

# Reimagining the Church with Women's Eyes: Pope Francis and the Path of Feminist Theology

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**Abstract**—This article examines the evolving role of women in the Catholic Church in light of feminist theological reflection and the reform-oriented leadership of Pope Francis. Rooted in a historical context marked by the marginalization of women, feminist theologians have long advocated for a more inclusive Church that honours women's voices, experiences, and contributions. Their work challenges patriarchal theological frameworks and calls for structural transformation within ecclesial life. Pope Francis, while maintaining continuity in doctrine, has taken significant steps to widen the space for women's participation by promoting synodality, emphasizing a maternal and relational vision of the Church, and appointing women to prominent positions in the Vatican. These developments signal a renewed openness, yet substantial challenges remain, particularly the exclusion of women from ordained ministry and ongoing systemic barriers in Church governance. By exploring the intersections between Francis' pastoral style and feminist theological insights, this article proposes a transformative vision of the Church: one that not only speaks about women but authentically speaks with women, especially those on the peripheries. This convergence offers a hopeful yet critical framework for the Church's ongoing journey toward justice, tenderness, and full inclusion.

**Keywords**—Feminist theology; women in the Church; Pope Francis; synodality; ecclesial reform; inclusion.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church, with its long theological tradition and hierarchical structure, has often come under scrutiny for its limited inclusion of women in formal theological discourse and ecclesial leadership. Although women have played indispensable roles in the spiritual, social, and missionary life of the Church throughout history, their contributions have frequently been overlooked or undervalued in the Church's doctrinal development and institutional structures (Fiorenza, 1994: 33). This marginalization has prompted various theological responses, among them feminist theology, which emerged in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as both a critique of and a contribution to mainstream theological paradigms. Feminist theology challenges patriarchal interpretations of Scripture, doctrine, and tradition, while offering alternative frameworks rooted in the lived experiences, embodiment, and spiritual agency of women (Johnson, 1992: 8–12).

While the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) marked a significant turning point in the Church's self-understanding and its relationship with the modern world, it still left unresolved many structural questions regarding the role of women. As theologian Tina Beattie has noted, "Vatican II opened the window to the modern world, but it left women standing outside looking in" (Beattie, 2006: 23). Subsequent

papacies reaffirmed the dignity of women but largely retained a conservative stance on their roles in ordained ministry and decision-making bodies. In this context, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, elected as a successor of saint Peter in 2013 and chose the name Francis, emerged as a surprising and paradoxical figure. A Jesuit from the Global South, shaped by the theology of the people in Latin America and a deep pastoral sensibility, Pope Francis inherited a Church both rich in tradition and burdened by clericalism, internal divisions, and growing calls for inclusivity. He brought renewed attention to the possibility of deeper reforms. Known for his pastoral orientation, his concern for the marginalized, and his global sensibility, Francis has consistently advocated for a Church that is inclusive, participatory, and attuned to the signs of the times.

While Pope Francis has not explicitly embraced feminist theology as a school of thought, his magisterial documents, symbolic actions, and synodal approach to Church governance have opened new avenues for the inclusion of women's perspectives. For instance, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, he asserts, "The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society... The reservation of the priesthood to males... can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general" (Pope Francis, 2013: 104). Similarly, in *Querida Amazonia*, he calls for "more incisive female presence in the Church," especially in roles of leadership and theological reflection (§103–105). His efforts to appoint women to positions previously reserved for clergy—such as undersecretaries in the Synod of Bishops and also signal a shift in ecclesial culture.

The article will address the following research questions: How does Pope Francis' theology and pastoral approach reflect sensitivity to feminist concerns? What concrete reforms and statements has he made regarding women's roles in the Church? What challenges and limitations still remain in the path toward a gender-inclusive Church? Methodologically, this study employs a thematic and dialogical approach, engaging the writings of Pope Francis, core feminist theological works, and pastoral reflections from global Catholic contexts. The special attention is given to the contextual expressions of feminist theology in Latin America and Asia, where they lived experiences of women intersect with postcolonial struggles, ecological concerns, and liberation theology.

This article hopes to contribute to the broader theological conversation about building a Church that is not only more

inclusive and synodal but one that genuinely listens to and learns from women’s experiences. By exploring the intersection of Pope Francis’ pastoral theology and feminist theological thought, it becomes possible to imagine new ecclesial possibilities—what Elizabeth Johnson calls a “whole-making theology” (*Consider Jesus*, 1990: 22)—in which justice, compassion, and inclusivity are not peripheral but central to the Church’s identity and mission.

## II. POPE FRANCIS AND THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH’S UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN

The pontificate of Pope Francis marks a nuanced yet significant shift in the Catholic Church’s engagement with questions surrounding women’s roles, dignity, and participation. While not embracing a full-fledged feminist theological paradigm, Francis introduces a dialogical and pastoral orientation that opens new pathways for reflection. His vision of a “feminine Church” is often articulated through symbolic gestures, appointments, and theological language rooted in mercy, synodality, and care—areas traditionally associated with feminine virtues. However, these advances remain situated within the constraints of established magisterial boundaries, particularly regarding ordained ministry.

### *Relevance to Ecclesiology and Ministry*

Feminist theology deeply informs ecclesiology and the theological understanding of the Church by highlighting the need for structures that reflect inclusivity, justice, and communal discernment. Feminist perspectives critique clericalism and hierarchical exclusivity, advocating instead for synodal, participatory forms of governance and liturgical life. Gebara’s work particularly emphasizes the need for the Church to stand in solidarity with oppressed women, especially in contexts of poverty and violence, and to reshape its mission accordingly (Gebara, 2002: 42–50). Through the critique of exclusion and the proposal of alternative visions, feminist theology has become a vital force in the renewal of the Church, especially in post-Vatican II contexts. It insists that the Church cannot be fully Catholic and universal without the full and active participation of women in shaping its theological and pastoral life.

### *Symbolic Gestures and Inclusive Language*

Pope Francis’ papacy has been marked by symbolic acts and inclusive language that signal a shift towards greater recognition of women’s roles within the Catholic Church. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis acknowledges the “indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess” (Francis, 2013: 103). While this acknowledgment affirms women’s contributions, it has been critiqued for perpetuating essentialist views that associate women with specific traits, potentially reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Feminist theologians like Elisabeth S. Fiorenza argue that such language, even when positive, risks maintaining theological subordination by confining women to stereotypical

roles (Fiorenza, 1993: 21). Similarly, Ivone Gebara critiques ecclesial discourse that romanticizes feminine traits while failing to address structural inequalities within the Church (Gebara, 2002: 63). These critiques suggest that while Francis’ language represents progress from prior ecclesial silence on gender justice, it necessitates deeper theological development to avoid reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

A significant symbolic gesture was Pope Francis’ 2016 modification of the Holy Thursday foot-washing ritual. Traditionally reserved for men, the rite was opened to include women, non-Christians, and prisoners, reflecting a broader vision of inclusivity (Francis, 2016). By washing the feet of individuals from diverse backgrounds, Francis emphasized the universal call to service and humility, aligning with Jesus’ example at the Last Supper.

Phyllis Zagano interprets this gesture as an implicit theological statement that all baptized individuals, regardless of gender, participate in Christ’s priestly ministry through service (Zagano, 2020: 89). Such liturgical reforms, while not altering sacramental doctrine, expand the Church’s symbolic imagination and resonate with feminist theological calls for visibility and equality within ecclesial life. Furthermore, these actions align with Beattie’s concept of “sacramental inclusion,” which advocates for a re-symbolization of Church practices to reflect the dignity and equality of all faithful (Beattie, 2010: 144). While not revolutionary in terms of dogma, Francis’ gestures contribute meaningfully to the ongoing transformation of ecclesial culture towards greater inclusivity.

### *Synodality and the Inclusion of Women’s Voices*

Pope Francis’ theology of synodality, centered on participation, dialogue, and discernment which offers a significant response to long-standing feminist critiques of clericalism and hierarchical exclusion in the Church. In his landmark 2015 address commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, he articulated: “A synodal Church is a Church which listens... the faithful, the bishops and the Pope all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit” (Francis, 2015: 50). This vision reimagines the Church not as a top-down institution but as a *communio* a communion of the People of God where discernment and mutual listening are foundational to its governance and mission. Feminist theologians have long called for precisely this shift. Cristina L. Gómez highlights synodality as a transformative space for “dialogical mutuality,” one that disrupts the “patriarchal monologue” traditionally dominant in Church governance (Gómez, 2022: 58). She views synodality not merely as a process, but as a theological and ecclesial commitment to co-responsibility, inclusivity, and justice.

The Synod for the Amazon (2019) embodied this development, where Indigenous women both religious and lay offered direct testimonies, influencing the synodal conversation. Though the final document did not propose priestly ordination for women, it strongly emphasized the need to recognize women’s leadership. In his post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, Francis acknowledged: “In the Amazon region, many communities have long preserved and

passed on the faith without the presence of priests, simply by relying on strong, committed, and generous women. The Church must therefore ensure that women feel that they are truly valued and that they can fully participate in the life of the Church” (Francis, 2020: 103). He further calls for the expansion of roles for women in pastoral leadership, even suggesting the creation of new ecclesial ministries for them (Francis, 2020: 104). This represents an important shift in magisterial language, recognizing women not just as helpers but as collaborators in the Church’s mission.

Church structures must reflect the radical inclusivity of Jesus’ community. In the Schüssler Fiorenza’s view, “*ekklesia* must be structured according to democratic and participatory principles if it is to embody the gospel message” (Fiorenza, 1994: 178). The synodal process thus aligns with her feminist ecclesiology, offering a means of reforming the Church’s exercise of power without necessitating doctrinal changes to sacramental ministry. Pope Francis’ actions, such as appointing women to synodal leadership positions (e.g., Sr. Nathalie Becquart as undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops with voting rights) also demonstrate his commitment to institutionalizing these principles. These moves signal not just symbolic inclusion but real steps toward reconfiguring ecclesial structures to be more participatory and representative (Mertes, 2021: 33). Tina has described these shifts as moments of “theological opening,” where Church tradition becomes a space of “critical fidelity,” allowing for dialogue between historical doctrine and contemporary justice (Beattie, 2010: 109). Though Francis stops short of supporting women’s ordination, his synodal model provides a platform through which feminist voices can shape the Church’s future.

### III. INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS AND STRUCTURAL INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Pope Francis’ pontificate marks a historic transition in recognizing women’s contributions within the institutional framework of the Catholic Church. Although doctrinal teachings on the male-only priesthood remain unchanged (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1577), a series of appointments and canonical reforms under his leadership reflect a renewed commitment to women’s active participation in ecclesial governance and ministry.

#### *Pioneering Appointments in Vatican Leadership*

One of the most groundbreaking developments was the appointment of Sister Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ, as Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops in 2021. This appointment made her the first woman to hold voting rights in a Synod of Bishops, a significant step in including women’s voices in key deliberative processes (O’Connell, 2021: 1). In the same year, Sister Raffaella Petrini, FSE, was named Secretary General of the Governorate of Vatican City State, the highest administrative role ever held by a woman in the Vatican (White, 2021: 2). Her subsequent promotion in 2025 to President of the Pontifical Commission and Governorate of Vatican City State further entrenched her influence in Church administration (Vatican News, 2025).

In another historic move, three women Sister Raffaella Petrini, Sister Yvonne Reungoat, and lay theologian Maria Lia Zervino, were appointed in July 2022 to the Dicastery for Bishops, the Vatican body responsible for selecting episcopal candidates. This unprecedented inclusion of women in the episcopal selection process challenges the traditionally male-dominated structure and affirms Pope Francis’ synodal vision of shared discernment and co-responsibility (Brockhaus, 2022: 3). These appointments underscore Pope Francis’ broader theological vision of synodality as a participatory, listening Church. They indicate a deliberate institutional shift toward inclusion, without altering doctrine but rather reconfiguring structures to reflect the baptismal equality of all the faithful.

#### *Canonical Reforms: Women as Lectors and Acolytes*

Another key institutional development came with the *motu proprio Spiritus Domini*, issued on January 10, 2021. This document amended Canon 230 §1 of the Code of Canon Law, allowing women to be formally instituted as lectors and acolytes, ministries previously reserved to men. Pope Francis emphasized that the reform reflects the “common baptismal dignity” of all Christians and responds to pastoral needs worldwide (Francis, 2021: 2).

Although many women have already served informally as readers and altar servers, this legal and liturgical recognition provides a stable framework for their service. According to Francis, it also acknowledges “a consolidated practice in many parts of the Church” and offers a pathway for deeper participation in evangelization and liturgical life (Francis, 2021: 4).

#### *Honouring Women in the Liturgical Life of the Church*

Francis has also initiated symbolic but meaningful changes in the Church’s liturgical calendar. In 2016, he elevated the memorial of Saint Mary Magdalene to the rank of Feast, affirming her role as the “Apostle to the Apostles” (*Congregation for Divine Worship*, 2016). This action reclaims a foundational narrative of early Christian witness by a woman, aligning liturgical emphasis with biblical testimony (John 20:17–18). The decree emphasized her missionary character and described her as “a paradigm of the ministry of women in the Church” (Sarah, 2016: 1).

#### *Theological Perspectives Supporting Reform*

These institutional reforms have been championed by many feminist and ecclesiological scholars. Phyllis Zagano, for instance, argues that the early Church featured women in significant roles including as deacons and that restoring some of these ministries today would honour both tradition and justice (Zagano, 2013: 115). She sees Francis’ actions as opening the door to greater inclusion, even if ordination remains doctrinally closed to women. Similarly, Tina emphasizes the importance of “critical fidelity”—the practice of remaining faithful to tradition while critically engaging it through feminist theological lenses. She contends that inclusion of women in governance is not only a matter of equity but also a theological necessity for the Church to fully reflect the mystery of Christ’s body (Beattie, 2006: 142).

Furthermore, feminist ecclesologist Cristina interprets these changes as fruits of the synodal journey, which seeks to decentralize clerical power and uplift the voice of the marginalized, including women (Gómez, 2022: 63). Theologically, this resonates with Vatican II's call for the full, conscious, and active participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the Church (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, § 14).

#### IV. PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND MARIAN SYMBOLISM

Pope Francis' pastoral theology frequently invokes Marian symbolism as a theological and spiritual lens through which to understand the identity of the Church. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he describes Mary as "the woman of faith who lives and advances in faith... she is able to turn a stable into a home for Jesus" (Francis, 2013: 286). For Francis, Mother Mary is not merely a devotional figure but a paradigm of ecclesial identity, embodying the maternal, receptive, and missionary character of the Church.

Francis continues a longstanding theological tradition that associates Mother Mary with the Church (*ecclesia*). This correlation finds its roots in the writings of the Church Fathers and was reaffirmed at the Second Vatican Council, particularly in *Lumen Gentium*, which refers to Mary as "a type of the Church in the order of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ" (Paul VI, 1964: 63). Yet Francis' Mariology adds a pastoral dimension, emphasizing Mary's closeness to the people and her solidarity with the poor and suffering, what he calls a "Marian style" of evangelization (Francis, 2013: 288).

#### *Marian Imagery and the Feminine Face of the Church*

Francis' frequent return to Marian imagery also serves to reassert the feminine dimension of the Church, which he argues is essential to its spiritual and pastoral life. In a 2013 interview, he stated, "The Church is feminine... The Church is a woman. She is not a spinster. She is a mother" (Francis, 2013: 52). This metaphor is not merely poetic but theological: it highlights nurturing, relational, and incarnational aspects of ecclesial life, contrasting it with a cold institutionalism or clericalism often critiqued in his writings.

#### *Feminist Reinterpretations of Marian Symbolism*

While traditional Mariology has often emphasized Mary's humility, submission, and obedience, feminist theologians have sought to reclaim her image as a model of strength, prophetic resistance, and agency. Elizabeth A. Johnson, for instance, critiques a reductionist view of Mary that idealizes female passivity. In *Truly Our Sister*, she reconstructs Mary as "a woman of Spirit," who stands in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, a symbol not of submission but of justice-oriented discipleship (Johnson, 2003: 81–84).

Johnson's approach resonates with Pope Francis' emphasis on Mother Mary as one who "journeys," "intercedes," and "comforts," presenting her not as removed from human suffering but as one intimately involved in the struggles of the world. For Johnson and other feminist theologians such as Ivone Gebara and Tina Beattie, Marian symbolism can provide a theologically rich site for feminist reinterpretation

when it moves beyond idealization toward embodiment and resistance (Gebara, 2002: 77; Beattie, 2010: 133).

#### *Mother Mary and the Pastoral Mission of the Church*

In Francis' view, Mary is also the "star of the new evangelization" a maternal presence who animates the Church's missionary impulse with tenderness and courage (Francis, 2013: 287). By pointing to Mary's action at the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12), Francis emphasizes her initiative, her perceptiveness to human need, and her trust in divine power all essential traits of a pastoral Church that listens and responds. In this way, Marian theology becomes a unifying thread between traditional Catholic piety and contemporary theological reflection, especially in feminist and liberationist contexts. Her image, when interpreted dynamically, offers a bridge between past and future, between devotion and discipleship, between hierarchy and hospitality.

#### V. EMBODYING TENDERNESS AND JUSTICE: FEMININE IMAGES IN POPE FRANCIS' THEOLOGY

Pope Francis' theology is marked by a profound sensitivity to the feminine dimension of divine mercy and the Church's mission. Throughout his papacy, he has frequently invoked feminine imagery, particularly in his depiction of the Church and God's mercy, as a means of presenting a more inclusive, compassionate, and relational vision of God and the Church. By embracing metaphors and imagery traditionally associated with femininity, Francis seeks to challenge the patriarchal structures that have often shaped the Church's understanding of leadership and care.

#### *The Church as "Mother" and God's Mercy as Maternal*

One of the most striking features of Francis' theological approach is his emphasis on the Church as a "Mother" and on the maternal nature of God's mercy. This imagery is particularly evident in several of his key writings and speeches, where he stresses that the Church's role is to care for, nurture, and heal her children. This understanding of the Church as a maternal figure can be found throughout his papacy, particularly in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he writes: "The Church is a mother who goes out to meet her children, the Church is a mother who has tenderness for them" (Francis, 2013: 139).

In his depiction of God's mercy, Pope Francis often invokes maternal qualities such as tenderness, compassion, and care, which are typically linked to the feminine. For instance, in his *Misericordiae Vultus*, which announced the Year of Mercy, Francis writes: "My thoughts now turn to the 'Mother of Mercy'. May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness" (Francis, 2015: 24). This maternal gaze represents a vision of mercy that is not detached or abstract but one that is relational, embodied, and engaged with the realities of human suffering.

This maternal imagery challenges the traditional, patriarchal representations of God and the Church, which have often been male-dominated. By reintroducing feminine qualities into the understanding of divine mercy and the

Church's role, Pope Francis shifts the theological landscape toward a more relational and nurturing vision of God's love, emphasizing that mercy is not just about forgiveness but also about companionship and care.

#### *Affective Leadership and Non-Patriarchal Care*

The maternal images in Pope Francis' theology serve as a foundation for his vision of leadership, which contrasts sharply with patriarchal notions of power and authority. In this regard, Francis critiques models of leadership that are based on dominance and control, proposing instead a model of leadership that emphasizes tenderness, compassion, and service. He presents leadership as a relational endeavour, one that involves deep engagement with the lives and struggles of others.

In his *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes that leadership should reflect the "style of Jesus," who was humble and servant-hearted. He emphasizes that "true leadership is not about exercising power or dominion over others but about accompanying them with affection and tenderness" (Francis, 2020: 194). This approach challenges traditional, hierarchical, and patriarchal understandings of leadership that are often grounded in the exercise of control and authority. By positioning leadership as something deeply relational and affective, Francis invites a rethinking of ecclesial governance and pastoral care, moving away from the top-down approach to one that is more collaborative, listening, and responsive to the needs of others.

This vision aligns with feminist critiques of patriarchy in both the Church and society, where power dynamics have historically marginalized women's voices and experiences. Feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson have long critiqued patriarchal imagery of God and the Church, advocating for a more inclusive and relational theology that highlights care, justice, and compassion. Pope Francis' focus on non-patriarchal leadership resonates with these feminist calls for leadership models that prioritize justice, inclusivity, and compassion rather than domination and control.

#### *Pope Francis' Pastoral Commitment to Women's Dignity*

From the very beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has emphasized the importance of dignity and equality for women in both the Church and society. His consistent emphasis on the dignity of women is one of the most striking elements of his papacy. His actions whether washing the feet of women prisoners during Holy Week or denouncing human trafficking and violence against women—highlight his commitment to acknowledging the inherent worth of women and their agency in the world.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis speaks at length about the importance of promoting women's rights and voices, especially in positions of leadership within society and the Church. He insists that the Church must do more to ensure that women are not just present in the pews but are engaged as active participants in the ecclesial community. This commitment is not merely symbolic but is grounded in a more profound theological assertion: the recognition of women's

full humanity is essential to the Church's mission and its witness to the world.

#### VI. FEMINIST THEOLOGY: RELATIONALITY, EMBODIMENT, AND ETHICS OF CARE

Pope Francis' maternal imagery and his emphasis on relational leadership can be fruitfully linked to feminist theological principles, particularly those focused on relationality, embodiment, and ethics of care. Feminist theologians like Elizabeth A. Johnson have emphasized the importance of relationality in understanding the nature of God and humanity. For them, relationality is central to a theology that values the interconnectedness of all people and sees God as a relational being who is engaged with the world and its suffering. By portraying the Church as a mother and God's mercy as maternal, Pope Francis embraces a relational understanding of the divine and the Church, where connection and community are at the heart of the faith. This view of God's mercy and the Church's mission resonates with feminist theological ideas about embodiment and ethics of care, which emphasize that true care and justice require active, embodied engagement with others, particularly those who are marginalized or suffering. Feminist theologians have long argued that care is not a passive or abstract concept but a deeply embodied practice that involves vulnerability, presence, and responsiveness to the needs of others.

In his papacy, Pope Francis has frequently called the Church to a ministry of compassionate presence, particularly in regard to the poor, the marginalized, and women. In his document *Gaudete et Exsultate*, he urges Christians to "be close to the poor, to the sick, to those who are suffering, and to women, who in many parts of the world bear the burden of poverty and violence" (Francis, 2018: 46). This emphasis on embodied care aligns with feminist theology's call to embrace an ethics of care, one that values tenderness and justice as integral to Christian discipleship. In this way, Pope Francis' theology can be understood as an invitation to the Church to embrace a model of care and leadership that reflects the deep relationality and embodied justice at the heart of the Christian gospel. His use of maternal imagery, especially in his depiction of the Church and God's mercy, serves to challenge patriarchal structures and propose a vision of the Church that is nurturing, compassionate, and attentive to the needs of all people, particularly women.

#### VII. SUGGESTION

##### *Deepening the Synodal Vision through Feminist Theological Insights*

Pope Francis' call for a synodal Church; where listening, participation, and discernment shape ecclesial life which provides a meaningful pathway for engaging feminist theological concerns. By embracing the synodal method, the Church can recognize the diverse gifts, voices, and experiences of women as essential for discerning the Spirit's movement in today's world. This vision affirms that genuine communion requires the inclusion of all baptized persons in

the conversation, especially those who have historically been on the margins.

#### *Listening to Women's Experiences in Global South Contexts*

In regions like Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), Indonesia, women often carry significant roles in both Church and society, yet their struggles and contributions are not always acknowledged theologically or pastorally. A synodal Church is one that listens intentionally and respectfully. Structures should be developed at diocesan and parish levels to invite women's testimonies especially from rural, indigenous, and marginalized communities and to integrate their lived experiences into pastoral planning and theological reflection.

#### *Promoting Theological Education and Leadership Formation for Women*

One practical path forward is to encourage and invest in the theological education and leadership development of women. Particularly in NTT, Catholic-Protestant universities, seminaries, and religious institutes should offer inclusive academic environments those are still not yet have seen this necessary for the church leaders and its people. So, the feminine theology should be included into the curriculum, and women theologians or professors should be placed as lecturers for to contribute scholarly discourse. Formation programs for lay leaders, catechists, and religious should also include feminist theological perspectives that promote dignity, justice, and collaboration.

#### *Ensuring Structural Inclusion in Church Life*

Without structural change, listening and dialogue risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative. The Church should broaden women's access to roles of responsibility in ecclesial governance, pastoral councils, and synodal assemblies. These positions offer opportunities to shape pastoral priorities and decisions in ways that reflect both Gospel values and the realities of women's lives.

#### *Empowering Local Churches and Religious Congregations*

Many local churches, religious, congregations and groups, including those in NTT, already serve as models of inclusive and compassionate pastoral care. These communities can further lead by example, integrating feminist-informed pastoral approaches that honour women's agency, dignity, and spirituality. Encouraging collaborations among dioceses, women's religious, congregations and groups and lay movements will help build a more inclusive Church from the grassroots.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Pope Francis has made notable contributions to the ongoing transformation of the Church's approach to women's roles, though the journey is far from complete. His emphasis on synodality, inclusive decision-making, and the recognition of women's contributions in Church life represents a significant departure from the patriarchal structures that have historically dominated the Church. However, feminist theologians like Elizabeth Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Ivone Gebara remind us that the Church's

reforms must go beyond symbolic gestures and rhetorical affirmations. They call for deeper structural changes that ensure women not only speak but also act in leadership capacities, within both ecclesial and social contexts. In this sense, the prophetic witness of feminist theology in the Church has been a clarion call to center the experiences and contributions of women. Feminist theology invites the Church to become a community where justice, equality, and shared authority are not only ideals but lived realities.

As the Church moves toward greater inclusion of women, further study is needed to understand how Pope Francis' synodal vision is being lived out globally. Comparative research in regions like Africa and Asia can reveal how local Churches are applying this vision, particularly in expanding women's leadership roles. The impact of post-synodal reforms should also be examined to see whether women are gaining more opportunities in decision-making and pastoral leadership. Rather than focusing on female ordination, further reflection is needed on how women can be more actively encouraged and entrusted with existing ministries, such as lectors and acolytes. Additionally, connecting feminist theology with other liberation theologies such as indigenous and ecological approaches and offers valuable insights into reimagining the Church's mission today. In conclusion, while Pope Francis has initiated important steps, continued reform, theological engagement, and grassroots participation are vital to building a more just, inclusive, and synodal Church.

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