

7. Women Participation

Theological Briefing Papers for the Synod 2023

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Summary

The Working Document speaks at some length about the “full and equal participation of women,” an issue “almost all reports raise” (no. 60-65). The *Instrumentum Laboris* makes it one of the topics for discernment: “How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?” (IL, B 2.3).

In the academic literature the topic of women is often mentioned, yet mostly in passing. A limited number of contributions gives it sustained attention. In these contributions one finds strong pleas for overcoming clerical, male-dominated structures, processes, and thinking. One senses frustration about past and present misogyny, exclusion, stereotypes, and the slow rate of changes. Women ordination (to diaconate and/or priesthood) is addressed yet it is not the main topic.

Detailed Analysis

Statistics

- The terms woman/women are mentioned 3,186 times in 60% of the documents (395/651). The top 4 articles feature more than 130 references each (Eckholt, Estévez, Berrelleza & Zagano, Faye). There are 14 contributions that focuses on the topic of women (most of which feature below and in the Recommend Readings).
- The authors come from across the globe: Brazil (Souza), Burkina Faso (Faye), Chili (Arenas), Germany (Eckholt, Kolm, Wendel), India (Abraham), Philippines (Del Castillo, Sanchez), Spain (Estévez & Martínez-Gayol, López, Martínez), USA (Berrelleza & Zagano, Heller, Zagano).

1) Exclusion

- Various aspects of exclusion are thematized. Eckholt points at the misogyny in Thomas Aquinas' anthropology—he considers women inferior to men and incapable of representing Christ—that still marks ecclesial reflection. Feminist theology exposes power structures and mentalities that obstruct women participation (Abraham, Estévez & Martínez). Indeed, women are usually underrepresented in ecclesial gatherings, e.g., the Second Vatican Council (23 observers with 2,000+ Council fathers) (Arenas, Estévez & Martínez, Souza), CELAM gatherings (Souza), or diocesan synods (Kolm). The same holds true for the Vatican Dicasteria (Heller) and the Synod on the Youth and the Amazonia Synod (Berrelleza & Zagano, Zagano). Sanchez speaks of exclusion of women and others as a “social sin.” Ecclesial exclusion sometimes overlaps with societal and cultural patterns of exclusion (Souza).
- All authors point with frustration at the slow rate of change, and some note the resistance of groups making greater participation difficult. Some quote from Francis' 2015 address: “journeying together is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice” (Estévez & Martínez, Faye). Faye also elaborates reasons for hope, such as the nomination of Nathalie Becquart, and the “Women’s Consultation Group of the Pontifical Council for Culture.”

2) Participation

- A desire for greater participation is felt in all articles. That desire is inspired by both the synodal renewal and transformations in society, both of which are about the participation of *all* (Estévez & Martínez, Faye, Martínez, cf. others). Greater participation is essential for synodality, not secondary: “Walking together affects directly the question of women in the Church” (Martínez). It is rooted in baptism, *sensus fidelium*, and charisms (almost all). Moreover, actual church life provides examples of women leadership (Abraham, Berrelleza & Zagano, Del Castillo, Zagano), women theologians (Azcuy), and women with responsible positions in the Vatican (Faye). Past examples include Catharine of Sienna (Zagano). A growing majority of US Catholics accepts women deacons (Berrelleza & Zagano), and this is true for other contexts too (Eckholt).
- According to these authors, what is needed is the following:
 - Other types of reflection. This includes re-imagining anthropology, e.g., by overcoming stereotypical thinking on women that focuses on service, motherly

qualities and Mary as a disciple, virgin and spouse (almost all authors). Other aspects that are mentioned are: imagining leadership as “distributed leadership” (Arenas), priestly ministry as service (Eckholt), and the Church as communion instead of a hierarchy of power (Martínez). Generally speaking, caring and listening should take the place of using one another and using nature (Martínez).

- Listening more to women’s experience. This will open our eyes to the reality and plurality of women’s realities (Del Castillo, Faye, Estévez & Martínez, Martínez). We need to promote possibilities for dialogue and encounter.
- Structural change. As ecclesial structures and canon law are ordination-based and therefore male-dominated, including women in *decision making* and in *decision taking* requires deliberate efforts that involve structural changes, so that women participation is not a favor or an option ‘if need be’ (Abraham, Arenas, Faye, Martínez, Zagano).

3) Ordination

- Some articles address women’s ordination to the diaconate and/or priesthood (Berrelleza & Zagano, Eckholt, Heller, Sanchez, Wendel) sometimes with a more general focus on ministries (Estévez & Martínez). Authors refer to the extensive body of post-conciliar scholarship related to women and ordination that thematizes, amongst other things, the fundamental baptismal equality of men and women, historical evidence of women deacons, the misogynic Thomistic anthropology (see above) and androcentric understanding of the priesthood, and the pastoral reality in which women play an important role.

Materials: Major Recommended Readings

Abraham, Kochurani, “Sinodalidad: Cuestiones críticas y preocupaciones de género desde Asia” *Concilium. Revista internacional de teología* (2021): 199-210.

———, “Synodalität: Kritische Fragen und Bedenken zu Genderfragen aus Asien,” *Concilium. Internationale Zeitschrift für Theologie* 57 (2021): 149-157.

———, “Synodality: Critical Questions and Gender Concerns from Asia,” *Concilium. International Journal for Theology* (2021): 37-46.

Arenas, Sandra, “Sin exclusiones: catolicismo, mujeres y liderazgo distribuido,” *Teología y Vida* 61 (2020): 537-553.

Berrelleza, Erick and Phyllis **Zagano**, “What Do U.S. Catholics Think About Women Deacons?,” *Review of Religious Research* 61 (2019): 273-284.

- Del Castillo**, Fides A., “Toward Synodality and Social Transformation: Lived Religion of Select Catholic Women Servant Leaders,” *Religions* 13, 963 (2022): 1-11.
- Eckholt**, Margit, “Ministerios para mujeres en la Iglesia?: Debates en el camino sinodal de la Iglesia alemana,” *Teología y Vida* 61 (2020): 511-535.
- Estévez López**, Elisa, and Nurya **Martínez-Gayol** Fernández, “‘Escuchar, dialogar y discernir’ con las mujeres. Retos de una Iglesia sinodal,” *Estudios Eclesiásticos: Revista trimestral de investigación e información teológica* 97 (2022): 555-589.
- Faye**, Anne Béatrice, “La sinodalidad en femenino: nuevos espacios de discernimiento y de colaboración en la Iglesia,” in *Sinodalidad y reforma. Un desafío eclesial*, ed. by Rafael Luciani, Serena Noceti and Carlos Schickendantz (Madrid: PPC, 2022), 203-227.
- Heller**, Karin, “‘Steht oder fällt’ die weltweite Synodale Kirche mit der Frauenfrage?,” in *Synodalisierung. Eine Zerreiẞprobe für die katholische Weltkirche? Expertinnen und Experten aus aller Welt beziehen Stellung*, ed. by Paul Zulehner, Peter Neuner and Anna Hennersperger (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2022), 177-190.
- Kolm**, Melanie, *Frauen in der Katholischen Kirche – betroffen und beteiligt. Ekklesiologische Reflexionen über nachkonziliare synodale Prozesse* (Theologische Frauenforschung in Europa, vol. 27) (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2016).
- Martínez Cano**, Silvia, “Hablar de sinodalidad es hablar de mujeres,” in *En camino hacia una iglesia sinodal. De Pablo VI a Francisco*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and Teresa Compte (Madrid: PPC, 2020), 347-367.
- Sanchez**, Rachel Joyce Marie O., “The Synod on the Youth from the Perspective of Gender Minorities in the Philippines,” *Asian Horizons. Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 13 (2019): 60-74.
- Souza**, Alzirinha, “El rol de la mujer en la Iglesia. ¿Un contratestimonio sinodal?,” in *En camino hacia una iglesia sinodal. De Pablo VI a Francisco*, ed. by Rafael Luciani and Teresa Compte (Madrid: PPC, 2020), 369-388.
- Wendel**, Saskia, “Partizipation von Frauen am kirchlichen Handeln nach ‘Querida Amazonia’,” *Zeitschrift für Pastoraltheologie* 40 (2020): 159-168.
- Zagano**, Phyllis, “Whom to Obey: the Law or the Prophets?,” *Horizonte. Revista de Estudos de Teologia e Ciências da Religiao* 19 (2021): 630-645.

Italian References

- Simona Segoloni, “Chiesa e questione femminile. Un caso serio per la sinodalità,” in Riccardo Battocchio and Livio Tonello (eds.), *Sinodalità. Dimensione della Chiesa, pratiche nella chiesa* (Padova: EMP, 2020), 81-98.
- Serena Noceti, “Donne e ministero diaconale. Un ministero possibile per una nuova chiesa,” in *Riječki teološki časopis* 26 (2018) II, 291-305 [originally “Mujeres y ministerio diaconal. Un ministerio posible para una nueva iglesia,” in *Iglesia viva* 52 (2018) 274, 45-61].

Phyllis Zagano and Bernard Pottier, “Che cosa sappiamo delle diacone?,” in *Il regno documenti* (2021) III 69-74
[translated from *Asian Horizons* 13(2019) 4, 647-658].