



MAGDALA

NEWSLETTER

July 2021

Report on The International Conference on **Women in the Church: The Challenges of Synodality**

18 June on zoom

The synodal movement within the Church, now developing around the world, resonates with many of the themes that have been at the heart of Magdala's projects. With over 7000 participants this conference (hosted in Rome by the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations and in Mexico by the Academy of Lideres Catolicos Latinoamerica) had as its principal speaker **Sr. Nathalie Becquart**, first woman undersecretary to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops.

She spoke of the changes in the Church and the greater awareness of women's contribution. This awareness is especially pertinent with the approach of the upcoming synod "For a synodal Church: communion participation and mission" beginning in October and rolling out into the universal church by 2023. She challenges us to return to the practices of the early Church communities, with women and men working side-by-side in equal reciprocity, collaboration and cooperation. A synodal Church, therefore, is one that is free of a patriarchal vision, clericalism and the practice of domination.

During this time of preparation we need to discern our new relationships. The new model of Church is open to listening to every single person, rooted in the Holy Trinity, a dynamic, all-inclusive approach. A synodal Church must find concrete ways in the world's archdioceses to practice an inclusiveness of all people. Women cannot be marginalized. Women need to discern their own vocations as well as step up to the challenges of responsibility and shared governance. We need simple/direct relationships formed by mutual encouragement.

Mons. Jorge Eduardo Lozano (Secretary General of the Episcopal Conference of Latin American Bishops) reminded us that women are "the feminine face of the Church," that

as Church we need to make room for *all* at the heavenly banquet at which Jesus is the centre. A Church that is too fearful and structured cannot follow the Holy Spirit. From the clerical to the synodal requires listening and conversion. Women's gifts are vital. Synodality is the way forward for our Church in the 3rd millennium.

“Synodality is the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God.”

(from “Synodality in the life and mission of the Church” published March 2018 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s International Theological Commission).

Lucinda M. Vardey

A New Season of Discovery:

Magdala Toronto’s Maturing Understanding of the Feminine Dimension

Toronto’s Magdala conciliary met monthly from October 2020-May 2021. Conciliary members selected a topic related to the feminine dimension to research and present during our eight virtual gatherings. These included Jesus’ teaching on non-violence, the role of complementarity in liturgy, the art of story-telling, solidarity and the cultivation of a “culture of encounter” (noted in the recent papal encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*), the relationship between the body, mind, and soul/spirit, and the non-hierarchical, inter-relational model of Church revealed through a feminine interpretation of the metaphor of Jesus as the True Vine (from the Gospel of John).

1) Nonviolence

In preparation for discussion, the conciliary read a letter from Pope Francis to Cardinal Peter Turkson on the occasion of the Vatican’s April 2016 conference on *Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence*. The conciliary’s sharing highlighted that peace can be achieved not only on an individual level, but “at the level of people and nations,” since the Church and international community represents a “Family of Nations.” Nonviolence is not a “tactical behaviour” but a *familial* attitude, or way of being, that confronts forces of evil with acts of genuine love and kindness, and recognizes that loving one’s enemy is the real “nucleus of a Christian revolution.” One member considered a parallel to

Pope Francis' affirmation of the communal dimension of making-peace and quoted Martin Luther King's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech claiming that "nonviolence restores the broken community." Nonviolence, according to Martin Luther King, only received traction when people were united in intention doing something that was considered disruptive. In other words, a movement was created to confront injustice and the cause was amplified because the community realized it was stronger together, galvanized by a common purpose.

Finally, it was shared that Jesus' Beatitudes are both a challenge and invitation for a daily renewal and reaffirmation of a call to be gentle and steadfast in the ways of harmony and reconciliation (both within oneself and in relation to one's neighbour). We explored such questions as, *how does Jesus help illuminate the roots of nonviolence*, and *if we were to seek the 'good of all' and achieve it, how might we as individuals, maintain it?* Ultimately, the conciliary concluded that reconciliation and conversion must be part of a collective community-based endeavour, to make-peace rather than seek to end violence altogether.

2) Examining the Paradox

The conciliary considered the role of complementarity and lay participation in liturgy, based on *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the sacred liturgy). The discussion began with the examination of the thinking of Fr. Robert Taft, SJ and William Storey, in regards to the origins or forms (modes) of prayer. The core understanding is that the ritualist (Cathedral/Priest) form of prayer is complementary to the contemplative (Monastic/Spouse) form of prayer. The group discussed the way this is present in both the Liturgy of the Hours, and the Mass. In exploring how this related to the role of liturgy, the conciliary identified some dualistic elements, which led nicely into the discussion of complementarity and paradox in the liturgy. There is a wealth of duality/complementarity in our understanding of the liturgy, and how they are all paradoxical. For example:

- The church (building): Is our understanding that God resides in the church as the Holy Place vs. out in the world, in all of creation?
- Time: "*The Liturgy is a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy*" (SC #8) – is Mass temporal (finite), taking place during a set time period in the church building vs. or is it atemporal (eternal) taking place in heaven?
- Corporality: "*In the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members*" (SC #7); is liturgy an act of worship between the body of Christ (the faithful) and the Head (Priest *in persona Christi*) vs. the whole of the Body of Christ, the earthly Church (bride) united in praise with the heavenly Church (bridegroom).

The conciliary shared how complementarity should be better actualized, and ways to broaden our understanding of the feminine dimension of the Church. Both of these considerations deserve a full re-discovery. While the duality exists, sometimes in seeming opposition, it is important to recognize that the duality is not a consequence, but an integral part: they are two sides to the same coin. Key learnings from this gathering include: that liturgy is sacred and as such, is a gift to us (informed by our daily lives and meant to *inform* our daily lives), and that the feminine dimension of the Church is not external, but internal and intrinsically bound to it. The main work of the conciliary should continue to be the mending of the very structure it must navigate (i.e. the institutional Church and the Body of Christ's engagement with the formal governing and teaching bodies of the Church).

3) Storytelling for Earthly Survival

Magdala explored the research of scholar Donna Haraway in the documentary "Storytelling for Earthly Survival." Haraway shared that through the art of storytelling, personal narrative and experience can be considered valuable—especially the experience of marginalized peoples whose stories are often unheard, devalued, stifled, or "disappeared by masculinist thinking and explained away." Storytelling creates knowledge and new thought processes that is mutually beneficial, and can leave a lasting impact on converging fields of study (such as inter-sectional feminism, medicine, anthropology, and artificial intelligence, among many others). By telling stories typically not included in patriarchal, capitalist cultures, story-telling has greater influence over a culture's shared ability- and responsibility- to dream and envision a better future. The conciliary articulated that story-telling contains elements of the feminine dimension since Haraway advised that the academic community develop a greater consciousness of women's lived experience and "be deliberately and intentionally precise about women's thinking." Women's wisdom and new models for collaboration will become a key feature of the feminine dimension's hermeneutic and the development of a theology of women.

4) Fratelli Tutti

For our first gathering of 2021, it was very timely for Magdala to share insights from Pope Francis' third encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (published on the feast of St. Francis, October 4, 2020). Through conversation, Magdala sought to ascertain the deeper meaning of the Pope's writing and what lessons our current reality—living through a pandemic—could illuminate for us about Church as Mother and the necessity of a dialogue of encounter to remedy our great social ills. Major themes that were discussed include: the injustice of social inequalities and individualism, the

principle of subsidiarity, cultivating a culture of encounter (at the local and global level), and the spiritual significance of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and its applicability to today.

The parable is a lesson not solely about charity, but also a transformative encounter of mercy. One of our central preoccupations was on the important question: who is my neighbour?" One member shared that "Magdala is like a light" that creates a safe and welcoming space to be vulnerable and explore the gifts of men and women working to contribute meaningfully to the C/church. In answering the question, "Who is my neighbour," there is no distinction between male and female. The Pope provides a detailed description of each character in the story so the reader can ask "Who am I/who are we...in this story?" The conciliary explored the questions: "Have you ever experienced such an 'encounter of mercy'?" And "Has this influenced your experience of Church as family (kinship)?" An encounter of mercy means to be changed by the sufferings of another (the poor and the earth are crying out; their pain needs to become our own). We explored the importance of *compassion* when encountering others.

Conciliary members discussed if the wording of the encyclical's title was fully inclusive of women and how this text is perceived by others around the world, of varying socio-economic backgrounds. The voices of those marginalized, including women, need to be incorporated into the Church in tangible and meaningful ways. Catholics need to be reintroduced to the Spirit of the Law and educated on how consciences are formed so that they can engage with marginalized communities with compassion ("suffering with"), empathy, and a hermeneutic of love. In other words, the principles of *Fratelli Tutti* represent the hallmark of Jesus' most fundamental commandment: love God and love one's neighbour (reiterating once again the call to embrace and live the understanding of Church as Family). One member poignantly asked: "What is the feminine dimension if it were to be separated from the body?" If the Body of Christ were to live the reality of our inter-relatedness, the feminine dimension could be experienced and better understood as this very "culture of encounter" that Pope Francis describes.

The conciliary explored what it means to live in hopefulness as the Body of Christ, implementing concrete change at the local level forging renewed personal relationships: "We can start from below and, case by case, act at the most concrete and local levels, and then expand to the farthest reaches of our countries and our world, with the same care and concern that the Samaritan showed for each of the wounded man's injuries. Let us seek out others and embrace the world as it is, without fear of pain or a sense of inadequacy, because there we will discover all the goodness that God has planted in human hearts. (*Fratelli Tutti*, article 2, p. 78)."

To continue our conversation about *Fratelli Tutti*, the conciliary gathered to watch a youtube video of Professor Kim Daniel's lecture for the GIVEN Institute Catholic Young Women's Leadership Forum presented in September 2016. Daniel's lecture was titled "*The Feminine Genius Unleashed in the Church.*" We discussed how women are a gift to solidarity, and the limitations of categorizing characteristics of men and women, and how to work towards models of complementarity and true equality in the Church.

Once again, members acknowledged that women have a special receptivity to accompany and minister to vulnerabilities. The conciliary also recognized that there is a variety of meaningful ways that women can contribute to the C/church as they live out their baptismal promise as priestess, prophetess, and king/queen. Our thinking about and defining the "feminine dimension" must also always evolve and move beyond polarity or the reinforcement of unhelpful stereotypes. One member stated, "I struggle with the word *genius* as though it is the essential quality that "unlocks" the truth of femininity." Another member noted that we need to revert back to Jesus as our model and reference point for understanding how women are to be valued, stating: "I've given up on trying to find the one thing that relates to all women; the Church has not listened closely enough to women; what is the genius/wisdom that women have found in their own lives that we have lost by excluding them—silenced because they are women?" A recurring theme in our conversations is that being called into relationship with one another and God requires dialogue and an openness to vulnerability and conversion. With reference to the current pandemic, members questioned how our attitudes and habits will be transformed and oriented towards a more relational way of thinking/being when "we return to our parish communities and pews, and sit side by side." To this end, we explored: "How do we create a culture of encounter in our local parish community?"

5) Relationship

The conciliary also discussed the relationship between the body, mind, and soul/spirit. Personal narrative and faith sharing were used as a means of exploring the dignity of the human person, the beauty of creation, and the nature of death and the resurrection. We read an essay authored by Sr. Elizabeth Johnson entitled "Jesus and Women: 'You are Set Free'" (from the *Global Sisters Report*), and studied excerpts from the writings of mystics St. Catherine of Siena and St. John of the Cross.

6) The True Vine

This season of the conciliary's gatherings concluded with a study of the metaphor of Jesus the true vine, with a close reading of John 15:1-8. This passage illustrating a two-

fold feminine community as being a “community of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling (an organic unit)” and a “radical non-hierarchical image of the composition of the Church (all are called to bear fruit as a result of the common origin: the one true vine).” One member claimed, “This metaphor represents a Christian’s intimate, direct relationship to Christ that is irrespective of talent or function. St. Paul’s writings (for example First Letter to the Corinthians) talks more about function and utility in reference to the Body of Christ, but this passage from John’s Gospel is a feminine signal that the Church needs to be less hierarchically minded and more attuned to the radical equality of the vine metaphor.”

Emily VanBerkum and Magdala Toronto Conciliary Members

A Round-up of Rome’s Round Table

Deepening the Dialogue on the Feminine Dimension and Discovering Direction

Members of the Rome Round Table on the Feminine Dimension have met quarterly since its inception in March 2019. Gathered around a table in the Vatican they encountered a sense of the times and how to create a culture of conversion following on to what had been identified as the call for change in our Church and our world. Subsequent dialogues were focussed on exploring the maternal in God and the Church, and the feminine attributes embedded in the Beatitudes. Meetings on zoom this past year focussed on the aspects of the feminine dimension in relation to the Gospel in defining a specific Feminine Method, Process and accompanying Principles.

Much fruit has been born out of our subsequent three discourses on Wisdom and Sophiology defined as “the area of overlap between divine and created life” (*Rowan Williams*) which “develops the idea of an alternative modernity” (*Adrian Pabst*). Our research was garnered from the biblical wisdom books as well as the historical revelations documented in Michael Martin’s book *The Submerged Reality: Sophiology and the Turn to Poetic Metaphysics*. We focussed each discussion on the Figure of Wisdom, the Spirit of Wisdom and the Promise of Wisdom.

1. The Figure of Wisdom

The sapiential books (namely *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon and Song of Songs*) provided the resource in identifying the three dimensions in “a personal and familial” figure (*Clifford*) who embodies

- a way of seeing reality
- a guide to ethical and righteous behaviour
- relationship with the order of God (*ref Pope Francis*)
- who is God's consort, a partner with God in creation and for the human race
- who teaches guidance on the art of living well and enjoying life as divine gift
- who is a muse and inspiration, lover and friend, trusted confidante with God and a heavenly being. (*ref William Irwin CSB*).

Members contributed their scriptural exegesis to understand the call to be custodians of the abundance, harmony and beauty in God's creation and to be interiorly strong in awaiting the resurrection. That the feminine "call" is one of co-creating with God in being creative. Creation, however is not dualistic; it can only happen with a third dimension, similar to our understanding of Trinity. Perhaps Sophia lives as the energy of love and spirit between the dualistic?

Members discussed the contemplative aspect of Sophia in her relationship with our world, that she is subtle in her presence and her works. Her way is seeing with love, this is her energy and power, to guide us to a world fed purely by love. As love is in itself complete—love *is* God—love has implications as Jesus taught and exemplified. Love calls and enables us to change and Love is where we dwell with our mistakes as well as those of the Church. Jesus as the figure of wisdom calls us to see not only with faith but our hearts.

2. The Spirit of Wisdom

In this session members focussed on the specific aspects of the spirit of wisdom revealed in mystery, love, God's nature, as *Anima Mundi* (the soul of the world) and the immanence and preserver of "the phenomenal world" (*Martin*). The ingredients in this spirit and their specific identification and expressions were studied and discussed at length particularly as it related to the workings of the Holy Spirit, within the Trinity, and in Jesus and also Mary. Sharing focussed on the Spirit of God made present in our poverty, the need for the spirit of unity, the mission particularly of women to "bear the mystery."

The prophetic in women, their illumination of our human intelligence to the light of the Spirit is needed to be discovered today. The light that unites a "new diversity." To be enlightened by the beauty that we bear within. This spirit of the Trinity is not manifested outside, it is in our interior, and moves and creates from within. To live in the beauty of Divine life in the material is difficult but necessary.

Prophecy and creativity are fundamental not only in our present culture but also for those who suffer poverty, to help them find a new way. Creativity is an expression of “the other.” We seek the other by seeking Wisdom. She waits at the gates and we are her children being called. Prophecy is about making the invisible visible and Wisdom is necessary in making sense of our history and what needs developing. The greatest spiritual crisis we experience today is due to the loss of the prophetic.

Sophia (holy wisdom) is as a bridge, the divine energy field that communicates everything into a united whole between heaven and earth, like Mary. She is the mediator, between the Divine and the human, she is the unifier. Wisdom is the dimension in which Jesus acts and works.

3. The Promise of Wisdom

Wisdom’s promise is as an invitation to inner dynamism and beauty, friendship, insight, the gift of freedom through the mediation of grace. Members had found spiritual movement in their lives by the presence of Sophia and the revelations shared. Many were called to the practice of patience, humility and gratitude, some to illumination and being a lamp for the word of God. Transformation was readily happening through prayer, relationship, presence, wonder and revelations. Chiara Lubich’s words were shared “The eye of God on the world is the Heart of Christ whose pupil is the wounded....”

Many members were clearer in their direction, mission and purposes and felt the tangible presence of Sophia at work in their lives.

Conclusions offered were that Wisdom/Sophia cannot be grasped in concrete ways; like the mystery of God you have to believe, to have faith in the not-knowing and be secure in the mystery which requires being vulnerable.

The feminine dimension was confirmed by a quote shared from Gregory the Great “We make idols of our concepts, but wisdom is born of wonder.”

Lucinda M. Vardey

with Members of the Round Table on the Feminine Dimension, Rome, Italy.

Farther Afield

In Italy -

Anne-Marie Pelletier's article *The Church and the Feminine Dimension*—which appeared in the Community edition of our With One Accord journal—will be reprinted in Italian in the prestigious *Vita e Pensiero* scholarly magazine. Founded in 1918 out of the Catholic University of Milan, *Vita e Pensiero* is the oldest university press in Italy. Its books and magazine offer international scholarship for human inspiration as well as addressing the challenges of cultural transition.

In Japan -

Barbara Hallensleben's article *A Theology of Women in Relation to God's Spirit* (originally published in our Holy Spirit edition) and Lucinda M. Vardey's *Embodying Landscape* from the Creation issue, are being translated into Japanese. The periodical *Shingaku Digest*—produced out of the faculty of theology at Tokyo's Sophia University—will publish them in their upcoming December edition.

Congratulations

to Susan Muto whose latest book, *A Feast for Hungry Souls: Spiritual Lessons from the Church's Greatest Masters and Mystics*—reviewed in our Holy Spirit edition of the With One Accord journal—received a first-place award in spirituality from the Catholic Media Association.

With One Accord:

Learning and Living the Feminine Dimension as Church

The upcoming Autumn issue of our journal is on the theme of *CONVERSION* and will be available in late August. Subscription is free, and our subscribers are notified by email. To subscribe or for more information visit our website

www.magdalacolloquy.org

With One Accord is published quarterly online in English, Italian and French.

We can be contacted at: editor@magdalacolloquy.org