

Women see synod as a way to help the Church listen

The Vatican's pre-synodal gathering of young people was yet another event in preparation for this fall's 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will discuss the theme "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment." But the March 19-25 meeting in Rome took the novel step of essentially running the discussion model for the Synod of Bishops, but with young adults taking the place of the bishops.

The 300 attendees broke into small discussion groups by language and set about the drafting of a final document, which then will be used to guide the bishops' discussions at the actual synod in October.

Among the many observations and recommendations in the document is the note that promoting the dignity of women in the Church and society can help young people to be less marginalized.

"Today, there is a general problem in society in that women are still not given an equal place," the document said. "This is also true in the Church. There are great examples of women serving in consecrated religious communities and in lay leadership roles. However, for some young women, these examples are not always visible. One key question arises from these reflections; what are the places where women can flourish within the Church and society? The Church can approach these problems with real discussion and open-mindedness to different ideas and experiences."

Our Sunday Visitor collected the stories of women – from those who have been working in the Church for decades to those who are newer to ministry – and used these approaches to explore

where these women saw opportunities for the Church to become a stronger ally to them and their peers through all stages of life.

Real discussions



Osman

Having discussions means first that the Church must be willing to hear and amplify the voices of women.

“This might come across as simplistic, but I think it’s essential,” said Helen Osman, the first woman to be elected president of Signis, the World Catholic Association for Communication, where she’s currently serving a four-year term. She previously has worked in official Church posts within the Diocese of Austin, Texas, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. “We have to do a better job of listening to women. That means whatever stage of life they’re in.”



Glowaski

Mary Glowaski, victim’s assistance coordinator in the Diocese

of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, where there are women serving in the bishop's cabinet, noted the importance of having women "in places where there are real decision-making venues, where there are substantive, meaningful conversations about the life of the Church that women aren't just present, but they have a voice that is valued and considered." Glowaski, whose work in the Church has spanned more than 25 years, added: "It's important that we realize that it is not just having a voice – it's having a voice that matters."

"To me that seems like the beginning place that there are these places that women can have an impact and make decisions for the diocese," said Providence Sister Tracey Horan, 30, community organizer for the Indianapolis Congregation Action Network and the 2017 recipient of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development's Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award. "Having women in leadership positions is a really concrete step the Church can take," Sister Tracey added, "and something that would be worthwhile and fruitful."



Horan

Of three high-ranking jobs open to laypeople in dioceses across the county – chancellor, chief financial officer and superintendent of schools – just less than one-third are filled by women, according to a 2015 analysis of the Official Catholic Directory conducted by the Catholic news outlet Crux. In addition, about 35 percent of U.S. dioceses have no women filling those positions.

Open-mindedness

Involving and listening to women in the life of the Church also means being open to and mindful of them. A recent survey of more than 1,500 American Catholic women, commissioned by America Media and conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in cooperation with The GfK Group, found a growing number of Catholic women, especially millennials, are disengaged from life in the Church. Only 24 percent of the women surveyed said they attend Mass weekly, while 18 percent have considered leaving the Church or left the Church briefly.

Although religious education and youth opportunities are abundant, many parishes don't have ministries in place to walk with childless young women – and couples – as they grow in faith.



Espinoza

Rachel Espinoza, director of children and family catechesis in St. Clement Parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago, told OSV about a friend who has struggled with infertility. Because nearly all the programming at her friend's parish and surrounding parishes focus on families with kids – there's little offered in support of married couples without children or young singles – she said her friend is considering leaving the Church.

“It's just so painful for her to constantly be told – through the way we structure parish life, through the ministries that

are offered, through the prayers we say at Church, for the way women's roles are talked about during homilies and in Church documents – that her marriage is somehow 'less than' a marriage that produces or nurtures children," said Espinoza, 32.

Drawing upon the experiences of those who are struggling can help parishes truly act as allies to all women, Espinoza said.

Women with children, on the other hand, often have to choose between bonding with their newborns and returning to work.

"We say that family is the most important, but when we employ women, we don't give them time to be with their families," Osman noted.

Sister Tracey concurred.

"I have a number of friends and family members who are either employed by a Catholic school, or a Catholic church or the archdiocese (of Indianapolis) itself, who have really struggled," she said. "It makes it difficult. We celebrate families, and we celebrate the Church growing when someone has a child, but how can we better support women?"

However, that is beginning to change as dioceses are offering more support for new parents.

Espinoza lifted up the example of her own archbishop, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich, who has instituted 12 weeks of paid parental leave across the Archdiocese of Chicago. "Not just maternity leave – but for both partners, male and female – for all benefits-eligible staff," Espinoza said. "By having paid parental leave for dads, too, the archdiocese is helping remove some of the invisible barriers that keep women from advancing in their careers by helping give men an avenue to share some of the burden of care in infancy and early childhood versus having it all fall on women."

Different experiences

In engaging women, the Church is bound to hear stories and experiences unique to that half of the world's population. Osman suggested that, especially when talking about sexual harassment or abuse, there must always be an ear to listen.

"We have a teaching in our Church about each of us becoming fully human, we have a teaching about how we should be in relationships with one another, but yet we are so absent in this conversation right now for women who are experiencing harassment in the workplace or in their personal relationships," she said.

And women must speak up and ensure their message is amplified.

"We have to offer something that's substantive and have the courage to make sure that our voices are heard," Glowaski said. "That can be a little bit unusual for women to speak up in that manner, but we've got to learn to do it," she said. "We have a responsibility to that."

Regarding the synod in October, Osman said she hopes the bishops involved recognize that a lot of hard work lies ahead in creating different structures and processes. "It can't become 'Oh OK, we did that synod, so now we've taken care of young people,'" she said. "We can't let the Church become irrelevant to people's struggles and concerns."

Glowaski, who has worked with young people throughout her career, said they "have made me braver; they have made me more insightful and thoughtful; they've made me consider things that I hadn't seen," she said. "We absolutely need that. We are impoverished as a Church without it." As the synod process has been changed through the direct input of young adults, Glowaski noted that a healthier, more thriving Church is one that seeks to include the input and decision-making of women. "It changes the outcomes of decisions. I think that has to

happen more," she said.

Glowaski said she hopes one major realization to emerge from the synod will be that one of the greatest gifts young women – and young people in general – offer the Church is that “they have the vision, the imagination, the creativity.”

The vision, imagination and creativity of young people may at times challenge the Church’s day-to-day approach, she said, but recognizing and responding to that challenge, and in doing so incorporating the gifts of young people, is not optional, but is in fact essential to the life of the Church. “We need to be open and not threatened by that. Just because you are young doesn’t mean you don’t bring great gifts and knowledge.”

Brittany Wilson writes from Pennsylvania.