

Women, Church and Change: Past Learning; Present Challenges; Future Calling

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I am honoured to speak on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the foundation of Andante, and I wish to thank the organisers, especially Dr Mary McHugh for inviting me to participate.

SLIDE 1

As European Catholic women our identities are inevitably shaped by our dual belonging as citizens of Europe and members of the Church.

I want to explore this dual belonging and reflect upon how our identities, attitudes and values are influenced by our national backgrounds and social location. And I want us to consider how our Christian vocation can inform our activities to help make Europe a more humane and female-friendly place to live, and help the Church more effectively implement its mission.

In our discussions later this morning I will ask you to reflect upon this dual belonging and to explore, in your own particular contexts, how you manage this dual belonging. Is it a problem, or not? Does your Catholic identity create challenges in your life, and in what you seek to achieve in your home country? If so, how?

In my talk I will look at size, shape and the diverse character of the Catholic Church today. Given the recent publication of Pope Francis' post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* ('the joy of love') I will say something about what is in this lengthy document, how it reflects what took place at the two Synod meetings on marriage and family life in 2014 and 2015, how Francis' recent statements relate to previous Church teaching, and what his papacy promises for the mission of the Church in the future.

SLIDE 2

I will begin by considering the size and distribution of the global Catholic population. Across the globe there are 1.2 billion Catholics. 287 million Catholics live in Europe. That is 24% of the worldwide Catholic population. This means one in every three Europeans is Catholic.

Univision survey 2014

[Show slides]

What can we learn from the Univision survey? Is there one Catholic answer to the questions and challenges we face? No. We have to learn to live with pluralism, multiple identities, differences and disagreements, catholicity. On some issues we have a common voice, but through discussion and dialogue we can learn about the issues that divide us, and gain understanding if not resolution.

Pope Francis and the Synod on the Family

[Show slides]

The huge diversity in Catholic opinion, with large numbers of Catholics - in both the North and South - disagreeing with Church teaching on many global issues, was reflected in the responses received prior to the two Synod meetings on the family and in the debates that took place between the bishops during the Synod. It was impossible to pretend that the bishops were all singing from the same hymn sheet. In fact, in his closing speech at Synod 2015, Francis said this:

what seems normal for a bishop on one continent, is considered strange and almost scandalous – almost! – for a bishop from another; what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another; what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion. Cultures are in fact quite diverse.

Francis is genuine about creating a more merciful, more compassionate and less 'hard-line' RC Church: 'The Church's first duty is not to hand down condemnations or anathemas, but to proclaim God's mercy, to call to conversion, and to lead all men and women to salvation in the Lord (cf. *Jn* 12:44-50)' (Speech closing the Synod).

However, despite its focus on the family and 'women's issues', the Synod had only a handful of female participants. Catholicism lacks mechanisms to ensure the full inclusion and participation of lay Catholics in decision-making processes. Rome appears incapable of developing such participatory frameworks in the Church. Strong advocacy is required to press for change.

Amoris Laetitia, 2016

[show slides]

‘not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it.’ AL3

‘Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs.’ AL3

‘We also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today’s problematic situation. We need a healthy dose of self-criticism.’ AL36

Pastors ‘find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them’. AL37

‘Rather than offering the healing power of grace and the light of the Gospel message, some would “indoctrinate” that message, turning it into “dead stones to be hurled at others”.’ AL49

‘The Eucharist demands that we be members of the one body of the Church. Those who approach the Body and Blood of Christ may not wound that same Body by creating scandalous distinctions and divisions among its members... The celebration of the Eucharist thus becomes a constant summons for

everyone... to open the doors of the family to greater fellowship with the underprivileged, and in this way to receive the sacrament of that eucharistic love which makes us one body... When those who receive it turn a blind eye to the poor and suffering, or consent to various forms of division, contempt and inequality, the Eucharist is received unworthily.'

Amoris Laetitia on women

'even though significant advances have been made in the recognition of women's rights and their participation in public life, in some countries much remains to be done to promote these rights.'

'Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated. I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement'

'The verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages contradicts the very nature of the conjugal union.'

'their lack of equal access to roles of decision-making'

'History is burdened by the excesses of patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior'

'There are those who believe that many of today's problems have arisen because of feminine emancipation. This argument, however, is not valid, it is false, untrue, a form of male chauvinism.'

'we must nonetheless see in the women's movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.'

Is Francis' approach new?

No. Consider the Vatican II document on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*:

43. For guidance and spiritual strength let [lay people] turn to the clergy; but let them realize that their pastors will not always be so expert as to have a ready answer to every problem, even every grave problem, that

arises; this is not the role of the clergy: it is rather the task of lay people to shoulder their responsibilities under the guidance of Christian wisdom and with careful attention to the teaching authority of the church.

Similarly, Pope Paul VI encouraged local Christian communities to discern for themselves how social teaching can best be applied in their region. Given the different social settings and cultural contexts across the globe, Christians should not expect Rome to provide universally applicable answers to social questions:

In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgment and directives for action from the social teaching of the Church. (*Octogesima Adveniens* 4)

Concluding remarks

By Francis' words and actions he is modelling a way of being Church that closely follows the compassionate and merciful actions of Christ. And he calls on members of the church to do the same. He wants Catholics to have an adult faith, where they take ownership of their Catholic identity and question themselves about how it is expressed in their lives. He wants mature and responsible citizens, who do not blindly obey but discern what the Lord requires in the concrete reality of our lives. This is hardly new teaching. Doctrine has not shifted, but Francis has brought into focus themes such as compassion and mercy that can easily be obscured in a church primarily known for its high ideals and uncompromising moral teaching.

The accumulated wisdom of Catholics offers resources for the transformation of Church and society. However, the Catholic Church has not always been good at gathering and using this wisdom – especially women's wisdom. The hierarchy's failure to listen to the voices of lay people and past efforts to

ignore the concerned voices of women has meant that many women have turned away from the Church. Many of the Church's directives concerning lay participation are optional in character, which means bishops do not need to implement them. They are desirable but not mandatory, invitational rather than obligatory. Can Francis create mechanisms and structures in the Church to benefit from the wealth of human experience insight among lay people? Institutions and organisational structures are always slow to adapt and tend to be receptacles for old approaches, paradigms and ways of thinking. These can be hard to shift. Moving the church in a new direction can be like trying to divert the slow and icy course of a glacier. Don't expect the church to budge and make space for lay participation in the Church through structural reform any time soon. Andante has to forge change through its own creative efforts and make do – for now - with existing structures, inadequate though they may be.

Francis has said that we must move from being only a teaching church to one that also learns. He is showing the Catholic community the way forward. Now we need to join forces with him in making the church a more compassionate and humane institution. Francis is good with words, and his personal actions offer such an inspiring witness that he is rightly regarded as the most influential of world leaders. Let us hope and pray that he can also help to transform the sinful and sexist church structures that have privileged the voices of the Church's princes over the example of the Church's paupers.