

The Thread of Patriarchy

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The Issue. Community minded women, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit, wish to use their gift of agency to discern their own calls, as any male might do, with of course the appropriate due processes. To serve in the church in the capacity God calls them to whatever that might be. In their capacity and gifting as a lay person or in ordained ministry according to their charisms. In ministry, leadership and decision making. To do so without prejudice. Responding to their call would be understood as responding to God's will.

The historical and current hurtful marginalisation of women, where a male hierarchy deprive them of their agency of choice and baptismal dignity, is perceived as abusive and a moral wrong; a 'sin' against humankind and the Holy Spirit. Actions contrary to the church's own documents on discrimination and recognition of the importance of personal agency; actions contrary to the agency the male clergy accord themselves; actions against an inalienable respect for the human dignity of all; and, in the end, actions against grace. Grace builds upon nature. A holy agency has been accorded to the natures of both women and men. Marginalising women has stood in the way of God's graces that could bless all.

A reasoned review of various subject areas suggests the current subordinate position of women in the church with their loss of true agency and opportunities, is not the work of the Holy Spirit. That it is the work of the repressive and oppressive patriarchal keys of men, rather than any revelation by God or any provable natural law. It has had repercussions that have afflicted all.

The word patriarchy, meaning 'the rule of the father,' "denotes the social-science concept of male dominance."¹ Patriarchy evolved to become a system of hierarchical inequality. In this form it became the rule of 'men over woman' with the assumption men were meant to rule. It bestowed primary power and privilege upon men with women considered inferior and subordinate to the will of men.

"When patriarchy of any kind is enforced, women's gifts and potential are squelched and their decision-making power is stripped, and that in itself is abusive."² Women do not have the opportunities, rights and privileges of men. The church as part of society has absorbed patriarchy into its structures and practices. These seeds germinated a long time ago and still bear their "fruit" today.

The early church fathers. While the early church fathers and reformers passed on many traditions for which we are grateful, they also passed on traditions steeped in assumptions about the inferiority of women. An overview of our Judeo-Christian tradition show that the early church reformers and fathers, enmeshed in the ignorance and patriarchal prejudices of their time, perpetuated the exclusion of women from ministry and leadership. "Women were considered the source of sin and the fall (Eve); women were considered to be unclean at certain times (menstruation, childbirth); and women were considered inferior to men in every way."³ Tertullian (160-240 A.D.), John Chrysostom (349-407 AD), Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) and Thomas Aquinas (1224/25 -1274), were among the church fathers who left this 'deposit of faith'.

Tertullian in Book I "On the Apparel of Women", wrote, "You are the devil's gateway: ... you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack: you destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert – that is death – even the Son of God had to die."⁴ This literal misuse of scripture is not, uncommon among the church fathers.

John Chrysostom, using text from 1 Timothy, 1 Corinthians and Genesis 3, argued in Homilies 6 and 9, that

female subordination was a direct result of Eve's sin, as was the restriction on women teaching men. "The woman taught once, and ruined all. On this account therefore he says, 'let her not teach.'"⁵

Augustine, while seeing both man and woman as responsible for the fall, appears to assign the greater responsibility to Eve as the seducer believing it was through her that man became guilty of transgression. He also considered women to be inferior to men as had St Ambrose his mentor. He believed the rational Adam had an "inherent inability to be deceived"⁶ but not the irrational "women who was of small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with the promptings of the inferior flesh than by the superior reason."⁷ In a "Literal Commentary on Genesis," Augustine stated he could not think of any other reason for women as man's helper other than, "for the production of children".⁸ In his commentary 'On the Trinity,' he expressed that a woman alone was not the image of God but they could become the image of God if they married a man.⁹ Women were of lesser worth spiritually and intellectually. Humanity contributed to their likeness to God but not their gender.

Jewish practices based on Genesis 3 and women's inherent degeneracy, were also accepted and practised by the church. The belief "that a woman's uncleanness makes her unworthy in the ancient Jewish practices was not superseded by Christianity. From the early middle - ages to the threshold of modern times it gave way to the idea that women are not worthy to enter the sanctuary or touch the sacred vessels."¹⁰ Women earlier in history also had to cover their 'unclean' hands with a cloth to receive the Eucharist.

Thomas Aquinas, highly influenced by Aristotelian thought from centuries before Christ (384-322 BC), left an almost indelible mark on women and their place in both church and society. Aristotle, an advocate of human hierarchy, taught that women were inferior, deformed, men.¹¹ In Aquinas' mind, women were inferior to men too and he set about to expound this in an ecclesial context, justifying women's lower position in the church including their exclusion from the priesthood. He determined women were defective males (due to some defect in the generative process) who contributed nothing to the innate humanness of the foetus. 'Passive' in principle. Aquinas believed that a woman's only contribution to procreation was the womb and nutrition to grow the male seed that contains the future child, including its soul.¹² Women provided an 'incubator' and nourishment but no more. He subjectively determined, women as part of the created order, were socially inferior and subject to man by nature who had superior human reason.¹³ Further women were created as dependent on men as men were created first.

For Aquinas, women were forbidden to teach in church or have authority over men who he saw as in the image of God in a special sense. A man he maintained, naturally commands authority. He signifies eminence in human nature. As the perfect human, man is the sacramental sign of Christ.¹⁴ Aquinas' stand is a rejection of woman's authority. Clearly Aquinas's Aristotelian lens, together with tendentious exegeses of Scriptures including Genesis and Pauline texts, had undermined his reasoning, despite his conclusion that women may be saved.

Interestingly the vision Aquinas had before he died saw him devalue his own work and not return to it. "The end of my labours has come. All that I have written seems to me like straw compared with what has been revealed to me."¹⁵ Aquinas's personal encounter with God suggests his scholastic theology could not depth the length and breadth of God's wisdom and love, with something amiss in his writings. God's absolute power transcending any principles of logic.

Aquinas a saint and Doctor of the Church, revered by a succession of pontiffs, remains enshrined in canon law as the standard theological and philosophical role model for today.¹⁶ "Neither Canon Law, nor the

encyclical, nor the liturgical prayer make the slightest gesture toward purging Thomistic teaching of those scientific, sociological and philosophical views that have been outmoded by later developments.”¹⁷

The teachings of these men, and others not mentioned, where women are utilitarianly compartmentalised, were used by the church to justify male dominance in the church. The weaker sex is protected, saved and redeemed by their submission to men. This ‘word’ on women is embedded in the church and continues to influence it to this day.

Complementarianism. The magisterium and the last three Popes in particular have used a theory of complementarianism to validate the church’s marginalising position on women, using justifications that avoid the inequality perceptions of the past. Men and women have different but complementary roles and responsibilities, with each role said to be equal in value and dignity. However, headship and decision making are still assigned to ordained men as it has been in the past. This implies that it is not just presiding at Mass that continues to be out of reach for women, but many other associated roles too, including ministerial, leadership and decision-making roles. Ordained women Deacons included.

In 1994 **Pope John Paul II** declared in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, that women could not be priests as the church had no authority to ordain women. This teaching was formalised as a truth by the Doctrine of the Faith with women gifts suitable to other feminine gender related roles. The *Responsum* (reply) has received extensive criticisms from many key theologians, who disagree with what was said and the claim of an infallible teaching. The various criteria for an absolute truth (infallibility) have not been met. The critics include Francis Sullivan SJ, emeritus professor Gregorian University Rome and the Catholic Theological Society of America.¹⁸ Laypeople and religious also perceive the declaration as unacceptable, lacking the universal and constant consensus of catholic theologians and the common adherence of the faithful. Canon 749.3 of the Code of Canon Law states, “No doctrine is understood to be infallibly defined unless this fact is clearly established” and Canon 750 implies that for a doctrine to be proposed as divinely revealed by the ordinary and universal magisterium, it is first “manifested by the common adherence of Christ’s faithful”.¹⁹ The study group further suggested that all the bishops could not have agreed to the reply with the unexpected decision coming as a shock to many people. The document has not stood up to scholarly examination.

The magisterium and the last two popes in particular have appealed to Hans Urs von Balthasar’s twentieth century, theologically undeveloped, “Marian-Petrine” principle, to validate the church’s ‘gender complementarian’ position on women. A principle von Balthasar hoped could be used to integrate the papacy into the life of the universal church.²⁰ A principle he never would have expected the magisterium to use to integrate women and men into the Church.²¹ The Church however used the principle to define a “maternal” and “domestic” characterisation for the role of women - the Marian principle. The ministry of authority was reserved to Peter, which is to men – the Petrine principle. A benevolent patriarchy where women’s status was ‘equal’ but more of a nurturer at service to the church and men.

Pope Francis in recent years has continued to support the ‘Petrine and Marian principle,’ while also acknowledging the theology has yet to be developed. To his own rhetorical question in 2022, he answered “And why can a woman not enter ordained ministry? It is because the Petrine principle has no place for that.”²² Sacramental ministry is for men. In a 2024 interview Pope Francis simply announced a resounding ‘No’ to women deacons and the ordination of women.²³ A definite ‘No’ in what is currently supposed to be a climate of ‘synodality’ in a contemporary world with new insights. Further, the ‘question of the necessary participation of women in the life and leadership of the Church,’ has been clandestinely left to the unnamed ‘male study group 5.’ Transparency is missing, and a group of men only does not project a synodal image. The other 14 special

groups members are all named.

The applied 'Marian-Petrine' principle, is viewed as another measure of patriarchalism and a poor dichotomous theological attempt at a much more complex matter. It is considered scandalous to conceive of sexual difference in hierarchical terms. An act of patriarchal privilege giving men the role of authority over women. You are not your own. It puts women at the dictates of men, a vulnerable position. The concept of complementarity should not be used divisively. It would be wiser to see the strengths of women and men working together, co-sharing in ministerial, leadership and decision-making roles.

Dogmatic theology. What appears to have happened here is the church has continued to use deductive reasoning to argue a predetermined conclusion about women, set in motion centuries before. The traditional, dogmatic theology of the church is a closed loop where 'faith seeking understanding' supports the institutional status quo. It would be expected that a patriarchal mindset, within a clericalized system, would continue to produce a patriarchal church discriminating against women. Dogmatic theology does not leave any departure from 'the party line' where static traditions have simply propagated a static tradition. A doctrinal or dogmatic approach imposes a 'truth' by an 'authority' with preconceived beliefs.²⁴

Overlooked Flaws. The church in taking the above approach appears to have overlooked the flaws in the work of the early church fathers and reformers. There has been a lack of attendance to the historical context and culture, word meaning and the transferring of meaning from one period in history to today's context; and the church fathers unrelenting misuse of Genesis 3, Genesis 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. The biases of the earlier Jewish writers of the scriptures were also inadequately considered and the prophetic voice of Jesus ignored. The church fathers had none of the resources of archaeology or linguistic tools available today. The ignorance of the church fathers, anthropological or otherwise; their encultured biases; limited theological methods; and their reliance on reason and logic, tied to a static, fixed, immutable, worldview, seem not to matter. The reality is we are no longer ahistorical and one culture centric with one superior normative culture to be aspired to. This will not suffice in a post - modern society and where the church is no longer regarded as a perfect society.

Alternate perspectives supportive of women. Other contemporary theologians using more updated approaches to theology have found there is no tangible evidence in either the scriptures or tradition, for excluding women from ordained ministry and decision - making roles in the church. It is hoped more attention will be given to these alternate views.

Karl Rahner a highly respected theologian and one of the great church fathers of the 20th century (died 1984), is regarded as one of the most prominent critics of the Church's exclusion of women from the priesthood. "Rahner challenged the Vatican's central argument against women's ordination, namely, that because Christ and the Apostles did not ordain women, the Church is not authorised to ordain women."²⁵

"Rahner insisted that we cannot draw any "definite and unambiguous" conclusions from Jesus' choice of men for the college of the Twelve. It is one thing to say that only men were members of the college of Twelve, but it is quite another to say that, therefore, only men can serve as the "simple leader of the community and president of the eucharistic celebration in a particular congregation of a later period". His perspective was, "It would have been sociologically unthinkable for women to have exercised pastoral leadership in first-century Jerusalem, but the reverse would be the case in the late 20th century."²⁶ Rahner held the position that we cannot just assume that what happened in the early church is an absolute for all times – a divine law so to

speak. The refusal to allow women in ordained ministry or in any leadership, or decision - making position, is based on outdated assumptions from a culturally different era.

Many of the theologians who rejected Pope John Paul's II, 1994 *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* and the *Responsum*,²⁷ mentioned earlier, would agree with Rahner.

Elizabeth Johnson has taken aim at the tradition that only men can act as a priest in consecrating the Eucharist because the sign needs to have a natural resemblance to Christ. Women, made equally in the image of God (Gen 1:27), do image Christ as Johnson writes, "let it be plainly stated that women are icons of Christ, *imago Christi*, in every essential way. There is a natural resemblance of a common humanity and participation in divine grace."²⁸ It is not the male physicality of Jesus that is important. Further God is spirit, and we all have His indelible spirit.

Fr. Tomas Halik, a theologian currently involved with the synod, recently stated that the position of the church against women's ordination to both the priesthood and the diaconate, "is based on more psychological reasons than theological reasons" and said that relying on the argument that, "Jesus chose just men isn't persuasive." "Jesus chose just the Jews," he added, before asking rhetorically: "Do we have a right to ordain Italians, Americans and Japanese?" Whatever is decided at the synod he believes it is "a sin against the Holy Spirit not to embrace the charism of women to proclaim the Gospel."²⁹

Fr Raymond E. Brown, a biblical scholar (died 1998), stated the "evangelists' description of the supper corresponds to issues they were dealing with; it is with great peril applied to later Church problems that never entered their minds."³⁰ Jesus did not raise the question on should only men represent him in the Eucharistic meal. Avery Dulles, although not a supporter of the ordination of women, has said, "no doctrinal decision of the past directly solves a question that was not asked at that time."³¹

If it is insisted that who was present at the last supper is important, it is not known who was really present at the last supper. It should always be remembered that what was written and included in the Bible was done so by men, with women on the whole, left out of the storyline. It is possible that a patriarchal mindset saw it as irrelevant to mention the presence of women.

It is also worth remembering that in the first century women often led house churches and 'presided' at these simple 'breaking of the bread' gatherings. Priscilla, Lydia and the mother of John Mark for example. Paul in 1 Corinthians does not tell us who the 'presiders' were at these ceremonies either; possibly both men and women. The male led sacramental liturgy for the Eucharist only evolved later.

The **1976 Papal Biblical Commission** unanimously decided that Scripture alone supplies no basis for decreeing that women should not be ordained.³²

The **Catholic Theological Society of America** view is, "Since Christ left the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make many decisions on its own regarding the organization of its ministry, scholars judge it very doubtful that he intended to lay down such a particular prescription regarding the sex of future candidates for ordination. The majority of exegetes hold, instead, that Jesus' choice of only men for the Twelve was determined by the nature of their symbolic role as "patriarchs" of restored Israel."³³ The twelve tribes of Israel.

Gertrud Heinzelmann asked the question, "What would Christ do today if He were to found His Church? How would Paul argue, how would he dispose things if he had before him the independent career woman of today

instead of a row of harem women with veiled faces whose education and personal rights had been suppressed in a way that we can scarcely appreciate in our time?”³⁴

Phyllis Zagano has offered very plausible, historical evidence for women deacons. Her extensive studies have found no precedent on which to base the exclusion of women from the diaconate in the Catholic Church.³⁵

A new approach. In 2023 **Pope Francis** requested theologians go further than ‘faith seeking understanding’. He has recognised the issues relating to the inadequacy of dogmatic theology mentioned earlier. Theology is to be anchored in the contemporary experiences of humankind and in the modern world of contemporary knowledge from all schools of thought across all cultures and denominations; to seek God’s revelation for our time in history. The scriptures and tradition need to be enlightened by this.³⁶ Pope Francis also recently asked theologians to ‘demasculise’ the church.

Ironically as illustrated above, there are theologians who have gone beyond the constraints of dogmatic theology and approached their work without the lens of patriarchy, only to be left as ‘a voice crying out in the wilderness.’ They have been speaking out since the mid nineteenth hundreds. It is hoped their perspectives and the work of others to come, will now be better received.

The prophetic voice of Jesus. In the renewing of theology and with regards to women, more emphasis needs to be placed upon the prophetic voice of Jesus for any real change to occur. The equalitarianism, non-gendered attitudes of Jesus, lost momentum after the second century.³⁷ The traditional church needs to be reawakened to Jesus’ words and action together with what he did not say or do, to grasp better the truth of women’s place in the church.

“Nowhere does Jesus ever state that only men may serve as leaders in the church, nor does he teach that it is by maintaining traditional male-female roles that we will advance God’s reign. Jesus’ teachings do not focus on the apostles’ ethnicity or sex as a model for Christian leadership.”³⁸

The scriptural reality is women were permitted to be the **first witnesses of the resurrection**, the greatest historical event in history. They were also the first called to announce the fulfilled Good News of Jesus’ resurrection to the Apostles and disciples. To also advise the men they were to meet Jesus in Galilee, alluding to where Jesus had first commenced His ministry (Matthew and Mark’s Gospel). It appears men, and women (who also were witnesses to Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and the truth; conditions for being an apostles), were both called to ministry to take the good news out from Galilee with all its responsibilities. A fresh start together. The scripture passage that comes to mind here is ‘the first shall be last and the last will be first’ (Matthew 19:30). Jesus has provided women a knowledge of themselves not derived from the value system of patriarchy and it is hoped the institutional church will follow His lead.

Further, Jesus choosing to speak first to Mary Magdalene in **the resurrection garden**, before any man, alludes back perhaps to the Eden of Genesis, correcting the condemnation and marginalisation of women as the primary source of sin and weaker sex. An attitude of persecution that preceded him that he knew had caused great suffering to women, and that he understood could do so again. In the new covenant garden there is no condemnation of women but Jesus illustrating his perspective of women - not the ‘Jezebel’ concept emanating from the Garden of Eden, but the faithful ones who endured with Him to the end. The trustworthy ones who had courageously loved to the “end,” not leaving Him destitute and alone. Jesus appears to be restoring the dignity and equality of women to eliminate the mores of a misogynistic culture. Mary Magdalene will be called by the church, an *Apostle to the Apostles*. A step in alignment with Jesus’ prophetic voice.

Jesus started his church at Pentecost, where the unifying gift of **the Holy Spirit, the true witness** and representative of Jesus, was clearly given to both men and women. There are many things that could be said about this event, but what is important to this essay is that the Holy Spirit also equipped women to give witness to Christ too. The earlier historical context discriminating against the public witness of women was no longer relevant. Being a witness was not subject to culture. Further the power of witness resided in the Holy Spirit working in the person. At Pentecost we can infer there were faithful women who had followed Jesus as His disciples and who witnessed Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, fully qualified for the authentic teaching of Christ. It would not be wrong to say they were empowered to be apostles too.

The lack of representation of women apostles in the Bible does not necessarily falsify what is written above. Women wrote not one word of the Bible that was written by men for men with a patriarchal mindset. Further Jesus' ministry was no longer to just the 12 tribes of Israel but to all people and nations of all races and the needed number of apostles had grown. He had already moved from 12 apostles to the seventy - two and as we know, many more unnamed apostles, including the possibility of women. Junia an apostle (Rom 16:7) is believed by many theologians to be a woman.³⁹

Those who would protest against a woman apostle because of a belief in an unbroken line of only male bishops, should consider the fact that we do not have all the paperwork to support this claim to the unbroken lineage of men.

Controversial scripture passages. To bring further closure to the impact of patriarchy, the scriptures that were historically poorly exegeted by the early church fathers and used to discriminate against women, need to be ascribed new meanings. These include Genesis 3, Genesis 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. This would put to rest the contaminated meanings of these texts that have permeated the cloth of our church. Today's theologians, with updated exegetic' tools, historical and archaeological knowledge, are skilled in exegetic analysis.

Can we take the controversial texts by Paul literally? In the words of Heinzelmann, "It is important to consider Paul was a Jew. His statements to that effect should not be regarded as timeless abstractions."⁴⁰ Alternatively, the texts that seem to marginalise women may relate to a particular incident rather than there being a generic discipline for all times. For example, the verses from Timothy and Corinthians mentioned above that prevented women from speaking in church. It is also possible that Paul's words might have been incorrectly redacted. There is evidence that Paul collaborated with women in ministry and regarded them highly. In Romans, chapter 16, eight active Christian women are favourably mentioned by Paul, including Priscilla and Junia. Junia is said to be "eminent among the apostles"⁴¹ Perhaps Paul was on a growing curve of learning to walk with the values of Christ, rather than those acquired from a patriarchal culture. A call to all humankind. There is evidence in the New Testament of women who were deacons (Phoebe), prophets (daughters of Philip), and founders and leaders of churches (Junia, Prisca, Lydia, Chloe).⁴² Leadership and governance positions that Paul supported.

Genesis 3 needs further exegesis for both its patriarchalism and truth. It was Adam who was advised by God not to eat from 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' (Gen 2:17), with the devil taking advantage of this by tempting Eve who had presumably received the message second hand from Adam. In that situation the man purely stood beside the woman saying nothing, making a scapegoat of the woman, as many men have done since. Genesis 3:16, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you," could well be read as women calling for a unified, collaborative approach in life, but men will not cooperate. This being the issue today. We should also remind ourselves this story for how the world became corrupted, was from a male

perspective. The Bible texts were written by men with an inherent attitude of male righteousness.

Ephesians 5:23 also needs further analysis, “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.” This text is used by the church to supplement the argument that only a man can represent Jesus as the bridegroom at the Eucharist. Heinzelmann, referring to the studies of Else Kübler (Doctor of Theology) states, “No man can claim that he has given himself for the Church and done for it what Paul is talking about, [thus] no other man has the right to put himself in the place of Christ.”⁴³

Wider issues. The church’s marginalisation of women and the need for reform needs to be taken seriously. Throughout history the church has in many ways role modelled patriarchy as normative, reflecting it back to society justifying and reinforcing what is there. Of lower status, women receive less for their labour in paid employment and fewer higher decision - making roles. For centuries in the church, nuns, on too many occasions, have been the unpaid servants and rape victims of clergy, with guilty clergy continuing in their positions.⁴⁴ Women laity often the backbone of a parish. Women’s sense of a ministerial vocation has been considered irrelevant with women made to feel sinful because of their gender - referred to as ‘holy guilting.’⁴⁵ The value and dignity women should have been accorded has never been fully accorded them. The patriarchal disempowerment of women has role modelled, whether intended or not, a disrespect of women visible to all. Sadly, a male ecclesial church has also perpetuated an image of a patriarchal God, a projection hard for many women to draw close too; one that can also lower their sense of self – worth. It could appear that God favoured men.

The lasting psychological damage. “The lasting psychological damage of the patriarchal state and the church has been to make its gendered order appear normal, even natural, in the same way that class and racial oppression have historically been framed as natural by those in power.”⁴⁶ The lower value of women has become enculturated contributing to abuse. Domestic violence is rampant. Women are raped, battered, prostituted, sold into sexual slavery, murdered by men to a degree that is not neutral. United Nations statistics show that: women make up around ½ of the world’s population, 1/3 of them experience physical and/or sexual violence, 2/3 of illiterate adults are women, women own less than 1/5 of the world’s land, do most of the unpaid labour, are more likely to be starving, receive less for paid work, and have fewer higher positions; millions of young girls are subject to forced marriages, among other disparaging data.⁴⁷ The ecclesial church must look at the role it has played in normalising a gender subverted world.

The above issues associated with patriarchalism indicate what a moral evil it is.

The future of the church. In cultures where women have been better educated, many have become more reform minded, withdrawing their consent from their previously conditioned and internalised mindset and sense of inferiority. They are refusing the justifications that men have made for their position in the church (in society in general too), no longer conferring on men the power to overrule their free agency and calls. They are moving beyond the “cruel blows” they have suffered over the centuries “from philosophers and theologians and formal acts of the Church and working for change.”⁴⁸ They are losing respect for their leaders.

Disillusioned, many are simply **leaving** the church to walk their own spiritual journey. Both women and men. Without change the church may lose many of the generations that follow them as the faith will not be passed on. The church will lose many future evangelist and missionaries. The **Eucharist**, instituted by Christ and assuredly the Father’s will in His plan of redemption and unity, will be left unreceived by many. The unifying and empowering grace unreceived. The church threatening to become a ‘museum,’ as something of the past. The institutional church working against itself. Without women, the church would not exist today and without

them the church's future is challenged.

Further, studies have shown that denying a person their agency to choose has a negative impact upon motivation, the use of talents, responsibility, and accountability.⁴⁹ This could apply to those women and men who have not only walked away from the church but also the current lack of involvement in the mission of the church by many of those still present. It is not a 'world' where they want to be or feel they are fully a part of.

Current church policy of defusing. Currently it is perceived that the church is using an ecclesial policy of 'appease and defuse.' A few women to advise and be part of the official synod for example. Any appeasement by the hierarchy as an attempt to defuse the issue of women, be it by any cardinal, bishop, or priest, will ultimately garner disrespect for the church. As indicated above, the reform clouds have gathered.

The Church must critically question itself. Those who would defend the Magisterium and the Pope as the authoritative truth bearers, and thus the current position of women in the church is to be accepted, should be aware there have been times when the church has been wrong on issues. Divine revelation has clearly not always been the premise for their decision making. Corruption, ego, sin, and serious error have also played a role in the history of our church's decision making.

To name a few: The Papal Bulls, commonly known as 'The Doctrine of Discovery'⁵⁰ have been one of the church's gravest wrong 'truths.' The Bulls resulted in the coloniser's brutal subjugation of the native people (called 'barbarians'). Indigenous people are suffering the consequences of this to this day, with Pope Francis apologising last year to the Canadian Aboriginal people for the sufferings they have endured. Many other countries have still to receive apologies. Long-standing traditions that have been reversed include the condoning of slavery (also supported by Paul, the church fathers Augustine and Aquinas), the obligation requiring rulers of Catholic nations to prevent the propagation of Protestantism in their territories, the teachings on Limbo, and the doctrine that no one can be saved outside communion with the Catholic Church. Also reversed is the 1442 common teaching by the whole episcopate that all pagans and Jews would certainly go to hell if they did not become Catholics before they died.⁵¹ There has also been more than one Pope 'reigning' at one time, and at times corrupt and immoral popes, Pope Benedict IX for example sold his papacy among other misconducts. Pope Alexander VI was responsible for the Bulls of Donation.⁵²

"The church has preserved central and fundamental truths through the work of the Holy Spirit and many saintly men and women"⁵³ but it has as indicated above, also been characterised by failings that they have had to correct. Ecclesial men discriminating against women by imposing their decisions upon them and limiting their agency and opportunities, is considered by many as another of those errors that needs to be addressed. Rutherford has stated the greatest theological problem with infallibility is that it makes it very difficult for the church to admit it was wrong.⁵⁴ However as Francis A. Sullivan SJ, emeritus professor Gregorian University Rome, has stated, "The changes in church doctrine that have actually taken place in the course of history show that a tradition could hold firm until advances in human knowledge or culture obliged the church to look at the question in a new light."⁵⁵ This is that time.

Conclusion

In light of the above, to ask women to accept that men have a right to govern women's free agency and determine the roles in the church they may participate in, is questionable. It is viewed as immoral causing suffering to women, the church and society. Upon an examination of conscience and prayer, to submit would be a moral suicide for many. The church in light of the Gospel needs to be bearers of moral justice leading the way for change not only in the church but in society too.

Rhetorical Questions:

How can the church justify that men can decide what women in the church can or cannot do?

How can the church justify that women do not have a real vocation to diaconship and priesthood when God can call anyone?

How can the church justify denying women's free agency and baptismal gifts?

Can you tell me what you believe is a moral evil?

Can you tell me where you believe there is the evidence that women cannot be ordained?

Can you tell me what the church is afraid of where the issue of women is concerned?

FOOTNOTES

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Maree originally wrote this essay to share with Synod delegates as they prepared for the second session in October. "The essay I have written is with a sincere heart," she states by way of introduction. "I wrote it over a three-month period with much prayer and deliberation. The web sites were visited between June and September 2024 inclusive. I hope you will read it with a synodal heart and give some consideration to the points I raise on the position of women in the Church. I looked at it from a moral perspective. I am a committed Catholic and love the church. I have many friends in the church, laity, religious and priests".