Opinion

News



Italian synod observer Federica Ancona speaks during small group discussion at the Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment at the Vatican Oct. 19. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Phyllis Zagano

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Here's the perfect comment on the ongoing 2018 Synod of Bishops:

> *I call on the Church, my family to live up to the challenge to instill in our family the church a sense of* we*, to encourage each person — male or female — to develop their skills to serve the Kingdom of God. I ask our Church leaders to recognize how many women who feel called to be in service of the Kingdom of God cannot find a place in our Church. Gifted though some may be many cannot bring their talents to the tables of decision making and pastoral planning. They must go elsewhere to be of service in building the Kingdom of God.*

Good idea? It came from U.S. Sacred Heart of Mary Sr. Maureen Kelleher, at the 2015 synod. I know things move slowly, but this is critical. Women, who once did the slow walk away from the church, now never get there in the first place. The new generation (read: youth) followed or were carried out the doors by their mothers, who had had enough. Enough of pederasts and predators, of corrupt or do-nothing pastors, in short, enough of a church completely controlled by men. No woman would allow any creep near a child; no woman would cover up for a philandering cleric. Women might steal, but it is highly unlikely they would drain the parish accounts while off on cruises. And women ministers tend to work, not play golf.

Diocesan chanceries are slowly adding token women officers where they can. In Rome, repeated calls and promises to place women in positions of leadership have not breached the dicastery doors, behind which real influence lies. Oh, here and there a woman or three is named as a "consultor" or gets an undersecretary spot, but there is no visible female presence in the church. None.

Run the video of any Vatican ceremony and, except for a few women and girls bringing up the gifts or reading in their native languages, it is very clear that it is a men's operation through and through. Who surrounds the altar? Who touches the

sacred vessels? Who distributes Communion?

Ceremony represents reality. As early as the fifth century, popes complained about women being unclean. That charge, repeated and ingrained over the years, helped end both the ordinations of women deacons and of married men. Women — by definition unclean — cannot approach the altar. And men who touch women render themselves unclean.

The current kerfuffle about laywomen voting at the Synod of Bishops both gives evidence to and deflects the real discussion. (Backstory: They invited the group representing men's religious orders and institutes to name ten representatives. The men sent eight priests and two brothers, all now voting members. The women's group sent seven sisters, but none has a vote.) The business of men and women religious' representation goes in several directions. If, like the medieval church, you recognize abbots and abbesses as the equivalent of bishops, then their representation and voting today makes sense. But that does not equal voting laypersons — religious or secular — in a synod of bishops.

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The working document for the synod — the *instrumentum laboris* — reads in part like the sociological analysis it contains (*pace* Archbishop Chaput). But the original idea was to listen to young people. So, here is what young people said they want: recognition of the role of women in the Church and in society (n. 70); renewed reflection on the vocation to ordained ministry (n. 102); and promotion of the dignity of women (n. 158). As it happens, at least five of the synod's individual language groups — two in French and one each in English and German — have called for a greater participation of women in church leadership.

Of course, young people want a lot more, but central to their requests is a call to genuine respect for all persons — young and old, male and female — both inside and outside the church. There is a deep understanding that the Gospel gives the answers, but no clear indication of how the answers can be concretized with action.

That is what Sister Kelleher pointed out: "*to encourage each person — male or female — to develop their skills to serve the Kingdom of God. I ask our Church leaders to recognize how many women who feel called to be in service of the*

Kingdom of God cannot find a place in our Church."

It's time.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. Her books include *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (recently published in Canada as *Des femmes diacres*) and *Holy Saturday: An Argument for the Restoration of the Female Diaconate in the Catholic Church*.]

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