The Church, Women and Authority: Why Not? Baroness Nuala O’Loan

Do you know how many Catholic women there are in the world? About 600,000,000.

The women here today are just a few of them. I wonder what your experience is as Catholic women? How do you feel about it? How do men feel about it and about their experience as Catholic men?

And when we feel what we feel, do we look back to other women in the Church and reflect on their role? I think for example of the women who gave everything she had to God - bearing his son, fleeing from danger within a very short time of his birth - a refugee in a dangerous world, caring for him, loving him, bringing him up and teaching him the things that mothers teach, losing him on a journey and searching desperately for him, wondering what could possibly have happened to him. Have you known that terror? Then watching him as he grew into a fine young man, proud possibly - the rest of us mothers are anyway, going with him to weddings and social events, watching him move out into the world for three brief years, losing him probably to his father’s business, when he really did not have so much time for her, then becoming more and more fearful as his teaching provoked the authorities, then seeing him seized, tortured, murdered, hanging crucified in the hot sun for hours slowly dying in agony, staying with him in his pain and desolation, able only to let him know that she was there, that she loved him despite all that others were doing to him, praying no doubt for the agony to stop. She is a wonderful role model for us in terms of self-giving love, generosity, fortitude and how to live with suffering and pain and fear.

I think of some of the great women of the church whose work lives on after their death - Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, Mother Theresa, Chiara Lubich, Phyllis Bowman who fought so hard for the pro-life cause, Hildegard of Bingen who in the eleventh century recognised that sickness was not the punishment of God but something to be investigated, so that ways of healing could be found, Edel Quinn of the Legion of Mary. We could go on and on. They were women whose contribution to life was magnificent and who lived for God. They were all able to do great things. Like Mary, they may not have had access to the corridors of power, especially at the top of the Church, yet they were able to live the Gospel with courage and integrity. And at the end of the day maybe that is what really matters.

Sometimes I think that when we contemplate the role of women in the church we need to ask ourselves a lot of questions.

We might ask:

• What decisions are made in the church which really matter?

• Who makes them?

• How do we know about them?

and

• Where are decisions made and by whom?

• In the Vatican?

• In the diocese?

• In the parish?

and

• How do women get a word in?

• Do their words matter?

• Who is listening?

Are those the right questions? Given the shortness of our lives are there other questions we should be asking? What is it that makes a life truly well lived? What do we remember when people die? What matters?

I guess it depends on individual experience. We may feel excluded, marginalised, as we contemplate our situation. But actually that can be the experience of laymen too. Or we can live our lives as best we can in the changing situations in which we find ourselves, striving always for justice, for peace, for harmony in our homes, our workplaces, our parishes, our towns, our country.

In reality there can be no doubt that for women of my generation things have changed enormously. We have access to education, to a greater degree of material comfort than our mothers and grandmothers did, we have the ability to travel. We can drive. We no longer face a significant risk of dying in childbirth. We believe, and so we have hope.

You know, if you look around you in society, that in the professions, (with the exception of education), in law and politics, medicine, accountancy, there are only limited numbers of women, About 30% of public appointments in NI are held by women - 70% by men. The new commissioner for Public Appointments was talking about it yesterday - calling for targets of 50% for women appointed to boards. Women are more likely to be in low paid jobs. So things have improved but much remains to be done.

In Church terms progress has been similarly slow. For decades after Vatican 11 provision for greater involvement of the women was honoured largely in the breach. Expectations were raised by Paul VI (1965) saying that ‘the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and ….to have brought into relief her basic equality with man’ have not been realised. He went on to say, ‘the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. … at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.’

Things did change. We no longer have to wear black mantillas or hats to cover our hair in Church.. We can and do now enter the Sanctuary, we can and do become Ministers of the Word and the Eucharist. Girls can be altar servers. Women do chair Pastoral Councils, in Diocese and Parish. We are no longer required to be “churched” after childbirth.

The language being used about women has changed too. In Evangelii Gaudium, para 103 Pope Francis stated

“The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. I think, for example, of the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood. I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because “the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace” [72] and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.”

This is a very different interpretation of how women interact with the Church than that which we have known in the past.

More informally he said,

"The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable. [As the Declaration Inter Insigniores points out, ‘]The Church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: today their role is of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church'

What else has he done or said?

 • He undoubtedly focuses on women’s caring role within family, church and society, talking of how families benefit from women's "gifts of delicateness, special sensitivity and tenderness."

 • He seems to be moving to bring more women into roles within the Vatican and the pontifical bodies. This will inevitably be slow work. Membership of such bodies normally lasts for several years so appointments are not made frequently. One would wonder also whether the Presidents have a strong role in the decision making. Traditionally these roles are overwhelmingly held by men, ordained and unordained. Nevertheless:

 • He increased the number of women on the International Theological Commission from two to five, making them 16% of the Commission.

 • A body tasked with carrying out a detailed inquiry into the Vatican's administration is made up of seven lay people, including a woman

 • The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, (established last year to deal with sexual abuse etc) includes five women -- and just one cardinal. The women include Marie Collins described by French journalist JEAN-LOUIS DE LA VAISSIERE, as an “eye-opening appointment”

 • A woman was appointed as a member of a Vatican Congregation: the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, in Rome. She is the Superior General of the Combonian Missionary Sisters, Sister Luzia Premoli.

 • The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education recently appointed a woman Franciscan Sr. Mary Melone, to lead one of Rome's seven pontifical universities, the Pontifical University Antonianum

 • The Pontifical Council for the Laity has 24 lay members of whom 11 are women.

 • The Pontifical Council for the Family has a Presidential Committee composed of 15 cardinals and 12 archbishops and bishops, plus 18 married couples from all over the world.

 • The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has a Cardinal President who is assisted by a Bishop Secretary and a woman Under-Secretary.

But:

Most congregations, councils, commissions, universities have no women members.

The Popes can be quite good at talking the talk, not so good at walking the walk.

Pope John Paul II said in 1988 that:

“the Church gives thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility; for ‘perfect’ women and for ‘weak’ women - for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal ‘homeland’ of all people and is transformed sometimes into a ‘valley of tears’; as they assume, together with men, a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself.” (n 31)

But there is of course one big issue in this context of women and decision making.

In para 104 of EG Francis said this

“Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded. The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion, but it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general. It must be remembered that when we speak of sacramental power “we are in the realm of function, not that of dignity or holiness”.[73] The ministerial priesthood is one means employed by Jesus for the service of his people, yet our great dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all. The configuration of the priest to Christ the head – namely, as the principal source of grace – does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others. In the Church, functions “do not favour the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others”.[74] Indeed, a woman, Mary, is more important than the bishops. Even when the function of ministerial priesthood is considered “hierarchical”, it must be remembered that “it is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members”.[75] Its key and axis is not power understood as domination, but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist; this is the origin of its authority, which is always a service to God’s people this is the origin of its authority. This presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.”

 And that is the nub of the big issue - ordination within the Church is reserved to men, and one of the consequences of ordination is that it brings with it the right to be a decision maker. If you can’t be ordained within our Church then you cannot ultimately be a decision maker in some spheres, arguably very important spheres.

Do I want this to change? I don’t know. I have difficulty with it but ….

I think there are other battles to be fought in the church today which are smaller but more immediate and which need to be won.

I want to share with you a document which was created by a group of women about the position of women in the Church today. They said this

“A look at the present leads us to the risk of rhetoric and clichés. Women were the first believers, the first witnesses. And it is they, as mothers and grandmothers above all, whom Pope Francis has asked to continue to proclaim hope and resurrection. Women have always been a sort of silent rock of strength in the faith, to them has always been entrusted the task of educating children to life as believers.” Do we recognise this description of women? Is it real? They went on….”An army of teachers, catechists, mothers and grandmothers that, however, instead of being seen as figures of the Church seem to belong to a small ancient world that is disappearing. In fact, it is in the area of young women that the crisis is starting to be felt. In the West, women between 20 and 50 years old rarely go to Mass”, Is that your experience? “They opt for a religious wedding less often, few follow a religious vocation, and in general they express a certain diffidence toward the formative abilities of religious men.” Think about that one!! “What is not working, today, so that the image of womanhood that the Church has kept, does not correspond to reality? Today women no longer spend their afternoons reciting the rosary or taking part in religious devotions, they often work, sometimes as top managers engaged as much as, if not more than, their male counterparts, and frequently they also have to care for their families. They are women who, perhaps with great difficulty, have reached places of prestige within society and the workplace, but have no corresponding decisional role nor responsibility within ecclesial communities. There is no discussion here of women priests, which according to statistics is not something that women want. If, as Pope Francis says, women have a central role in Christianity, this role must find a counterpart also in the ordinary life of the Church.”

This document was produced by women in preparation for a conference in Rome in February this year. It was called “Women’s Culture: Equality and Difference.” It was organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture headed by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi. The Council consists of 21 Cardinals and 14 Archbishops and bishops. It also has three Men of Culture but no women of culture. It has 28 Consultors of whom 7 are women.

Women were invited to make presentations on various issues to be taken up in the plenary assembly but the issues were discussed in private by men. There were a few women advisors present, but they had no decision making role. Cardinal Ravasi was reported as defining the process as “women directing the dance with men performing the steps.” It met to discuss issues such as domestic violence, commercialisation, women’s role in the Church etc etc. The actual debate was among men only. In 2015!!

However I read that:

A permanent Women’s Consultation Group met for the first time Tuesday 23 June 2015 in the offices of the Pontifical Council for Culture. (20 names not given) Desired by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi to give explicit feedback on the various projects he oversees, vision and shape to any new initiatives, as well as help in identifying cultural priorities for women, the group consists of university professors and mothers, diplomats and journalists, political activists and scientists, bureaucrats and women in the media.

In welcoming them, Cardinal Ravasi, to whom the Group will refer directly, said he looks forward to hearing their advice and being challenged by their insights.

You know, when I looked at the Vatican website, the photographs of all the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, the three men of culture, even the 28 Lay Consulters are there, but the 20 women in the women’s consultation group are unnamed and un- photographed!

The contribution which women can make has been much evidenced by their massive involvement over centuries, in the name of Christ, in the developing world, and in the poorest and most marginalised areas of the developed world. Women across the world make a massive contribution to law, medicine, the economy, philosophy, international relations and in so many other fields.

Over the past ten years they have been very slightly more visible at almost the highest levels in our Church. The responsibility for enabling that contribution rests with those who hold power now in the Church. It rests also with women themselves, for they must make the decision to devote their time, their energy and their faith to their Church in a multitude of different ways. When I go to speak I do not speak from just my own views. I must read and study and think before I can formulate things to say to you. I must be very careful to be as true as I can to the Gospel. I must not mislead.

People want to hear the voice of women but there are very few women who will step forward and allow their voice to be heard. I often question whether I have anything worth listening to say. You know, we must cast off the diffidence which makes so many of us think that we are limited in the contribution we can make, and value the work to which we are called, whatever it is, and we must be open to what ever God calls us to. We must have the courage to pray, in the words of St Alphonsus Liguori “Grant that I may love you always and then do with me what you will.”

And all that takes me back to my original questions - what kind of decision making do we really want women to be involved in as women sitting here today in Dromantine? I think there is a role for us which does not involve priesthood - but through which we can live the Gospel very fully. We can make a difference, and we do have a contribution to make to decision making in the Church. There is a challenge there for our Church. Francis said, “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.” He is right.

Nuala O’Loan