



europäische allianz katholischer frauenverbände  
european alliance of catholic women's organisations  
alliance européenne d'organisations féminines catholiques

# Women in the Church make the difference

Andante Study Days & Training

Snagov, Romania, 24<sup>th</sup> -29<sup>th</sup> April 2019

*Can women be part of the thinking church? What are the ways (and what historically have been the ways) to contribute thus to the life of the church? And what does that mean to the church? These were some of the questions considered at the training days of Andante, 24–29 April in Snagov (Romania).*

Over 50 women from 12 countries were warmly welcomed by the Romanian women with bread and salt, and then every organisation presented one woman who made a difference for their church or their organization: historical or contemporary, political or social, unknown or well known.

## **Suffering from the absence of women**

The following day Tina Beattie, Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Roehampton, started her lecture '[The Future Church: A Home to Hope For?](#)' with a quote: 'When women pray, they are holy, when women work, they are good, they are doing God's work. But when they think, they say: Not a good idea.'

Our thoughts were focused by Tina Beattie on homes and houses. What do we think is a home? A house can be hell, it can be a shelter, but a real home means people can flourish, can have dreams, visions and a sense of destination. The church can become a sacramental home, a place for homeless souls. But in Christian theology we also talk about the challenge of a certain form of homelessness. Jesus had no place for his head to rest; our citizenship is in heaven. The church should not be a solid building, but a place of welcome and inclusivity for all. It is the people who give meaning to the buildings, as we saw with the Notre Dame of Paris.

*Laudato Si'* speaks about the earth as our communal home. It uses female symbolism for the earth, our mother, although the thoughts and works of female authors are missing, as well as the particular ways in which poverty, environmental degradation and the pressures of modern life have an impact on women and girls. Can women discover a home in the language of *Laudato Si'*? Or does the Vatican speak about sexual differences without listening to women's voices, in language to control sexual and reproductive capacities, to maintain exclusion from sacramental priesthood?

We need to keep asking why women are absent in *Laudato Si'*. It uses romantic images for the earth, but does not listen to the meaning of being a mother or a sister, nor does it acknowledge the problems of the maternal mortality rate. When it speaks about the impact of individualism it does not recognise many women, with full time jobs, are responsible for the care of children, older people and the community.

Women need to find a language in which to speak and be at home with the realities – about our female bodies, about sexual violence, domestic abuse and the challenges of motherhood. The church suffers from the absence of women's voices and also from the absence of the inspiring examples of women who transform models and styles of leadership. Homemaking is not restricted to women only. Everyone can make a home of our planet and God chooses little human beings for the biggest differences.

Tina Beattie ends with her image of a homely church. It does not have a roof and the structures are crumbling, since our voices aren't heard, and our bodies are not welcomed. But inside the church trees are growing. In this cathedral we nurture the life that is growing from the grassroots, which we can recreate, creating hope.

During the discussion women contributed: 'We can be at home in Christ.' Also: 'Christ acted against the establishment.' 'You can't be a child always, waiting for others to create a home. All people face the challenge to create a home in the church.'

### **ECECW and CoE**

Anne-Marie Schott spoke about the history and work of the [Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women](#) (EFECW). [Sibylle Bader](#), the representative of Andante at the Conference of INGOs at the [Council of Europe](#) (CoE), explained the structures and possibilities of the Council, and identified a new attention to religious identity. Women of all organisations are welcome to visit the working groups of the Conference of INGOs.

### **Female Disciples**

Boroka Beke is one of the few female pastors in the Reformed Church of Romania and the elected President of the Pastor's Union in the Reformed Church. Talking about 'Female Disciples – The Need and Possibility of Training Women in Church' she started with the different religions of Romania. The Orthodox Church is a huge majority, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches are present mostly in Transylvania, which used to be part of Hungary. Transylvania was the eastern border of the protestant influence in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. She wanted us to remember from Romania the [Edict of Torda](#) (1568) which for the first time ever, declared some basic ideas about religious tolerance.

Jesus called the twelve disciples we know; they were amateurs, not official religious leaders like rabbis, and their circle was already widening in Jesus' lifetime. Jesus clearly

did not exclude women from his followers. It was recognized there was a diversity of servants and tasks. And, most important, discipleship is about both teaching and learning: 'What has to be constant is the eagerness to change, learn and develop with the guidance of God's Word.' The source of learning is the Bible.

Boroka Beke emphasised the church should not get lost in activities that do not have a clear relation with the Bible. She mentioned five important training programmes for women, of which the most interesting was Bible Study Group, which have existed since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Women can read the Bible themselves and reflect about its meaning for their own lives.

The first female pastors were ordained at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however there is still a numerus clausus for ecclesial education, whereby less women are admitted than men. During the discussion at the end of her talk Boroka added that women obtain better results because the competition to obtain one of the few places is higher. Today they sometimes accept 'a few more young women', as it is less easy to find young men willing to study theology, as a result of the many other possibilities and the open borders.

### **The Church in theory and practice**

Zuzanna Flizowska works as an architect at a museum in Rome and she is also General Manager at [Voices of Faith](#). In her country, Poland, there appear to be only two ways for her generation to deal with the Catholic Church: to accept the status quo or to leave. Voices of Faith wants to show the third way: taking responsibility and overcoming silence.

Taking responsibility means empowering women to take up more leadership positions. This desire is based on the belief that in a prophetic church all voices should be heard. In theory women and men are equal in Christ Jesus, and all are one in God. Church leaders are called not to follow the power models of the world. However a group that cannot participate in power is not seen as equal. Motivated by their faith Catholic women work both at the margins of society and as writers, theologians and spiritual advisors, although their experiences and wisdom are not taken into account in the decision making structures of the Church.

The title of her speech was, 'Creating global participation: new strategies for inclusion', Zuzanna Flizowska talked about the first step to make women visible in the Vatican, by organising an International Women's Day inside its walls. In order to create a global shift in Catholic mentality and sense of participation Voices of Faith launched the website [www.overcomingsilence.com](http://www.overcomingsilence.com) where women and men who believe in their goals upload their photo with a message.

Future goals are voting rights in future synods and Vatican leadership roles for women. Since religious men now have voting rights, there can be no objection for religious women to have them too. In the Vatican administration women are appointed as undersecretaries, and since a non-ordained man could be chosen for one of the highest positions, the way should be free for those women who have the relevant skills and faith to break the glass ceiling of the Vatican. The third goal is a global consultation: an official process of change. Education is important to promote thinking differently about the church and the power in the church.

Zuzanna has made an analysis of the messages that come with the photos on 'Overcoming silence'. They are motivated by contemporary values (diversity, Human Rights, decentralisation of power) and historical arguments. However the most simple and perhaps the most powerful argument is about our faith: we are baptized as equal. Loud applause ends her speech. Questions were about tokenism and the need to support women who are the first in new fields. Zuzanna answered a French question about power with: 'We have to think about the church without an hierarchical model. How can we find a Christian way to get out of the logic of power?'

### **Women contributing to the Church**

Regina Heyder, lecturer at the University of Mainz, works on the project, 'History of International Movement of Christian Women'. In her lecture 'Women in History' she pointed out that women often had filled the gaps, she uses the word *LückenbüsserInnen*. In the circle around Jerome [Hieronymus], translator of the Vulgate, women are mentioned as second choice, but women, for example, Marcella learned Hebrew, supported Jerome's translation and had theological discussions with him. In the Middle Ages the abbess Héloïse, known for her relation with Abélard, was inspired by these female friends of Jerome. Heloise and her sisters also studied the languages of the Bible, and as Heloise thought the Rule of Benedict did not suit her nuns a new rule was invented for her community.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century a woman, Mary Ward opened schools for the education for girls. During the Industrial Revolution women became active in religious congregations that worked in poor areas, hospitals, schools etc. This example of religious women working in society was inspirational for catholic women and demonstrated that they were not only confined to matrimony and motherhood.

Regina's final historical research was about women and the Second Vatican Council. Women became active as lay listeners and multipliers of the news. They asked for a liturgy in the vernacular, and also had influence in other areas. They stressed that if lay people were to be heard, women should also be welcome, and were so well organized

that they could find representatives to work for the Council as soon as they were needed. It is time, says Regina, to recognize the difference women made.

During question time it was mentioned that church buildings should be open for other activities, other than just the Sunday services, to show all the work the church is involved in and all the people who are motivated by their faith.

There was a discussion about the term 'lay people'. In most languages the word 'lay' means someone who hasn't the necessary skills. But in relation to our faith we are equal since we all are baptized. Ordination says nothing about our skills, or about our relation to the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

In the reflection groups it became clear that everywhere the place of women is dependent from the decision of the priest or the bishop. We should reflect on the criteria and functions of their position.

### **Women do dialogue**

In the summary Tina Beattie appreciated we come from the different cultures, with different needs. How can we identify common ground while creating space for differences? She thought it very inspiring to see women in history take the opportunities of their time, but also inspiring were the women in the workshops of this conference. It made her feel less alone in her work.

She commented how women do dialogue. We do speak heart to heart, not arguing about fine theological points. We are able to be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. To conclude she showed pictures from the Middle Ages with women, serpents and doves in central roles – and beautiful surroundings.

These Study Days have given us a lot to think about, not only about the position of women, but mostly about the essence of the Church. Also the participants – and there were people from Ghana, Indonesia and the United States among them – could enjoy the beautiful church of the monastery, the spirituality of the workshops, the exchange with women from all over Europe, the interesting trip to Brasov surrounded by the Southern Carpathians, and last but not least the Andante service in which all could participate!

Author:

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