

Women and youth ministry in a synodal Church

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It is with great joy that I greet the members and authorities of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO). Thank you for the invitation to participate, I have received it as a grace and a privilege because of the fruitful history of this ecclesial platform. Moreover, the meeting is taking place in this land of Assisi, which bears the traces of St. Francis and St. Clare, that inspired so much in the Church.

My sharing is born from listening to the reality of a part of the Church and of society, such as young people, and from a *sentient* way of thinking, with the hope of continuing to make a breakthrough in society and in the Church, as disciples of Jesus, artisans and poets of fraternity, justice and peace, indebted to so many who have gone before us.

I bring the voices of some of the young women with whom I share the exciting task of animating youth ministry in a great archdiocese such as that of Madrid. I do it with Latin American roots, my origin is Argentinean and I made part of the pastoral paths of the Church in Latin America, where I learned to be a woman, to be Church, in the Church and in the world, where I discovered my vocation.

I propose to briefly develop two ideas:

- I. What do young women say about the Church and to the Church?
- II. What does it mean for a lay woman to animate, on behalf of the bishop, a pastoral ministry (in my case with young people)? In a universal Church that is beginning to rediscover its synodal being.

1. Voices of young women in the Church

I think we will all agree with Pope Francis that we are going through a change of era. He just said it again to the young people who will attend World Youth Day in Lisbon next summer, and he points it out in his programmatic letter *Evangelii Gaudium*. This notion is fundamental to understanding the reality of the new generations. Some of them are present here. I will let the poetry of a young woman from the south of Spain, Ana Castro, show us.

*My sister is the first woman in my family who does not know how to sew.
Perplexed, we looked at each other.
and we silently blame ourselves.
How could this have happened,
if women in my family mend everything that way,
sewing,
women in my family always thread the needle on the first try
and we feel that it calms the world down a bit.*

*We comment on this fact with panic
and we wonder what her life will be like when she is alone.
How will she raise her children, how will she take care of the plants,
how will she look out onto the balcony, if she does not know how to sew.*

*It seems impossible to us that without knowing how to sew
one can get ahead in life.*

*Then, we remember current times,
modern life,
and we tell ourselves that what matters is beyond repair.*

*Grandmother did not want her daughters to learn to sew.
She thought that way they would have a job. I do work,
And I still know how to sew and it is inconceivable to me
not having a needle and thimble at hand
(for what might happen).*

*After all, that is the way we were brought up,
in the warmth of a brazier table, watching
the hours pass by to the rhythm of the stitching*

*My sister did not know these customs.
When she arrived,
the time of the threads had passed,
Grandmother had already died,
the herd had broken up.*

*And all that, remains far away.
The girls of today,
like my sister, they don't know how to sew
and they don't care. It is better like that:
heaving a job and not sewing
-as grandma wanted,
to go ahead like this, without a family tree,
all gunpowder and future.*

(The spinners, Ana Castro. From the book *El cuadro del dolor*, winner of the Solienses Prize 2018).

We could say from our perspective: *my little sister doesn't know how to pray... and be astonished as the spinners, How could this happen! If women in our families have passed on the faith to us... how will they find meaning in their lives if they have no faith? How will they raise their children without the sacraments? How will they live if the Gospel has become unknown to them and Jesus is only a historical figure or an idea? We could repeat: "My sister did not know these customs. When she arrived, the time of the threads (the time of faith handed down in cultures and families) had already passed, grandmother had already died, the herd had broken up".*

The societies in which we live, particularly in regions with Christian roots in large parts of America and Europe, are today secular and secularised societies, that is to say, societies concentrated on themselves, on their own social and cultural construction and devoided of beliefs, at least institutionalised beliefs. We won't be surprised, then, by the little interest of the young generations for a life of faith: only 28.2% of young Spaniards aged 18 to 24 declare themselves Catholic, 50 points less than three decades ago.

The lack of significance that religion has for many young people is a fact recognised by the Synod on Youth¹ in 2018, and the reason why Pope Francis, in his exhortation *Christus Vivit*, proposes: 1 " [the] *development of a youth ministry capable of being inclusive, with room for all kinds of young people, to show that we are a Church with open doors. Nor does one have to accept fully all the teachings of the Church to take part in certain of our activities for young people. It is enough to have an open mind towards all those who have the desire and willingness to be encountered by God's revealed truth.* ". (ChV, 234)

In this cultural and ecclesial context, it is a sign of hope to walk with many young people, and among them, many young women who participate in parishes or lay youth movements or those close to religious congregations or in our organisations, seeking their place because they have found meaning in their lives and also wish to be poets and artisans of a world that needs equity, justice, fraternity and peace. Let us listen to the voices of some of these young women.

Being a woman today is like it has always been, but different," says a young woman from Madrid. Women are still judged as if it was wrong to be who they really are and not to want what the world expects from us, or what for centuries was defined as expected behaviour from a woman. The difference is that now we can speak openly about it and fight for change. To be a woman is to be what we want to be, and the role a woman plays in society, it is her who has to define it.

It is about struggles, challenges and achievements, because although on paper we have guaranteed rights and access to the same as men, we constantly have to prove ourselves, build and justify ourselves, says another young woman.

A leader of a youth movement that participates in the youth roundtable of the archdiocese of Madrid adds: "If we add to this being a Christian, it is a battle of justifications before others about your faith, and how it must not condition you when it comes to achieving your personal and professional goals. In contrast, to be a man today is to try to balance the patriarchal ideas and values still present with the current changes in mentality and feminism. It requires questioning and education in relation to these issues, so that they become drivers of action and example. The Church is still represented by men. Although in the Vatican women have assumed high-level positions, this example is not reflected in the dioceses and parishes, where it is men who in most cases assume roles of responsibility and assistance to the Church.

Little by little, and as happens in other social instances in other social bodies, women are becoming more involved in the Catholic Church" says Mercedes, a young teacher from León, "There are new gestures that confirm this and show a greater presence of women in in Church's life. It is materialised in new appointments to positions of responsibility, previously held by men; but there is no recognition of other, less visible, but no less important presences that women carry out in the service of the Church and that make it move forward, such as in the field of education, voluntary work, care and so many others. For everyone, including many women, this means moving from a vision and attitude of servility to the dignity of giving oneself in service.

It is up to us to recover the role that women played in the origins of the Church, not only because we are women, but also by demonstrating with our professionalism and good work that we are capable of committing ourselves to it. At the same time, there has to be a change in attitudes, on the one hand knowing how to delegate, trust, openness and, on the other, commitment and availability.

¹ "Young people, the faith and vocational discernment", 15th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 3-28 October 2018

It is necessary for the Church to assume the mistakes it has made and continues to make (for example in the case of sexual abuse) - claims another young woman from a youth movement - I believe that catechesis should be rethought in order to transmit the teachings of Jesus and not the interpretations and own convictions of so many priests and catechists with which they justify judgements and exclusion of people. Let them stop using the bible as a justification for everything. The Church is fraternal and welcomes everyone, it neither chooses nor excludes. We must stop judging others because there is nothing Christian about that. I believe that the Church, especially the priests, should empathise with the current problems of society, should reflect on the progress and the plurality of realities of society and therefore of the Christian faithful.

For their part, young women in charge of a youth movement have experienced that their participation, both in ecclesiastical and social spaces, "involves us working in areas that are mostly occupied by men. We live in situations where it is difficult for us to find the space and the time to contribute and for our contribution to be taken into account. An example of this is the history that precedes us, where inequality and the subordination of women to men has been fostered; this subordination and inequality is much more evident if you are a person who belongs to a minority group² .

These young women ask for a Church that truly believes that, through baptism, we are all the People of God and that women, whether lay or religious, also have an active and leading role within it.

Others affirm that integrating the gender perspective has been and is deeply liberating for them and for other young people, it is a necessary tool to develop new ways of being a person - woman and man - being a family and a community, new ways of loving and being loved, claiming self-love, respect so that difference can never be a reason for inequality or oppression.

Many young women agree that Christian commitment today is a continuous "swimming against the tide", because with Jesus "the year of the Lord's favour" became present. He wanted to make way for a world of justice and care, a world of free men and women living fraternally.

For many others the encounter with Jesus has been healing, has given meaning to their lives, and although they live a fragile membership in the Church, they are drawn to experiences that emotionally and existentially speak to them about their lives today.

In contrast to these voices, there is an important ecclesial sector that encourages a pastoral of impact, ritualistic, that reinforces hierarchical and apparently secure structures in the face of a fragile, wounded and disordered world of many young people, who are induced to believe what they have to believe, how they have to believe. A faith that does not provoke doubts, that directs a behavioural praxis centred on sexual morality, that brings the dimension of eternity closer, but without being incarnated in a mission and a commitment to social transformation.

Pope Francis is sensitive to this reality and recognises that " a Church that is overly fearful and tied to its structures can be invariably critical of efforts to defend the rights of women, and constantly point out the risks and the potential errors of those demands. Instead, a living Church can react by being attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality. A living Church can look back on history and acknowledge a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of

² Contribution of the state leaders of the YCW (Young Catholic Workers) Young Women and the Church, in the magazine 2 Exodus, March 2019.

enslavement, abuse and sexist violence. With this outlook, she can support the call to respect women's rights, and offer convinced support for greater reciprocity between males and females, while not agreeing with everything some feminist groups propose. Along these lines, the Synod sought to renew the Church's commitment "against all discrimination and violence on sexual grounds".[17] That is the response of a Church that stays young and lets herself be challenged and spurred on by the sensitivities of young people. (ChV, 42).

2. My experience as an episcopal delegate for a pastoral task.

It is strange to recognise that this is still an exception. It is necessary to open doors, change customs and ways of relating to each other among the actors in the evangelisation process, the majority of whom are priests.

At the beginning of this service I found myself with a pastoral paradigm in which young people were not protagonists but only recipients and volunteers for specific tasks. And that it was a matter of organising activities and proposals subsidiary to those of each parish or movement.

I soon discovered that having a responsibility delegated by a bishop as a woman, a laywoman and a migrant were new categories in ordinary clergy-centred pastoral ministry. I realised that we had a reciprocal challenge: to walk the path together, adding others, young and not so young, women and men, with different charisms and vocations; to encourage new, open and flexible structures, to promote processes as well as to organise activities. Thinking, creating, dreaming and praying, also together, leaving aside prejudices, sterile claims, while occupying the spaces proper to the responsibility entrusted to us.

I chose the path of communion and love for the Church, regardless of a certain hostility and initial resistance on the part of some. I proposed to learn through teamwork, plural and open, through dialogue, a believing reading of reality and discernment.

Christus Vivit brought us the new paradigm, that of a synodal pastoral ministry, going out. It goes "*from for young people to with young people*", that welcomes everyone, that calls for a vocation and a mission, that accompanies, cares for and looks after the life of people, communities and nature, that is creative, dreaming and passionate because it beats with the heart of young people who meet Christ.

I believe that moving forward without breaking, without demanding, without forcing, helped me to meet with people and not with the clerical roles of people. I discovered that although we are still separated, with some, by ways of thinking, of being and doing Church, we are united by faith and communion. That the path of a synodal Church is slow but steady. And that without it many young people will only be passing through or will not be there at all.

I believe that as women we are born in Mary's school. We are heirs to the struggles of so many who brought us here. Allow me to end by also giving voice to one of them who is very close to all of you, Pilar Bellosillo: "I am aware of having made a long path, always going forward, and I can identify Jesus Christ in my own "Exodus" towards the land of freedom, dignity and justice".