

Pope Francis and Women: The Ambivalences of a Pontificate

Regina Heyder

Theologisch-Pastorales Institut Mainz, Deutschland

Abstract At the beginning of Pope Francis' pontificate, many Catholics expressed hopes for substantial changes for women in the Church. Pope Francis has taken up these expectations and speaks more than any pope before him about 'women in the Church'. On the one hand, he refers to gender stereotypes and the corresponding complementarity of women and men; on the other hand, the idea of reciprocal relationships is becoming increasingly important to him. Changes in his pontificate concern the liturgy and women in leadership positions, while with regard to the sacramental ordination of women, the door is still closed. Since the Synod on Synodality, however, there seems to have been renewed movement on the issue of the sacramental ordination of women deacons. During his pontificate, Pope Francis had to confront the abuse of women religious in the Church, which has now become public knowledge. Changes to canon law and the intention to define spiritual abuse as an offense are evidence of efforts to combat these offenses committed by clerics. During Francis' pontificate, new reform-oriented women's networks have emerged, and the established women's organizations have expanded their forms of action.

Keywords Pope Francis. Women. Gender Stereotypes. Sexual abuse of women religious. Synod on Synodality 2021-24. Catholic Women's Organizations.

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Hopes, expectations, or even fears always accompany the beginnings of a pontificate. In 2013 and the following years, many Catholics were optimistic that under Pope Francis the Church would see substantial changes for women. Numerous publications, particularly in Italian, dealt with ‘Pope Francis and women’ – a subject that was simply not present in the literature by and about Pope Benedict XVI.¹

1 Introduction: Pope Francis and Women – Biographical, Doctrinal, and Narrative Approaches

1.1 Women of Faith, Women of Strength

On the one hand, these publications present women who have had an impact in Jorge Bergoglio’s life. In doing so, the authors are following a path that Pope Francis himself has laid in his autobiographical interviews with Sergio Rubin and Francesca Ambrogetti, when he was Cardinal of Buenos Aires. These interviews had been published in 2010 under the title *El Jesuita. Conversaciones con el cardenal Jorge Bergoglio s.j.* and were subsequently translated into numerous languages when Bergoglio became Pope Francis.² Like Francis’ autobiographical publication from 2024, *Life. My Story through History*, the volume begins with Grandma Rosa, a key figure of his childhood, to whom he also owes his familiarity with Piedmontese Italian. Rosa Vassallo, who was involved in the female branch of the Catholic Action in Asti (*Unione femminile cattolica italiana*) before emigrating to Argentina, was decisive for the young Bergoglio’s religious development:

In fact, it was she who gave me my first introduction to Christianity, taught me to pray, and talked to me about that great personage I didn’t yet know: Jesus.³

The formative female figures in Bergoglio’s life also include his mother Regina Maria Sivori, who would have preferred a career in medicine for her son, and Esther Balestrino de Careaga from Paraguay, who taught him the importance of precise work as head of a chemistry

¹ Canta, *Papa Francesco parla alle donne*; Fabrizio, *Francesco. Il papa delle donne*; Francesco, *La Chiesa è donna*; Franziskus, *Keine Kirche ohne Frauen*; Galeotti, Scaraffia, *Papa Francesco e le donne*; Militello, Noceti, *Le donne e la riforma*; Romeo, *Francesco e le donne*.

² Rubin, Ambrogetti, *El Jesuita*.

³ Francis, *Life*.

laboratory. She played a leading role in the Paraguayan women's movement in the 1940s and was one of the co-founders of the *Madres de Plaza Mayo* during her exile in Argentina. Bergoglio was in contact with this communist sympathizer until she was kidnapped and murdered by the Argentinian military junta in December 1977. The intention of these autobiographical narratives is to demonstrate that in his life, Francis has met women with exceptional strength who have been shaping his faith as well as his image of women to this day.

1.2 Women's Nature, Contributions, Dignity, Significance, and Recognition

Pope Francis' statements on women's characteristics are abundant: women are harmony, poetry, beauty, peculiar sensitivity and tenderness, genuine strength and reserve of the entire humanity. Women are more patient, more creative, more courageous than men.

The feminine genius is decisive in public life as well as in families. A woman knows how to take life to heart, brings into the world the grace that makes things new, possesses the power of care and healing. A woman's look at things opens the new perspective of love that originates hope, and she can uniquely synthesize the languages of the mind, the heart, and hands. Women give an example of determination and possess a strength that does not give up and transcends suffering.

Much more should be done in women's favour: their voices should be given more weight; their authority should be recognized; they should be given more space and participate more and more in decision-making.

In short: Woman is unique, or – as the title of a book published under the name of Pope Francis in October 2024 puts it – *Sei unica. Inno al genio femminile* (You Are Unique. Hymn to the Female Genius). All of the above statements are taken from the introduction to this book and its first chapter on the “seven talents of women that make the world a better place”; they provide a synthesis of a “synthesis”.⁴ The book itself is a kind of florilegium, the quotes originating from Pope Francis' teachings in his encyclicals (especially *Amoris laetitia*), apostolic exhortations, general audiences, homilies, meditations, speeches, and press conferences.

In fact, Francis' countless affirmations on women provide more than enough material for such collections. As the statements above show, they have always been ambivalent – idealizing, eulogizing, and patriarchal precisely because they project gender stereotypes onto

⁴ Cf. Francesco, *Sei unica*, 7-13. These two chapters are characterized as “a synthesis” of different texts (see 219 ff.).

women with the intention to legitimize the expansion and, above all, the limitation of women's agency simultaneously. With a view to various narratives that stylized Francis as a kind of an unconventional papal 'superman', he himself referred to Sigmund Freud:

Sigmund Freud diceva, se non sbaglio, che in ogni idealizzazione c'è un'aggressione.⁵

Women feel just the same.

Pope Francis' statements on women perfectly fit into the pattern described by the philosopher Kate Manne:

Women may not be simply human *beings* but positioned as human *givers* when it comes to the dominant men who look to them for various kinds of moral support, admiration, attention, and so on.⁶

[...] women are expected to give traditionally feminine goods (such as sex, care, nurturing, and reproductive labour) to designated, often more privileged men, and to refrain from taking traditionally masculine goods (such as power, authority, and claims to knowledge) away from them.⁷

Kate Manne's concept provides an explanation how women's contribution can be described as in *Sei unica* and at the same time women can still be denied access to most leadership positions in the Church and to ordination to the priesthood – apart from the fact that this is a question of gender justice, despite all assertions to the contrary.⁸

Pope Francis' particular style owes much more to Pope John Paul II and his notion of the 'feminine genius' than to the Second Vatican Council which wisely refrained from describing any gender stereotypes. Both popes assume a biologically based complementarity of the sexes, and Pope Francis considers gender theory (in the singular!) an ideology that erases the differences between men and women. Besides the eulogies, Pope Francis sometimes uses unfortunate images, for example when he translates Latin American idioms into Italian or talks of women in a disrespectful and paternalistic manner – examples are the female theologians in the International Theological Commission whom he characterized as "strawberries on the cake", or the women religious with "vinegar-faces". It is the Pope himself who condemns chauvinism and machismo as part of the culture of his Argentinian

⁵ De Bortoli, "Intervista con Papa Francesco".

⁶ Manne, *Down Girl*, XIX.

⁷ Manne, *Entitled*, 11.

⁸ Cf. Beattie, "Human Dignity and Rights".

homeland, without himself being able to escape it completely.⁹

The events during the Pope's apostolic trip to Belgium in September 2024 demonstrate how antiquated it is to convey these stereotypes today. In the Aula Magna of the Catholic University of Louvain, the Pope had told the students:

The Church is woman, female and not male. She is female, a wife. [...] Womanhood speaks to us of fruitful welcome, nurturing and life-giving dedication.¹⁰

In an unprecedented move, the Université Catholique Louvain distanced itself from this position in a press release and made a connection between these gender stereotypes and "sexist and sexual violence":

UCLouvain expresses its incomprehension and disapproval of the position expressed by Pope Francis regarding the role of women in the Church and in society. He declared: 'Womanhood is motherhood [in the original Italian 'accoglienza feconda'], nurturing and life-giving dedication'. UCLouvain can only express its disagreement with this deterministic and reductive position. UCLouvain is an inclusive university and committed to the fight against sexist and sexual violence.¹¹

However, the view of Francis as a Pope, who only recurs to hyperbolic gender stereotypes, does not depict the entire picture. Unlike his predecessor, Francis repeatedly and unequivocally denounces discrimination against women in society and in the Church. Already in *Amoris laetitia* he talks about "unacceptable customs", among them "the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement". Francis mentions the "verbal, physical, and sexual violence that women endure in some marriages", "the reprehensible genital mutilation of women", the "lack of equal access to dignified work and roles of decision-making". The pope deplores the exploitation of the female body, be it through surrogate motherhood or in the media. The belief "that many of today's problems have arisen because of feminine emancipation", is, according to the Pope, "a form of male chauvinism". In the women's movement he discovers "the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women".¹²

⁹ Cf. Francis, *Press Conference on the Return Flight From Bahrain*.

¹⁰ Francis, *Meeting with University Students*.

¹¹ Université catholique de Louvain, *Reaction to the Pope's Address*.

¹² Cf. Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Amoris laetitia*, art. 54. Cf. John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, art. 41, where women's "increasing awareness of their natural dignity" and their

1.3 Exempla: Mary and Female Saints

In addition to the essentialization of women, Francis' rhetoric is characterized by the fact that he repeatedly recurs to *exempla*, example narratives about contemporary nameless women as well as about the great figures from the cosmos of female saints. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is unrivalled among the female saints; she is the mother of the Church and of faith; she is the star of the new evangelization and the mother of the living Gospel;¹³ she is the woman of listening, the woman of decision, the woman of action and much more.¹⁴ She is the Untier of Knots, as depicted in a picture in the Augsburg Church of St. Peter am Perlach, which became so dear to Francis.¹⁵

Apart from Mary, Pope Francis especially venerates the French Carmelite Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, whom he quotes at length in his latest encyclical *Dilexit nos* (2024). She is the first woman ever to be cited in an encyclical by Pope Francis.¹⁶ Undoubtedly due to the chosen topic, the veneration of the Sacred Heart, in this document the writings of female saints are present to a significant extent whereas in his previous encyclicals Francis had never cited any women at all and in his Apostolic Exhortations hardly any. An exception is *Querida Amazonía*, where lines of the South American female writers Amarilis Tupiassú, Yana Lucila Lema, and Sui Yun appear in the poetic passages. The reception of contemporary women theologians in Pope Francis' magisterial documents is still to be awaited.

In Pope Francis' rhetorical strategy, the *exempla* are aimed at concrete action and also at insight into (inconvenient) doctrinal teachings. Thus, the example of Mary is to become concrete in the lives of women and should, above all, make them aware that they are essential in the Church. Mary at Pentecost in the midst of the apostles shows that "women, in the Church, are more important than bishops and priests".¹⁷ This argument inevitably evokes images and icons of Pentecost that show Mary as the central figure in the midst of the

demand for rights and duties in domestic and in public life are considered a "characteristic of present times".

¹³ Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, art. 288.

¹⁴ Cf. Francis, *Preghiera a Maria*.

¹⁵ Cf. Francis, *Preghiera per la Giornata Mariana*.

¹⁶ Quotes of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus in Francis, *Dilexit nos*, art. 90, 133-42, 195-9. Further women saints quoted or mentioned are Faustina Kowalska, Gertrude of Helfta, Catherine of Siena, Margaret Mary Alacoque, Lutgarde and Mechtilde of Hackeborn, Angela of Foligno, and Julian of Norwich. The importance of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus for Pope Francis may also be seen in his apostolic exhortation "*C'est la confiance*" on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Saint Therese's birth.

¹⁷ In 2018, Pope Francis inserted the celebration of Mary, Mother of the Church, on the day after Pentecost as a Memorial into the Roman calendar.

apostles and thus attribute a singular significance to her that the biblical text itself does not suggest: according to Acts 1,12-14, a larger group consisting of the apostles, the women, Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers were united in prayer in Jerusalem.

2 **One Door Closed, One Door Half Opened? Women's Ordination to the Priesthood and to the Permanent Diaconate**

2.1 **"Women, in the Church, are more important than bishops and priests"**

Right from the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has left no doubt that he neither wants nor considers it possible for women to be ordained to the priesthood. With reference to *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* from 1994 he has declared that

as far as women's ordination is concerned, the Church has spoken and said: 'No'. John Paul II said it, but with a definitive formulation. That door is closed, but on this issue I want to tell you something. I have said it, but I repeat it. Our Lady, Mary, was more important than the Apostles, than bishops and deacons and priests.¹⁸

What this often-repeated statement means for Pope Francis may be read in *Querida Amazonia* arts. 99-103, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation from 2020:

In the Amazon region there are communities that have long preserved and handed on the faith even though no priest has come their way, even for decades. This could happen because of the presence of strong and generous women who, undoubtedly called and prompted by the Holy Spirit, baptized, catechized, prayed and acted as missionaries.

This summons us to broaden our vision, lest we restrict our understanding of the Church to her functional structures. Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow

¹⁸ Cf. Francis, *Press Conference on the Return Flight From Rio de Janeiro*. The definitive character of *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* is the subject of theological debate, cf. the declaration of Ladaria, *In Response to Certain Doubts*; Eckholt, *Women in Church Ministries*; Knop, *God's Strong Daughters*.

our vision; it would lead us to clericalize women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective.

By making present the “tender strength of Mary, the Mother” women are contributing to the Church, with “the kind of power that is typically theirs”, with their “simple and straightforward gifts”, with “other forms of service and charisms that are proper to women”, “in a way that reflects their womanhood”.¹⁹ With this essentialist concept Francis justifies the theologically highly problematic separation of a person’s role in the Christian community and sacramental ordination. This essentialism is almost exclusively expressed in relation to women – sentences about men’s power, men’s gifts and charisms, or the ways that would reflect men’s masculinity, may only rarely be found. What however is in the background of Francis’ theology are the so-called Marian and Petrine principles, which were first formulated by Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar and which have been highly appreciated by the popes since Paul VI, yet in entirely diverse contexts. Their intention is – very roughly outlined – to describe along gender characteristics a specific female respectively male presence in the Church: Authority, structure, and ordination are reserved to the male-Petrine principle, whereas the female-Marian principle relates to the inner, mystic life of the Church. Since “the Church is woman”, and she is a “bride”, Pope Francis concludes that the “Marian [principle] is more important than the Petrine”. According to him it was one of the great sins to have “masculinized” the Church, and she should strive now to de-masculinize herself (“smaschilizzare la Chiesa”).²⁰ This spontaneous appeal to the members of the International Theological Commission in November 2023 was to have a concrete effect: Italian Sr. Linda Pocher, who is teaching Christology and Mariology at the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences Auxilium in Rome, organised four meetings of mostly female theologians for the C9, the Council of Cardinals. Each of these meetings is documented in a book, starting with a critique of Balthasar’s principles as Leitmotiv: “Smaschilizzare la Chiesa”? *Confronto critico sui ‘principi’ di H.U. von Balthasar*. Pope Francis contributed a trenchant preface to each of the books.²¹

The range of contributors demonstrates a great openness to current challenges, critical issues and the experiences of women in a global

¹⁹ Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Querida Amazonía*; cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, arts. 103-4; Wendel, “Partizipation”.

²⁰ Francis, *Udienza*.

²¹ Cf. Vantini, Castiglioni, Pocher, “Smaschilizzare la Chiesa”?; Wells et al., *Donne e ministeri*; Pocher, da Costa Pedro, Morra, *Donne e uomini*; Horak, Pocher, Rotondi, *Economia e diritto*.

and ecumenical context. Besides Linda Pocher, the contributors of the first meeting, e.g., include the professor of Philosophical Anthropology and Fundamental Theology Lucia Vantini (Verona and Venice), who is current president of the *Coordinamento Teologhe Italiane* and has published on ‘dangerous’ topics as power, gender, sexual difference, or motherhood and fatherhood, and Luca Castiglioni, a professor of Fundamental Theology teaching at the Seminary of Milan, who has written on baptismal equality and sexual difference.²² Speakers at the third meeting were Stella Morra, who teaches Fundamental Theology at the Gregorian University, and Regina da Costa Pedro, who writes about her experience as an Afro-Brazilian woman of colour and a religious sister. Often she was the first Black woman – in her congregation, in classes at the Gregorian University, or in leadership positions. Da Costa Pedro includes the testimonials of four other Brazilian women, thus proving that cultures, like women and men, must be thought of in the plural, as is reflected in the book title: *Donne e uomini: questione di culture. Per una Chiesa del noi*.

It would require a further article to describe the reception of the magisterial documents during Francis’ pontificate by women theologians and/or feminist theologians. Despite all criticism levelled at these documents in detail, many consider them as a source of inspiration, whereas the works and teachings of the ‘Theologenpapst’ Benedict XVI have often been passed over in silence (at least in German-speaking countries, the reception of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is clearly dominated by male theologians).²³ Pope Francis in contrast has focused on topics that female theologians had previously recognized as signs of the times – ecology and climate justice, migration, marriage, family and relationships, ethics of care, global solidarity, interreligious dialogue, to name but a few.²⁴

2.2 Female Deacons?

Even in the Pope’s understanding the magisterial document *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* does not ban the ordination of female deacons. With him, the sacramental diaconate of women seemed to be a realistic

²² Cf. Castiglioni, *Figli e figlie di Dio*.

²³ Cf. e.g. Tück, *Der Theologenpapst*, with only three contributions by female theologians H.-B. Gerl-Falkovitz, J. Rahner, U. Nothelle-Wildfeuer (out of a total of 36 contributions).

²⁴ Women theologians who refer to the teachings of Francis besides those mentioned in this contribution include e.g. Virginia Azcuy, Maria Clara Bingemer, Agnes M. Brazal, Farina Dierker, Elizabeth E.Green, Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Julia Knop, Stella Morra, Marinella Perroni, Dorothea Sattler, Marie-Jo Thiel, Adriana Valerio, Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro, Birgit Weiler.

goal. Already under Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the International Theological Commission had dealt with developments and perspectives on the diaconate and published its findings in 2002.²⁵ A background is the decision of the Second Vatican Council to revive the permanent diaconate of men after it had been forgotten in the Church for centuries. According to the Council's constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* art. 29, the bishops' conferences should decide whether to introduce or not deacons with the consent of the Roman Pontiff. At a meeting between Pope Francis and representatives of the *Unione Internazionale delle Superiore Generali* (International Union of Superiors General) on 16 May 2016, the women religious asked Pope Francis what was preventing the Church from including women among the permanent deacons. Pope Francis promised to set up a commission with members suggested by the UISG and by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. Until June 2018, it worked primarily on the diaconate of women in the Early Church. The commission members to date do not know what results have been presented in their name by Cardinal Ladaria to Pope Francis. After discussions in favour of female deacons during the Amazon Synod a second commission was established, which held two conventions in 2021 and 2022. Nothing is known about its results, and when asked about the findings in an interview in May 2024, Pope Francis once more expressed a firm 'no':

No. If it is deacons with holy orders, no. But women have always had, I would say the function of deaconesses without being deacons, right? Women are of great service as women, not as ministers.²⁶

Interviews are certainly not the most authoritative way of the magisterium to express itself, and it seems that Pope Francis has since then made another change of positions. His desire to keep the second session of the Synod on Synodality 2021-24 free from discussions about female deacons did not prove to be successful. On the contrary these discussions prevailed, and in the end, the members of the Synod voted not unanimously, but with the necessary majority on the statement:

There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the

²⁵ International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ*. Cf. also Noceti, *Diacone*.

²⁶ O'Donnell, "Interview With Pope Francis" (21 May 2024), cited in Zagano, "Survey of Vatican Studies", 516.

Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue.²⁷

During the Synod, the news came as a surprise that the second commission on the diaconate is to continue its work; it convened again in Rome in February 2025. And Pope Francis who approved the Synod's Final Document and declared it to be part of the ordinary Magisterium of the Successor of Peter, even mentions this position affirmatively in his last autobiographical work *Hope*.²⁸

The Synod's Final Document, speaking with the voices of more than 350 male and female members, clerics and lay people, who during this Synod for the first time were allowed to vote, is remarkable in a further aspect: in it literally no gender stereotypes or ideas of complementarity are to be found. Instead, another, less prominent strand of Pope Francis' teaching is repristinated: the ideal of reciprocity should shape the relationships between men and women and between husband and wife (art. 36; art. 52).

After more than a decade of Francis' pontificate, the honeymoon between women and the Pope is long over. Today, female Catholics find themselves "between disempowerment and empowerment", as Osnabrück theologian Margit Eckholt puts it.²⁹ Hopes have often turned into disappointed expectations. Pastoral theologian Ute Leimgruber speaks of "paternalistic oppressive care" with regard to the quoted passages from *Querida Amazonía*.³⁰ With the blog post "Women in the Church. Spare Me This Plitudinous Waffle", theologian Tina Beattie reacted to the *Instrumentum laboris* for the Second Session of the Synod on Synodality and its announcement that the admission of women to the diaconal ministry "will not be the subject of the work of the Second Session" and the document's statement that

it is good that theological reflection should continue, on an appropriate timescale and in the appropriate ways.

Tina Beattie speaks of "delays, deferrals, further reflections, unpublished reports".³¹ After the high expectations of the early years, many theologians as well as Catholic women and men with a reform agenda are now more or less disillusioned (those with a more conservative

²⁷ Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church*.

²⁸ Cf. Francis, *Hope*, 178.

²⁹ Eckholt, *Frauen in der Kirche*.

³⁰ Leimgruber, "Fürsorgliche Krankenschwestern", 176-7.

³¹ Beattie, "Women in the Church". Cf. also Marzano, *La Chiesa immobile*.

agenda have been disillusioned right from the beginning of the pontificate). The situation, however, is different in certain Latin-American, African and Asian regions, where Pope Francis is an important ally against the globalized exploitation of the Earth, and the discrimination against women, migrants, indigenous people, to name only a few. It is to be mentioned that analysis and fierce critique nevertheless benefit from Pope Francis' understanding of *parrhesia* – a concept much less appreciated in the previous pontificates. And, at least in theory, Pope Francis knows how urgent substantial changes are right now. In his preface to the book *Donne e uomini: questione di cultura. Per una Chiesa del noi*, published by Italian Theologian Linda Pocher only a few days before *Sei unica*, he is very clear:

A livello istituzionale, le resistenze al cambiamento possono assumere la forma di vere e proprie strategie che a volte vengono messe in atto per bloccare la riforma: rimandare le decisioni a un futuro indefinito; rispondere alle richieste con il silenzio, cioè non rispondere; rifugiarsi dietro a un falso bisogno di discutere e indagare senza fine; moltiplicare la burocrazia; eliminare in vari modi le persone che danno fastidio, oppure stancarle in modo da spingerle a rinunciare alle loro richieste.

Il segno che una comunità ha fatto un buon discernimento è la consolazione. Finché non c'è consolazione nella comunità ecclesiale, il discernimento non è compiuto: forse si tratta di ascoltare più in profondità e senza giudizio; forse si tratta di arrivare a una decisione più definitiva, anche se *ad experimentum*; sicuramente si tratta di fare più attenzione alle resistenze, di nominarle e di dare loro parola.³²

3 Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi?

Various changes with regard to women's issues have been taking place during the pontificate of Pope Francis. Some of them apply to the *lex orandi*, starting with the washing of the feet on Maundy

³² Francis, "Prefazione", in Pocher, da Costa Pedro, Morra, *Donne e uomini*, 6 (Author's transl.: "At the institutional level, resistance to change can take the form of real strategies that are sometimes put in place to block reform: postponing decisions to an indefinite future; responding to requests with silence, that is, not responding; taking refuge behind a false need to discuss and investigate endlessly; multiplying bureaucracy; eliminating in various ways people who are a nuisance, or tiring them so as to push them to give up their demands. The sign that a community has made a good discernment is consolation. As long as there is no consolation in the ecclesial community, discernment is not accomplished: perhaps it is a matter of listening more deeply and without judgement; perhaps it is a matter of arriving at a more definite decision, even if *ad experimentum*; it certainly is a matter of paying more attention to resistance, of naming it and giving it a voice").

Thursday 2013 in the Roman youth prison Casal del Marmo. As it has been his practice already as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Pope Francis included in this gesture two women and also a non-Catholic prisoner, whereas the washing of feet is traditionally performed on men only (in 2024, in the prison Rebibbia, Pope Francis washed the feet of women exclusively). As it was to be expected this provoked fierce critique for breaking with tradition, but following Francis' homilies on the Maundy Thursdays during his pontificate, he understands the washing of feet as an inclusive symbol of God's love, of human humility, and solidarity. In 2014, Pope Francis made this a law for the whole Church when he in a letter to Cardinal Sarah, then head of the Congregation for the Divine Worship, decreed that the pastors are allowed to choose the participants of the rite among all members, male or female, of the people of God.³³

In 2016, Francis elevated Mary Magdalene to the rank of apostle and subsequently her liturgical celebration from obligatory memory to the status of Festivity, as it is the case with the other apostles. Francis also formalized Mary Magdalen's ancient title *apostola apostolorum* (apostle of the apostles), commemorating

the peculiar function of St. Mary Magdalene as the first witness of the Risen Christ and the first messenger who announced to the apostles the resurrection of the Lord.³⁴

The liturgical agency of women was then to be enlarged in 2021, when, with the *motu proprio Spiritus Domini*, Francis modified can. 230 § 1 of the Code of Canon Law, explicitly referring to the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism.³⁵ "All suitable faithful", male or female, may now be entrusted the ministries of *lector* and *acolyte*, formerly reserved for men and usually conferred only to candidates for the priesthood. Although this change has eradicated an often-criticised aspect of gender injustice in canon law, for many women it somehow came too late and does not go far enough. It is one of the tragedies of this pontificate that among reform-oriented Catholics any initiative in favour of women is measured by access to priestly ordination. At the same time, groups that identify themselves as conservative are turning the exclusion of women into an identity marker of Catholicism, and every change in favour of women, no matter how small, is instrumentalized to oppose Pope Francis.

³³ Cf. Francis, *Ad venerabilem fratrem nostrum*.

³⁴ Cf. Holy See Press Office, *Mary Magdalene*.

³⁵ Francis, *Motu proprio Spiritus Domini*.

4 **Sexual Abuse of Religious Sisters and Adult Lay Women: “the other scandal of the Church”**

From the very beginning of his pontificate Francis had to deal with the issue of sexual abuse of children and young people by clerical offenders. Although worldwide cases of abuse had been known in the Church for a long time, public awareness and the pressure to act intensified at the beginning of 2010. The “Year for Priests” proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI for 2009-10 became a year of crisis, a crisis which continues to this day. In Germany a study on clerical abuse was published in 2018, which ultimately resulted in the Synodal Path of the German Bishops’ Conference and the Central Committee of German Catholics in order to tackle the systemic factors of abuse. The disastrous declaration of Iquique (18 January 2018) during his pastoral trip to Chile, in which Francis rejected the cover-up accusations against Bishop Barros as “slander”, was to be followed by a complete turnaround. Francis apologized in April, accepted the resignation of Barros in June, and dismissed the perpetrator Karadima from the clergy in September. These are just two examples that could be supplemented by numerous other cases from the entire world Church.³⁶

Among Francis’ most important measures against sexual abuse is the establishment of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors in 2014 with half of its members being women. Women also played an important role in the 2019 meeting on *The Protection of Minors in the Church*. Journalist Valentina Alazraki and the Superior General of the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus, Veronica Openibo, addressed systemic factors like gender injustice, a taboo on clerical misconduct, and the abuse of adult women in their speeches, which received a lot of media coverage. Openibo asked:

Why have other issues around sexuality not been addressed sufficiently, e.g. misuse of power, misuse of money, clericalism – we felt that many times –, gender discrimination, the role of women and the laity in general?³⁷

Alazraki was convinced that the Church was at the threshold of another scandal and declared the sexual abuse of women religious as first and foremost an abuse of power:

³⁶ Overviews on the situation in the different countries may be found in Aschmann, *Katholische Dunkelräume*; Hilpert et al., *Sexueller Missbrauch*; Lecaros, Suárez, *Abuse in the Latin American Church*.

³⁷ Openibo, *Openness to the World*.

Credo che tutti ci siamo resi conto del fatto che siamo sulla soglia di un altro scandalo, quello delle suore e religiose vittime di abusi sessuali da parte di sacerdoti e vescovi. [...] Potrebbe essere una grande opportunità perché la Chiesa prenda l'iniziativa e sia in prima linea nella denuncia di questi abusi, che non sono solo sessuali, ma prima di tutto di potere.³⁸

Pope Francis has also always emphasized the triad of sexual abuse, abuse of power and abuse of conscience.³⁹ In fact, the double power asymmetry of women in relation to men and clerics, misogynistic gender stereotypes, clericalism, and multiple dependencies of a spiritual, economic or emotional nature are fatal risk factors for the abuse of adult religious sisters and lay women.⁴⁰

When Valentina Alazraki gave her lecture at the Vatican, the abuse of women religious had long been public knowledge. The *National Catholic Reporter* and the *New York Times* had published the studies, sent to the Vatican in the 1990s, of the nuns Maura O'Donohue, Marie McDonald and Esther Fangman in early 2001.⁴¹ These publications even led to a *European Parliament Resolution on Sexual Violence Against Women, Particularly Catholic Nuns* (2001). It was however only in an interview on the return flight from Abu Dhabi in February 2019 that Pope Francis confirmed the sexual abuse of women religious with such strong words that the head of the Vatican press office subsequently felt compelled to "explain" the Pope's words and replace the term "sexual slavery" with "sexual manipulation" (without naming it, the Pope spoke about the Communauté St. Jean, founded by notorious Marie-Dominique Philippe). Less public attention was paid to the fact that Pope Francis at least implicitly confirmed the cover-up of this abuse under canonized John Paul II: he told the journalists that as Pope, Benedict XVI immediately reopened files that he had been forced to close involuntarily as Cardinal Ratzinger.⁴² The Pope's confession was to be followed by the Arte documentary *Religieuses abusées, l'autre scandale de l'Église*, which again caused lasting outrage.⁴³ In its aftermath more and more victims started to speak out.⁴⁴ For the topic of abuse of women religious and adult

³⁸ Alazraki, *Comunicazione*.

³⁹ Cf. Francis, *Letter to the People of God*: "the suffering endured by many minors due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons".

⁴⁰ Cf. Lembo, *Religieuses abusées en Afrique*; Hoyeau, *La trahison des pères*.

⁴¹ Cf. Wagner, "#NunsToo".

⁴² Francis, *Press Conference on the Return Flight From Abu Dhabi*.

⁴³ Quintin, Raimbault, *Religieuses abusées, l'autre scandale de l'Église*.

⁴⁴ Haslbeck et al., *Erzählen als Widerstand*.

women the year 2019 was to become the turning point that 2010 has been for the abuse of minors.

Among the many scandals, the Rupnik case is especially prominent because it raises questions about Pope Francis' and the Curia's dealing with the prominent Jesuit and artist Marko Ivan Rupnik. Already in the 1990s, several sisters of the Loyola Community, located in Slovenia, had denounced the spiritual and sexual abuse committed by Rupnik. He continued his abusive behaviour as head of the Centro Aletti in Rome. In a way, Rupnik was 'too big to fail', because he had worked for the Vatican and, e.g., designed the logo for the Year of Mercy. Over 200 churches and chapels in the Vatican, Rome, and around the world are decorated with the mosaics of Rupnik. At the end of 2022, the scandal reached Pope Francis himself when it became known that in May 2020 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had declared Rupnik formally excommunicated for an *absolutio complicitis*, but had lifted the excommunication in the same month. Pope Francis denied having been involved in this decision. In particular, the extensive interviews with former members of the Comunità Loyola conducted by journalist Federica Tourn revealed the dimensions of the scandal. They show a highly manipulative perpetrator whose grooming strategies include theological and spiritual elements and his authority as a cleric and as an artist. Rupnik has since been expelled from the Jesuit order, and the Vatican has lifted the statute of limitations, an unusual move in cases of abuse against adults. The investigation of the case was transferred to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, where the gathering of information has now been completed and the preparations for the trial have begun.⁴⁵

The Pope's initiatives to improve the protection of minors and vulnerable adults bore fruit when the revised ecclesiastical penal law was published in June 2021. In the new Book VI of the Code of Canon Law, abuse of minors is no longer considered as a violation of the clerical celibacy obligation, as was previously the case, but is instead qualified as an "offence against human life, dignity, and freedom" (canons 1397-8).

The canon dealing with the abuse of adults by clerical offenders has also been revised, although this abuse remains part of the "offenses against special obligations" of clerics (canons 1392-6). Characteristics of the offense are the use of force, or threat, and – a new parameter – the abuse of clerical authority (canon 1395, § 3). The norm does not focus on the violation of rights, as criticized by canon law expert Judith Hahn:

⁴⁵ Cf. Heyder, "Erfolg als Täterstrategie".

the legislator does not take into account the sexual integrity of adult victims or their right of self-determination.⁴⁶

Spiritual abuse, which in addition to the so-called *crimen sollicitationis* often serves as a grooming strategy for clerics, has not yet been taken into account in the reform of ecclesiastical penal law; until now it has often been labelled as ‘false mysticism’. Currently Cardinal Fernández and a study group of his dicastery are making efforts to formulate a more precise definition of the delict of ‘spiritual abuse’. The relevant criteria could include abuse in a pastoral context, in professional relationships, manipulation with spiritual elements, and more, as Cardinal Fernández told in an interview in the journal *Alfa y Omega* of the diocese of Madrid.⁴⁷

5 Women’s Leadership Roles Within the Roman Curia and Vatican Institutions

Pope Francis has been increasing the presence of women within the Roman Curia right from the beginning of his pontificate. The most spectacular appointments, however, came after the Synod on Synodality, that ended in October 2024. The final document of the Synod describes women’s presence in different fields of parish and community life, in theological research, and in various positions of responsibility in the Church before stating, as cited above, that women should carry out leadership roles in the Church (art. 60). It seems to be quite clear that Pope Francis at least for the moment prefers women’s leadership roles to decisive steps towards the female diaconate. The first woman with a voting right in the Synod of Bishops itself has been Sr. Nathalie Becquart, since 2021 one of the under-secretaries of its General Secretariat.

In January 2025, Italian Sr. Simona Brambilla became the Vatican’s first female prefect, now heading the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, where she had formerly been serving as secretary. With her appointment came also that of Cardinal Ángel Fernández Artime as pro-prefect of the Dicastery – a title and function not foreseen in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate evangelium* on the Roman Curia for this Dicastery.⁴⁸ On 1 March 2025 Sr. Raffaella Petrini took up her position as president of the Governatorate of the Vatican City State.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Cf. Hahn, “Sex Offenses-Offensive Sex”.

⁴⁷ Cf. Cardiel, *Interview With Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández*.

⁴⁸ Cf. Holy See Press Office, *Rinunce e nomine* (6 January 2025).

⁴⁹ Cf. Holy See Press Office, *Rinunce e nomine* (15 February 2025).

These outstanding appointments have been prepared by the previous personnel policy of Pope Francis with regard to Vatican Institutions and the Roman Curia. Yet it is to be stated that at the beginning of 2025, the Secretariat of State and most of the sixteen dicasteries – among them the important Dicasteries for evangelization and for the Doctrine of the Faith – are without women in leadership positions. Currently, besides Sr. Simona Brambilla as prefect, Sr. Carmen Ros Nortes is under-secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life; in the Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life two Italian women, Linda Ghisoni and Gabriella Gambino, are under-secretaries. Sr. Alessandra Smerilli is secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Out of this group of five, three are women religious, and four are of Italian origin. Ghisoni, Ros Nortes and Alessandra Smerilli hold decrees in Theology and Canon Law (the latter also in economics), whereas Brambilla received a training in Psychology, and Gambino in Political Sciences and Bioethics.

In addition to these women in the Curia, others have taken positions of responsibility in Vatican institutions: Italian art historian Barbara Jatta has been director of the Vatican museums since 2017; Cristiane Murray, originating from Brazil, has been Vice Director of the Holy See Press Office since 2019. She succeeded Paloma García Ovejero who served as the first female Vice Director from 2016-18. In summer 2024, Sr. Inês Paulo Albino, born in Guinea-Bissau, has been appointed the second female Secretary General of the Pontifical Society of the Holy Childhood, one of the four Pontifical Mission Societies. The latter two might indicate an increasing opening of Vatican leadership positions to non-European women. Due to the Vatican's notoriously tight finances, leadership positions at the Curia are said to be paid significantly less than the usual salaries in Italy, which could make it more difficult to employ more lay-people, men as well as women, who cannot rely on the infrastructure of a religious community. The question of women's access to leadership positions in the Church depends not least on the respective financial possibilities of the local Churches.

6 Women and Pope Francis: New and Long-Established Networks

6.1 New Networks

A contribution on ‘Pope Francis and women’ would be incomplete without addressing the question of how Catholic women have reacted to Pope Francis’ pontificate, his teaching, his specific style and, in recent years, the Synod on Synodality. Soon after his election, new national and international networks of women emerged which, with their informal structures, were able to act much more flexibly than the ‘old’ Catholic women’s associations with associative and canonical status.⁵⁰ These new networks can undoubtedly be interpreted as an indication of the increased expectations of reform-oriented Catholic women towards the new Pope. They include grassroots movements such as the Italian *Donne per la Chiesa*, who went public with a manifesto in 2018, or the German Maria 2.0-movement (2019). The *Revue de mujeres en la Iglesia* is active in various Spanish regions and has been taking to the streets since March 2020 with the slogan “Alcemos las voz” (Let’s raise our voices). Furthermore, new associations of women professionals in the Church emerged – such as the *Associazione Donne in Vaticano* (founded in 2016) which became a member of WUCWO,⁵¹ or *Mujeres-Iglesia Chile* as a professional network of lay and religious women conceiving itself as a “response to the wounds of sexual violence and discrimination”. At the same time the members assume the task of evangelization, also towards the Church itself.⁵²

The members of these and many more groups are concerned with the visibility of women, their speaking and being heard in the Church in general and especially in liturgy, and not least with being involved in decision-making in the Church.

Two large networks with reform objectives should be given a more detailed look: Catholic Women Speak (CWS) was founded by theology professor Tina Beattie as a “private Facebook group” in January 2014, and provides an international forum “to discuss issues relating to the dignity and equality of women in the Church and society”.⁵³

⁵⁰ Networks also include publications like *Caro Francesco* (2014), and, more critical, Blanchon et al., *Se réformer ou mourir*. See also the activities of Coordinamento Theologhe Italiane (CTI).

⁵¹ Cf. *Associazione Donne in Vaticano* (<https://www.donneinvaticano.org/index.php/it/>).

⁵² Cf. Del Villar Tagle, “Mujeres-Iglesia Chile”.

⁵³ Cf. Catholic Women Speak (<https://www.catholicwomenspeak.com/>); Hadebe, “Kann die katholische Kirche global und divers sein?”

CWS became particularly visible in the context of the synods: the group published the volumes *Bringing Our Gifts to the Table* (2015) and *Visions and Vocations* (2018) for the Family and Youth Synods.⁵⁴ For the Synod 2021-24, CWS commissioned an *International Survey of Catholic Women*, conducted by researchers Tracy McEwan, Kathleen McPhillips, and Miriam Pepper from the University of Newcastle, Australia, and Tina Beattie, University of Roehampton, London. It reached 17,200 responses from women in 104 countries through snowball sampling.⁵⁵ The answers speak for themselves – 88% of the participants agree with the statement “my Catholic identity is important to me”, 84% agree reform is needed in the Catholic Church, and 85% complain about the damage caused by clericalism. At the same time, 83% think that the Church’s social teaching is an important resource for social justice action.⁵⁶

The Voices of Faith (VoF) initiative also began its work in 2014 under the leadership of Chantal Götz from the Fidel Götz Foundation. From 2014-17 it organized in occasion of the International Women’s Day previously unprecedented events at the Vatican itself, at which Catholic female leaders from various continents spoke about women’s experiences and perspectives. The year 2018 became a tipping point: The organizers had, among others, invited former Irish Prime Minister Mary McAleese to the *Why women matter*-event. Irish-born Cardinal Kevin Farrell, prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life since 2016, is said not to have accepted McAleese and two other women as speakers; the assumed reason for this is McAleese’s positions on women’s ordination and gay Catholics. Since VoF did not want to do without the voices of these women, it withdrew the event from the Vatican and moved it to the Jesuit Curia in Rome. These developments, corresponding with the disappointing response from Vatican officials in previous years, caused VoF to abandon its previous cautious and defensive strategy and to put controversial issues such as the ordination of women, women in leadership positions, participation in decision-making, the various forms of abuse of women in the Church, and the exploitation of women religious on the agenda. Today, VoF focuses in particular on the systemic discrimination against women religious.⁵⁷

Whereas the first focus of CWS and VoF had been on addressing the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, both groups have also developed charitable and educational projects – supporting e.g. Catholic

⁵⁴ Catholic Women Speak, *Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*; Catholic Women Speak, *Visions and Vocations*.

⁵⁵ Cf. McEwan, McPhillips, Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women*.

⁵⁶ Cf. McEwan, McPhillips, Pepper, *International Survey of Catholic Women*, 4.

⁵⁷ Cf. Voices of Faith (<https://www.voicesoffaith.org>).

girl's schools in the Global South or training religious sisters against violence. More often than not these groups experience great frustration in addressing Church leaders in their struggle for women's dignity and equality, whereas solidarity and jointly developed projects in order to empower girls, women and women religious contribute to the experience of self-efficacy within these reform groups.

6.2 Established Catholic Women's Associations

Not only did new women's networks emerge during Pope Francis' pontificate, but the old Catholic women's organizations with canonical status, some of which have existed for over 100 years, also changed their themes and forms of action.⁵⁸ As women are a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to climate change, responsibility for creation was already on the agenda of these organizations long before Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'*. In recent years, there have also been calls for women to be involved in decision-making in the Church, for the Church to be inclusive of LGBT people, and to address the systemic factors of clericalism. In some, but not all, associations, particularly in Australia, the Americas and Western Europe, a more determined commitment to the sacramental ordination of women to all ministries of the Church has developed, while in the countries of the Global South, women's access to education is usually the highest priority, with calls for the ordination of women to all ministries also being found there.⁵⁹

The Synod on Synodality 2021-24 has prompted numerous female organizations and networks to formulate their concerns for an inclusive, gender-just Church. One project of an 'old' organization should be mentioned in particular: The World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO), founded in 1910, is the only Catholic organization that has been recognized under canon law as a "Public International Association of the Faithful". It is politically active as an NGO, for example with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (New York), the Human Rights Council (Geneva), the Food and Agriculture Organization (Rome), to name but a few. WUCWO launched the World Women's Observatory (WWO) in 2021

to give visibility to women, especially the most vulnerable [...] in order to inspire and generate changes that favour their integral development.

⁵⁸ Cf. Magali Della Sudda, "Réseaux catholiques féminins".

⁵⁹ Cf. Leimgruber, *Catholic Women*.

In a first project, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in Latin America were to be made visible; another report, jointly commissioned with the Latin American-Caribbean Bishops' Council (CELAM), deals with *Discriminación y participación de mujeres latinoamericanas y caribeñas. Una Mirada desde y hacia nuestra Iglesia* (Discrimination and Participation of Women From Latin America and the Caribbean. A View From and Towards Our Church). Further projects surveyed *African Women's Experiences of Violence* using quantitative and qualitative methods.⁶⁰

The motto of the WWO, "Listening to transform lives", has a direct link to the Synod 2021-24, for which a report was also prepared in March 2023 in response to the *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (DCS). The nine calls to action are quoted here because – despite regional differences – they illustrate the common desiderata mentioned by women worldwide:

1. Develop a synodal culture within the Church that defeats clericalism; 2. More theological and synodal formation for lay people, especially women and sisters; 3. Create more systematic channels for women's participation in the Church while preserving the synodal style; 4. Inclusion of qualified women in the seminary formators' teams; 5. Greater access of women to decision-making positions in the Church; 6. Preaching and female diaconate; 7. Right to vote for women in the final stage of the Synod; 8. Greater inclusion of more marginalized groups; 9. Always strive to strengthen ecclesial communion and not polarity.

Overall, during the pontificate of Pope Francis, the 'old' Catholic women's organizations such as the WUCWO have clearly gained in importance again, after the Pope and the Curia had been particularly sympathetic to the new *movimenti* since the pontificate of John Paul II.

6.3 Networks of Female Catholics Identifying as Conservative

In the later years of Pope Francis' pontificate, however, the rise of initiatives who express greater conservatism can also be observed.⁶¹ It is not surprising that the relationship between Catholicism and modernity is also being negotiated over women's rights, gender roles, and Mary as a role model. As a direct counter-movement to Maria 2.0,

⁶⁰ For all reports and summaries, cf. <https://www.worldwomensobservatory.org/en/wworeports>.

⁶¹ Cf. McEwan, *Women and the Catholic Church*.

the association Maria 1.0-Maria doesn't need an update! followed in Germany and later also in Switzerland.⁶²

In Australia, Catholic influencer and entrepreneur Karen Doyle launched the website The Genius Project in March 2020; she operates with similar intentions and structures. The name is derived from John Paul II's speech about the "genius of women"; the name of Pope Francis will be searched in vain in her publications.⁶³ The Genius Project aims to "support catholic women towards growth" so that they can use their gifts in a spirit of service for the Church, culture, family and community. As with Maria 1.0, there is no organizational connection to the Roman Catholic Church in Australia, but protection from individual dioceses and Catholic media.

Groups such as Maria 1.0 often favour a liturgically and doctrinally pre-conciliar Catholicism and present themselves as the sole faithful who obey the Magisterium in a Church suffering from 'confusion'. However, leaders of Maria 1.0 explicitly reject freedom of religion and freedom of conscience – a rejection which it against the magisterial teaching of Vatican II. Ironically this rejection in turn is only possible by invoking freedom of conscience. Pope Francis' favourite ideas such as responsibility for creation, synodality, the participation of lay people in leadership positions or diaconal commitment "at the margins" are more than unwelcome to these groups. If one asks their representatives how they feel about Pope Francis, the answer is often: "Well, we loved Pope Benedict". Since the pontificate of Pope Francis, the narrative of loyalty to the magisterium or the Pope no longer works for these groups.

7 Conclusion

During the pontificate of Pope Francis, the networks and forms of action of Catholic women worldwide have become more diverse, agile and international. In addition to organizations such as WUCWO and the established Catholic women's associations, new, more informal initiatives and networks now exist. Especially in the early years of the pontificate, reform-oriented Catholic women placed great hopes in the Pope from Argentina, who often spoke of the greater presence of women and their full participation in the Church and society while at the same time referring to hyperbolic gender stereotypes. During these years, female Catholics have networked internationally and increasingly digitally; they have raised their voices in events, protests and publications. They are claiming the right to recognition of their

⁶² Cf. Maria 1.0 (<https://mariaeinspunktnull.de/>).

⁶³ Cf. *The Genius Project* (<https://geniusproject.co/>).

dignity and equality; indeed, the fundamental right to be heard in a Church that is still dominated by men. A contextual, polycentric theology is characteristic for them, according to which the diverse biographical experiences and charisms of women are relevant both for theology on one hand, and for the leadership in the universal Church and the local Churches on the other hand. After more than a decade, many women have come to realize that Pope Francis will not meet their initial expectations, and in many cases this has led to an accentuation of positions. Women who had had great expectations deemed the results of the 2021-24 Synod on Synodality as insufficient; their decisive criterion usually being women's access to ordination. The Synod, however, has opened the door more widely for reciprocal gender relations, for women's leadership positions, and for the female diaconate, and it is of great importance that leadership and diaconate are not played off against each other. The ambivalences to be found in Pope Francis' ideas on women correspond to the ambivalence that women feel with regard to this pontificate.

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