

# Experience and dreams as Religious Women in the Catholic Church in Ireland

(To be included in the AMRI Submission to the Irish Church Submission to the Synod in Rome)

## General feelings and hopes

- Religious life is a charismatic, prophetic, radical way of following Christ. Despite our declining numbers and high age profile, religious women in Ireland today continue to provide very valuable, meaningful, courageous, and relevant ministries to the poor and marginalised, both in Ireland and overseas.
- We are very aware of the hurt, pain, oppression, and sadness which was experienced by some of the women and children who were entrusted to our care in the past. For our failure to give the care and compassion which they so needed and deserved we are deeply sorry. We hope that we have learnt from the failures of our past.
- Hurt, marginalisation and resignation have been expressed by religious women in the institutional church, referring both to the past, and to today. There is a deep sense that we have been pruned 'to non-existence' by the Irish Church.
- Religious women feel faithful, resilient, hopeful, courageous, and committed - we keep the impossible dream for a more inclusive church. Many others have walked away but we stay, often only barely holding on with our fingertips.
- There is a deep desire to grow into new ways of working together as one church where all people are valued equally, and every contribution matters and makes a difference.
- The crisis of the pandemic has created unexpected space and the possibility for change. It has shown that we are all interconnected and are ultimately responsible for each other. We have learned to connect and re-connect in new ways. Our hope that this will create new ways of being and new openings for action as we move forward.

## Views about the Synod: An opportunity, but almost afraid to hope

- We hope this synod will lead to a new way of being Church where men and women work together as equal partners committed to healing, peace, unity, and new life.
- We hope this synod will help the institutional church to "let go and respect change"; to embrace an inclusive language and inclusive roles within the institutional structures.
- **BUT:** is it worth investing energy into? Are we afraid to have hope? Would we be heard? Is it just too complex? We haven't been heard in the past and have found other ways of belonging within the institution. Will we be hurt again if we invest our energy into it? Will it make a difference? Will a woman's voice be allowed to come in? What will it take for inclusiveness?
- The 'language of Synodality' must be void of clerical imposition. There needs to be a 'culture of relationship', not something forced, to ensure that change will happen and will last.

## The unique and invaluable gift of women to the Irish Catholic Church today

- The many gifts of women in the Church today include creativity, contemplation, warmth, compassion, vision, nurture, intuition, responsiveness, adaptability.
- Because of an experience of exclusion in the church women bring a spirit of radical hospitality, a commitment to the inclusion of all and a vision of a church where everyone can find home.
- Women are adaptable and in service, quick to realise what is needed and to take appropriate action in response to that need. By nature, as women, we are given to spiritual midwifery and birthing new life. We have multifaceted and colourful ways of sharing our gifts. (This can evoke fear in our brethren)
- Religious are not bogged down with dogma; they have a different perspective and often move ahead in many social, environmental and justice issues.

- We bridge the gap between doctrine and life by grounding our experiences of God in real life situations. There is an intuition from women to find a different way to interpret scripture and theology - an invitation to debate on doctrine, particularly around the Eucharist.
- As religious women, our way of decision making is very inclusive and involves a high level of participation. This is in contrast to the very hierarchical method which is typical of the Hierarchy and parish Clergy and which is reflected in how lay people and religious are currently involved in the life of a parish. This needs to be addressed.

## Experiences of Inclusion and of Exclusion in the Irish church as a religious sister

### **1. Longing to Belong**

- Recognising that WE ARE ONE CHURCH there is a desire to belong to the wider community of the church and a longing to create a space big enough for all to participate. It's difficult to be part of the institutional church that occurs as outdated, outmoded, lacks authentic dialogue, pays lip service to inclusion, and appears far removed from where women and religious are. Women religious are trapped by this experience but clergy are also trapped and there's little room for men too to manoeuvre within the institutional church.

### **2. Exclusion at the parish level:**

- Many clergy are closed to creativity and can be resistant to/refuse change, "he isn't able for ideas, and can't be argued against. His word is the last word..."; "If you question old thinking you meet a wall". This limits those within the parish structures such as the parish council, parish planning group, liturgy group, diocesan planning group, etc., who have unique gifts to offer to support the parish, in particular women religious.
- Clergy are not trained or accustomed to working together as a team. The result is that religious and clergy simply create spaces to work alongside each other, rather than engaging and working together. There must be space and dialogue to move forward together – but what does together look like?
- A deep sense of isolation and dissolution as parish liturgy and rituals are no longer nourishing. Offers to dialogue and support clergy/parish priests are dismissed as threatening.
- With an ageing clergy and religious conservatism among newly ordained seminarians, some religious ask is it better to let that church die out?

### **3. Exclusion at the sacramental level, including the inclusion of a new layer in the hierarchy:**

- Women can only experience 6 of the 7 sacraments: "I realised this when I was 9 years old preparing for confirmation... I still can't believe my ears"!
- When the role of 'deacon' was added, this was limited to 'married men' and excluded women. Women religious are uniquely qualified and experienced to conduct this role, yet another layer was added to exclude them. Whether women religious would be open to this role or not is irrelevant in the absence of a choice.

### **4. Exclusive language:**

- The exclusive language continuously used in the church and especially in liturgical celebrations, for example, for us 'men' and for our salvation.

### **5. Scapegoating and feelings of isolation: Media and Public Perception**

- Today, religious life in Ireland is given a lot of bad press, with a particular focus on the past, and as women religious many of us feel challenged in a very deep way. We have been subjected to constant battering from the media. Media reporting is happy to use women religious as scapegoats for Irish church and society. When we feel that it's ending it comes back again and again like a niggling sore.
- The release of the Ryan report in 2009 was very difficult. The experiences around the recent reports on Mother and Baby Homes have been similarly painful for all involved. Despite the reports demonstrating that Irish society as a whole was culpable, the focus has remained on women religious.

- The invisibility today of women religious in Ireland: There is a sense of Being silenced, but silence is seen as condoning the accusations and giving an impression that “we’re all guilty”. We are partly to blame for our own invisibility as we appear to have gone underground. What can be done? It is difficult for women religious to respond, as “any religious who speaks up would be shut down”.
- The institutional church has enjoyed ‘the glory of the schools and education’ that the Sisters provided. Yet when new ways had to be found due to declining numbers, the hierarchy has tended to withdraw, disassociate or rely on “delay tactics”, refusing to respond to or dialogue with religious orders to look at change and move on with the times.

We dream of a prophetic church, an inclusive Church, a community of love, the Kingdom of God. A Church that embodies faith, hope and love, visible in the here and now. How can we create this church together?

- Listening to the voices of all the people of God: The fundamental part is listening – “everything must be on the table” with an emphasis on sincere listening, respect, and inclusivity. People who have no voice also need to be heard.
- The first step is the dialogue, engaging intentionally with a living conversation where the people of God will come together. We will create a place where all voices are heard, listening to each other’s stories. We will concentrate on the here and now in our own country.
- Dialogue will be at multiple levels, including local (priests, deacons, sisters, lay people). We will harness the power of ritual - song and story. Our approach to dialogue will be sensitive.
- Today is an invitation for Transformation and a call to an openness with each other, to work together and speak with a united voice, and address issues together.
- Do we need to ‘befriend’ clericalism to see if it can be ‘softened’ or ‘moved’ to inclusion?
- There is need for inclusion of the unique ‘gifts’ of women religious, alongside those of clerics, and to incorporate these into an inclusive church.
- As women religious in Ireland, we are no longer in leadership roles in the Church: i.e. through schools and hospitals. We are in the background, and while this is a little intimidating and can be painful, we realise a lot of ‘letting go’ must take place. We also realise that this is a healthy reminder that our identity was linked too much to what we did. We need to grow into the realisation that we are ‘contemplatives in action’ and the importance of our self-identity as women Religious, not just our working function.
- As returned missionaries, there was much we did not know or had not experienced within the Irish Church. We felt a great sense of fear on our return, our newness. It was as if the Church and ‘us’ were running on parallel lines like two tracks of a railway. We must remember that the tracks eventually emerge as one on the horizon. What we’re working for is the future, working and planning together as the people of God but with a shared vision.
- Sexuality within the Catholic Church / the Church’s understanding of sexuality and the link primarily to procreation; more contemporary understandings and what this means could be healthily engaged with, a sense of the faithful.
- Our Future is working with others: As religious and indeed as Church in Ireland, we are an aging community and those involved in the Church are aging. This will lead to something better, perhaps working together with more Christian groups.
- We don’t always need to be in leadership but can be in service – being there with others, a simpler approach.
- There is absence of community ownership of our faith in Ireland. A Catholic community based on the Gospel with a relationship in the Risen Lord and all that flows from and into that is paramount, rather than doctrine. It’s a mode of being - a way of life.

- It is necessary to identify ourselves as Church, not as the institution, and to reflect on the question, who are the hosts of the future in our world and align our energy to these people.
- We will be more vocal to issues that are relevant in our world. Injustices here as we see it. We will support the agenda of climate crisis. We will use our resources, our wisdom to mobilise and raise crucial awareness.
- We need to keep hope alive in our call - God is working through us at this time. If we look to nature, we see a tree that has died yet one shoot comes out of nowhere and continues life. The seed falling into the ground to die is a silent thing but, given time, something new emerges. It is all in a movement of silence, waiting and open to the Spirit who is always working. The seed is potential and is possibility; we must see it, be it, watering it with hope, trusting the future.

### Conversations held between the IEC and Women Religious

We believe that re-imagining and renewing the Church calls for time, space, and authentic relationships. Hence, we are grateful that honest and sincere dialogue began between the I.E.C. and women religious in 2021, and we trust this will be a foundation for walking together towards a synodal church.

From the conversations held to date the following has emerged:

- On hearing the report from Women Religious on their experiences in the Church in Ireland, the bishops expressed a deep-felt sense of sadness that women religious have become hidden, criticised, belittled. They acknowledged that sisters had suffered a lot more over those years than was realised. There is recognition that without women religious the Church is a lot poorer. They accept that it will be necessary to examine structures to see how women, religious and lay, can be brought into the decision-making process, realising that the Synod will stand or fall on this issue.
- It was apparent that it is not only the religious who are lost and in pain. The massive change in the culture leaves us all disoriented, lacking in security. Though struck by the sadness there was hope and a sense that only in relationship can anything emerge and what can emerge is mysterious and unknown. Yet we are very keen to keep hope alive in the “parched land”.
- A desire was expressed that we might be involved together in creating a new future. We all want the same thing, to be at the service of the Kingdom and to reach out to the people like Pope Francis - a man who gives hope, sees new possibilities yet is very challenging and not afraid to speak out. The big question we ask ourselves as bishops and religious is - where is the new life that is blooming and is bursting forth?
- We know God’s mission is alive and active and continues whether we cooperate or not. The Church exists to be an instrument of that mission, but we need structures that are more inclusive and that allow for greater integration and involvement and dialogue.
- There was some exploration of mission response with some seeing that women act from a more charismatic space whereas the episcopal ministry is perceived to be connected into the tradition of the apostles and more closely aligned with the institutional Church. In the past, religious occupied an institutional stance and the hierarchical structure within these institutions was very strong. However, since Vatican Two there has been a shift within these congregations towards a more participative and inclusive model.
- There was a challenging and helpful exploration of perceptions we have of one another as well as an examination of our own blindness as Church leaders, as hierarchy and as Religious, as women and men.
- These meetings between bishops and women religious are very important and have been a profoundly synodal experience. We would want a culture of good and effective communication to be a defining characteristic of our synodal Church.
- We are in a great moment of transition. The conversation between women religious and bishops is a part of the beginning of sharing/dialogue on perceptions and sensitive points. It is much bigger

than us and is part of how the Church as a whole can engage in dialogue. Questions brought up need more exploration and conversation.

- There is hope that in our dialogue, and in the sense of Synodality and walking together, we can move forward with a focus on mission, open to widening and broadening as appropriate in the future. Laywomen and men, and religious men (priests and brothers), must also be part of this conversation.