Sophie Rudge’s presentation

Within Andante I represent the Associates of the Holy Child Jesus. The Society of the Holy Child Jesus is an inspiring, international religious congregation founded in England over 175 years ago by Cornelia Connelly.

I think it is her influence that has made me so eager to engage with the synodal process. Throughout her life’s work of founding her Society she had to battle with English Bishops and other men who wished to impose their own idea of how she should run her fledgling order and write the rule for her Society.

However she was not afraid to stand up to them, which given the position of women in life generally at that time, was extraordinarily courageous.

A wonderful story about her was I think a dispute about a confessor the bishop was giving her community, whom she did not think was suitable. She replied to the bishop saying, ‘thank you for your letter , which I read, and burnt on the fire’.

What is the modern equivalent to deal with an email that is unimpressive, as was the response from the Conference of European Bishops, CCEE, to Andante’s request to be present at the European meeting of the synod in Prague next year?

As many Andante women know at our last General Assembly in Latvia we decided we should like to do everything we could to influence the European continental phase of the synod.

Sabine Slawik my Co-President of Andante and Simone Curau-Aplei from SKF met Father Martin Michalicek, the secretary to the Conference of European Bishops, who very helpfully explained the unfolding continental phase for the synod.

As he explained for the next stage of the synod there will be a meeting for Europe in Prague in February 2023, which is 1 of 7 continental assemblies taking place around the world .As well as the bishops each individual bishop’s conference will bring 4 delegates and also choose 10 people who can join for online discussion groups. In addition the European bishops will invite 50 delegates who represent organisations in Europe. The working document, DCS, makes it very clear the majority of Episcopal Conferences want the entire people of God to be involved and highlight women and young people as being essential as well as those who represent the poor and marginalised.

Sadly the CCEE replied by email to Andante saying our request to attend at Prague had been rejected, as we were not representative enough. They have not replied to my further request to try and work with these organisations which the CCEE think are more representative of women in Europe.

How do you burn an email in the fire? Putting in one’s junk folder does not have the same finality.

The DCS is a remarkable document, which if you have not already read I would encourage you to do so, as it draws together the results of the listening and discernment process over the past year from around the world.

It was drawn up by a group of around 30 theologians, lay workers and bishops who met for several days in Frascati near Rome. They synthesised reports from 112 bishops’conferences, (only 2 did not contribute), different religious orders and around 150 lay organisations.

It is an incredibly open document , and it shows the Church as being diverse, dynamic and universal in its desire for change, as well as its members expressing a deep love for the Church.

The report stresses it is not simply an opinion poll result, but a Holy Spirit inspired listening process which encourages all God’s people, whether bishops, clergy, religious or laity to walk together along the synodal pathway. There has been resistance to the process, and reports of fears from some clergy, and this may well be why the Pope has extended the process by a year to 2024.

Each continental assembly will draft a final document by March 2023, which will focus on the priorities , recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and it will draw up a list of priorities upon which the First session of the synodal assembly of bishops in October 2023 will carry out their discernment. There will then be a second session in October 2024.

The working document has the wonderful title from Isaiah,” Enlarge the space of your tent.”

I wonder what image this conjures up in your mind and especially as women how you imagine this developing. Am I the only one whose immediate thoughts were the chaos of arriving at a campsite with a family of squabbling children and trying to placate everyone as the tent is unfolded and erected, finding the mislaid instructions and equipment, listening to everyone and feeding everyone all at the same time.

This made me think the synod needs the wisdom and gifts of women. .

Rather than my immediate image of tents with fractious husbands and children ,with women creating order and calm, the image of the tent has been chosen to symbolise the space of communion, participation and a foundation for mission, which are the 3 elements of synodality.

So, a church that practices synodality will offer a potent Gospel witness to the world.

Throughout the report the responses are woven around the 5 themes which are,

1.Firstly, Listening as openness to welcome, which starts with a desire for radical inclusion, so no one is excluded.

2. Secondly, Our outgoing drive towards mission, which needs to be carried out with people of other confessions and believers of other religions.

3. Thirdly, Carrying out the mission, requires assuming a style based on participation of all baptised people.

4 Fourthly Participation and mission, through structures inhabited by people properly formed and sustained by living spirituality

5 Fifthly The liturgy especially Eucharistic, being the source and summit of Christian life which brings the community together and nourishes us for mission.

From all continents there is a growing awareness and sensitivity to the role of women and their vocation as baptised people to participate fully in the life of the Church.

Women remain the majority of those who attend liturgy and participate in activities, men a minority, yet most decision making and governance roles are held by men.

The role and vocation of women is described as a critical and urgent area with the document calling for discernment on how to include women in governance, the possibility of preaching and the female diaconate.

On the ordination of women to the priesthood, there was a diversity of opinion expressed, with many in favour, and others considering the matter closed. There was however total consensus on the need to value the contribution of women to the Church.

Some reports note the cultures of their countries have made progress in women’s inclusion and participation, which could act as a model for the Church, and it was stated this lack of equality for women within the Church is seen as a stumbling block for the Church in the modern world.

The image of enlarging the tent references other groups, beside women who feel excluded, examples being, young people, remarried divorcees, single parents, those in polygamous marriage and LGBTQ people.

One barrier to a more synodal Church is clericalism. The document says it is important to rid the Church of clericalism so that all its members, including priests and laity can fulfil a common mission.

An obstacle of particular relevance on the path of walking together is the scandal of abuse by members of the clergy. Careful and painful reflection on the legacy of abuse has led many synodal groups to call for a cultural change in the Church with a view to greater transparency, accountability and co-responsibility.

Reports also highlighted the need for the formation of the clergy in synodality.

Contributors expressed a deep and energetic desire for renewed forms of leadership, priestly, episcopal, religious and lay that are relational and collaborative and generate solidarity and co-responsibility.

There were calls for a stronger emphasis in the Church for ecumenical and interfaith engagement with a more united witness among Christians and between faith communities.

The liturgy was raised as an important concern, with many wanting a more participatory form, and great concern was raised about the suffering of those whose situations hindered or excluded their access to the Eucharist.

To conclude the document shows the next steps in the short term as the continental phase of the synod, whilst long term walking together as the People of God requires continual conversion, individual and communal. On the institutional and pastoral level this will lead to continuous reform of the Church, its structure and style, building on the legacy of the second Vatican Council 60 years ago.

So, what an opportunity for women we have now, and which we must realise.