

ENVISIONING OF A BETTER CHURCH IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM: A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to highlight the condition of women in the Church before, during and after Vatican II. It appreciates the positive changes brought about through the Council and through the teachings of recent Popes and calls for further progressive steps to improve the place and involvement of women in the Church. It begins with a rather detailed and well-documented discussion of the plight of women in the Church before the Council, and then studies the welcome changes opened up by it. After appreciatively discussing the proclamations of the post-Vatican II Popes, the paper concludes that the process of giving due place to women in the Church should continue, and in this process, women will also have to take a proactive role.

Key words: Equality, Ennoble, Dignity, Transformation, Gender Justice, Empowerment and Communion

Introduction

Jesus wanted the community of disciples he founded to be a community of love and service, as is clear from his statement, “by this shall people know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). The history of the Church testifies that, to a great extent, it

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has lived up to this expectation of Jesus. The Second Vatican Council has shed much fresh light on many areas of the Catholic Church, challenging it for renewal and re-structuring in order to be more effective in its mission. *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 9 highlights the sublime fact that those who believe in Christ are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people, and also the people of God. It also acknowledges that the people who have Christ as their head have the dignity and freedom of the children of God, in whose hearts the Holy Spirit dwells as in His temple. Its law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us.

Pope Francis, in the encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti* points out that a Christian is called to overpower the dark shadows of neglect and violence in the service of petty interests of power, gain and division.¹ The Church, as the sacrament of Christ, urges us to establish unity, equality, justice and holiness amidst the corruption and exploitation that exist in the contemporary world. Many feminist theologians believe that the matter of giving women their rightful place and due respect in human society and in the Church still remains a yet-to-be-fulfilled promise. The existence of many structures and attitudes which still fail to duly respect, protect, and fulfil the legitimate rights of women continues to call for the Church's attention to intensify its efforts for a genuine *aggiornamento*.

Jesus Christ honoured and empowered women because they were often conveniently ignored and undervalued in society and religion. The focus on the presence and participation of women in the ministry of Jesus Christ serves as a testimony to the principles of justice, freedom, and equality. Many Christian theologians continue to teach an unfair attitude towards women based on the faulty philosophical understanding that they came about through a physical degeneration of the human being (Plato) and that women were defective human beings/infertile males (Aristotle).² They have propagated the message that women should restrain themselves from involving in the ministries of the Church even after Jesus expressed a comprehensively inclusive attitude towards women that was different from the general attitude of his time.³ The gradual progress in understanding of the

¹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti (FT)*, Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship, no. 72, 03 October 2020, Bandra, St Pauls, 2020, 57.

² V.J. Berry, *Why Historical Phenomena Instigates Resistance to Female Clergy*, Morrisville, NC, Lulu, 2016, 36.

³ Women are more prone to fall when tempted than men (1 Tim 2:14), they are to obey their husbands and to be subject to male leadership (Eph. 5:22-23), they are

equal dignity and status of women in the Church can be observed during these 60 years after Vatican II. The 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries' developments in the natural and social sciences paved the path for the transformation of oppressive and discriminating practises towards women in both the sociological and religious arenas.

1. Women in the Church Before and During Vatican Council II

In the past, women played only a secondary role in the ecclesial community on the basis of various cultural and traditional interpretations of the Scripture. The role of women in the Church was assigned based on the belief that women should be subordinate to male authority, and it had a history of exclusion and discrimination. The place of women in the Church largely depended on the extent to which male dominance precluded female leadership. "The ebb and flow of women's participation in leadership does not merely fluctuate according to changes in Biblical exegesis or the reigning interpretation of particular passages of Scripture. Rather, the pattern can also be traced to the institutionalisation of the Church (the development of organisational structures), influences from the surrounding culture, and the Theology of leadership at work in the Church."⁴ The exclusive language and symbols used by the Church legitimised and perpetuated the denigration and obliteration of women as unequal human beings. It discriminated against half of the human population by maintaining the idea that women are not capable of imaging God since they are the lesser forms of humanity. Women were in deep trouble in the Church for weakening their full humanity by absolutizing the maleness of Jesus rather than his humanness.

In many societies, the status and role of women as the ones who bring up children, look after household needs, and help on the farm, remained unaffected until the Industrial Revolution destabilised

unqualified to teach religious doctrines (1 Tim 2:12), they are not to speak or express their views on matters of the Church (1 Tim 2:13), women can be saved only by bearing children (1 Tim 2:15), they are not to wear jewellery or nice clothing (1 Tim 2:9), and have to have their heads covered during worship (1 Cor 11:5-6, and 10), (J.T. Bristow, *What Paul Really Said about Women: An Apostle's Liberating Views on Equality in Marriage, Leadership, and Love*, New York, Harper-Collins, 1991, 1). Paul "also insisted that wives be subject to their husbands and that women are morally weaker than men. He seemed to accept the idea of women speaking during worship in the congregation in Corinth, yet he told Timothy that women were to remain quiet in Church," (Bristow, *What Paul Really Said about Women*, x).

⁴ S.J. Grenz and D.M. Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*, Downers Grove, IL, IVP, 1995, 37.

them.⁵ Rome's attitude towards women before Vatican Council II can be best understood from the following instruction.

In 1949, the Vatican issued a 'very important instruction,' approved by the pope on three issues: private chapels and above all altar 'boys.' It is said there ... 'only when there is no man, women, including consecrated women, can give the responses, but only *ex longinquo*, that is, from a distance.' It was explained that a woman who during Mass would come close to the altar would commit grave sin (which meant of course mortal sin). The instruction also said, 'All moralists agree that a woman coming closer to the altar beyond the communion rail, would commit grave sin.'⁶

The status and role of women according to the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century can be retrieved from Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891). It states that "women ... are not suited for certain occupations; a woman is by nature fitted for home-work, and it is that which is best adapted at once to preserve her modesty and to promote the good bringing up of children and the wellbeing of the family."⁷ Because of the feminist movement's influence from the late 19th century onwards, women began slowly to assert themselves by taking up jobs although they were discouraged by the later instructions of the Popes too.

In 1930, Pope Pius XI in his encyclical letter *Casti Connubii* presents that

The order of love includes both the primacy of the husband with regard to the wife and children, the ready subjection of the wife and her willing obedience, which the Apostle commends in these words: Let women be subject to their husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ is the head of the Church. This subjection, however, does not deny or take away the liberty which fully belongs to the woman both in view of her dignity as a human person, and in view of her most noble office as wife and mother and companion; nor does it bid her to obey her husband's every request if not in harmony with right reason or with the dignity due to wife; nor, in fine, does it imply that the wife should be put on a level with those persons who in law are called minors, to whom

⁵ L.F. Cervantes and L. Harrington, "Woman," *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 14, 2nd ed., 2003, 817.

⁶ B. Häring, "Letter of 11 December 1994," cited in C.E. McEnroy, *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2011, 21.

⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (RN), Encyclical Letter on the Condition of the Working Classes, no. 33, 15 May 1891, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1960, 32.

it is not customary to allow free exercise of their rights on account of their lack of mature judgment, or of their ignorance of human affairs.⁸

It was not an ordinary practice of the Church that women were allowed to be present in an ecumenical council, and Bishop Carmelite Donal Lamont, the bishop of Rhodesia, expressed it, saying “with no previous experience of women’s involvement in Church structures, it never occurred to us that they should be there.”⁹ With the first wave of feminist movement, “unprecedented changes marked the twentieth century, and the Catholic Church was cautious in responding to the questions that concern women.”¹⁰ According to M.R. O’Brien “a review of these (Church’s) teachings on women shows an uneven but noticeable progression from initial reservations and resistance toward increasingly active promotion for the equal involvement of women with men in all dimensions of society: access to opportunities for work, protection from violence and other exploitation, political participation, and the shaping of culture.”¹¹ Even though many statements advocated an egalitarian culture in the Church through various Church documents, the ambiguity in the Church’s view on the status of women continued till the time of the Second Vatican Council.

Like in other areas of serious concern for the Church in contemporary times, Vatican II opened a new chapter in the case of the role of women in the Church. For the first time in the history of the Church women representatives were invited to the Council, *albeit* as ‘*auditrices*.’ 23 women were officially invited to this Council as *auditrices*, an important symbolic gesture.¹² It points out the change of attitude towards women in the Church, allowing them to be part of walking together as the People of God. It was a profound call to end gender-based discrimination and promote women’s presence in the Church and in its administrative structures. The emphasis given to the communion and

⁸ Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (CC), Encyclical Letter on Christian Marriage, nos. 26 and 27, 31 December 1930, in AAS 22, 1930, 549.

⁹ C.E. McEnroy, “Women of Vatican II: Recovering a Dangerous Memory,” in P.M. Hegy, ed., *The Church in the Nineties*, Collegetown, MN, The Liturgical, 1993, 149.

¹⁰ S. Alla, “Women at Vatican II: An Appraisal,” in S.G. Kochuthara, ed., *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, Dharmaram Moral Theology Series 3, Bengaluru, Dharmaram, 2016, 378.

¹¹ M.R. O’Brien, “Women and Papal Teaching,” *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* 14, 2nd ed., 2003, 823-824.

¹² McEnroy, *Guests in Their Own House*, p. 20. 10 of these 23 women were religious sisters. The ‘auditors’ had no official role in the deliberations of the Council, although they attended the meetings of the subcommittees working on Council documents, particularly those that dealt with the laity.

collegial character of the Church in *Lumen Gentium* and the notions of participation, mutual relationship, and co-responsibility points out the willingness of the Church to imbibe the attitude of Jesus, who treated every human person without any gender discrimination.

It must be noted that the women *auditrices* were without the right to speak in the council and were denied communion at the Masses.¹³ Also, it is obvious that fundamental personal rights, such as the right and freedom to choose a husband, embrace a state of life, or acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognised for men, are not universally honoured for women, even in the documents of Vatican II. It explains that

the family is, in a sense, a school for human enrichment. But if it is to achieve the full flowering of its life and mission, the married couple must practise an affectionate sharing of thought and common deliberation as well as eager cooperation as parents in the children's upbringing. The active presence of the father is very important for their training; the mother too, has a central role in the home for the children, especially the younger children, who depend on her considerably; this role must be safeguarded without, however, underrating women's legitimate social advancement.¹⁴

Although the essential and active presence of the father with his children is mentioned, the emphasis in the document that the mother 'has a central role in the home for the children,' may not leave her much time to engage in social and related activities. Nevertheless, this document does open the door for women to take up important activities outside the walls of their home. *GS*, no. 60, explains that "the duty most consonant with our times, especially for Christians, is that of working diligently for fundamental decisions to be taken in economic and political affairs, both on the national and international level, which will everywhere recognise and satisfy the right of all to a human and social culture in conformity with the dignity of the human person without any discrimination of race, sex, nation, religion, or social condition."

GS acknowledges that women are at present employed in almost every area of life, so it is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper role in accordance with their own nature. It seems to be understood that women's nature is both well-defined and limiting, though there was also an implicit concession to new possibilities in the need for everyone to acknowledge and favour the proper and necessary

¹³ Alla, "Women at Vatican II," 380-381.

¹⁴ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes (GS)*, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," no. 52, 07 December 1965, in Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council*, 840-841.

participation of women in cultural life, to which they may not have contributed. But GS serves as a charter in order to establish gender justice in society by renewing and creatively designing the Church's apostolates and effectively implementing programmes to affirm women's dignity and fight against discrimination.¹⁵ GS nos. 29 and 55 inspired Catholic women to look critically at their own traditions and undertake theological studies in view of advancing the reforms initiated by the Council.

Human dignity is a crucial theological principle that the first chapter of GS endorses. The creation account serves as the foundation to affirm every person's dignity. Being made in the image and likeness of God offers inviolable dignity to all, men and women, without distinction. Affirmation of women's dignity enables us to recognise their capacity to know, to decide, to activate their moral agency, and to shape their lives and destinies. Here we note the Church's resolve to make the affirmation and promotion of the inalienable and intrinsic dignity of all people, especially women, her mission.¹⁶

In the decree on the apostolate of the laity of Vatican II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, the importance of women's participation in the various fields of the Church's apostolate is affirmed. "Since in our days women are taking an increasingly active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that their participation in the various sectors of the Church's apostolate should likewise develop."¹⁷ The redefining of the role of women in the documents of Vatican II is implicitly communicated in the expressions of renewed self-understanding of the Church as the People of God, the universal call to holiness, and the baptism-based invitation to the laity to participate in the life of the Church and its mission in their own right.¹⁸

Even though the presence of women in the Council was a first in the history of the Church, the reluctance to consider them as equals without excluding them from the life and mission of the Church indicates that the Church's interventions to empower women and affirm their equal dignity in the Church are still in need of seeing the light of day. The efforts to transform the mindsets, cultural, and traditional structures to ensure women's equal dignity in equal measures within the Church is still today's need, even after 60 years of comprehending the fact in *Gaudium et Spes* that "Women now work in almost all spheres. It is fitting

¹⁵ Alla, "Women at Vatican II," 381.

¹⁶ Alla, "Women at Vatican II," 380-381.

¹⁷ Vatican Council II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA), Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, no. 9, 18 November 1965, in Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, 684.

¹⁸ Alla, "Women at Vatican II," 380.

that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favour the proper and necessary participation of women in cultural life.”¹⁹

2. A Church that Ennobles Women

The steps taken to communicate the importance of women in the Church are many in this third millennium. Through its interventions in the fields of education, health, social welfare developments, mobilisation and organization of women at the grassroots, and human rights advocacy, the Church has contributed a lot to the cause of empowerment of women.²⁰ The recent teachings from John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis reveal that the Church is progressive in its mission of creating a pro-women culture and transforming her ways by reiterating Jesus’ attitude toward women. The recent steps to empower women as ennobled humans in the Catholic Church are displayed by sharing the office of decision making and leadership roles. It gives great hope for having a woman-friendly Church in the near future. The active participation of women in the Church by uplifting them to a status equal to that of men creates a bright and inclusive community that radiates the Gospel values of equality, justice, and freedom. By affirming women’s equal dignity to achieve gender justice built on the wonderful contributions of Vatican II, the Church to surely move more toward gender equality in this third millennium.

2.1. Dynamic Views on Women for a Better Church by John Paul II

John Paul II’s keen interest in the topic of the dignity and vocation of women is obvious in his articulations of a dynamic Church view of women. Some women took over the pastoral and administrative duties in the parishes where there were no parish priests and were appointed as chancellors of dioceses around the world during his pontificate. In 2004, for the first time, he appointed two women theologians to the prestigious International Theological Commission and named a Harvard University law professor, Mary Ann Glendon, to be president of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.²¹ The basic elements of his teaching on women are found in his Apostolic letters *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), and his *Letter to Women* (1995).

¹⁹ GS, no. 60.

²⁰ Rita Noronha, “Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society,” *IJFS* 6, no. 2, 2008, 27.

²¹ C. Wooden, “Pope John Paul II Looked Closely at Role of Women in Church,” <http://www.catholicnews.com/jpii/stories/story12.htm>, accessed 10 August 2013.

Mulieris Dignitatem is the first letter of its kind devoted entirely to the subject of women that continues to guide women and men to reflect on women and their contribution in society.²² The positive understanding of the mission and vocation of women in the creation story impelled John Paul II to argue against the outdated cultural views that God meant women to be subject to men. According to him both women and men are God's images, and they have equal dignity. Hence, both man and woman are called from the beginning to exist side by side or together, one for the other.²³ He holds that the subjugation of women is the result of human beings' sinfulness, and the continuing consequence of it still remains in the situations where the woman remains disadvantaged or discriminated against by the fact of being a woman. "He points to Mary as a permanent model of all the riches of femininity, the specific originality of woman, precisely as God desired her."²⁴

In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* he affirms that "by defending the dignity of women and their vocation, the Church has shown honour and gratitude for those women who- faithful to the Gospel- have shared in every age in the apostolic mission of the whole People of God. They are the holy martyrs, virgins, and mothers of families, who bravely bore witness to their faith and passed on the Church's faith and tradition by bringing up their children in the spirit of the Gospel."²⁵ Hence the history of the Church sincerely acknowledges and appreciates the presence and active participation of women in her life and ministry. In *Laborem Exercens*, the Encyclical letter on the nature and dignity of human work, he called for a social re-evaluation of how women's irreplaceable role in the rearing of children may be exercised without loss of opportunities for gainful and fulfilling work.²⁶ His

²² Antony Chundelikkat, "Anthropological and Theological Foundations of the Dignity and Responsibility of Women in the Light of *Mulieris Dignitatem*," *IJFS* 6, no. 2, 2008, 74.

²³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD), Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, no. 7, 15 August 1988, Bangalore, ATC, 1988, 17.

²⁴ Unnata, "Women in the Teachings of John Paul II," *IJFS* 5, no. 1, 2007, 101.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (OS), Apostolic Letter on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, no. 3, 22 May 1994, in *AAS* 86, 1994, 547; and *MD*, no. 27.

²⁶ O'Brien, "Women and Papal Teaching," p. 826. "It is a fact that in many societies women work in nearly every sector of life. But it is fitting that they should be able to fulfil their tasks in accordance with their own nature, without being discriminated against and without being excluded from jobs for which they are capable, but also without lack of respect for their family aspirations and for their specific role in contributing, together with men, to the good of society. The true advancement of women requires that labour should be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them and at the

Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, with special attention to women, to their rights and roles within the family and society, underlines the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men.²⁷

Christifideles Laici, focusing on the status and role of women, invites all to acknowledge the indispensable contribution of women to the building up of the Church and the development of society.²⁸ Aware of women's greater consciousness of their proper dignity, the Synod Fathers affirmed strongly the urgency of defending and promoting the personal dignity of women and their equality with men.²⁹ This papal exhortation points out that through recognising their responsibility as leading characters, women themselves could do the task of advancing the dignity of women in the Church and society, and it will liberate them from the unjust and deleterious mentality which considers the human being as a thing, as an object to buy and sell, and as an instrument for selfish interests or for pleasures only.³⁰ Inspired and motivated by John Paul II's extensive attention towards developing a dynamic and positive view of women in the Church, particularly focusing on the equal dignity of women along with their empowerment, many Church leaders today express their readiness to articulate some concrete ways to remove gender biases in Christian traditions and in its theological and biblical studies and praxis.

2.2. Dynamic Views on Women for a Better Church by Benedict XVI

Benedict XVI, in his book *Holy Women*, appreciatively acknowledges that "the Church receives great benefit from the exercise of spiritual motherhood by so many women, lay and consecrated, who nourish souls with thoughts of God, who strengthen the people's faith, and direct Christian life towards ever loftier peaks."³¹ As the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), he wrote in 2004 to the Bishops of the Catholic Church about the complementarity of man

expense of the family, in which women as mothers have an irreplaceable role," (John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (LE), Encyclical Letter on Human Work, no. 19, 14 September 1981, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981, 28-29).

²⁷ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC), Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, no. 22, 22 November 1981, Trivandrum, Carmel, 2014, 41.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* (CL), Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, no. 49, 30 December 1988, Mumbai, Pauline, 2002, 143.

²⁹ CL, no. 49.

³⁰ CL, no. 49.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Holy Women*, Huntington, IN, Our Sunday Visitor, 2011, 84.

and woman. Furthermore, in 2008, in his speech to the participants of an international congress on the theme 'Woman and Man, the *'Humanum'* in Its Entirety' he points out that "man and woman's equal dignity, their unity, and their reciprocal and complementary vocations rest on their being created in the image and likeness of God, who created them male and female, avoiding indistinct uniformity and flat and impoverished equality, as well as massive and confrontational difference."³² On 22 March 2009, during his apostolic journey to Cameroon and Angola, in his address to the meeting with Catholic movements for the promotion of women he acknowledged that "history records almost exclusively the accomplishments of men, when in fact much of it is due to the determined, unrelenting, and charitable action of women."³³

2.3. Dynamic Views on Women for a Better Church by Pope Francis

In the 21st century, one could affirm that Church has travelled a long way in her awareness, understanding, and articulation of the fundamental rights of women. The Church pays much attention to making its members aware of the equal dignity of men and women and places women on par with men regarding their fundamental rights and duties.³⁴ In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis makes it clear that being a woman does not disqualify a person from occupying a position more important than that of bishops and priests. In other words, it is not gender that determines the importance of different positions in the Church. He exhorted that "the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity."³⁵ The affirmation given by Pope Francis during his weekly audience on 3 April 2013 indicates the importance of women in the Church. He says: "Women were the first witnesses of Christ and have a special role in spreading the faith. In the

³² "Pope Benedict Praises the Dignity of Women," <https://www.Catholicnewsagency.com/news/11760/pope-benedict-praises-the-dignity-of-women>, accessed 01 September 2022.

³³ Benedict XVI, "Address of the Holy Father Benedict XVI: Parish of Saint Anthony in Luanda," https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090322_promozione-donna.html, accessed 04 September 2022.

³⁴ J.M. Pampara, "Fundamental Rights and Duties of Women in the Catholic Church," *Journal of Dharma* 41, no. 4, 2016 391.

³⁵ EG, no. 104.

Church, and in the journey of faith, women have had and still have a special role in opening the door to the Lord.”³⁶

Through appointing a woman religious, Mary Melone SFA, as the Rector of the Pontifical University of Antonianum, Rome, the Pope acknowledges the important role women are capable of playing at the service of the universal Church. In the Encyclical letter *Laudato Si* Pope Francis invites all humanity to have an integral vision of reality through which one can live free from all kinds of discrimination. He mentions the particular struggles and rights of women³⁷ implicitly, with the awareness that the cries of both women and the earth are connected in the one and same logic of oppression. According to him the integral vision of reality is that which helps every person be accepted as dignified irrespective of gender, caste or power. “For Francis, nature cannot be radically separated from us because of our constant interaction and interconnection with it. If nature is such an inseparable reality, how deep should be the internal link between men and women.”³⁸

Pope Francis issued in 2016 “a decree revising the rules for the traditional foot-washing ritual on Holy Thursday, saying the rite should no longer be limited to men and boys, but also include women and young girls, ... [as] an attempt to improve the method of implementation, to express the full meaning of the gesture performed by Jesus at the Last Supper, his gift of himself ‘to the end’ for the salvation of the world, his boundless charity.”³⁹ In *Amoris Laetitia* he opines that “the equal dignity of men and women makes us rejoice to see old forms of discrimination disappear, and within families there is a growing reciprocity. If certain forms of feminism have arisen which we must consider inadequate, we must nonetheless see in the women’s

³⁶ Francis, “General Audience,” http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130403_udienza-generale_en.html, accessed 26 November 2013.

³⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si (LS)*, Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, nos. 52, 93 and 158, 24 May 2015, Bengaluru, Claretian, 2015, 38-39, 68-69, and 117.

³⁸ S.M. Kanayankal, “Gender Equality and the Ecological Virtues in *Laudato Si*,” *Journal of Dharma* 41, no. 4, 2016, 454.

³⁹ I.S. Martin, “Francis Changes the Rules: Women Can Have Their Feet Washed on Holy Thursday,” <https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/01/francis-changes-the-rules-women-can-have-their-feet-washed-on-holy-thursday>, accessed 25 August 2022.

movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.”⁴⁰

An association of women working in the Vatican was launched on 23 November 2016 and officially announced on 7 December 2016. It is named Women in the Vatican and aims at providing a personal and professional network for women to offer support to each other and to the community, as well as creating a network of friendship, exchange, and solidarity among all for personal and professional growth. In the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope clearly states the inconsistency between the words/decisions and reality, in which women remain doubly poor because they endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment, and violence. Pope Francis mentions that “the organisations of societies worldwide are still far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men.”⁴¹

The appointment of Nathalie Becquart XMCJ as the first woman with voting rights in the Synod of Bishops by Pope Francis on 06 February 2021 indicates his desire for a greater participation of women in the process of discernment and decision-making in the Church. Pope Francis “sees the ‘masculine monochrome’ of leadership and influence in the Catholic Church as ‘a defect, an imbalance’ that harms the Church itself and its mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the world.”⁴² The recent appointment of three women, namely, Raffaella Petrini FSE, Yvonne Reungoat FMA, and Dr Maria Lia Zervino to the Dicastery for Bishops on 13 July 2022 testifies Pope Francis as a person who “seeks to usher in more gender equality within the Church’s positions of government and responsibility.”⁴³ Through his approval of the “changes to the norms governing the Synod of Bishops, a Vatican body that gathers the world’s bishops together for periodic meetings, following years of demands by women to have the right to vote.”⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia (AL)*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family, no. 54, 19 March 2016, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016, 43.

⁴¹ *FT*, no. 23.

⁴² C. Wooden, “Vatican Magazine Looks at Women in the Church in the Age of Pope Francis,” <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/12/30/vatican-magazine-looks-women-church-age-pope-francis>, accessed 10 February 2020.

⁴³ “In First, Pope Francis Names 3 Women to Dicastery for Bishops,” <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270543.shtml>, accessed 1 September 2022.

⁴⁴ “Pope Francis Allows Women to Vote at Upcoming Bishops’ Meeting,” <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pope-francis-allows-women-to-vote-at-upcoming-bishops-meeting/articleshow/99793678.cms>, accessed 22 May 2023.

Conclusion

The contributions of Vatican II for a better Church can be affirmed by glancing at the council documents' firm foundations for a very vibrant and dynamic Church. The contemporary paths of the Church of Christ are dynamic in its implementation of the renewal of its structures, and procedures, and institutions. The efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to walk together as members of the Church and discern God's will concretely for the Church in this third millennium are manifested in different ways through her teachings and performances. The contemporary efforts of the Church to empower, first of all, women as ennobled humans reassure humanity with the hope of a renewed life. The Church's activities in fostering and weaving together healthy relationships in the contemporary world point towards a bright future. The focus on enhancing the uniqueness of each person and engendering mutual respect in a community would usher in a world that is better attuned to the plan of God, the Creator.

On the basis of the historical fact that women served together with men in the early years of the ecclesial community (Acts 9:36-41; 16:11-40; 21:4-9; and Rom 16:1-5), the role of women in the Church is still well defined and they should have an active part in the life of the Church. The attitudes which deter the equal participation of women in the life of the Church as God's images should be replaced with a view of individual gifts and ministries that affirms the fundamental equality of women and men in Christ.⁴⁵ As Pope Francis acknowledges, "the role of woman in the Church is not only maternity, mother of the family, but it is stronger. The role of the woman in the Church mustn't only end as mom, worker, limited ... The Church cannot be understood without women, but active women in the Church, with their profile that they carry forward."⁴⁶ Women also have to become aware and accept that they are capable of serving the Church with its vast existing needs, such as active involvement in world evangelisation, public ministries of the Church to empower the discriminated - especially women, and to educate the members about their rights to live as images of God.

⁴⁵ Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, 13.

⁴⁶ J.L. Allen, *The Francis Miracle: Inside the Transformation of the Pope and the Church*, New York, Time, 2015, 127.