the way out the door that the parish priest said, "Well, we couldn't have done this without you." And I just turned to my husband who was furious, and I said, "Wouldn't that have been nice if he'd actually mentioned me in the list?"

Susan Pascoe: What is that, except for an example of clericalism?

Avril Baigent: A female friend of mine writes homily notes for the Redemptorists, and sometimes listens to her own stuff being read out.

Renée Köhler-Ryan: Not ever named, either.

Avril Baigent: This, I think, is one of the most subtle obstacles. Until women's contributions to the Church are fully recognized, from African women theologians to the professional advice given to a parish, we are living in a partial reality.

The obstacles we have outlined across the four themes range from the practical to the conceptual: from finance and access to restricted imaginaries and self-censure. Not everyone agreed (for example about women deacons) but there were significant shared experiences of both wounds and gifts, above all centered around a sense of calling that could not be denied. Taking seriously the equal baptismal dignity of women and men would include: re-imagining the very notion of vocation; funding equivalents of formal seminary training while recognizing the role of religious orders and academia in forming women; expanding the imaginaries of what roles women can already play; and recognizing the contribution of women to the Church both throughout our history and now.

QUESTION 3: WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCES OF LEADERSHIP?

Susan Pascoe: Here in the Australian Church there's a lot of roles women are assuming, such as principals of schools, CEOs of hospitals and welfare agencies. We have one of the highest rates of women in leadership in the world. But I do understand for some women the fact that they may not exercise a sacramental role in the life of the Church is deeply distressing. It is not a calling I have ever had myself. Moving to the ordination of women deacons would be good steps now, but it may still be too controversial. That's a matter for the Pope and his advisors to think through.

Renée Kohler-Ryan: From being assistant librarian when I was a student to being Associate Deputy Vice Chancellor which is what I am now, I kept on being given leadership roles. I started to realize that people were seeing this is something I could do, which as women, we might not always think. I have approached leadership very much through relationships. And then the mentoring that happens with other colleagues as well, just appreciating when there is a bit of a power shift, and seeing it as more of an opportunity to serve.

What I have certainly found challenging is that, sometimes, with every good intention in the world, people think that because one is a woman with leadership capacity, that they should be given lots of jobs to do. So I actually had to leave one parish because I was being asked to do everything. All I wanted to do was to go to Mass and go home and have lunch with my kids and my husband rather than running the Altar Society, training the lectors, helping all the new parents, and everything else like that. It was just too much. So I think, there needs to be appreciation that service to the Church might actually be through one's career. Sometimes I feel like that is almost seen as a luxury, as though that is not actually the vocation. But I have been able more and more to realize that, actually, my work is my vocation, and everyone needs their Sabbath.

Susan Pascoe: Sometimes there is a distinction between remunerated and unremunerated involvements. In the minds of some, it is only volunteer activity that's truly vocational in nature. Those in paid Church roles may also be responding to a calling.

Avril Baigent: It's quite subtle, isn't it? We are back to that notion of what it means to live out our vocation as a woman: what gets recognized; what is counted and not counted.

3.A: Women at the Synod Assembly

Catherine Clifford: I am so happy, Avril, that you are taking this methodology of starting from women's experience. One of the things

where there was pushback during the Synod was there was an attempt in the drafting of the Final Document, to minimize women's experience of exclusion. And to minimize what had emerged from the consultation, that women in every context encounter obstacles and experience this non-recognition and devaluing of their gifts and charisms and their work. I would just say that every word, and there are not many, in the Final Document on women was fought for. Hard. That is a story that needs to be told. It happened at my table that men said, "No, it's not true that in virtually every place women encounter obstacles." And I said, "I'm sorry, that's exactly what was said." There was, I think, a substantial pushback in that final week against all of this language.

Avril Baigent: I did have bishops at my table affirming that the language of the Final Document represented what the women of their dioceses had said to them. But at our diocesan women's retreat, I was sharing paragraph 60, and then somebody said to me, "This isn't our women, right? This is the global women, this is the women in Africa, or somewhere else." And then about twenty women all got up and shared their experience of how their own sense of ministry and charism had been belittled in various ways within the Church. Not always by priests, it has to be said, it was often by other members of the congregation.

Christina Kheng: I've got a suggestion for the next steps. I have always thought that the experience of the Synod, and especially at the assembly, needs to be highlighted because it is a real-life experience where so many women were there, playing really important roles and speaking up very influentially. I think the world and Catholics themselves need to see this, that women participants from various walks of life were present, and very naturally being ourselves and exercising our competence. And the Synod was very fruitful. All these experiences, the optics, the stories, need to get out more so that it becomes ingrained into the consciousness of many Catholics.

Avril Baigent: I salute all the women at the Assembly. All the grit and determination and faith that it takes just to keep on down that path. It's astonishing, really, but also unsurprising that there are not more women in the canonical places where women can be exercising leadership. The work of this conversation really helps to explain why.

QUESTION 4: WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL NEXT STEPS?

Avril Baigent: There is a rich opportunity to raise awareness of what women are already doing. For example, my doctoral research

into the faith identity and practices of Catholic teenagers highlighted the importance of families, and particularly the women—the mums, the grandmas—in the significant domestic labor of raising Catholic children. It revealed a skill of spiritual apprenticeship, which walks with them through their teenage years and can relate church teaching in a way that is applicable to them. We should also tell more stories of the saints and biblical women. I would love, for example, to have a Gospel which includes Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday morning. Every year I mourn that we have a wonderful Triduum, but we do not hear her story until the Tuesday, by which time no one is in church. What prevents us from having that passage on Easter Sunday to recognize the Apostle to the Apostles?

Renée Köhler-Ryan: Feminine spirituality is there in the Church. I often think of those young women, the Holy Roman martyrs who are named during the Mass, such a powerful witness. And then, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, two doctors of the Church (along with St Teresa of Avila and St Therese of Lisieux)—all of these really powerful women, and somehow, they are not our models right now.

Why could we not have Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday morning? Why could we not have many of the other voices of women throughout the Old and New Testament? How have we ended up where we are right now? And what might the Second Vatican Council have to teach us about *ressourcement* that isn't only going back to previous historical sources in Scripture and in a theological tradition, but in the ways of living the Christian life. Is there something there that we could find that might help us to have more of a balance?

Susan Pascoe: Even though it is not my personal vocation, I would like to see women in deacon roles, noting there is work being done to look more broadly at the role of the priesthood and the diaconate. Aside from that we can recognize and celebrate the many women in leadership here in Australia. Much of the governance leadership comes from the religious congregations themselves when they pass on their ministries.

There is a tremendous opportunity in our Catholic education system to form young women and men, for lives of mature Christian living, whatever it will look like in the future. Some of that formation can occur. Women can play a significant role there.

Catherine Clifford: The Synod recognizes that many religious institutes are living witnesses to a synodal culture, from whom we need to learn and receive. And I think that they could play a very important role in the formation of Christians in our communities, in the practices of communal discernment and decision making. I spoke

at a chapter this summer of a congregation of Benedictine women to say, “You are a synodal community, reading the rule of Benedict, you’re a gift to the Church by who you are. If you continue to live this well, could you engage and commit to being a center of synodal formation?” I think this also corresponds to the thirst for spirituality that is in our culture and has been expressed in the consultation that preceded the synodal assembly.

Renée Köhler-Ryan: We need a really concerted effort to recognize what women are already doing as well as calling out where canonically speaking, they can make contributions, but are not being invited or supported or encouraged to do so.

Maria Cimperman: I think women (and men) need to read the Final Document. It’s only 155 paragraphs. There’s no substitute for women reading the document, praying and reflecting with it, being able to quote it, discussing it and finding ways to act on it—with others. I see who is often missing from the tables of discussion, discernment, and decision-taking. We are all in need of conversion.

We also need to create some spaces for the challenging conversations, and we need to learn new skills for how to do this. What are the topics that need space and time? This is a fully embodied conversion. Another practical step, as we hear in the Final Document the importance of bringing forth the voices of women: cite women. Who you cite is not simply a strategy. It is a moral decision.

All of us in this conversation also have a platform. We need to tell stories of where we are working together. Stories need to be told where things are working because it opens people’s imagination.

Witness, witness, witness. Create those spaces.

CONCLUSION: LIVING THE PARADOX

These conversations expose the paradox at the heart of Catholic women’s vocation. The very presence of women as experts and voting members at the Rome Assembly would almost suggest that the work of inclusion is complete. However, whilst the Church has taken positive steps towards engaging women in positions of responsibility, obstacles remain at multiple, mutually reinforcing levels. Intersections between lay/clerical and male/female status can muddy the waters. Obstacles include masculine and clerical imaginaries of vocation that struggle to conceive of women’s calling beyond religious life and married life; the difficulty in accessing paid formation opportunities; the precarity of lay employment; and the lack of recognition for women’s contributions. Both the WUCWO data and this conversation show that even the women who served at the Synod Assembly, who

advise bishops or direct Catholic institutions, encountered these obstacles repeatedly.

The roundtable discussion reveals how these obstacles are perpetuated. Traditional notions of calling and charism can lead to censure and even self-censure as women ‘adopt historicity as normativity’ (in Christina’s phrase). These hamper the necessary work of prophetic re-imagining of vocation required to move from a largely male and clerical institution, to a recognition of the equal dignity of baptism of men and women. Structurally, implementation of the Synod is entrusted primarily to bishops and priests, thus sidelining women from the work of dismantling the obstacles that currently exclude them. Catherine’s testimony that at the Synod Assembly every word about women “was fought for. Hard” exemplifies the resistance that persists even within processes explicitly designed to engage women’s voices.

What is at stake here transcends the sense of calling of individual women. Rather, as the Final Document states, the lack of recognition of women’s charisms and vocation “is to the detriment of the Church’s shared mission” (no. 60). The accounts in this article reveal that where women’s gifts are engaged, mission flourishes, with women leading remote communities, forming bishops in leadership, facilitating discernment processes and leading theological institutes. The practical next steps identified by participants—citing female scholars, highlighting women in existing roles, funding formation for men and women, reforming canonical structures, and including women’s voices in liturgical texts—are not radical innovations but responses to the equal baptismal dignity already affirmed in Scripture and Church teaching.

The Church stands at a moment of choice. Catholic women across the world have named obstacles to their full and equal participation. Yet the obstacles they face require structural and cultural dismantling. The question facing the Church is not whether women possess the charisms and vocations for leadership. That question has been answered by centuries of witnesses, and the voices of women today. The question is whether the Church will undertake the hard work of removing the obstacles preventing women from exercising those gifts fully, or continue to impoverish its own mission by failing to take them seriously. **M**

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