“The Church, women and authority: Why not”

This conference will explore the role of women in the Church today,

The title- “The Church, women and authority: Why not”, gives us some clue to the thinking behind the conference and maybe a recognition of the reality of how women are still perceived and treated within the Church and indeed, within wider society.

In society women are unlikely to occupy positions of power, they are still underrepresented in the Board room and whilst the pay gap is getting smaller it still exists. From my own perspective as the Chairperson of a construction company and President of The Construction Employers Federation for N.I.

I meet very few women in my sector and I meet even fewer who are in senior positions within industry. However when I meet young women I find a great ability, enthusiasm, aspiration and a willingness to take on the world, unfortunately that doesn’t seem to translate into women taking up key positions of authority.

This is not unique, in many societies throughout the world the lives of women are totally controlled by men and their views and voices are silent. We are horrified when we see on our television screens the lives that many are forced to endure but it continues to this day. Can we make a difference today? I hope that we don’t leave here today with good intentions but nothing actually changes.

Whilst we have made some progress in bridging the gender gap there is still much to do. Women were only allowed to graduate from British Universities on the same basis as men since 1920. In Ireland married women could not work in the Civil Service until 1973. This meant that many women were reliant on their husbands to earn the household income. This seems bizarre in today’s world but there are many more recent examples of gender discrimination.

As we sit here today, the Synod of Bishops in Rome will focus on the family and among other issues, will discuss the role of women. The meeting will involve 279 bishops from more than 120 nations, women will be represented through the presence of 17 married couples and there will be also the 17 auditors present throughout the Synod, women will account for less than 10% of those present.

Whilst women cannot be ordained as priests they have held position of authority within the Church, through Religious Communities, Educational establishment, Care Organisations, Charities and even in the Catholic media.

Like society in general the Catholic Church has had a varied relationship with women. They have been at various times hailed as saviours and at other times demonised. The attitude to women has traditionally been influenced by the male in society who sought to control the lives of women and ensure that they were kept to the role that was deemed appropriate for them by men.

From my perspective there is something wrong with the concept that you cannot occupy certain positions purely on the basis that you are a woman.

Whether you believe that women should have equal status with men in the Church or if you are of the belief that you don’t need a collar to make a difference we would like to hear your views today.

This conference has been designed to allow you to give meaningful feedback on how you believe the role of women can be enhanced in the Church. Our Archbishop Eamonn has been very supportive of this conference, he would have been here today had he not been attending the Synod in Rome. He is looking forward to getting your feedback which will be written up and presented to him on his return.

This is the start of a process; we need to set ourselves realistic goals and we need to come up with ideas which hopefully will lead to action. After the speakers we will split up into groups and you will be asked to reflect and answer questions like for example:

1. Are we satisfied with the role of women in our church today?
2. What roles do we see women fulfilling?
3. What do we need to do now to start making a change?

Or anything else that you wish to share, we look forward to hearing your views.

After our speakers we will break into groups for discussion and we will end with an open question session, I can guarantee that we will be finished by 1pm.