

REPORT ON THE DAY OF DIALOGUE

Women in the Church: How it Started How's it going?...

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t: 017979364 | m: 0876649862

e: info@macfd.ie

www.margaretaylwardcentre.ie



Dympna Mallon, director of the Margaret Aylward Centre for Faith and Dialogue welcomed participants to a safe place where open and honest conversation can occur alongside deep and authentic listening. Dympna then introduced the day's facilitator, Jane Mellett Laudato Si' Officer at Trócaire & Laudato Si' Movement who reiterated the need for safe spaces like the centre for dialogue and active, compassionate listening.

The day began with a short communal prayer after which Jane introduced the first speaker, Dr Jessie Rogers, Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Lecturer in Sacred Scripture at St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth. Jessie presented on Women in the Early Church: How it Started and how it is going.



Image: "Inner Listening"
Mary Southyard



Jessie pre-empted her talk by referencing the fact that it is a given that the early church of Jesus was welcoming to women, and thus she chose instead Paul as her starting point, and used his letters, specifically Romans 16, to answer the question – what was it like to be a woman in the early church?

Quotations from Romans 16 which were made available to all participants on a handout gave us a great sense of who was with Paul in the doing of his work, and the colour coded document clearly illustrates that many of those mentioned and lauded for their roles were women, and women from various levels in society and in the church. The inclusivity of the early church is evident in the roles held by women including deacon and apostle, but even more interesting and radical is the inclusion of slaves indicating an open and egalitarian organisation. Just as Jesus had women benefactors and followers, the early church under Paul was naturally inclusive of women which is evident in his greetings in the letters.

Jessie went on to outline the structure of the early church which had no priests and was in no way patriarchal, and the fact that it began in homes and was community based might explain why women played such an important role. This idea was to be taken up later in the day in some of the ensuing discussions and group work.





Jane thanked Jessie for her insightful talk and introduced the second speaker, Baroness Nuala O'Loan.

Nuala is a member of the House of Lords and Chair of the Trustee's Safeguarding Committee for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster. She was the first Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and continues to fight for justice and truth to which she has been called.

Nuala presented on her journey as a woman of faith today, A Pilgrim's Journey of challenges and blessings. She did not focus on her role as a woman in all that she does and has done and recounted how she stopped thinking about being a woman, and rather on the greater call, the call of God as the driving force in all she tries to achieve in the world where she finds herself.

Nuala has faced many challenges upholding the causes she has championed throughout her life but has steadfastly upheld the importance of her living faith and she quoted Pope Francis who describes authentic faith as involving 'a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.' Nuala gave many examples of how, through her work she has tried to fight for justice and truth and to give voice to the voiceless. Presently for Nuala this includes fighting for the families who lost loved ones during the troubles in Northern Ireland. As the British Government prepares to put through legislation which will deny them access to damages, or even an inquest, Nuala is fighting against the government to secure their rights. Nuala used the example of the Ballymurphy shootings to emphasise the importance of investigating incidents to establish whether or not what was done constitutes criminality. The current legislation, if it goes through, will deny justice to many. The Human Rights Convention ensures a Public Enquiry into the Omagh Bombings which happened on 15th August 1998, which was after the Belfast Agreement but anything before that could be cleared uninvestigated from records if the legislation is passed. Nuala has worked as the first Police Ombudsman in Northern Ireland, as Investigator of the Metropolitan Police, has worked with the families of the Disappeared and is chair of the Archdiocese of Westminster's Safeguarding Committee. She has lived under death threats and knows the dangers involved in championing such causes. However, like St Oscar Romero of El Salvador she believes that people of faith must take risks for others. Nuala acknowledged that this is a hugely challenging calling, and she finished up with a beautiful prayer attributed to St Augustine of Hippo which calls on God's help to lighten our burden and brighten our darkness.

The prayer was very well received, and several participants asked for a copy of it. It was shared with all participants and became the closing prayer of the day which was later read aloud together in unison by all participants.





Jane thanked Nuala for sharing so openly with us her journey of faith paved with challenges and blessings.

She then introduced the third speaker, Professor Michael Conway. Michael is Professor of Faith and Culture in the Faculty of Theology at St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth.

Michael presented to us on 'the issue of our times' in his talk: Beyond Eulogy – Women in the Church. Michael began by describing a personal experience he remembers from his time as curate in Galway Cathedral. Early on Saturday mornings, as curate he would celebrate the Eucharist at a side altar. Michael remembers the atmosphere as being very special, as a small intimate community of market workers and early risers celebrated the sacrament together. The memory of this warm intimate atmosphere stayed with Michael and when he witnessed a similar celebration on a side altar in Westminster Abbey years later, he was transported back to Saturday morning in Galway – but was jolted from his comfort zone momentarily when confronted with a woman celebrant. This visceral reaction was resolved in the gut and Michael stated that once he had adjusted to this model, he was struck by the ordinariness of witnessing a woman in that role. This experience and his reaction to it has stayed with Michael who stated emphatically that he has no fear for the future and for women in the church.

Michael did not however deny the complicated nature of the space inhabited by women in the church today, but he stressed the importance of understanding that complicated space as a space of creativity – opening up to a new kind of future. Michael went on to explain this based on the idea of interlapping modes. The first mode – resist resisting – goes back to the originating dynamics of Christian faith. The initial movement was as Jessie stated earlier always liberating for women. Foundational equality was at work in the early church and this value of freedom and liberation is a central component to Christianity. Michael noted how plurality was built in at the beginning offering two states of life – marriage and celibacy – so women couldn't be enclosed exclusively in marriage. Michael presented examples from Japanese and Irish culture to emphasise how the urge towards freedom continued to thrive in the church and he used the specific example of the Dominican and Holy Faith sisters working towards the liberation of women in their missionary work abroad and at home in the provision of education for Irish women to provide them with a better future. The desire for change was there and these pioneering women acted on it. Michael noted that although younger people don't see this, it is important to make the connection between the desire for change that existed then and what we are experiencing now, which he named at the outset as 'the issue of our times'.

Although Michael did not get around to outlining the second mode, his talk provided rich material for the discussions and groupwork which would happen later in the day. He finished with a short quote from the Paul Durkin poem 'Women Are Brutally Practical People'.



After a short break Jane introduced the fourth and final speaker Dr Tony Hanna. Tony is a former director of Armagh Diocese and a co-founder of a new ecclesial movement - The Family of God - which is recognised as a Private Association of the Faithful and he has worked full-time in the Church for the last forty years.

Tony presented on Hope and Promise in the New Paradigm. Tony's argument points to the tensions within the church, between Baptism and Holy Orders, the Petrine and the Marian models, and between the Institutional and the Charismatic.

Tony acknowledged that while the role of the Petrine was to serve and enable the Marian, and in the past, its effect has been to crush it. Tony pointed to hopeful signs that this is shifting now in the present climate. He referred to the fortress mentality around ministry as the role of the laity grows in strength. To illustrate this shift, he used the analogy of John in the Desert. At the time the people were going out to seek him in the wilderness and abandoning the temples and the high priests. He referred to the recovery of pneumatology - the Cinderella of the Holy Trinity - with the renewed focus on the Holy Spirit.

Tony argued for new and different models for leadership in parish communities. He referred to the Code of Canon Law which cites seven models for running a parish. This idea led to rich discussion in the group work later in the day. Tony recognised the difficulty inherent in balancing the rights of the ordained against the rights of the charism. He used the stark metaphor of the heart with blocked arteries to illustrate the plight of the present-day church as it struggles to breathe.

Like all the earlier speakers Tony finished on a note of hope quoting from Emily Dickenson's poem:

Hope is the thing with feathers - That perches in the soul - And sings the tune without the words - And never stops - at all - - suggesting that we are on the cusp of that now.

Tony's final image was of a dam with the sluice gates closed and then opening to allow the waters to rush through - a metaphor for the Holy Spirit waiting in the wings.



Image:

"Great Solstice Moon"

Mary Southyard

Plenary Session Jane thanked the four speakers again and introduced the plenary session.

She asked participants to take some quiet time to consider the following questions before discussing the issues in twos and then feeding back.

- **What has struck you?**
- **What has surprised you?**
- **What is missing?**
- **How have you been affected by what you have heard?**

There was rich feedback after this phase which is summarised below:

- A participant spoke of being affected by Nuala's reference to 'authentic faith' and the words of Pope Francis inspiring the courage to face the challenges.
 - Several participants expressed hopelessness despite the hopeful tone of the speakers. While the speakers all expressed hope, several participants could not find that on the ground in their parishes. One was agreeably surprised at the attitudes of the speakers but disappointed that she could not find a place to actively participate. She felt she had no role, and this feeling was reiterated by others who felt no sense of community in their parishes. One struggled with being in a parish where women are not respected for their gifts and their leadership. One found it difficult to find hope in what is happening with the Synod at this moment.
 - There was a contrasting view expressed from a participant whose experience of parish life was the opposite, and who felt cherished and respected in her community. She acknowledged that her experience was not the norm and she felt lucky in this respect.
 - Surprise was expressed at the fact that a deacon cannot remarry if his wife dies even though he has been married already in the role, indicative of church's attitude to women and sex. (Tony had referred to this in his preamble as one of the reasons he did not become a deacon of the church).
- The Margaret Aylward Centre for Faith and Dialogue was acknowledged as a lifeline – a space to share as fellow travellers.
- The idea of the place of conflict also being a place of creativity was revisited and one participant proffered that we are all in that place. She alluded back to Tony's image of the sluice gates opening – the momentum is building and won't be held back – and when it happens it will impact the church moving forward – which gives her great hope.

- This idea was challenged by one participant who was surprised by the level of optimism in the room. She cited church teaching which says women are inferior coupled with the cohort of men coming to the priesthood today being extremely conservative. She expressed disappointment that the feminist left view was not being voiced. She countered the image of the Holy Spirit surging forth as the sluice gates burst suggesting an alternative image of the Holy Spirit as being locked in a cage.
- Small Christian communities were suggested as being the way forward. Several examples were given of such groups which are working successfully with great input from the various congregations of sisters – but it was acknowledged with very little involvement from the priests. Such communities were cited as a hopeful sign for the future.
- One participant expressed unease about the complexity of finding justice. She referred to Nuala's account of the Ballymurphy killings. Just as the voice of truth was suppressed in that instance so too is the voice of women not being heard in the church. She did however hold up optimism that out of chaos can come creativity and expressed hope that a moment of change was on hand.
- Another participant was disappointed that any ecological awareness was missing from the discussion so far.
- Several expressed surprise at the seven modes of running a parish that are listed in canon law of which they were unaware.
- Others would have liked to hear more about the Synod and how it was going, reactions to it and the state of the church in Ireland generally.
- Another found the Petrine/Marian distinction very helpful. She reiterated the analogy of the Holy Spirit being caged with too much emphasis on the personality of the priest who might not necessarily have leadership qualities. She cited Pope Francis who has said that change is not going to come from the mainstream church but from the margins.
- Participants found the imagery of the speakers very powerful, and Tony's image of the dam spoke to one participant who felt the church was blocked. In her parish a change of personnel has impacted how the community can advance. Lay people and women have lost their roles in her parish example where there is disappointment and anger. She felt that the role of ministry in a parish needs to be explained in terms of women and the Christian community. She explained how many of the new priests who are being imported into Ireland were trained by the very priests we exported as far back as the forties. They are anachronistic and are recreating a church of the 1940s which is not appropriate today.
- One participant acknowledged that many women are exercising spiritual autonomy and leaving the church. They are still living Christian lives but are not deferring back to the church to authorise this. This point – that women have already left the room – was taken up as one of the topics for discussion in the afternoon session.

- One participant expressed the belief that the floodgates have already opened but there is no direction, and so much has already been lost – so much beauty and how do we cope with that loss?
- Tony reiterated that the paradigm change comes from the margins. He used the story of the lost keys to illustrate this. They searched for the lost keys in the light and couldn't find them. How do we look in the dark margins for the truth we seek?

During Lunch the feedback was examined, and five topics were isolated for discussion in the afternoon group sessions.

Afternoon Session – Topics for Discussion

1. As people of faith, we are called to witness justice and courage. How do we encounter with those who challenge us as women in the Church?
2. Are small Christian communities the way forward? Church as a movement rather than an institution.
3. If a place of chaos/conflict is a place of creativity, what is being born now?
4. How do we channel the hope in the room? Four models of Parish which don't depend on a priest.
5. The women have left the room – where have they gone?

The participants were asked to choose a group and were directed to the assigned rooms. We all reconvened in the main space at 2pm for feedback.

Feedback from the Groups

1. As people of faith, we are called to witness justice and courage. How do we encounter with those who challenge us as women in the Church?

The group agreed with the statement. They noted there are not many opportunities to do that within the church – but a lot outside. Personal experiences were shared about the difficulties experienced when trying to make small changes even in the use of inclusive language as a reader of the Word. It was reported that such experiences and challenges give way to emotions of rage and embarrassment. The group felt that women are waiting for permission. In their feedback this group suggested breaking down the structures of the parish and gave examples of smaller Christian communities in Africa and asked what is stopping us? They wondered are we conditioned to be passive? To do what we're told? To not take the initiative? And could this change? Could we take the initiative and change the structures? Give more power to parish councils to make decisions. The main message from this group was to face up to the crisis, acknowledge people are not happy and look for opportunities to do what we can do – to distinguish between what no longer serves us and what is life giving - without asking for permission.

2. Are small Christian communities the way forward? Church as a movement rather than an institution.

This group shared the experience of a small community under the Columban fathers with the acronym HOPE (Helping Our People to Evolve). They called for faith development and suggested that older people need to be re-catechised. The idea of small Christian communities needs to be clarified and not institutionalised. They stressed the importance of 'encounter' whether on the street or in the locality and of intercessory prayer to the Holy Spirit to overcome the challenges. They cited Pope Francis who is encouraging the idea of being open to 'encountering' each other wherever we are – inside or outside the church. The example of looking after refugees and caring for those who have very little fitted into the suggested model of small Christian communities which were not institutionalised.

3. If a place of chaos/conflict is a place of creativity, what is being born now?

The group suggested that younger women feel the church doesn't speak their language. There is a dissonance in a church they view as misogynistic. They cited the Synod as an expression of trying to think creatively. There was a strong sense coming from this group that they felt we were 'on the brink of an explosion', that a 'crunch' was coming and the voices of women and of the youth needs to be heard. They stressed the need for meaningful ritual and cited the example of the response to the suicide of a young person in Cork which unleashed the need for ritual which was enacted spontaneously. The need for a language that speaks to people – especially women and young people – was acknowledged. The group was very hopeful for the youth. Although young people are not going to church, they are demonstrating faith in action, engaging in and fighting for social justice. They referenced the film *The Letter*, produced by the *Laudato Si'* Movement as an example of the voice of the people being heard. In the chaos creativity emerged. People wanted to talk and had the opportunity to be heard. The tone of the group feedback was hopeful, expressing a particular hope in Pope Francis.

4. How do we channel the hope in the room? Four models of Parish which don't depend on a priest.

Participants had expressed a lot of interest after the morning session in the seven models of running a parish which are listed in canon law, and more specifically in the four models which don't depend on a priest that had been alluded to in Tony's presentation. The feedback from this group urged that we live our Baptism. They acknowledged the need for ongoing formation and highlighted the diversity that exists that is evidenced in parishes that are set up for different purposes and groups e.g., the travelling community and the military. There have been parishes that have appointed sisters (Limerick example) or a deacon to run the parishes and these are possible models down the line. The group advocated that change is not implemented in the church – it just happens and while there are those who want to do one of the following –

- Ignore
- Restore
- Replace
- Deplore

– this group advocated that what we ultimately need to do is EXPLORE.

Clarification

Tony was with this group and cleared up any confusion by clarifying that while seven models for running a parish are listed in canon law and while many different models are operational, the only person in canon law who has full pastoral care of a parish is an ordained priest. In newer models, partial care can be handed over to others and this can be anything up to 99.9%. Such models are being operated in other parts of the world, but the priest still technically has responsibility in canon law.

5. The women have left the room – where have they gone?

Jessie had been with this group and from her experience teaching theology to young women she could confirm that young women value their autonomy and ability to self-direct. The group suggested that there is nothing appealing for this cohort in the church and yet they are very spiritual and searching. The teaching of Pope Francis does however have appeal for them, and they see him as 'cool', as a 'punk'.

This group acknowledged the emptiness women feel as they search for what is nourishing, and they wondered would Jesus even recognise the church he founded?

This group suggested that people are moving out of a structure that can't hold them – and a lot of those who are 'leaving the room' are women.

They expressed great concern about what can replace religion at a time like this. They warned that we must 'mind the gap' for that is the space where self-appointed gurus can take hold, especially on social media and on the internet. 'Spiritual Influencers' can have hundreds of thousands of followers, but the message is shallow, lacking wisdom, depth and experience, for you can only bring people as far as you have gone yourself. This group believes that the reason such influencers are gaining such huge support is precisely because there is a gap to be filled.

This group ultimately advocated, like the previous group, that we stop asking and waiting for permission. They wondered what are we waiting for?

The importance of ritual was again acknowledged as was the fact that many Irish catholic women having trained are moving on to other spaces where they can offer meaningful rituals outside the church.

The importance of ritual was revisited with reference to the secular role of the Solemniser. An example was given of an official solemniser who is also a minister of the Eucharist and who chose this role to be able to bring God into the marriage ceremony.

The question of grief arose, and the group acknowledged that they are not grieving about what is lost but about what the church could be.

Discussion ensued and the point was raised that while there is a lot of talk among priests and among women there is very little dialogue between these two groups. Nuala shared that a lot of the priests she speaks to can be so demoralised and suggested that there need to be channels to allow this important dialogue to take place.

Plenary Session – What are you Hearing? What Matters? Is there a Next Step? The Way Forward?

During the plenary session participants were afforded the opportunity to voice their feelings in the light of the day's discussions:

- Hope was expressed and enthusiasm – what matters is action, that we listen and do something about it.
- Frustration was expressed – we need to stop waiting for permission; community matters and we need to get organised.
- What needs to be torn down and what rebuilt? There needs to be a conversation about getting rid of the dead wood and focussing on what is nurturing and life-affirming. The example of Brendan Leahy in Limerick was cited again as an example of this. The idea of handing parishes completely over to sisters did not appeal to all but there was general consensus about the need for all the parties – priests, sisters and the laity – to work together, to explore new possibilities, initiate pilot projects – (slowly, a few to start with) and see how it goes. If it is life-affirming it will attract others.
- What matters are the new ideas and ways of doing things. If we listen to Pope Francis and his idea of 'encounter' we can't go wrong.
- Nuala expressed her belief in the right of women – but not in reverse discrimination – as in the idea of carving up our church into bits run by men and bits run by women. Hope lies in men and women working together side by side.

- The singularly lonely plight of priests in the church today which was highlighted in earlier discussions was revisited. The sense of fear, and of security being threatened impacted and it was suggested not to 'throw the baby out with the bath water' but to pray to the Holy Spirit hovering above the chaos for guidance regarding the next step.
- A rowing boat analogy was shared. The idea of a boat with no oars and no current waiting for the spirit – the life force – to find the way.
- The words of St Francis were evoked as he was instructed by Christ to go 'rebuild my church', but of course this was not referring to the building'. There is always the danger of counteraction. Collaboration is what matters in a new egalitarian society. Solidarity. It was suggested that the church is in crisis and that we need to pray more than ever and to trust.
- A dream was shared of a butterfly which had once been a caterpillar trapped in a gothic room as an image for the need for intercessory prayer.
- Nuala shared how her work has brought her to horrible places and gave examples. She shared also how she has been helped through the word of God. The scriptures contain skill and knowledge which we can access and relate to ourselves. Many people face horrible things every day in their lives and in their jobs, but scripture can be healing and can carry us through the darkness. Nuala stressed the importance of the word of God and how we need it now more than ever.

The final stage of the day was to isolate at least three issues for prayer and possible action that we can take away with us; what we might/need to do next. The following were suggested:

- The need to take personal initiative – to build back up again from the ground starting with small spaces of trust.
- The need to recognise the importance of studying the scriptures more – to have the language. Maybe join online reading groups. Engage and recognise the value of facilitated scripture education – and of theological reflection on the issues.
- The need to increase our knowledge of canon law – we need to know more about that – to know what we are fighting. Maybe a follow-up workshop?
- The need to assist our priests and understand through dialogue where they are at. To ask the questions e.g., why the objection to inclusive language? To engage more with our clergy and to have practical conversations that are more diverse – priests, laity, irrespective of gender age etc.
- The need to look at Bishop Leahy's experimental team model – with the priest as one of the team. The need to try to model that and to hear from spaces that are already modelling that way.
- The need to keep it Christ-centred – guided by prayer.

Closure

Jane thanked the four speakers and Dympna and everyone who attended and participated. Dympna thanked Jane for facilitating and the day closed with a group reading of the prayer that had been introduced earlier by Nuala;



“God of our life, there are days when the burdens we carry chafe our shoulders and weigh us down; when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening; when our lives have no music in them, and our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage. Flood the path with light, run our eyes to where the skies are full of promise; tune our hearts to brave music; give us the sense of comradeship with heroes and saints of every age; and so quicken our spirits that we may be able to encourage the souls of all who journey with us on the road of life, to your honor and glory.”

~ SAINT AUGUSTINE