

Women Leaders – Towards a Brighter Future

My thanks to the British and Australian Ambassadors and to Caritas Internationalis for the privilege of presenting these opening remarks as we begin this International Women's Day Conference with the theme: Women Leaders; Towards a Brighter Future.

This title bring me back to the early 1600's when the foundress of my religious congregation, an English woman, Mary Ward, envisaged a new form of religious life for women. It was to be non-cloistered, with sisters engaging in the education of women and girls and meeting the social needs of the day. In 1617 when a cleric made an observation about the weakness of the religious fervour of her sisters saying 'they are but women' she responded vigorously saying "there is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things." Then she added "And I hope in God that it will be seen that women in time to come will do much." Sadly in the 17th century her God given vision was suppressed by the Church.

However over the centuries Mary Ward's vision for women and the vision of countless women within church and society has brought about change. Some years I shared a panel with women leaders from different fields – one a CEO of, another an international lawyer, a third an astronaut and the fourth ran her own business. Several were mothers with children. The topic focused on Pope Francis' appeal for a revolution of tenderness and compassion. They shared how tenderness and compassion in the home and workplace were essential for the flourishing of humanity. These were women who had broken through the glass ceiling of their professions and who sought to make a difference.

While I remember that particular experience, my thoughts also turn to the many women that I have met over the years, living in challenging and difficult situations; women who are leaders in their own right because of their extraordinary resilience, courage and hope. I remember them today and honour them. We can't forget the many women who today are living with their families

in difficult contexts especially where wars, conflicts and scarcity prevail. I want to remember women who walk for four hours to the well for water and labor in the fields; those women who have been trafficked; women who migrate overseas to work to support their families at home. I think of the women who challenge cultural mores in their societies and want a better and more fulfilling life for their daughters. I hear the voice of one woman in South Sudan proclaiming loudly “I will see to it that my daughter won’t be valued by the number of cows needed for her dowry.” I want to remember the women who are raising their voices to protest at environmental destruction happening near their villages because of mining and deforestation. I could continue and add to this list.

In the midst of these demanding situations women are showing leadership across the planet. Wells are being dug, trees are being planted, cultural practices are being slowly challenged and changed. Awareness raising campaigns are tackling human trafficking. Women are advocating for education and health care for themselves and their families. They are joining hands across old bitterness’s and hatreds to work for peace and justice. They are working together in local cooperatives and women’s’ groups to build sustainable livelihoods. They sing and dance and rejoice together even in the midst of daily difficulties because they know that community and collaboration are the only way to build a common future. The Dominican Albert Nolan wrote that “the only way ahead is together, hand in hand, helping and healing one another.”¹

And where are we the Catholic sisters? We are there in the midst of the daily struggles of people. We have answered Pope Francis call to “leave our nests”; “go out through that door and meet the people” “go out on the streets”; “go to the frontiers” “leave the centre and travel towards the peripheries”; “reach the fringes of humanity.”² Together with other women and men we are building

¹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today*,

² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Rejoice: A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women*, (R) # 10, KW, p. 60; Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), #46

networks of solidarity and developing practical projects to tackle human trafficking, to welcome migrants and refugees and to mitigate and confront climate change and environmental destruction, reaching out in multiple ways to those seeking for help of any kind. Care for the planet and care for the poor is at the heart of our mission and ministries because “fullness of life” is at the core of Gospel living.

As women religious we feel called to take up a leadership role in encouraging people to work for real connectedness, to being in solidarity with one another, to work together to tackle global and local challenges and to advocate with governments for changes in policies and programmes. Pope John Paul II stressed that the virtue of solidarity calls us not to

*“.....a vague feeling of compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of many people, both near and far. On the contrary it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are really responsible for all”.*³

And where are we as Catholic Sisters within the Church? As Sisters we occupy an interesting place in the life of the Church. We are lay people with a vocation to live the vowed life in community. We are not clerics and yet the public often view sisters as part of the clerical institution. Like women everywhere who care about the Church and its mission, we want to bring our experiences, insights and perspectives to shaping the mission of Christ in the world. As religious we are called to a prophetic-mystical presence in the church and in the world. Pope Francis in a message to religious women and men said

*I am counting on you “to wake up the world”, since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. “Radical evangelical living is not only for religious: it is demanded of everyone.....This is the priority that is needed right now: “to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy.”*⁴

³ St. John Paul II, 1987.

⁴ Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis to all Consecrated Persons, II, 2

We can bring that prophetic dimension to the life of the Church at every level. During these past years we have welcomed the appointment of women – both religious and lay – to positions within Vatican Dicasteries, knowing that they bring with them a diversity of perspectives and experiences. In addition, we are now hearing the voices and experiences of thousands of sisters living and ministering at the margins into the public discourse. In the past the voices and experiences of sisters were rarely heard. Now that has changed and sisters in many parts of the world see that the call to be prophets impels them to speak out on behalf of those who have no voice but more so to stand with them as they raise their own voices to seek the conditions necessary to live dignified lives.

Much has happening in terms of raising up the importance of the role of women in leadership in the Church. Pope Francis has said on numerous occasions that “it is necessary to broaden the opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the church.” An increasing number of women, lay and religious, from different parts of the world serve on the Councils of Vatican Dicasteries/Departments, Pontifical Councils and Academies, Commissions. They bring their expertise in theology, liturgy, law, economics, the sciences, health, bioethics, art and architecture, education, culture, family life, religious life and many other fields to these roles and the Church is enriched by these diverse gifts.

In the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis wrote that “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.”⁵ In the post Synodal exhortation “*Querida Amazonia*” Pope Francis praised the way lay and religious women have kept the faith alive in the Amazon region. During the Synod itself he said that we still have not understood how and why women are important in the Church saying “we focus on the functional – what offices they are permitted to hold, which is important but it is not

⁵ *Evangelium Gaudium*, #103.

everything.” He continually acknowledges the essential and irreplaceable contribution of women to the Church, their equal dignity, saying that women must be valued in their own right. What is important according to Pope Francis is that through baptism as Christians we all share equally in the mission and ministry of the Church. This was the central theme of the recent Synod on Synodality. The number of women attending this Synod of Bishops was increased significantly and the women participants – lay and religious - had the right to vote.

Participation at the synod was a profound experience for those who attended. The Conversation in the Spirit method enabled participants to listen to and to hold with respect and reverence different perspectives on many topics. Among the women participants there is a diversity of perspectives. The role that women can and will play will be crucial in the emergence of a synodal church. The matter of the female diaconate is being considered; the possibility for women to preach and the need for new types of ministries were other topics raised. The “synod” asks the participants to discern, by the light of the Word of God and by listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.⁶ This is not a quick process, it will take time – even beyond the second session of the Synod - and deep listening to one another and to the Holy Spirit.

Before the Synod on Synodality, Archbishop Mark Coleridge of Brisbane acknowledged that synodality would be messy, marked by tensions and would require "holy patience." He is convinced that this "is the way forward... (this) is what the Spirit is saying to the Church today." For Archbishop Coleridge these synodality is "a moment of awakening", which is "re-centering the whole Church". He notes that this is calling us to a new kind of faith where all vocations are being reconfigured, not just those pertaining to lay people. The archbishop said the "call to synodality is profoundly biblical", saying that we are not part of

⁶ International Theological Commission, Synodality in the life and Mission of the Church

a "static, but of an on-the-way Church" that is continually in process. He called the Patriarch Abraham the "father of synodality" and pointed out that "journeying" is the root metaphor of the Bible." It is dislocation, moving from one place to another" but he also warned that "this all happens at a price." It will involve painful decisions of what we leave behind and what we take on," he said.

And so as women we have set out on this synodal journey with hope as the participation and leadership of women begins to flourish within the church and society. There is much still to be done. Reflection, presence, encounter, sensitivity to the needs of others, going deeper, discerning the greater good are in our DNA as women. Today as we live through major global challenges, no matter where we live, people are experiencing vulnerability and fragility and the call to solidarity and compassion. More and more we realize that we can only make the future by walking together, women and men sharing companionship and the lights of the Holy Spirit as we move towards the edge of tomorrow. Now we can echo again the words of May Ward that I quoted at the beginning – "there is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things."