

# Addressing the Role of Women in the Church

**Grainne Doherty** is engaged in pastoral ministry in Knock Shrine. She reflects on Pope Francis's call for a synodal Church and the role of women in church leadership.

'Has God spoken only through Moses?' (Num 12:1). This was the question, the Exodus story tells us, that Myriam asked of God over 3000 years ago. This text has often been used by Church leadership to show that because Myriam was subsequently punished by God for asking such a question, God did not want women in leadership roles in the Church. What such an argument misses, however, is the wider context of this event: it was not petty jealousy towards Moses that prompted such a question, but a courageous challenging of Moses' form of leadership. Moses' leadership was becoming more hierarchical. Myriam was questioning a move from a God of liberation, who was on the side of the powerless, to a God who was to be obeyed out of fear.

Myriam's struggles to discern where and how God was calling her as a woman cannot be consigned to the pages of the Old Testament. They come alive in women today, who struggle when they are not given space to explore their understanding of Church, experience of God, awareness of the gifts they can offer and sense of being called to live out the Gospel. Many women explore these things privately and do not realise that

they are not alone in their search for something more life-giving than what they are currently experiencing in the Church.

In a rapidly changing Ireland, many women of faith feel increasingly on the margins. On the one hand, when they bring questions of faith into secular discussions on health, education or politics, they are often dismissed as too Catholic. On the other hand, when they question their Church's teachings on sexuality and the role of women in Church governance and leadership, or when they search for more inclusive forms of ritual and the use of broader language and imagery for God, they are often judged not Catholic enough.

The findings of the recent listening phase of Pope Francis' call to synodality confirms what has already been widely known and expressed by women in the past: women in general feel that their giftedness, voice and faith experience are given little (if any) recognition at either the parish or institutional levels of the Church. This echoes research done by Florence Craven, a lecturer at Trinity College Dublin, who consulted both Catholic and Protestant Irish women about their faith. Craven's research found that 74% of Irish Catholic women dis-



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agreed with the statement, 'It would be true to say that my church regards women with a lot of respect'. In contrast, only 6% of Protestant women disagreed with the same statement.

Such statistics are fleshed out by women in my own research. I had the privilege of listening to the faith experiences of many Irish women who are choosing to stay within the Catholic Church. Encapsulating what all of the participants shared, one woman said that, 'I know that there are many wom-

en out there – and I would be one of them – who would feel that we have a huge gift to offer the Church, but where does that gift find expression?'

Since the Second Vatican Council, the various popes (especially John Paul II) have written extensively on the role and nature of women in the Church and in the world. Written from a male perspective, there is no evidence that women were ever consulted or asked to contribute to any conclusions drawn by celibate men

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about women. The Church's ongoing teaching that being loving and nurturing, gentle and kind, comes so naturally to women that they are called to caring roles rather than to any form of leadership, fails to acknowledge the reality of gendered social and cultural conditioning and the ever-increasing opportunities in every sector of society that are opening up for many women today. Pope Francis has begun to address such discrimination, but we are still a very long way off from women being included in any real way, especially in decision-making and formulation of doctrine.

Following the synodal process that took place in Ireland over the past few months, I was intrigued as to how difficult it was for many of us to actually understand what Pope Francis was asking us to do. After all, very shortly after becoming pope, he clarified what working in a synodal way meant: 'A general condition is. Speak clearly. Let no one say: "This you cannot say." You need to say all that you feel with parrhesia (courage and passion) and, at the same time, you should listen with humility and accept with an open heart what others say.'

For too long, the institutional Church has encouraged women toward one part of that process – to 'listen with humility'. It is now time

for it to encourage women to speak their truth with parrhesia. As long as the Church fails to do that, it prevents the wonder of God from being fully revealed, and prohibits women from accessing the fullness of life which Jesus promised (Jn 10:10). Women speaking their faith with courage and passion is not something new. Rather, they follow in the footsteps of countless women in scripture. Women who include:

- Hagar: the first person in Scripture to name God (Gen 16:13).
- The Canaanite woman who helps Jesus understand that his mission went beyond the 'house of Israel' to the inclusion of all (Mt 15:21–28).
- Mary of Magdala who Jesus personally commissions to 'Go and Tell' (Jn 20:17).
- Elizabeth and Mary who, without permission from their religious leaders, changed the whole of salvation history (Lk 1).
- 'Our sister Phoebe: a deacon', Junia, who was called 'outstanding among the apostles', and Prisca who was St Paul's 'co-worker in Christ Jesus' (Rom 16).

All these women in their own way – as women continue to do today – are also asking Myriam's question, 'Does God speak only through Moses?' They are answering with an emphatic 'No!' 