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WOMEN IN THE SYNODAL CHURCH

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Abstract

There is a growing awareness among us today that women are not given their rightful place in the life and mission of the Church. This exclusion has been often justified by recourse to Scripture. It is generally accepted that reading Scripture is ideologically biased against women, and some texts are mistranslated and misinterpreted by the exegetes. Hence, the Bible has become an important source and legitimizer for excluding and alienating women from the mission of the Church.

Keywords: Discrimination against Women; Synodality; Synodal Church; Violence against Women; Women in the Bible; Women in the Church; Women in India

Introduction

Pope Francis has a broad understanding of the Church and society as evidenced by his choice of Synodality as the theme for the 16th General Assembly. Synodality could mean togetherness, being in communion, walking together, working together in friendship, etc. It means ending the Church's age-old tradition of top-down leadership

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and putting ordinary people at the core of the hierarchical Church.¹ Here, listening is an inescapable prerequisite, journeying together is the core, being the voice of the people is the base and the Spirit. The purpose of the synod is not to produce documents, as Pope Francis has said, but “to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and vision, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, and give strength to our hands.”²

Any discussion on synodality and its moral implications on a synodal Church would be incomplete and imperfect without a due consideration on the role of women in the Church. Such an assertion flows from the very fact that the Church consists of human beings, both male and female. Therefore, men and women need to contribute to the building up of the Church in a way that promotes reciprocity and cooperation. Keeping this in mind, I begin this paper by discussing how women are regarded in the Bible, proceed to the Church’s position on them, and conclude with how women are treated in the Church today.

1. Women in the Old Testament

In the first creation story in Genesis chapter 1, God is powerful and creates everything by Word and makes human beings as the culmination of God’s creative work (1:3–31).³ God creates human beings – male and female – in God’s image and likeness (1:27). While the creation story in Genesis 1 is often used to reinforce the equality between men and women, many factors in the Yahwistic tradition of creation account legitimize the dominion of men over women.⁴ Among them two factors stand out: (1) the Lord said that “it is not good” for the human to be alone, he needs “a helper suited to him” (Gen 2:18). So, the woman is created for the sake of Adam and therefore subordinate to the man. (2) God created woman out of sleeping Adam’s rib, therefore she is dependent on him and has only

¹Inigo, “Synodality and Synodal Process in India: A Religious Perspective,” *Word and Worship* 55, 1 (2022) 29–38, 31.

²Francis, “Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment,” October 3, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/october/document_s/papa-francesco_20181003_apertura-sinodo.html. (Accessed on 19.08.2022).

³Rekha Chennattu, “Biblical Women as Agents of Justice and Peace,” in *Word of God: Sources of Justice and Peace*, A. Peter Abir, ed., Tindivanam: CBF, 2008, 124–158.

⁴John J. Collins, et al., eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, 208.

a derivative existence (Gen 2:21).⁵ In the course of time, this helper figure was focused more in the interpretation of the creation narrative in the Bible.

Yet, both in the Old Testament and New Testament, there were several women-characters who had specific roles to play in the history of salvation. The stories of women can be categorised into three groups. First, women like Eve (Gen 2-3), Rebekah (Gen 22-49), Delilah (Judg 16:4-21) and Jezebel (1 Kings 16-21; 2 Kings 9) are wives of great men, but they are traditionally understood as vehicles of evil and deception. One needs to reread these stories from women's perspectives. Secondly, the stories like the daughters of Jephthah (Jud 11) and the concubine (Jud 19) reveal some of the most outrageous and atrocious experiences of violence and female victimisation in biblical history. These stories reflect modern women's struggle for the right to life, and for justice, dignity, and wholeness. Our daily newspapers reveal that sexual harassment, rape, and murder are the destiny of many women even today. Thirdly, heroines such as Shiphrah and Puah (Ex 1:15-21), Miriam (Ex 15:20, 21; Num 12:1-15; 20:1; 26:59; Deut 24:9; Mic 6:4), Deborah and Jael (Jud 4-5); Hannah (1 Sam 1-2), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20; 2 Chro 34:22-33), Esther, and Judith were well accepted as prophetesses, judges, seers, leaders, etc. They used their wisdom and exercised their authority to save people from oppression and establish justice and peace in the land.

2. Women in the New Testament

When we talk about Christianity, we may have to distinguish between Christianity as a religion that evolved through history with its ups and downs, and Christianity as a movement that began with Jesus Christ and continued for the first few centuries, before Constantine made it a state religion. The impact of both these on women and their empowerment is very different and we can even say they are opposite. Therefore, the history of Christianity shows great ambivalence towards women. On the one hand, women have been included, called, graced, inspired and canonized by Christianity throughout the centuries. On the other, women are not given their rightful place in Biblical exegesis and theology, and in the life and mission of the Church. This exclusion has been often justified by recourse to Scripture. It is generally accepted that reading Scripture is not neutral and interpreters are not free of presuppositions. Moreover, some biblical texts themselves are

⁵Rekha M. Chennattu, "Dignity of Women: Christian Perspective," *Journal of Dharma* 37, 1 (2012) 61-68, 62.

indeed ideologically biased against women; and some texts are mistranslated and misinterpreted by the exegetes. Hence, the Bible has become an important source and legitimizer for excluding and alienating women from the mission of the Church.⁶ This makes it imperative for us, both women and men, to identify attitudes that are discriminatory and dehumanizing to women, particularly when these attitudes are legitimized by Scripture. There remains the difficult question of attitude to women in cultures other than our own.⁷

According to the socio-religious tradition concerning women in the Second Temple period of Judaism, “women were excluded from testifying in a court trial; they were not to be seen in public or to speak with strangers, and outside their homes they were to be doubly veiled. They could not even teach or be taught the Torah in their homes... They had become second-class Jews, excluded from the worship and teaching of God, with status scarcely that of slaves.”⁸ But we have different portrayals of women in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus held an attitude of inclusiveness. Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as Gentile women were included in the genealogy of Jesus [Tamar (Aramean, Gen 38), Rahab (Canaanite, Josh 2:1-21; 6:22-25), Ruth (Moabite, Ruth 1-4), and Bathsheba (Hittite, 2 Sam 11-12)] (Mt 1:2-16). Women were present in the ministry of Jesus [Mary, the mother of Jesus (Lk 1-2; Jn 2; 19), Mary and Martha (Lk 10; Jn 11-12), Mary Magdalene (Jn 20), the Canaanite woman (Mt 15; Mk 7), and the Samaritan woman (Jn 4)]. Women were there in the tomb of Jesus (Mk 16:1, Mt 28:1; Lk 24:10; Jn 20:1). Women were the first to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus (Lk 24:1-11; Jn 20:18). Women’s stories in the Gospels also include women in the parables of Jesus (Lk 15; 18; Mt 13:25), the gospel texts dealing with women’s issues or gender justice, for instance, the question on divorce (Mk 10:10-12). This brief analysis emphasises the vital role played by women at every stage in the life of Jesus, from conception to resurrection. As a result, the gospels demonstrate the decisive role played by women in the progressive unfolding of Salvation History.⁹

⁶ S.M. Schneider, *The Revolutionary Text*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991, 180-182.

⁷ Rekha Chennattu, “Women in the Mission of the Church. An Interpretation of John 4,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 65 (2000) 760-773, 760.

⁸ Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Women: An Overview,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. B. M. Metzger and M.D. Coogan, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 807.

⁹ Chennattu, “Dignity of Women: Christian Perspective,” 68-69.

When we come to the Epistles, although the letters of Paul seem to have presented the differing views of Paul on the role of women in the church, no one can deny Paul's vision of a new society characterized by reciprocal partnership between men and woman in the church. Women such as Lydia, Phoebe (Deaconess), Priscilla, and so on assisted Paul and other disciples in their mission, and thus became collaborators of the missionaries. Moreover, some of the ethical concerns found in the Epistles of St. Paul exhibit an ideological bias against women. In addition, some of the texts that impose some restrictions on the participation of women in the life of the church (1 Cor 11) have been mistranslated and misinterpreted by the exegetes. For instance, the commands "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men. She is to keep silent" (1 Tim 2:12-14), "wives be submissive to your husbands" (Col 3:18-19), "women should keep silence in gatherings" (1 Cor 14:34-35), "woman should cover their heads during worship" (1 Cor 11:2-6), etc. receive more prominence in Christian tradition than Gal 3:28 teaching that "there is neither male nor female. All are one in Christ Jesus." As a result, the Bible has emerged as an important source and legitimizer for the exclusion of and alienation of women from the Church's mission.¹⁰ We find, therefore, that the helper-figure persisted in Christian antiquity.

3. The Inferior Treatment of Women Through the Centuries

The tradition of viewing women inferior to men continued in the church down the centuries. On the role of the women in the Church, the Church Fathers picked up where St Paul left off. John Chrysostom said, "For the woman taught the man once, and made him guilty of disobedience."¹¹ St Augustine stated, "the woman together with her own husband is the image of God," and taken by herself alone, "she is not the image of God."¹² St Thomas Aquinas gives an answer to the question as to why Eve is described by scripture as being made from Adam. Aquinas gives four reasons. In the first place, having the entire human race originate from one adds to the dignity of that one. Second, the mutual realization that Eve came from Adam would bind them together more strongly. Third, the subjection of Eve to Adam is mirrored in this relationship of origin. Fourth, such an origin provides a figure for the Church taking her origin from Christ.¹³

¹⁰Schneider, *The Revolutionary Text*, 180-182.

¹¹John Chrysostom, "Homily on 1 Tim 2:12." <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230609.htm>. Accessed on 28.08.2022.

¹²Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, III. https://biblehub.com/library/augustine/on_the_holy_trinity/chapter_7_how_man_is_the.htm. Accessed on 28.08.2022.

¹³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 92, a. 2.

Again Aquinas identifies two reasons for why the formation of Eve from a rib of Adam was fitting.¹⁴ In the first place, taking a part from Adam's body signified the intimately close union between man and woman. Choosing a part, such as a rib, from the middle of the body symbolizes that neither would the man dominate over the man nor would the man subject the women to servile subjection. But Aquinas' views on women are sometimes misunderstood, in particular, misreading his answers to the questions. In the second question a close attention to the Latin text is useful. In particular, one must pay careful attention to where the words *homo* and *vir* are used: *vir* means a male person, *homo* can mean a male person but is often used to simply denote a person of either sex. Indeed, *homo* and its derivatives can be used to denote humanity in general. So, in Gen 2:18 where we are told that "it is not good that the man should be alone," the Latin word used derives from *homo*, suggesting that we are being told that it is not simply the particular human being Adam that needs a partner, but that companionship is fundamental to humanity. Hence, one must be careful reading his four claims about women, namely, woman is a deficient male; woman was created only for the purpose of procreation; woman is inferior to man; and woman must submit to man,¹⁵ and not to impose modern notions of subjection on his implicit scheme.¹⁶ But, often these assertions and disrespect given to the whole class of women, by misinterpreting the text, was nourished by the cultural milieu of the Christian communities.¹⁷

Pope Leo XIII insisted that "The husband is the chief of the family and the head of the wife. The woman...must be subject to her husband and obey him."¹⁸ Again Pope Leo XIII stressed, "women, again, are not suited to certain trades; for a woman is by nature fitting 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

¹⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 92, a. 3.

¹⁵Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia q. 92, a. 1. Aquinas says that as regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition.

¹⁶Gregory the Eremite, "Reading the Summa: Question 92—The Production of Woman," <http://readingthesumma.blogspot.com/2014/01/question-92-production-of-woman.html>. Accessed on 17.12.2022.

¹⁷Pearl Drego, "The Feminist Viewpoint," in *Christian Woman*, ed. Stella Faria, Anna Vareed Alexander, and Jessie B. Tellis-Nayak, Pune: Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra/Ishvani, 1984, 44.

¹⁸Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, 18 (10 February 1880). AAS 12 (1879) 385–402.

children and the well-being of the family.”¹⁹ Reading the signs of the times, Pope John XXIII stated, “women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity....they are demanding, both in domestic and in public life.”²⁰ Two years later, in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers affirm: “Women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact.”²¹ Six years later Pope Paul VI reminds women not to pursue “false equality which would deny the distinction with woman’s proper role, which is of such capital importance, at the heart of the family as well as within society. Development in legislation should on the contrary be directed to protecting her proper vocation and at the same time recognizing her independence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social, and political life.”²²

With the publication of the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, we have for the first time in history a papal teaching on women. Written for the closing of the Marian Year 1987–1988, Pope John Paul II meditates on the fact that the role of women can only be comprehensively evaluated in terms of their essential dignity and vocation in terms of their anthropological and theological foundation for which the Blessed Virgin Mary is the model.²³ Even Vatican II gave many possibilities for the freedom to women, but although sixty years have passed, the message has not reached the grass root level.²⁴

4. Women in the Church Today

There are many women, including religious and nuns, who commit themselves selflessly for the cause of Christ. There exist pious women and consecrated women, as Pope Francis has recently lauded, who serve as catechists, theologians, and spiritual guides, demonstrating the beauty of God’s love and mercy. Women render remarkable services in certain areas of Church life such as the protection of poor, abandoned children, victims of violence and sexual abuse, the homeless, migrants, and so forth. These, and similar services, are credibly feminine “in nature” as the virtues of care, compassion, relationality, intuitiveness, and self-sacrifice flow more

¹⁹Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 33 (15 May 1891). AAS 23 (1890–1891) 641–670.

²⁰John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 41 (11 April 1963). AAS 55 (1963) 257–304.

²¹Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 9 (7 December 1965). AAS 58 (1966) 1025–1115, 1031–1032.

²²Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, 13 (14 May 1971). AAS 63 (1971) 401–441, 410–411.

²³John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, 4 (22 May 1994). AAS 86 (1994) 545–548, 548.

²⁴Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 48. AAS 58 (1966) 1067–1068.

often and generously from the hearts of women.²⁵ In addition, the women representatives in manifold administrative and leading posts, as very much found in the pastoral ministry of Pope Francis, can work effectively for the glory of God. In this regard, Pope Francis' concrete steps to promote women's role in the Church, appointing a number of lay people, including women and religious sisters in various administrative departments, is much appreciated and fruit-bringing.²⁶ His initiatives to open up new spaces and spheres of responsibilities to the women in the Church are already very much valued, opening new vistas of hope to the entire humanity.²⁷

However, the woman as a helper figure, found in the Bible, continues even today. Because, there are at least a few cases of exclusion, discrimination, and violence towards women in the Church.²⁸ Women may be consulted but their voice is not accepted in decision making!!! They are invited to catechize but not permitted to proclaim the Word, particularly in the Indian context. They are included in pastoral services but excluded from active ministerial responsibilities. The living tradition of the Church fails to pay ample attention to the innovative aspect of Christ's message that favoured more the isolated and down-trodden. It is deplorable that women are sometimes presented as inferior to men that eventually keep them away from participating in ministry and authority.²⁹ It is out of such exclusions that the following question was asked to the Pope by the International Union of Superiors General: "How is it possible that we are frequently neglected and not included as participants...? Can the Church afford to continue speaking about us, instead of speaking with us?"³⁰ Similarly, borrowing the words of Cardinal Leo Suenens,

²⁵ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *A Theology and Praxis of Gender Equality*, Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2018, 63.

²⁶Reuters, "Pope Rules any Baptized Lay Catholics, Including Women, can Lead Vatican Departments," March 20, 2022. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pope-rules-any-baptised-lay-catholics-including-women-can-lead-vatican-departments-1927150-2022-03-20>. Accessed on 13.05.2022.

²⁷ Francis, "Feminine Genius is Needed in the Church." <https://archive.slttrib.com/article.php?id=56893161&itype=CMSID>. Accessed on 03.06.2022.

²⁸Virginia Saldanha, "Gender Relations in the Tradition of the Church," in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, ed. Shaji George Kochuthara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2016, 157-168, 164.

²⁹Joy Philip Kakkanattu, "Musings on Gender Justice in the Bible," in *Gender Justice in the Church and Society*, ed. Shaji George Kochuthara, Dharmaram Publications: 2016, 52-66, 60.

³⁰Francis, "Meeting with the International Union of Superiors General," 12 May 2016, ZENIT. <https://catholic.net/op/articles/2466/cat/1245/popes-q-a-at-meeting-with-international-union-of-superiors-general.html>. Accessed on 01.08.2022.

the Daughters of Mary the helper, reiterate: "Why are we even discussing the reality of the Church when half of the Church is not even represented here? When the subject is family, sexuality, and reproduction, the absence of women's voices and women's votes is particularly tragic."³¹

Pope Francis addresses a sensitive issue in the Catholic Church: the exploitation of nuns and religious sisters as cheap source of labour! He is aware of the untold number of consecrated women who extend domestic services to seminarians, priests, and bishops.³² The Pope lauded consecrated women who serve as catechists, theologians, and spiritual guides, demonstrating the beauty of God's love and mercy. Pope Francis, who walks the talk, declared that under a new constitution for the Holy See's central administration, any baptized lay Catholic, including women, will be able to lead Vatican departments. He has already named a number of lay people, including women and religious sisters in various administrative departments.³³ He is convinced that the feminine genius is essential, wherever we make important decisions and when new spaces and responsibilities have been opened up to the presence and activity of women both in the Church, as well as that of the public and professional spheres.³⁴ This is merely the beginning from a higher level, but we still have a long way to go to get to the grass root level. In India, the Church has to get involved in a process of self-critique, along with cultural and structural critique, to unearth gender and other biases that persist both within the Church and outside it. Fighting gender stereotypes deeply engraved in the minds of people is indeed the core of change in the mindset.

5. Some Suggestions for Improving the Status of Women in India

- Women need to break the silence of violence in the Church. They should be committed in dealing with issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, dowry system, women's rights, and other social evils of our time. It is said that 62.5 percent of Catholic women in India remain in abusive, violent marriages 'for the sake of

³¹Katherine Marie, *The Church in the Twentieth Century*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012, 399.

³²Francis, "Behind the Pope's Fighting Words to Women Religious," February 2, 2022. <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/behind-the-popes-fighting-words-to-women-religious/15578>. Accessed on 29.05.2022.

³³*Reuters*, "Pope Rules any Baptized Lay Catholics, Including Women, Can Lead Vatican Departments."

³⁴Francis, "Feminine Genius is Needed in the Church."

their children.’³⁵ Just as Jesus came to liberate the marginalized, today a complete liberation can be achieved only when we stop all atrocities against women.

- The Church should talk about the practice of dowry and its negative impact on marital relationship. It should be announced from the pulpit that inequality and domestic violence are grave sins.

- Promote equal independence, mutual dependence, and reciprocal obligation which are of vital importance to have an equal partnership in the family.

- Empowering women does not mean that they all enter politics, or obtain high posts in decision-making positions. It would require women to be aware of their potentials, rights, and dignity.

- As legitimate members in the church, women, particularly women theologians, psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, doctors, and so on, need to diversify their ministries and contribute to the growth of the Church.

- There are instances where women religious are mistreated by priests, refusing to celebrate Holy Eucharist for them due to personal conflicts. In some dioceses, religious nuns are given only an allowance hardly sufficient to meet their bare necessities.

- As members of the parish council’s decision-making body, religious superiors should feel free to voice their opinions and suggestions. Even when they express their perspectives, they are being side-lined in the decision making, planning, and leadership processes.

- The gender policy of the Catholic Church of India must be implemented. Its benefits are not only a matter for women, but it is a human rights issue and a gospel imperative, and so it affects everyone in the Church.

Conclusion

The Bible, if it is interpreted in its real sense, it upholds the dignity of women as God’s beloved daughters created in God’s image and likeness as well as to promote their active participation in the mission of the Church. The teachings of the Church recognize and appreciate the fact that women with their manifold resources devote themselves to the service of the Church. No one disputes the fact that women

³⁵Kochurani Abraham, “Resistance: A Liberative Key in Feminist Ethics,” in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics*, eds. Linda Hogan and Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, New York: Orbis Books, 2014, 97-107, 98.

make significant contributions in the process of liberation and community building.³⁶ However, the Indian Church has to go a long way in gathering the voices of Indian women and make them heard, in giving visibility to the contribution of Indian women in shaping and transforming the Church and the world, in expressing the desire of women to be respected as fully responsible ecclesial partners and leaders in the life of the Church, and in endeavouring to build communities that are inclusive, equitable, sustainable, and just at local, regional, and global levels.

Synodality reminds us that society will never be just if we remain ignorant or contemptuous of even one person. If the Church has to fulfil her prophetic and liberative mission in the third millennium, that is, in a world marked by increasing pluralism, then it is imperative that she discovers a new identity, that is to say, a new way of being that is inclusive, and a new way of functioning which is dialogical.

³⁶ For instance, Pearl Drego, 'Women Theologizing: Beginnings of Feminist Theologies and Their Concerns,' *Jeevadhara* 40 (2010) 232-252, 237; Shalini Mulackal, 'Political Economy of Participation: Women in the Life and Mission of the Church,' in *Ecclesia of Women in Asia: Gathering the Voices of the Silenced*, eds. E. Monteiro and A. Gutzler, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, 184-194; and Rekha Chennattu, 'The Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and Women's Mission in the Church,' *Vidyajyoti* 74, 4 (2010) 300-304.