Seminar: Conversation on the experience of women religious in the catholic church

5 May 2021 @10.30-12.30pm

Facilitator: Maria Garvey

# INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

**Kathleen McGarvey, President AMRI (Opening Words)**

* Gathered today to begin a conversation on our experience and dreams as religious women in the Catholic church, especially here in Ireland.
* We all love the Church, at least the ideal. Many of us, however, have difficulties with the Institutional church, which today is greatly challenged, and all recognise that change is necessary.
* 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. Yet, as women, and in our case as women religious, we very often feel marginalised in the institutional Church.
* 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.
* The initiative for this first conversation for which we are gathered today, arose from a dialogue with the four Archbishops regarding the hurt, pain and marginalisation sometimes expressed by religious women in the church, referring both to the past, and to today. It was acknowledged that it is important for all of us, religious women as well as hierarchy and wider church and society, that these ideas/feelings might be clarified, and any hurts identified.
* Hope this conversation 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. As Pope Francis said, ‘Let us Dream’! And, as often said, dream first, then put on your overalls and make it happen!
* Today is just the beginning of this conversation.

# CONNECTION

Following the principle of connection before content Maria invited people into small groups to connect, reflect and share together on the scripture reading **The Vine and the Branches** (John 15: 1-8) in ‘Lectio Divina’ style

**Group Feedback/input:**

**Feedback I: From the scripture reading The Vine and the branches (John 15: 1-8): What struck you? Inspired you? What did you resist? What stirred you?**

* **Hope** and **courage** to dream the impossible dream and **commitment** to realise it.
* **Connection/ Interconnection, Relationship** - We believe that we are/in the vine and one with God and all of creation. We are therefore interconnected. The meeting is an opportunity to recognise that we do have a place, look at our own behaviours particularly in the church, stand up and put ourselves back in there and be connected.
* **Anger**, **oppression, sadness and resignation** - a sense of having been pushed away and an urge to give up the fight.
* **Surprise** at the visceral reaction to the reading and a deep sense that we have been pruned ‘to non-existence’ by the Irish Church.
* **Faithfulness** **and Resilience** - We religious keep the impossible dream for a more inclusive church going. Many others have walked away but we stay, often only barely holding on with our fingertips.
* **Purpose, Belonging, Responsibility** - Each branch is important, has a purpose and is connected to the vine. Just as we are also connected to each other, no matter what. The pandemic has shown that we are all interconnected and are ultimately responsible for each other.
* **Difference and Diversity of Experience:** Different cultures have different experiences of church. Sense of fruitfulness/belonging and being part of the vine can vary according to our different life stages and ministries. In Ireland, the experience is negative compared to women religious overseas who often indicate a more positive experience.

# CONTENT

Accessing and harnessing the experiences of women religious in the Church, yesterday and today and gleaning our hopes for tomorrow.

This work was done in the intimacy of small groups and expanding to listen to the body through large group feedback.

## Question 1: What would you say is the unique and invaluable gift of women to Irish Catholic Church today?

**Feedback:**

**Among the many gifts of of women, in the Church today the following were named :**

Creativity, contemplation, warmth, compassion, vision, nurture, inclusiveness, intuition, responsive, adaptability…

Together with:

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.

Women are open, discerning and flexible, able to see our errors and willing to change.

By nature, as women, we are given to spiritual midwifery and birthing new life.

We bridge the gap between doctrine and life by grounding our experiences of God in real life situations

We have multifaceted and colourful ways of sharing our gifts. (*This can evoke fear in our brethren*)

**Further Concerns and Reflections:**

* Why are men and women segregated in the first place? Being invited into this conversation because we are women, is that not another way of labelling us?
* There is an intuition from women to look at doctrine again – an instinct and a call to find a different way to interpret holy scripture and theology - as women religious we can bring an invitation to debate on doctrine, particularly around the Eucharist – did Jesus suffer to atone our sins, or was he killed taking a stand against oppression at that time?
* New testament, 4 Gospels – wrote women out of the story – but who prepared the table, hosted, provided the welcome? The story has been told for 2000 years that 12 disciples were around the table and that all of them were men who are chief witness to the church – despite women being central to the story. Finding the rightful place of women in the church seems impossible because of this gap – the branch has been cut from the very beginning.

## Question 2: What experiences of past belonging/not belonging to Irish church as a religious sister – what is the pain?

**Experiences:**

Creativity, vision, wholeness, richness and diversity of thought.

Recognising that WE ARE ONE CHURCH there’s a desire to belong to the wider community of the church and a longing to create a space big enough for all to participate.

We have a sense that though the ordained clergy are the public face of the spirituality of the church, religious are actually leading the way and the others are following. Not bogged down with dogma, Religious have and can often take a different perspective and move ahead in many social, environmental and justice issues. Out of a commitment to mission and ministry, women are often more tuned in and have been prepared to ‘take the blame’ in order to move the agenda forward – *“when everything goes well, the priest was praised, but when it didn’t, the nun got blamed”*

**Longing to Belong:** There’s no sense of belonging if there is no space to contribute or influence. It’s difficult to be part of the institutional church that occurs as outdated, outmoded, lacks the authentic dialogue, pays lip service to inclusion, and feels 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.

In this context women religious are working at ensuring a voice and a level of influence which gives us identity in our own right. We articulate and lead the way in enabling the clerical church to ensure that the voice of “the other” *(including the laity)* is included and heard.

With that sense of hurt and exclusion from the institutional church, we take heart from recognising that we are rooted in and part of God rather than church. Our source and strength within is through God and allows us to get beyond any sense of victimhood in a world that celebrates ‘the victim’.

**Opportunities: *Almost afraid to hope.***

The crisis of the pandemic has created unexpected space and the possibility for change. We have learned the importance of our interdependence and interconnection and how 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.

The possibility of a synodal church is very hopeful and **The Synod** presents an opportunity…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. Maybe that’s the best we can hope for.
* Sense of resignation – what’s the point?
* Will we be hurt again if we invest our energy into it? Ambivalence – get on with what you can.
* Will it make a difference? Will a woman’s voice be allowed to come in? Is there awareness to what extent are ‘they’ committed/buying into it?
* What will it take for inclusiveness? Is there a need for gender awareness with clergy?
* We can make a change elsewhere, but not within the church
* Amazon Synod demonstrates the difficulty in bringing about change

**Media and Public Perception - Scapegoating**

* We have been subjected to constant battering from the media re mother and baby homes. 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.
* Involves all religious, women in particular but this must have an effect on all of us.
* Invisibility of women religious in Ireland - Women religious keep their mouths shut and do what they are told to do so they are easily scapegoated. We are partly to blame for our own invisibility as we appear to have gone underground. What can be done? What can AMRI do? We need a meeting for women religious to say something.
* Media have turned victim into celebrity we are no-one unless we are victim. Let us not allow ourselves to be victim
* The Irish church is traumatised – maybe it will take migrants to change it.
* Will the church ever know how much women have to give?

# NEXT STEPS

## Question 3: What next? If we want to make something happen that isn’t going to happen on its own, what do you say the next step should be?

* **Expand to include**:
* This is only a beginning, the first real conversation with AMRI. Continue this conversation by meeting again, take up our voices and empower one another, share and expand this conversation with our congregations
* **Empower** each other to get to the table:
* Need to be empowered and build confidence
* Create our place at the table. If we wait to be invited, we will be left waiting.
* **Articulate more clearly our position in relation to the church**
* Build on our experience: who we are, and what we can bring together to our church
* Continue this conversation very soon.
* Agree concrete plans and 1-2 actionable steps.
* Name it again – ‘Mother and Baby Homes’ is a very important question today: together in dialogue - put a statement forward different to what the media are saying.
* Engage with the request for a round table conversation re. Mother and Baby homes.
* Way forward – further conversation to articulate: who we want to be in this church? What is our impossible dream that we want to take forward?
* A summary of the conversation so far to be circulated.

# COMPLETION

## Question: Is there anything you would like to say in a word or a phrase so that we are all complete at the end of our time together?

**Responses: In Zoom chat box.**

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| Stimulating | A lot to think about |
| Enjoyed the meeting | Great discussion – keep it going |
| Who we want to be in this church | Thank you for stimulating us and to articulate our struggle |
| Collective response | Getting together – important conversation |
| Helpful | Empowered |
| Included | Hopeful |
| Opportunity | We will find a voice |
| If we had a synod it would be stunning | Inspired |
| Valuable, worthwhile conversation | Energised |
| Good beginning | Only a tiny part of the global women’s movement represented at this meeting |

Following this meeting it was agreed that the Executive, Helena and Maria would re-convene to review the notes and agree next steps.