



STUDY GROUPS

on relevant questions from the *Synthesis' Report* of the First Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

DICASTERIUM PRO DOCTRINA FIDEI

FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH:
COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION

STUDY GROUP N. 5

THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE LIFE AND LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH



FINAL REPORT

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INDEX

PART ONE THE HISTORY OF GROUP 5 OF THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY.....	6
PART TWO A DETAILED SYNTHESIS OF THE THEMES EMERGING FROM THE SYNODAL DEEPENING	8
Honoring a Promise	8
The Essential Contribution of Women.....	10
A Sign of the Times.....	10
Fundamental Issues (I): The Relational Nature of the Human Person	11
Fundamental Issues (II): “Potestas”	12
Fundamental Issues (III): Ministries.....	15
Focal Point: The Charismatic Dimension of the Role of Women in the Church	17
APPENDICES	20
APPENDIX I FEMALE FIGURES IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT	21
Premises.....	21
I. Old Testament: The Matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel.....	22
<i>Sara</i>	22
<i>Rebecca</i>	23
<i>Leah and Rachel</i>	23
<i>A Point of Summary</i>	24
Women as Protagonists	24
<i>Hagar, Ishmael’s Mother</i>	24
<i>Miriam, Who Led the Dances</i>	25
<i>Deborah, Commander of the Armies</i>	25
<i>Ruth, the Foreigner</i>	25
<i>Hannah, Samuel’s Mother</i>	26
<i>Abigail, Who Stopped David’s Armed Men</i>	26

Personifications	27
<i>Wisdom and Folly</i>	27
<i>The Words of Lemuel's Mother</i>	27
II. New Testament.....	28
Premise	28
Women Who Followed Jesus	28
Women in the Infancy Narratives	29
<i>Elizabeth, Mary's Cousin</i>	29
<i>Anna</i>	29
Women Present in Jesus' Public Ministry	29
<i>Mary of Magdala</i>	29
<i>Martha and Mary, the Sign of Friendship</i>	30
<i>The Woman Who Anointed Jesus</i>	30
<i>The Samaritan Woman</i>	30
<i>The Widow and the Adulteress</i>	31
<i>Women Healed by Jesus: Simple References</i>	31
<i>The Female Figure in Jesus' Teachings</i>	31
Female Figures in the Acts, the Letters, and Revelation	32
APPENDIX II IMPORTANT WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.....	34
Premise	34
1. Empress Helena (c. 248 – c. 329).....	34
2. Spiritual "Authority": Macrina the Younger and Theodora "Episcopa"	34
3. Mixed monasteries in Ireland and England (5 th -9 th centuries).....	35
4. Abbesses with de facto authority also exercised over clerics (12 th -18 th centuries)	35
5. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)	36
6. Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373).....	36
7. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380).....	37
8. Joan of Arc (1412-1431).....	37
9. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582).....	38

10. Louise de Marillac (1591-1660).....	38
11. Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695)	39
12. María Antonia de San José (1730-1799).....	39
13. Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821)	40
14. Francesca Cabrini (1850-1917).....	40
15. Maria Montessori (1870-1952)	41
16. Armida Barelli (1882-1952)	41
17. Dorothy Day (1897-1980).....	42
18. Madeleine Delbrêl (1904-1964)	42
19. Wanda Póltawska (1921-2023)	43
Conclusions	43
APPENDIX III CURRENT TESTIMONIES FROM WOMEN WHO PARTICIPATE IN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH.....	45
Some Attempts at Innovation.....	45
Testimonies from the Roman Curia.....	47
A Look to the Future	49
APPENDIX IV The Marian Principle and the Petrine Principle. A Critical Look.....	50
The Development of the “Marian principle” and of the “Petrine principle”	50
The Use of the “Marian Principle” in the Magisterium of the Recent Pontiffs	52
<i>Popes St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI</i>	52
<i>Pope Francis</i>	53
<i>Pope Leo XIV</i>	55
Critical Considerations and Other Viewpoints	56
<i>Critical Perspectives</i>	56
<i>Other Opinions</i>	57
APPENDIX V ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY	59
Introduction	59
Historical Development of the Concept of Authority	60
<i>A Distinction that Becomes a Separation</i>	60
<i>The Restoration of Unity with the Second Vatican Council</i>	61

<i>A Comprehensive Theological Framework</i>	61
Recent Developments and Open Questions	62
<i>Two Lines of Thought</i>	62
<i>A Missionary and Synodal Church</i>	63
Some Recent Measures	64
<i>Some Future Perspectives</i>	66
APPENDIX VI THE CONTRIBUTION OF POPE FRANCIS AND OF POPE LEO XIV ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH’S LIFE AND LEADERSHIP	67
Critical Tensions Regarding Clericalism and Male Chauvinism	67
Contributions from the Teachings of Pope Francis	68
<i>Pope Francis’ Contribution Concerning Women</i>	68
<i>Pope Francis’ Contribution against Clericalism and Machismo</i>	69
Pope Francis’ Administrative Contributions	71
<i>General Administrative Contributions</i>	71
<i>Appointments of Women to the Roman Curia</i>	72
Pope Leo XIV’s Contributions	74

PART ONE
THE HISTORY OF GROUP 5 OF THE SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

1. Shortly before the Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith held in January 2024, Pope Francis, of venerable memory, encouraged the Dicastery to address, among other issues, the question of women’s participation in the life and leadership of the Church. After having consulted the Holy Father on the matter, the Dicastery selected this topic as the subject of a possible document and began its preparations in the usual manner.
2. Meanwhile, between the first and second sessions of the Synod on Synodality, the Dicastery received a request to engage with “Study Group 5,” to which the following theme had been assigned: “*Some Theological and Canonical Matters Regarding Specific Ministerial Forms (SR 8 and 9)*.” An initial dialogue with the Secretariat of the Synod led to the conclusion that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith would continue to examine in depth the role of women in the Church, with particular attention to their participation in decision-making processes and in the leadership of communities. Among the other topics that emerged for study were the following: the relationship between sacramental power and lay ministries; the origins of ministries; the charismatic dimension of the Church’s life; ecclesial functions and ministries that do not require the Sacrament of Holy Orders; the understanding of Holy Orders as a service to the richness of charisms; and the problems posed by erroneous conceptions of ecclesial authority. It soon became evident that Study Group 5 would have a rather original structure compared with the other study groups, as its organizational framework overlapped with the Dicastery’s working structure.
3. The Doctrinal Office of the Dicastery began its work by sending a request for a *votum* to all its Consultors and by drawing upon what had emerged during an initial Ordinary Session of the Dicastery (*Feria IV*) dedicated to the topic.
4. Thanks to these preliminary steps, three definitive points were reached, which were communicated by the Prefect at the opening of the Second Session of the Synod on Synodality:
 - a) The need to revisit certain insights of Pope Francis regarding the participation of women in the life and leadership of the Church, which had so far been insufficiently received. In particular: *Evangelii Gaudium*, 103–104; *Querida Amazonia*, 99–103; and *Antiquum Ministerium*, 3.
 - b) The question of women’s access to the diaconate did not yet appear sufficiently mature, all things considered and as maintained by Pope Francis himself; yet the opportunity remained open to continue the work of deeper study on the role of women in the leadership of communities and on other possible avenues of participation.
 - c) The overarching aim of the future document was to conduct an in-depth analysis of the profile of certain women who, in the Church’s ancient and recent history, have exercised genuine authority and real power in service of the Church’s mission. This authority or power was not tied to the reception of Holy Orders, yet it nevertheless represented an “exercise” of power and authority that was very fruitful for the life of the People of God. Therefore, the reflection would concern the expansion of the Church’s ministerial dimension, but this would always be considered in light of the Church’s charismatic dimension, which could suggest the recognition of charisms or the establishment of ecclesial services not immediately or necessarily linked to sacramental power. In general terms, the reflection would need to be constructed beginning “from below”: that is, from the concrete—both historical and contemporary—experience of how the Holy Spirit has inspired certain women to offer original responses to the needs of the holy People of God and to the evangelizing mission of the Church.

5. An important moment in the history of Study Group 5 was the lively discussion on the topic that developed during the Second Session of the Synod on Synodality. This led to the following conclusions:

- a) Pope Francis reactivated the work of the Second Commission for the Study of Women’s Access to the Diaconate, under the presidency of Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi.
- b) With regard to presenting its conclusions, the Dicastery would not produce a document on the theme according to its usual procedures but would adhere to the framework that had been established by the Secretariat of the Synod for all Study Groups.
- c) The Synodal Fathers and Mothers, as well as anyone else who wished to contribute, would be free to send their reflections on the participation of women in the life and leadership of the Church directly to the Secretariat of the Synod, which would then share them with the Dicastery.
- d) The Dicastery committed itself to organizing its Final Report—with the indications to be specified in due course—with the aim of identifying the *convergences* that had emerged from the work as a whole.

6. In light of these resolutions, the Dicastery’s Doctrinal Office initiated a very broad request for opinions on the topic, acquired additional study materials, prepared resources for a further working session of its *Feria IV*, and designated the group of women Consultors of the Dicastery as a privileged interlocutory partner.

7. The work then took on an increasingly clear direction following the indications provided by the Secretariat of the Synod on 18 February 2025. It was thus established that the Dicastery, like the other study groups, would simply prepare a *Final Report* on its long study of the theme of *the participation of women in the life and leadership of the Church*.

8. The aforementioned *Final Report* would therefore consist of three parts:

- a) a brief reconstruction of the history of Study Group 5, its working method, and the insights that emerged during the work itself (the present Part I);
- b) a detailed synthesis of the principal findings and convergences regarding the theme, drawn from listening to the various components of the Dicastery (its Consultors, Doctrinal Office, *Congresso*, and *Feria IV*), the reading of the texts received, and the testimonies gathered at the Dicastery’s request (Part II of the *Final Report*);
- c) an extensive appendix that catalogues at least a significant portion of the large body of material that the Dicastery has received and gathered in recent months, to be organized into six sections:
 - Female figures in the Bible.
 - Significant female figures in the history of the Church.
 - Contemporary testimonies of women who participate in the leadership of the Church.
 - The Marian Principle and the Petrine Principle: a critical perspective.
 - Ecclesial *Potestas*.
 - The contributions of Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV regarding the role of women in the Church.

9. Regarding Part II of the *Final Report*, as already mentioned, the Dicastery relied above all on the ongoing contribution of its female Consultors. During the various meetings with them, it became clear that the path for Study Group 5 was novel and distinct from the Dicastery’s usual procedures. What took place was the implementation of a living and dynamic listening, an ongoing and non-static process of discernment, the adoption of an approach “from below” rather than “from above,” and finally an exercise of mediation and of seeking possible consensus among positions often in tension with one another—not least because of the very subject that has been under discussion over these past two years.

PART TWO
A DETAILED SYNTHESIS OF THE THEMES EMERGING
FROM THE SYNODAL DEEPENING

Honoring a Promise

1. The entry of women into public life—which developed and consolidated during the twentieth century and was not limited to Western countries alone—is a phenomenon that continues to affect both civil society and the Church. More than sixty years ago, Saint John XXIII could already refer to this fact as a “sign of the times,” observing that “women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from [...] allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons” (Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris*, par. 41). Indeed, in the message addressed to women at the close of the Second Vatican Council, Saint Paul VI went so far as to affirm that “the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved” (*Message to Women*, par. 3). Can it be said that this fervent hope has been translated into reality, at least within the Church?

2. First of all, the Synod expressed a warm and fitting “thank you” to all the women engaged in the service of the Church throughout the world: from the communities of the Amazon to the cities of Central Europe; from the poorest peripheries of the Philippines to diocesan curiae in America and Australia; from villages in Africa to the mountain regions of Latin America. Their invaluable contribution—often carried out in quiet dedication—frequently enables the Church to fulfill her mission. For this reason, any attempt to enumerate the roles they carry out with generous commitment is necessarily incomplete: catechists and leaders of communities, mothers of families, consecrated religious and seculars, delegates in diocesan curiae, officials and superiors in the Roman Curia, teachers, theologians, directors and volunteers in Caritas organizations, those who offer an indispensable service of caring for the smallest and most forgotten parishes and churches, and faces of understanding and closeness in countless situations of need.

3. Yet all this, like the clear midday light that sharpens every shadow, also serves to make even more evident how much remains to be done for the promotion of the vocation of women in the Church. While significant advances have been made, it must nevertheless be acknowledged candidly and confidently that much work remains. And this realization has generated a specific *discomfort* among many women concerning their participation in the life of the communities to which they belong, particularly when ecclesial realities are compared with the civil societies of many of the countries in which they live. This discomfort manifests itself in various ways:

- a) The most evident is the increasing number of women—both younger and older—who simply no longer identify themselves as being Catholic.
- b) There is a growing disengagement of women from active participation in the life of the local Church, which is reflected in the well-known decline in vocations to female religious life (although the number of women choosing forms of monastic consecration is holding steady to some extent); notably, this is a phenomenon that is no longer limited to the Western world alone.

c) Another aspect of this discomfort is the ever-stronger call, on the part of many women who are very actively engaged in pastoral activity or who are experts in theology and canon law, to review the currently existing forms of ecclesial leadership to make them more accessible to women. One thinks of the question of access to the sacrament of Holy Orders, the possibility of establishing new ministries with specific characteristics for the service of the People of God, giving the homily during community celebrations, and finally, the delicate question concerning the specific nature of entrusting the governance of a community or of particular diocesan offices to suitably qualified women.

4. Regarding the reasons for the discomfort considered thus far, one cannot fail to recall several elements of analysis that are now widely shared. First, it is necessary to point out that, underlying all this as a general cause, there is the broader crisis of faith affecting every sphere of the Church—particularly in the West—and that affects both men and women. Beyond this general factor, however, it is also possible to identify more specific reasons relating precisely to the condition of women in the Church. In the first place, there exists within the contemporary ecclesial mentality a certain pattern of thought and behavior identifiable as “clericalism” or “machismo.” These attitudes concern a management of power and speech that creates distrust and, not least, distance among women. Clericalism is the tendency to transfer automatically the authority and unique role that properly belong to the priest in the celebration of the Eucharist into all other areas of community life. The presidency of the Eucharist is thus understood by some to justify a style of leadership that is fundamentally authoritarian and self-referential. It is not without foundation to observe that the element which, more than others, has contributed to establishing the divide between men and women in the Church is the fact that the male gender—throughout history and well beyond the boundaries of the ecclesial community—has been proposed as the normative reference for understanding humanity in its entirety. This phenomenon is reflected even in language, for example, in the use of the term “man” to mean “human being.” It is clear, therefore, how such a mentality leads to the establishment of a system that makes it difficult for women to express the competencies they have acquired and the charisms they bear. The problem is also evident in the adoption, by clergy and some lay persons, of a linguistic register that extends even into liturgical prayer and preaching. Added to this is the tendency to identify the “feminine” only with certain traits such as gentleness, submissiveness, docility, or weakness, or exclusively with roles belonging to the domestic sphere. All of this slows the emergence of an ecclesial language fully attuned to the reciprocity of the masculine and the feminine, understood in their equal, specific, and fundamental dignity. It should also be recalled that the Synod Fathers and Mothers specifically recommended paying greater attention “to the language and images used in preaching, teaching, catechesis, and the drafting of official Church documents, giving more space to the contributions of female saints, theologians, and mystics” (*Final Document of the Synod on Synodality 2023–2024* [FD], par. 60).

5. At a deeper level, one of the reasons for the discomfort mentioned above is the still-limited sensitivity that exists in certain ecclesial settings regarding this matter. In this regard, it must give pause that an increasing number of women, of every age group and in different parts of the world, no longer feel “at home” in the house of the Lord, to the point of leaving it altogether. These signs, however, are not to be read primarily in statistics on departures, but rather in the fact that the “question of women” is present precisely as a demand or expectation of equality in ever broader portions of the Church throughout the world (cf. Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Christus Vivit*, par. 42).

6. It must also not be overlooked that different situations depend on the cultural context in question, so that no single solution applicable to all contexts can be proposed. It is therefore

necessary that the effort to achieve greater participation of women in the life and leadership of the Church be accompanied by specific analyses of local ecclesial contexts. This does not diminish, from a general perspective, the need to recognize that “women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation, and place in the various areas of the Church’s life. This is to the detriment of serving the Church’s shared mission” (FD, par. 60). There is a risk that failure to listen to and address the present discomfort of many women could compromise the Church’s fidelity to her mission.

7. The following considerations, drawn from the listening process, are now presented, thus privileging an approach “from below.” Inspired by the principle that “realities are greater than ideas” (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 233) and taking into account both the witness of Scripture and recent magisterial teaching on the subject, particular attention will be given to the fact that “the Church’s history is a history of salvation” (*ibid.*). Keeping in view certain concrete experiences lived by the People of God—past and present—this reflection seeks to trace possible directions for development that may help define new spaces for the participation of women in the leadership of the Church.

The Essential Contribution of Women

8. The New Testament and the two-thousand-year history of the Church bear witness to the essential contribution of women to the evangelizing mission of the Christian community. This is well summarized in the paragraph already cited from the *Final Document of the Synod on Synodality*: “Scripture attests to the prominent role of many women in the history of salvation. One woman, Mary Magdalene, was entrusted with the first proclamation of the Resurrection. On the day of Pentecost, Mary, the Mother of God, was present, accompanied by many other women who had followed the Lord. It is important that the Scripture passages that relate these stories find adequate space inside liturgical lectionaries. Crucial turning points in Church history confirm the essential contribution of women moved by the Spirit. Women make up the majority of churchgoers and are often the first witnesses to the faith in families. They are active in the life of small Christian communities and parishes. They run schools, hospitals and shelters. They lead initiatives for reconciliation and promoting human dignity and social justice. Women contribute to theological research and are present in positions of responsibility in Church institutions, in diocesan curia and the Roman Curia. There are women who hold positions of authority and are leaders of their communities.”

9. It is necessary that this entire contribution of women to the life of the Church find ways to be realized more fully in our time, both by encouraging women in their service to the mission of the Church and by discovering new forms of participation in her leadership. It must also be remembered that the mission of the baptized is in the world, but also *for* the world. The Church, therefore, by its very constitution, is not an end in itself. Consequently, it cannot remain indifferent to the concerns—also arising from civil society—that express a genuine search for meaning to which the Church is called to respond (cf. Second Vatican Council, Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, par. 4).

A Sign of the Times

10. We are therefore called to recognize that the “question of women” is a sign of the times, in the sense that the Holy Spirit also speaks through it. This implies that in this area a path of conversion—that is, a change of mentality—is necessary at all levels of the Church, even before speaking of “roles.” While acknowledging that, both in the Church and in society, there have been positive historical examples of the advancement of women, the present situation challenges the

ecclesial community to decide whether to allow social transformations to happen to it or to become a proactive agent of its own change, thereby giving it a broader and richer meaning.

11. Reflection on the role of women in the Church is both necessary and urgent for the full recognition of the Church's identity. Faced with a world as complex as ours, the first attitude to adopt is that of listening to women before any decision or position is taken. Such listening allows for reflection that does not remain at a merely abstract level but takes into account the diversity of women's life experiences, education, and cultures across different parts of the world.

12. In approaching this reflection, certain attitudes must first be avoided. First, one must guard against the temptations of fear and haste. It is necessary both to foster the freedom to speak according to conscience, even when this proves "uncomfortable," and to resist the impatience to achieve concrete results at all costs within a short time. It must also be ensured that the question of women's participation in the life and leadership of the Church is not reduced to a purely sociological, cultural, philosophical, or historical perspective, detached from an overall theological framework.

13. As a Church, we are called to discern the presence of God in the concrete and ordinary course of history. Within this great history, one can find moments when God has acted and many faces through which he has worked, as well as moments in which God has been rejected. This history must be embraced as it is, with gratitude but also with courage, without denying anything that has occurred, including its darker aspects. The study of new forms of participation presupposes the initiation of processes of discernment that are aimed at the creative search for new spaces for participation.

Fundamental Issues (I): The Relational Nature of the Human Person

14. Since Christianity is a reality of communion and community at every level, the discussion about the participation of women must be situated within the horizon of reciprocal ecclesial relationships. While taking account of the complexity of the question, this reciprocity must not be understood as a claim advanced by some group but rather as a reality that concerns the very fabric of relationships within the Church, which must continually be built and renewed. The reciprocity of ecclesial relationships is the foundation of every genuine dialogue and can be realized only in a spirit of authentic gratuity, based on the simple observation that the life of a fruitful community cannot be sustained solely by women or solely by men. For this reason, the idea that the active participation of women in the life and governance of the Church constitutes a "concession" granted by hierarchical authority must be overcome. In this way, it becomes possible to move beyond a logic that is merely related to function or substitution, instead, recognizing that women possess a right in this regard insofar as they are baptized and bearers of charisms, thus giving precedence to the order of being over the order of doing.

15. Theological reflection must therefore undertake a deeper exploration of the relational nature of the human person. This requires thinking about human sexual duality not merely in a naturalistic sense—that is, one that simply acknowledges sexual difference in biological terms—but also from an anthropological and relational perspective in which man and woman are an indispensable "Thou" for one another. Because this relationship is an original *datum* rooted in the divine image of the human being, the partnership between man and woman precedes every historical institution and is grounded in God's own will. At the anthropological level, therefore, the first *datum* that must be acknowledged is the intrinsic incompleteness of every human being. The difference between women and men expresses this incompleteness in some way: it is not

limited to biological polarity but also unfolds in the uniqueness of individual biographies and in the cultural history of the society in which each person lives.

16. From a theological perspective, the sexual difference between man and woman is inscribed primarily within the mystery of vocation, which is realized in the communion between persons freed from the limitations imposed not only by sex but also by power. Alterity and communion are therefore the keys to the mystery of redeemed and fruitful relationality. Wherever a genuine relationship of faith and solidarity exists, the Church allows the face of the Kingdom to shine forth, thereby attracting others. From this arises the conviction that the subordination and condition of inferiority of women can only arise from sin. It is in the light of the Incarnation and Redemption of Christ that man and woman can rediscover fully their vocation to communion and to life, from which follows a correct understanding of authority, its exercise, and the diversity of roles.

17. Ultimately, the role of women in the life of the Church must be described beginning from reality in its fullness, illuminated by faith. Such an approach requires moving beyond a view limited to certain characteristics—such as motherhood, tenderness, or care—that can leave little room for other equally important feminine qualities, such as leadership, counsel, the capacity for teaching, listening, and discernment. By grounding such participation in the dignity of the common Baptism, one is led to reconsider the Marian archetype of female roles in the Church, particularly a certain way of presenting the figure of Mary in this context that risks basing women’s participation on ideological or cultural patterns that society attributes to them (cf. Appendix IV). It may therefore be helpful to draw attention to other aspects of Mary beyond motherhood alone, such as her role as witness, as a reflective and questioning woman fully immersed in the joys and sufferings of her people, and the fact that—as attested in *Acts* 1:14—Mary very likely served as a point of reference for the first Christian community gathered in prayer after the Ascension. In Mary, one can truly find the archetype of a woman connected to the destinies of the world because she is the guardian of life, not only at the physical level but above all at the spiritual level. Such a reflection should also be extended to other women mentioned in Scripture: for example, the first witnesses of the Resurrection or those figures who, already in the Old Testament, contributed to a revision of the exercise of authority and of established traditions (cf. Appendix I).

18. Theology and the Magisterium are therefore called to engage actively with the concrete history of persons. It is necessary to avoid the temptation of offering prepackaged answers and instead to offer a response that takes real problems into account—a response that is shared and that emerges as the fruit of a common search.

Fundamental Issues (II): “Potestas”

19. From this perspective, one should recall the significant contribution that Pope Francis has made to this question. Already in his programmatic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he clearly indicated the need “to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because ‘the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace’ [Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 295] and in other contexts where important decisions are made, both within the Church and in social structures” (par. 103). In the following paragraph of the text, he further stated that “demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity,

present the Church with profound and challenging questions that cannot be lightly evaded” (*ibid.*, par. 104).

20. Following the clarity of these statements, Pope Francis subsequently, over time, made a series of appointments of women to positions of particular importance for the mission of the Roman Curia. With his first appointments, Pope Leo XIV is continuing along this same line. The creation of greater spaces for female participation in institutional roles enables decision-making processes to be enriched with diverse perspectives, to challenge social stereotypes that have now been surpassed, and to create an environment in which all may feel they have equal opportunities to realize their vocation. While these are important first steps, it is evident that this approach must also be pursued within the contexts of the local Churches, so that it may constitute genuine ecclesial progress, that of a Church truly walking together as a single body. Laudable examples already exist. For example, in some French dioceses, a female “General Delegate” or “Episcopal Delegate” assists the Bishop and the Vicar General in important administrative responsibilities. Likewise, in certain regions of the Amazon, women lead the pastoral activity of communities, in addition to exercising the ministry of the Word and serving as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. These are *facts* that illuminate our reflection. Still, it cannot be hidden that, especially in some contexts, these are difficult steps to take and require a true cultural transformation—that is, a change of mentality—so that it may respond more fully to the demands of the Gospel in our time (cf. Appendices III and VI).

21. It is precisely in this context that the question of the *potestas of governance* and women’s participation in it arises (cf. Appendix V). Reflection on the participation of women in the Church must include a consideration of the masculine and the feminine together, as partakers of the same mission within an ecclesiological context of communion. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on a reformulation of the areas of competence of the ordained ministry. Indeed, “the configuration of the priest to Christ the head – namely, as the principal source of grace – does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others” (Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 104). Rather, “when the priest is said to be a sign of ‘Christ the head,’ this refers principally to the fact that Christ is the source of all grace: he is the head of the Church because ‘he has the power of pouring out grace upon all the members of the Church’” (Apost. Exhort. *Querida Amazonia*, par. 87; quoting Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, III, q, 8, a. 1, *resp.*). For this reason, it is good to recall that, as Saint John Paul II reiterated, “although the Church possesses a ‘hierarchical’ structure, nevertheless this structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members” (Apost. Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, par. 27). This principle is of fundamental importance for understanding the nature of the authority held by the ecclesial hierarchy, since “its key and axis is not power understood as domination, but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist; this is the origin of its authority, which is always a service to God’s people” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 104). It is clear that these magisterial statements have concrete consequences for the life of the Church. Redefining these areas of competence could open the way to recognize new spaces of responsibility for women in the Church.

22. In general terms, it is to be affirmed—together with what is stated in the already cited paragraph 60 of the *Final Document of the Synod on Synodality*—that every Bishop should take into consideration “all the opportunities already provided for in Canon Law with regard to the role of women, particularly in those places where they remain underutilized.” Furthermore, “there is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church.” It is important to reiterate that the mere fact of being a woman does not, in itself, prevent women from assuming roles of leadership in the Church.

23. From an ecclesiological perspective, it is therefore necessary to overcome an artificial separation between genders and roles, considering the shared dignity of all creatures made in the image and likeness of God as well as the common Baptism. By virtue of Baptism, every baptized person is a visible representative of the Church. Women should therefore be valued as expressions of particular vocations and of distinctive spiritual and religious experiences.

24. What Popes Francis and Leo XIV have done in practice, by appointing some women to positions of governance in the Roman Curia, offers a model for reflection. This model is grounded in the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* on the Roman Curia, which specifies its vicarious nature: “Each curial institution carries out its proper mission by virtue of the power it has received from the Roman Pontiff, in whose name it operates with vicarious power in the exercise of his primatial *munus*. For this reason, any member of the faithful can preside over a Dicastery or Office, depending on the power of governance and the specific competence and function of the Dicastery or Office in question” (Apost. Const. *Praedicate Evangelium*, II, par. 5). This vicarious *potestas* held by the heads of Dicasteries—whether laypersons, religious, priests, or bishops—is the *potestas* of the Roman Pontiff that, in this case, is also shared with baptized persons who are not ordained, except in the case of those offices that require sacred orders. Holy Orders, however, does not exhaust all possibilities of ministerial service. Therefore, the possibility of a woman holding the office of head of a Dicastery or another Vatican Office should not be questioned: it is a reality already foreseen by an Apostolic Constitution. Moreover, the fact that the authority of the head of a Dicastery, or another Vatican Office, is vicarious in nature holds equally true when that office is exercised by a cleric (a bishop or a priest). This therefore represents a further step in the path of reflection on the cooperation of the laity with the hierarchy initiated by the Second Vatican Council—a collaboration that Saint John Paul II described as *co-responsibility* (cf. Apost. Exhort. *Christifideles Laici*)—within a perspective that is not that of merely claiming some form of power, but rather of proclamation and service to the Church’s mission.

25. Whereas, in the appointment of a parish priest, the Bishop relies upon Holy Orders, the Roman Pontiffs, in appointing women to important ecclesial roles, have taken into account above all the specific charism of the persons they appointed and have granted them a participation in the Roman Pontiff’s universal governing *potestas*. It is important to reiterate this point: alongside the sacramental path and distinct from it, there is also a charismatic path that can be fruitfully pursued to open new spaces of participation for the lay faithful, particularly for women. It follows that even in the exercise of governance within a Diocese, opportunities of this kind may arise and should be employed. In the universal Church, the Pope can allow laywomen or laymen to participate in the exercise of his *potestas* because he recognizes in them an objective reality: a charism of the Spirit that can be present in both laypersons and ordained ministers. In an analogous way, this also occurs in a Diocese, where ordained ministers participate in the *potestas* of the Bishop, but laypersons also may share in it in a way not connected with the sacrament of Holy Orders—even in the leadership of a community, as in the previously mentioned case of the “General Delegates” or of catechists, whom the Second Vatican Council already described as “true *co-workers* of the priestly order” (Decr. *Ad Gentes*, par. 17)—thanks to an objective reality: a charism bestowed by the Spirit.

26. The discernment of such charisms is the responsibility of the Bishop (for example, by conferring a mandate or a delegation, or by instituting a ministry if he judges it truly necessary) through a process that should also involve the community. It is thus not a solitary decision. The purpose of such discernment—this should be reiterated—is to recognize an objective reality: the effective presence of a gift of the Spirit. Such recognition must nevertheless meet two conditions:

first, it must respond to a genuine need of the community; second, it requires that the person involved possess the appropriate competencies to carry out the service to which they are called.

27. From a theological and canonical point of view, however, it is appropriate to specify that in such cases the lay faithful do not participate in Holy Orders but rather in the exercise of the Bishop's ministry. The Bishop, therefore, remains ultimately responsible for the discernment of any charisms that may arise within the People of God (cf. Apost. Letter *Antiquum Ministerium*, par. 8).

28. In summary, two principal points can be identified that synthesize the contributions of the recent pontifical Magisterium regarding the *potestas* exercised by lay faithful in leadership roles within the Church:

- a) The *potestas* proper to clerics, deriving from the Sacrament of Holy Orders, first of all pertains to the administration of the Sacrament of the Eucharist (cf. Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 104), from which their authority derives for the care of the unity of the communities entrusted to them. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility that the authority to lead communities may, at least in certain cases, also be conferred upon members of the lay faithful.
- b) The primatial *potestas* of the Roman Pontiff may also be delegated to baptized persons who have not received Holy Orders (cf. Apost. Const. *Praedicate Evangelium*). Therefore, there would seem to be no obstacles to extending such an approach also at the local level in individual Dioceses, without this implying participation in Holy Orders.

29. It is therefore hoped that full advantage may be taken of all these possibilities already present in the current canonical framework, including the possibility of introducing, where appropriate, new instituted roles linked not only to the leadership of communities but also to ministries of listening, consolation, and accompaniment. It is also important that theology and canon law explore new forms of exercising authority grounded in the Sacrament of Baptism and distinct from those deriving from Holy Orders, so that adequate canonical forms may be found to make effective the participation of women in roles of leadership within the Church.

Fundamental Issues (III): Ministries

30. Turning to the concrete forms of women's participation in the life of the Church, one arrives at the question of ministries. At present, the canonical order provides certain instituted forms through which women may exercise their ministerial service. For example, the universal extension of the ministries of lector and acolyte—indeed a possibility that has not yet been fully utilized in many dioceses—as well as the institution of the ministry of catechist by the Apostolic Letter *Antiquum Ministerium*, which highlights the prophetic *munus* of transmitting the faith conferred by Baptism, taking into account that the Sacrament of Confirmation enables—and indeed obliges—the faithful “to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ” (Dogmatic Const. *Lumen Gentium*, par. 11). Moreover, as the Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* recalls: “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” (Apost. Exhort. *Querida Amazonia*, par. 99). Furthermore, “this would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions and

the direction of communities” (*ibid.*, par. 103). However, this reflection should not be limited to the Amazon region. As emphasized in *Antiquum Ministerium*: “In our own day too, many competent and dedicated catechists are community leaders in various parts of the world and carry out a mission invaluable for the transmission and growth of the faith” (Apost. Letter *Antiquum Ministerium*, par. 3). These examples should be taken into account in theological reflection, especially in considering more deeply why the presence of women in roles of authority has not posed a problem for such communities. Beginning from these concrete realities already present and operative in the Church, it becomes possible to think about the ministerial character of every vocation in the Church, so that the participation of women may be characterized in terms of lay ministeriality. Nevertheless, it remains the responsibility of the competent Dicasteries to institute any new ministries according to the needs of the Church, including upon the proposal of episcopal conferences for particular regions and taking into account the specific cultures of the places involved.

31. In any case, one must not forget the well-known principle that the sacrament—whether Baptism or Holy Orders—does not in itself confer all the qualities necessary for the exercise of a particular office; rather, specific personal formation is required. Therefore, especially with regard to specialized formation in theological and pastoral fields, it is necessary that women be enabled to acquire the appropriate competencies for occupying certain positions, thereby promoting genuine merit without discrimination between women and men. It is also useful to recall that in some countries it has been necessary to introduce preferential access for women to certain professional roles—the so-called “gender quotas”—from which they had previously been excluded for cultural reasons, and this has led to positive results. Moreover, this requires particular attention in the formation of priests, so that candidates for Holy Orders may assimilate the theology of women’s ministeriality, beginning with ministries grounded in Baptism, together with an awareness of the richness that arises from the collaboration of the various states of life and vocations within the Church.

32. During the Second Session of the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis reactivated the work of the Second Study Commission on the Female Diaconate that he had established some years earlier. The conclusions of this study were published on 4 December 2025 in a letter from Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, President of the Commission. These conclusions recognized the need to expand opportunities for women’s greater involvement in leadership roles in the Church. Indeed, the same Commission approved by a very large majority (9 votes in favor, 1 against), a thesis that considers the possibility of expanding women’s access to instituted ministries—such as that of catechist—or of establishing new ones, subject to evaluation by the pastors of the Church through the necessary discernment. The thesis reads as follows: “In this regard, it is now opportune to broaden women’s access to ministries instituted for the service of the community. Pope Francis’ Motu Proprio *Spiritus Domini* and *Antiquum Ministerium*—while confirming what was expressed in Saint John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*—move in this direction. It is now up to the discernment of pastors to evaluate what additional ministries can be introduced for the concrete needs of the Church of our time, thus ensuring also an adequate ecclesial recognition of the *diakonia* of the baptized, particularly women. This recognition will prove to be a prophetic sign, especially where women still suffer situations of gender-based discrimination” (*Letter from His Eminence, Cardinal Petrocchi to Pope Leo XIV*, 4 December 2025, p. 5).

Focal Point: The Charismatic Dimension of the Role of Women in the Church

33. Along with the recognized ministries there are those that are “not instituted by ritual but are exercised with stability” (FD, no. 76). Saint John Paul II already recognized this fact when he affirmed that “together with the ordained ministry, other ministries, whether formally instituted or simply recognized, can flourish for the good of the whole community, sustaining it in all its many needs” (Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, par. 46). These non-ritually instituted roles of service respond to a real need of the People of God and do not represent the mere fulfillment of personal desire on the part of the minister. They are enriched by charisms that are sown by the Spirit, who is always the Giver of all the gifts that are needed for the good of the ecclesial body. It should be recalled that wherever there is a need for evangelization, the Spirit has already bestowed a charism upon someone to respond to it. Remaining solely within the framework of formally instituted ministries—when it comes to women’s participation in the leadership of the Church—confines and impoverishes us, for this ministerial path may involve only certain women who possess those characteristics, abilities, and styles that are more closely associated with one form of being and acting. Indeed, ministries are certainly a great good, but they do not resolve the need to promote the possible fruitfulness of all women for the life of the Church. Charisms have a more widespread presence, enabling those who possess them to reach places that the usual structures cannot access. Such charisms are not subjective or marginal realities but *objective* gifts in the face of so many urgent needs of people that are not exhausted by the structural avenues of the Church.

34. At times, God hears the cry of his people not only through instituted ministries that the Bishop confers upon persons in whom he places trust or whom he and his advisers consider well-formed and qualified. Often the Spirit acts as he wills, beyond our rhythms and our criteria, in ways that may sometimes appear incomprehensible to those with particular ecclesial formation or experience. For, as Pope Francis noted, “differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, but the Holy Spirit, who is the source of that diversity, can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelization” (Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 131).

35. The development of healthy forms of synodality will facilitate the flourishing and exercise of lay or baptismal charisms (that is, charisms rooted in the Sacrament of Baptism) among the multitude of women who constitute the majority in our communities. These include charisms of leadership, guidance, coordination, and the management of processes, as well as others more closely related to communal prayer, spiritual accompaniment, and closeness to those most in need. The Spirit sows charisms in many women, but these do not always flourish. As noted earlier, the *Final Document of the Synod on Synodality* invited us to recognize that “women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms” (par. 60). The specific authority of the ordained minister has its center in the Sacrament of the Eucharist—the sacrament of communion—but the unity that flows from the Eucharist can never be lacking in richness, variety, and participation. Consequently, from a synodal perspective, ordained ministry cannot be conceived in isolation, since all vocations in the Church are interdependent and articulated. This naturally also applies to non-ordained faithful who are called to occupy positions of high responsibility in the Roman Curia and in Dioceses, where there is a risk of witnessing, under another form, a lay reproduction of the regrettable and reductive dynamics of clericalism. Without such attentiveness, the unity that derives from the Eucharist—which the priest must safeguard—would never succeed in reflecting in this world the inexhaustible beauty of the Trinity. Likewise, in discerning the exercise of these charisms, no one can act alone without involving *the concrete community* in which those endowed with these gifts operate.

36. The charismatic dimension has flourished in consecrated life, despite the many resistances that were encountered before it was recognized (cf. Letter *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*). In this sense, today laywomen have the right to affirm their participation in the mission of the Church not only on the basis of their equal human and Christian dignity but also on the basis of the charisms given by God. Reality itself urges us toward this way of thinking about the life of the Church in a charismatic dimension. Indeed, a new evangelization has become urgent: one that depends less exclusively on priestly resources and is enriched by the presence and contributions of women. A pneumatological approach decisively engages all the baptismal resources of the community, with the freedom and the particular form of authority capable of enabling their fruitful development.

37. Moreover, the Lord acts both in a Christological manner and in a pneumatological manner. Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Bonaventure, among other doctors, observed that God's action *ad extra* prolongs within the human heart and in history the processions of the Word and the Spirit. These processions can never be separated, even though they remain distinct and do not constitute closed compartments. Pneumatology manifests the freedom of love in the diverse dimensions of ecclesial life. These two modes can be exercised within the Church in a certain tension which, when lived in fidelity to the Lord and remembering that "unity prevails over conflict" (cf. Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, pars. 226–230), implies a creative continuity.

38. Mary is the supreme model of the charismatic dimension. Though she does not belong to the hierarchical structure, she possesses within the Church a unique authority and spiritual fruitfulness. She is also the paradigm of the fruitful motherhood of the Church. Nor should it be overlooked that, when communicating the great Paschal announcement to the Apostles, Christ chose a woman: Mary Magdalene; the Apostles themselves received this proclamation from her. It is therefore possible to think that this fact carries concrete implications for the participation of women in the Church. The history of the Church provides numerous examples confirming this intuition, including particular historical cases in which women exercised *de facto* authority even over clerics, such as the abbesses of Las Huelgas (Burgos, Spain) and Conversano (Bari, Italy). Other significant figures in this regard—although from a broader perspective—include Saint Monica, Matilda of Canossa, Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget of Sweden, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Joan of Arc, Saint Teresa of Ávila, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Saint María Antonia de Paz y Figuerola (Mama Antula), Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Adrienne von Speyr, Maria Montessori, Dorothy Day, and Madeleine Delbrêl (for some biographical details, see Appendix II).

39. These considerations imply that charismatic gifts do not always need to operate strictly within the structures of ecclesial communities, but can also act fruitfully beyond "the ordinary, well-planned pastoral ministry that parishes and movements carry out" (Apost. Exhort. *Christus Vivit*, par. 230). An obsession with ensuring that everything becomes structure, rule, rite, or norm is not faithful to the free dynamism of the Spirit. Pope Francis repeatedly referred to examples such as a "'popular' youth ministry," which stimulates "the natural leadership qualities and the charisms sown by the Holy Spirit. It tries to avoid imposing obstacles, rules, controls and obligatory structures on these young believers who are natural leaders in their neighborhoods and in other settings" (*ibid.*). In relation to them, what then should be the task of priestly authority? According to Pope Francis, "we need only to accompany and encourage them, trusting a little more in the genius of the Holy Spirit, who acts as he wills" (*ibid.*). These young believers can give rise to a new evangelization "that can open doors and make room for everyone, with their doubts and frustrations, their problems and their efforts to find themselves, their past errors, their experiences of sin and all their difficulties" (*ibid.*, par. 234). This "inclusive" capacity is seen to be particularly developed in women. In them, it is often easier to recognize charisms that open

doors, welcome without conditions, accompany the wounded, and create spaces free from discrimination.

40. These charisms may also be directed toward lay engagement in the midst of the world, which is the principal calling the laity must honor: in politics, in the economy, in institutions, and in every sphere of society. Another privileged place is found in the peripheries of the Church itself, through an ever more courageous and bold missionary engagement.

41. As has always occurred since the earliest Christian communities (consider the women whom the Apostle Paul greets as his great collaborators in his letters, for example, in *Rom* 16:1, 7), countless believing women manifest their charisms in the most remote places: small villages in jungles, deserts, islands, but also in the slums of cities. At the same time, in various existential peripheries, their presence and activity have acquired a certain authority. This also occurs at the margins of the Church itself—places marked by secularization, hostility, or even sin—where many people, despite their distance from the institution, continue to feel, in some way, connected to it. In such places, many women, compassionately sharing the crosses and hopes of their wounded brothers and sisters, keep the flame of the Gospel burning and ensure that the fragile thread which still binds many people to Christ and the Church is not broken. These women can go where no minister would be fully accepted and desire only that their evangelizing work—which is demanding, sometimes arduous, and unconventional—not be hindered. They seek to leave space for the “possible good,” because “a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life that appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love” (Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 44).

42. Certainly, none of these possibilities for women’s participation in the life and leadership of the Church should ever lead to diminishing the immense value that the Church’s tradition has recognized in the vocation of the wife and mother within marriage and the family. In the Church, there is neither contradiction nor competition between the vocation of wife and mother and the vocation to public engagement, though this unfortunately often occurs in civil society. However, this requires that family responsibilities be adequately shared between spouses so that women may have the possibility—just as men do—to develop their charisms in the world and in the Church. It is a matter of envisioning “freely chosen mutual belonging marked by fidelity, respect, and care” (Apost. Exhort. *Amoris Laetitia*, par. 156), through which men and women possess the same rights and obligations and—though distinct and differentiated—the same possibilities for fruitful development.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I FEMALE FIGURES IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

Premises

1. Reflection on the role of women within the Church requires a firm grounding in Sacred Scripture. Scripture remains the necessary starting point, and any in-depth study must inevitably begin with its sacred pages.
2. While it is true that the sacred text reflects—a consequence of its historical context—a predominantly male perspective in understanding, perceiving, and narrating reality, the feminine nonetheless appears, albeit in a more limited way. Considering the principal protagonists of biblical narrative, it becomes clear that the role of men is quantitatively more prominent than that of women. However, moving beyond such a statistical comparison, the pericopes in which women appear are remarkable for their value and richness, no less than those concerning men.
3. It should also be kept in mind that readers of the Bible may encounter expressions that appear particularly “strong” when compared with contemporary sensibilities. Certain pericopes, if read literally and without the necessary hermeneutical filter, may convey a severity of judgment toward women that can easily scandalize. Moreover, it is important to remember that sacred texts never aim at idealization or abstraction; for this reason, no ideal female profile is presented (just as there is none for men). There is no singular “woman,” but rather a series of women, each retaining distinctive characteristics, attitudes, styles, behaviors, and feelings, which the hagiographer presents while preserving their individuality.
4. A methodological note: the organization of these pages is straightforward. The profiles are divided into two sections—one dedicated to the most significant female figures of the Old Testament, and the other to those in the New Testament. In addition to a brief description of the sacred texts’ content, each woman’s profile includes appropriate references and suggested readings.

I. Old Testament: The Matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel

5. The term “matriarch” is used as a counterpoint to the more familiar term “patriarch.” It refers to the *mothers* whose role is specific because it is linked to the life of the ancestors of the chosen people. Sarah was the wife of Abraham, the woman with the gentle smile and spontaneous laughter; Rebekah, whose name refers to “the bond,” was the wife of Isaac; Leah and Rachel, both daughters of the same father, were married to Jacob, and from them—and their handmaids—were born the twelve sons, eponyms of the twelve tribes of Israel. The role of matriarch places these women in a privileged position. Their stories are told primarily in the Book of Genesis, with references and allusions in other texts of sacred literature. Their presence accompanies from the very beginning the history of the patriarchs who would give life to the people. This is not a silent, passive accompaniment, but genuine protagonism exercised alongside the patriarchs.

Sara

6. The name means “princess.” In Gen 17:16,¹ this meaning is implied: her royalty derives from being designated the mother of many kings, the true root of the people, the rock from which all the children were carved (cf. Is 51:1-2²).). Such a destiny, however, seems obscured in her first biblical mention, which tersely states: “The wife of Abram was called Sarai [...] she was barren and had no children” (Gen 11:29–30). The text recounts that she departed from Ur of the Chaldeans with Abraham at around sixty-five years of age, roughly ten years younger than her husband (Gen 12:4b–5a³). It also narrates the dangers from which she was delivered, first in Egypt and then in Gerar, when Abraham, presenting her as his sister, left her vulnerable to the designs of foreign rulers.⁴ According to the sacred texts, Sarah was “very beautiful,” and rabbinic tradition adds that when Abraham went down to Egypt, he attempted to conceal her in a basket, as though her beauty itself required hiding. The border guards, however, discovered her and brought her to Pharaoh, who was captivated upon seeing her.⁵

7. Alongside this scene stands another narrative—perhaps the most familiar concerning Sarah: the visit of the three men who announce the birth of a son, despite her advanced age and acknowledged barrenness. In the account of Gen 18, she remains in the tent, in a posture that seems almost to test the reach of the divine promise. As the visitors receive Abraham’s hospitality and foretell that within a year he will have a son, she stays concealed, listening, and quietly smiles at their words: “Then Sarah laughed to herself and said, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old, and my husband is old?’” (Gen 18:12). Her laughter, etymologically connected to the name Isaac, becomes a lasting sign, linking forever the mother’s hidden smile to the destiny of the son.

8. Sarah died at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven in Hebron and was laid to rest in the field Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite, where the cave of Machpelah was located (cf. Gen 23).⁶ There she rests with Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, and Jacob. Jewish tradition recalls that during her lifetime the door of her tent stood open in hospitality, her dough was blessed, a lamp burned from Friday to Friday, and a cloud hovered above her dwelling.⁷

¹ “I will bless her [*sc.* Sarah] and also give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she will become nations, and kings of peoples will be born from her.”

² “Listen to me, you who seek justice, // you who seek the Lord; // look to the rock from which you were cut, // to the quarry from which you were extracted. Look to Abraham, your father, to Sarah who gave birth to you; for I called him alone, I blessed him and multiplied him.”

³ “Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai...”

⁴ The episode of the wife-sister appears twice in reference to Abram, specifically in Genesis 12:10-20 and Genesis 20:1–18 (in the Negev), and once in reference to Rebecca among the Philistines (cf. Genesis 26:1-11).

⁵ Gen. R. xl. 6.

⁶ “Then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, opposite Mamre, that is, Hebron, in the land of Canaan” (Gen 23:19).

⁷ Gen. R. lx. 15.

9. Sarah is also mentioned in the New Testament. In the *Letter to the Romans*, she is called the mother of all the children of the promise (Rom 4:19; 9:9).⁸ Moreover, she exemplifies faithfulness (Heb 11:11)⁹ and demonstrates devoted affection toward her husband, whom she acknowledges as “Lord” (1 Pt 3:6a).¹⁰

Scriptural references: Gen 11:29–31; 12:5–13:1; 16:1–6; 17:15–21; 18:6–15; 20:1–21; 23:1–2, 19; Heb 11:11; 1 Pt 3:6.

Rebecca

10. Her name refers to a “cord,” although by extension or metonymy it can be understood more broadly as “bond.” Because of her beauty, Rebekah “binds to herself”: she is a woman who captivates, precisely by virtue of her striking appearance. This has led some to interpret her name as meaning “seductive,” “charming,” or, in rare cases, “trap” or “deception.”

11. The Bible provides relatively sparse information about her. We are told of her origins: she was the sister of Laban, the Aramean, father of Leah and Rachel, the future wives of Jacob. The text also recounts her meeting with Isaac and the birth of their love. Genesis 24 presents a clear and artistically significant passage: Abraham, now old, wealthy, and full of days, sends his faithful servant to the East to find a wife for Isaac in his country of origin, intending to provide Isaac with a bride from among the women of his own clan. The servant departs and brings Rebekah to the land of Abraham. Isaac sees the camels returning on the horizon; Rebekah sees the young Isaac approaching the group. The encounter, the exchanged gaze, and the immediate bond of affection are recounted in few but effective words. At their first meeting, they already feel the strength of the affection that binds and unites them.

12. The Bible also speaks of Rebekah’s preference for Jacob over Esau and the plot she devised to secure Isaac’s blessing for Jacob. To avoid conflict with Esau, she planned and organized Jacob’s flight to her brother Laban. God appears to accommodate Rebekah’s strategy, which ultimately ensures that Jacob receives the inheritance of the promise along with Isaac’s blessing.

Scriptural references: *Gen.* 24:1–67; 25:19–28; 26:1–11, 35; 27:5–17; 42:6; 49:31.

Leah and Rachel

13. The “destiny” and story of Laban’s two daughters are closely intertwined, and they should be considered together. Both are daughters of Rebekah’s brother: Leah, whose name means “weary,” and Rachel, meaning “ewe.” Both became wives of Jacob. Leah, following the deception orchestrated by her father against Jacob, proved immediately fertile and bore the patriarch his first sons, each given a specific name reflecting concrete situations—the etiology of these names is key to understanding the texts. Rachel, in contrast, remained barren for many years, experiencing suffering and difficulty compared to her elder sister. Eventually, the Lord grants Rachel motherhood, giving her Joseph and Benjamin, who become Jacob’s favored sons.

14. Leah bore Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; Bilhah, Rachel’s maid, bore Dan and Naphtali; Zilpah, Leah’s servant, bore Gad and Asher. Leah also gave birth to Dinah, who was raped by the son of Shechem, an event that led to the plundering of the city (Gen 34:1–19). Dinah was Leah’s daughter.¹¹ In any case, Jacob’s sons inherit the promise made to Abraham; the twelve sons give rise to the people of Israel. The four women—Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and

⁸ “He did not waver in faith, even though he saw his body as good as dead—he was about a hundred years old—and Sarah’s womb was dead” (Rom 4:19); “This is the word of the promise: ‘I will come at this time, and Sarah shall have a son’” (Rom 9:9).

⁹ “By faith Sarah, though past the age, received the ability to become a mother, because she considered him who had promised her to be faithful” (Heb 11:11).

¹⁰ “As Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord” (1 Pt 3:6a).

¹¹ See Gen 29, which recounts the marriage first to Leah and then to Rachel.

Zilpah—through their roles as wives and handmaids, ensured the fertility and continuity of Jacob’s lineage, establishing a numerous and strong people.

15. The paradoxical situation presented in the texts lies in the contrast between sterility on the one hand and extraordinary fertility on the other. The matriarchs experienced concretely both the sorrow and suffering caused by the lack of children, as well as renewed joy and the fruitfulness granted by God. Their lives oscillate between these two paradigms: on one side, the desire for life and the awareness of the absence of a generation to carry on the lineage; on the other, the generous, abundant gift of life. The hearts of these mothers seem to hold within them the mystery of such paradoxical circumstances.

A Point of Summary

16. Judging from the texts, certain elements appear particularly common across the narratives. It is worth highlighting some of these:

- a) The theme of barrenness. This is always presented as a starting point, never as an endpoint. Such inability to bear children functions as a true test for the patriarchs’ wives. Giving life and safeguarding it emerges as the underlying theme, a subtle red thread running through the narratives.
- b) The matriarchs frequently display considerable intelligence and an ability to shape the decisions of the patriarchs, often operating behind the scenes yet decisively guiding events. In the Book of Genesis, many stories recount quarrels, misunderstandings, confusions, and episodes of rivalry in which the matriarchs take risks. This lends the texts vividness and intrigue. Many times, God seems to accommodate such cleverness rather than reject it; indeed, at times, He appears to explicitly approve it to fulfill His promises.
- c) The beauty of the first women of Israel is repeatedly noted. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are attentive to the attractiveness of their wives. For Jacob, serving Laban, his father-in-law, for seven years is made light by the love and beauty he perceives in Rachel; the time passes swiftly and almost unnoticed.

Women as Protagonists

Hagar, Ishmael’s Mother

17. Her name means “flight” or “the fugitive,” clearly reflecting her story. The texts concerning Hagar’s story are few: Gen 16; 21:9–21; 25:12; and in the New Testament, Gal 4:24. In his *Letter to the Galatians*, Paul cites Hagar as a model and prototype of the slave covenant, in contrast to the covenant of the free woman.¹²

18. Hagar’s story is closely connected to the history of Abraham and Sarah. The text presents her as a foreign slave of Egyptian origin. Sarah, being barren and advanced in age, asks Abraham, in order to ensure a lineage, to unite with Hagar. The son born of this union is named Ishmael. During her pregnancy, after Ishmael’s birth, and later after the birth of Isaac, tensions arise between Hagar and Sarah, leading to Hagar’s expulsion. The first time, following a divine manifestation, she is invited to return and submit to her mistress; the second time, definitively, she ventures into the desert with Ishmael. By the Lord’s intervention, she not only survives, but her son Ishmael fathers twelve sons who give rise to twelve tribes. Tradition holds that the Arab

¹² “Now these things are said allegorically: the two women represent the two covenants. One, that of Mount Sinai, which brings forth children into slavery, is represented by Hagar...” (Gal 4:24).

peoples descend from Ishmael, and in Islamic culture, their flight into the desert is commemorated with specific rites.¹³

Miriam, Who Led the Dances

19. Her name may derive from a Hebrew root, meaning “bitterness,” or from an Egyptian etymology (*maryi*), meaning “beloved.” Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron.¹⁴ Her name does not appear in Ex 2, where she is said to have followed the basket containing the infant Moses and, speaking to Pharaoh’s daughter, arranged for a nurse to care for him.

20. Her presence reappears in Ex 15, where she takes on a role of joy and celebration. After crossing the Red Sea and witnessing the death of the Egyptians, she leads the women with tambourines and dances to celebrate the Lord’s victory over Pharaoh and his army.

21. In the *Book of Numbers*, Miriam’s profile darkens. While during the Exodus she retains her protective and exhortative traits, in Numbers 12 she suffers punishment for questioning Moses’ authority after he marries an Ethiopian woman. Her skin is covered with sores, turning white as snow, and for seven days the Lord, through Moses, excludes her from the camp. She returns only after the completion of her punishment.

22. Like many of her generation, Miriam did not enter the Promised Land. She died at Kadesh in the desert of Sin, and according to Num 20:1, was buried there shortly after the Exodus from Egypt. The historian Josephus notes that “she was buried with great pomp on a mountain called Sin, and the people mourned her for thirty days.”¹⁵

Deborah, Commander of the Armies

23. The figures of women who play an important role in the life of the people of Israel are not limited to the Pentateuch. In the *Book of Judges*, which recounts the ordinary life of the twelve tribes settled in the Promised Land, confrontations with enemies, usually the Philistines, give rise to charismatic figures tasked with defending the people and guaranteeing them a state of peaceful coexistence. Judges are not so called because they play a role in the administration of justice, but because, alongside this, their function is linked to protection, the management of defense forces, and everything related to peace and daily life in the Promised Land. Among these charismatic leaders, one of the figures who easily captivates readers of the sacred text is undoubtedly Deborah.

24. In Deborah, whose name means “bee,” several characteristics converge: not only the role of prophetess, common to other women of the OT, but also that of Israel’s only female judge, together with being a true military leader on the battlefield. She, through her loyal and obedient general Barak, defeated the rival army led by Sisera and Jabin, according to the account in Judg 4. In Judg 5, an entire hymn—probably one of the oldest texts of Hebrew poetry—is dedicated to her, in which she is called the “Mother of Israel” (v. 7). The Bible records the name of her husband, Lapidot, and the place where she usually exercised judgment, an unspecified area on the hills of Ephraim, between Ramah and Bethel. Seated in the shade of a palm, she devoted her time to resolving disputes brought by members of her tribe, administering justice.

25. Thanks to her presence among the people, Israel enjoyed a long period of peace. The text says that for forty years—a number rich in references to other periods in biblical history—“the land had rest” (Judg 5:31).

Ruth, the Foreigner

¹³ According to the Quran, Ishmael built the Ka’ba together with Abraham. The walk (*sa’y*) that pilgrims make seven times between the hills of *Safa* and *Marwa* recalls and imitates Hagar and Ishmael’s journey through the desert in search of water.

¹⁴ According to tradition, the firstborn daughter of Amram and Jochebed.

¹⁵ FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 4.4.6.

26. The interest in this figure, which some exegetes call the “biblical Cinderella,” is not so much due to the fact that an entire book, however short, is devoted to her, but to the fact that Ruth is a foreigner—a foreigner who is welcomed into the broader Israelite family. Her personal status as a Moabite does not prevent her from entering Israel’s genealogy and allowing the birth of pivotal and famous figures in biblical history, born from her womb.

27. Her name means “friend,” which in itself is already significant: she is a foreigner who acts with friendship and gains the trust and affection of the people among whom she lives. Ruth’s story exemplifies solidarity

28. The story is set in the period preceding the monarchy, during the era of the Judges. Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi, a woman who, because of famine in Israel, had moved to the territory of Moab. Naomi, meaning “pleasant,” had lost not only her husband in Moab, but also her two sons. Left alone with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, she decided to leave Moab and return to Israel, to Bethlehem. The narrative centers on Ruth’s ability to serve Naomi, her mother-in-law, and to be redeemed by Boaz, thereby redeeming and perpetuating the name of her husband.

29. Ruth became the grandmother of Jesse, father of David, from whose lineage Christians know that Jesus was born, according to the genealogy presented by the first evangelist (cf. Mt 1:5).

Hannah, Samuel’s Mother

30. The story of Hannah, as presented in the sacred texts, shares traits with the experiences of the matriarchs. The theme connecting Samuel’s mother to Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel is that of infertility.

31. Hannah is mocked by Peninnah (“coral,” “pearl”), the other wife of her husband Elkanah. Peninnah had children, while Hannah had none. In the accounts of 1 Sam 1:2–2:10, she is shown in the depth of her sadness and despair as she kneels in the temple at Shiloh, praying to the Lord to remove this blemish that shadows her life. Her lips move, but the elderly priest Eli does not hear what God says. The old man even thinks that Hannah, in her fervent actions, is drunk. She leaves her prayer in the sanctuary and returns home. God, who hears the prayer of the poor and afflicted, grants her the “grace” of a child, who will be called Samuel, “God has heard”: the child is consecrated and entrusted to the care of the elderly priest Eli. Samuel’s life will lead him to anoint the first kings of Israel (Saul and David).

32. Even Hannah’s name reflects the direction of her life. Hannah means “grace” and recalls the true favor that God granted her life: the gift of opening herself to motherhood.

Abigail, Who Stopped David’s Armed Men

33. It seems that in terms of beauty, Abigail (“my father is joy”) was ranked third in Israel, just after some of the matriarchs. Her story is unique and is recounted in 1 Sam 25:2–42; 27:3; 30:5,18; 2 Sam 3:3. The narrative highlights both her extraordinary ability to avert disaster and a style in which her concern for her husband becomes true intercession on his behalf.

34. The events take place during the period when David is still living as a fugitive, fleeing from Saul. He has a certain following but still must seek refuge from the king’s envy. His existence is still precarious. David sends some of his men to request assistance from the wealthy Nabal (“fool”), Abigail’s husband, in the form of food and support for himself and his companions. Nabal, acting on impulse, responds rashly, denying any help to David. Upon hearing of the refusal, David, along with 400 armed men, decides to kill Nabal. The denial of aid fuels the winds of vengeance. Meanwhile, the news reaches Abigail. To prevent her husband’s death and the ruin of his household, Abigail loads donkeys and goes to meet David and his men, offering them what Nabal had refused.

35. The following day, Abigail informs her husband of what transpired. In response, Nabal suddenly falls ill and dies ten days later. After Nabal’s burial, Abigail is invited by David and

becomes, after Michal, his second wife, bearing him a son named Chileab (2 Sam 3:3; according to 1 Chr 3:1, his name was Daniel).

Personifications

36. In the Bible, there are not only female protagonists, but the feminine is also used as a personification of concepts, as an embodiment of values that have a decisive impact and role within society. With the list of female characters, one could delve into many other references. For example, Bathsheba, the woman who seduced David, is omitted; or the witch of Endor, who with her prophetic abilities summoned the spirit of Samuel; women who took care of the prophets, such as the one who hosted Elijah; or the formidable Jezebel. The list could go on. Here, it is useful to recall two personifications that appear in the so-called wisdom literature: Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly.

Wisdom and Folly

37. There are biblical references, especially in the *Book of Proverbs*, where the image of a woman is used to portray Wisdom.¹⁶ The descriptive picture is completed when the exact opposite of Lady Wisdom is described, namely Lady Folly. The personification has value in ancient texts because it makes reasoning more accessible, which might otherwise succumb to the temptation of abstraction. It is a method of communication. Personification prepares the listener for simpler reasoning, without being any less effective than other forms of discourse.

38. Wisdom appears, calling out in the streets and public squares, inviting passersby to follow her. As a woman, she holds enormous value, far greater than the finest pearls, and every effort must be directed toward acquiring her. Just like a woman, she must be won, and one must strive to “marry” her. Wisdom cannot be bought with money; she is immaterial, but she must be desired with great ardor. Wisdom is prime; therefore, acquire wisdom (cf. Prov 4:7a). This is one of the most effective maxims, conveying how precious and necessary a wise life is.

39. Wisdom, just like a woman vulnerable to jealousy, demands fidelity. Like the woman of youth—or the first love that never fades from memory—one must remain faithful to her, never turning away. The author of Proverbs aptly comments: “Drink water from your own cistern” (Prov 5:15).

40. Chapter 9 presents a kind of diptych, almost mirror-like, contrasting Wisdom and Folly. Wisdom has a house, founded and solid (seven pillars support it); she has the certainty of a prepared table, ready for passersby. Folly, on the other hand, sits idly at the threshold, bored on a high throne, and also invites passersby, but she has prepared nothing for them. Her path leads deep into Sheol. Wisdom loves the day and delights in the light; Folly, in contrast, prefers darkness and enjoys shadows. Wisdom cooks her own food, while Folly loves “bread taken in secret.”

41. In the text, beyond the light-darkness diptych—which effectively contrasts Wisdom as a place of light and Folly as a place of death—the motif of the house often recurs. Wisdom is inclined to build: the wise person builds a house, constructs, and establishes; whereas folly brings ruin, demolishes, and destroys what has already been built. Folly does not like to stay at home; she wants to wander continuously. Wisdom, by contrast, requires a form of *stabilitas*, while Folly roams, dispersing herself here and there.

The Words of Lemuel’s Mother

42. The *Book of Proverbs* closes with some words of Lemuel, king of Massa. The text reports that the sovereign learned these sayings from his mother. Within these sayings is also the well-known “Praise of the Virtuous Woman,” an acrostic poem whose initial letters of each verse follow the ordered sequence of the Hebrew alphabet.

¹⁶ Prov 1:20–33; 3:13–18; 4:6–9; 5:15–23; 9:1–6 (Wisdom). 7–18 (Folly); 11:16; 12:4; 14:1; 18:22; 19:14.

43. Concerning the woman, the text states, in poetic imagery, that she is a source of happiness. This happiness is exclusively hers, and she alone can give it to her husband. Moreover, the supreme female virtue remains industriousness. The woman is likened to merchant ships poised at the edge of the sea, ready to reach the harbor with countless treasures on board. Such a practical and concrete style allows the woman to give orders to her servants; she becomes skilled in trade, buys the house and the field; she can accomplish everything; her lamp is always burning, even deep into the night. Her life is entirely spent for the good of her loved ones.

44. Alongside such enterprise, which does not allow her to eat the “bread of idleness,” the woman knows how to be generous and supportive toward those in need. She does not keep her hand closed but extends it to the poor. She prepares garments for winter and cares, not only for the present but also for the future, anticipating it with extraordinary foresight.

45. The text highlights her ability in managing the household, goods, and work. The female presence is not secondary, hidden, or relegated to the background. Her skill of managing is praised. In the administration of goods, the husband’s role is practically eclipsed. The man of this woman is mentioned only for going to the city gate and appearing in the assembly of judgment.

II. New Testament

Premise

46. Some necessary anticipations. When Jesus enters the synagogue of Capernaum—according to Mark’s account—the people, after listening to him, report having heard a “new” teaching, not repetitive, something delivered with full and original authority. This light, which Mark places at the outset, seems to project over the entire course of the Gospel. The new and authoritative teaching also includes Jesus’ encounters with women; his interpretation of Mosaic norms, always in relation to women; and, finally, it is new even in the way of considering the role of women within the spousal relationship.

Women Who Followed Jesus

47. We know from the Gospels that a group of women followed Jesus and supported him out of their own resources (8:2–3). A careful consideration of the terms used shows that “to follow” does not refer merely to walking alongside the Master but has a broader meaning. The verb suggests a deeper dimension, indicating that these women shared in Jesus’ daily life, listening to his teaching and taking part in his activity. Their support of the Teacher with their own means indirectly points to the time they spent with him. It implies a lasting presence rather than a brief encounter. The evangelist thus subtly indicates that the presence of women among those who followed the Master was not occasional or temporary, but enduring: a stable relationship marked by a prolonged sharing of life and experience.

48. A fact that rightly confirms this is the presence of the names of these women. If the Gospel records their names, it means that these figures were recognized in the community and their authority was acknowledged by the first Christians. They were somewhat like the matriarchs of Israel, important and decisive presences. According to Luke, their names are: Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza (Herod’s steward), Susanna, and many others. Such a practice also diverges from the first-century Jewish mindset, when a female following a Teacher had significant repercussions in terms of public reputation. The style was different: firstly, the Master was mostly resident, that is, “confined” to the enclosure of his home; moreover, he preferred to devote himself to the education of children, always in the home environment, and rarely on the street (education almost never took on an itinerant character; from this viewpoint, Jesus represents an exception); finally, education did not include the presence of female disciples.

49. Luke does not present us with mere female figures relegated to the margins with only an assistive role. The reference is to true disciples who shared the Master’s daily life, who were esteemed by the first Christian community, and who had clear authority.

Women in the Infancy Narratives

Elizabeth, Mary's Cousin

50. Wife of Zechariah. Her name is theophoric and refers to the “oath of God.” Biblical references are found only in the third Gospel, specifically in Lk 1:5–25.39–66.

51. Luke’s account refers to several different contexts: *a)* the announcement of the birth of a son in old age, made to her husband Zechariah in the temple during the liturgical service; *b)* the visit of Mary, who, having been informed in advance by the angel, goes to her and stays with her for several months; *c)* the story of John’s birth and the story of the choice of name: both Elizabeth and Zechariah agree on the choice of John as the name for the child.

52. Weaving together Luke’s account are two hymns well known in Christian liturgical tradition: the *Magnificat* spoken by Mary and Zechariah’s *Benedictus*.

Anna

53. Alongside the old man Simeon appears the elderly widow Anna, an old woman described as a constant presence in the temple, entirely devoted to prayer and religious practices (in particular fasting). Her name means “grace” and is already found in the Old Testament, with a reference in Lk 2:36–38. Luke describes her as a “prophetess.” This is in line with the Old Testament, according to which the prophetic office is not only the exclusive preserve of men, but also of women (see Miriam, Moses’ sister, who is also considered a prophetess).

54. The third evangelist enriches the story with numerous details: he tells us that Anna had been married for seven years; that when Jesus was brought to the Temple, she was eighty-four years old; that she belonged to the tribe of Asher and that her father’s name was Phanuel. Such a wealth of detail is surprising when we compare the text of Lk 2 with other, much less detailed accounts.

55. All this woman’s activity is summed up in the words: “she spoke of him [*sc.* of the child]” (in Greek, the verb used is *laléō*). The use of the imperfect tense describes an action that is not punctual but continuous, expressing continuity in the past. The encounter with the child becomes an opportunity to bear witness and to speak at length about his mission of redemption. (cf. v. 38).

Women Present in Jesus’ Public Ministry

Mary of Magdala

56. The name refers to the city of Magdala. The term *migdol*, in Hebrew, means “tower.” The Gospels mention Mary Magdalene in several passages: Matthew (27:55–61; 28:1–10), Mark (15:40, 47; 16:1–11), Luke (8:2–3; 24:10), and John (19:25; 20:1–18).

57. We know that this woman was among those who had been healed by Jesus. According to the evangelist Luke, Jesus cast seven demons out of her (8:2). From that moment on, Mary Magdalene began to follow Jesus. We find her at the foot of the cross, and her presence is particularly significant in the texts about Jesus’ resurrection. In Mark, Jesus appears only to her. The account in John, on the other hand, is much richer and denser from a literary point of view. There is the story of Magdalene’s weeping in the garden; of this woman’s inability to recognize Jesus, mistaking him for the gardener. Her eyes, unable to recognize Jesus, manage to open themselves to the mystery. Jesus calls her by name and she immediately understands that the Master—whom she calls *Rabboni*—has truly risen.

58. In the subsequent traditional development, different aspects have been compensated for around Mary of Magdala: she has been identified with Mary, the sister of Lazarus; or she has been confused with the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet on the eve of the Passion, the sinner who remains anonymous in the Gospels. One tradition made her the bride at the wedding at Cana, where Jesus performed his first sign. In the Gnostic gospels found at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, she is described as Jesus’ favorite, and as a result of this preferential love, the disciples suffered from

envy. Such predilection is present not only in the so-called *Gospel of Philip*, but also in the text that bears her name, the *Gospel of Mary*, in which Mary Magdalene was entrusted with a unique teaching that no other apostle was given.

59. The apocryphal texts return to the theme of a special choice of Mary of Magdala by Jesus, a theme that has often given rise to misleading interpretations.

Martha and Mary, the Sign of Friendship

60. There are not many references in Scripture: one quotation in Luke, specifically in 10:38–42, and then in John, in 11:1–3, 5:19–40, and 12:2–8. The Gospels tell us that the two sisters are from Bethany. During Jesus' visit to their village, they invite him to their home to eat with them. In this context, Jesus utters the admonition, "Martha, Martha...". Mary takes the posture of listening, while Martha becomes the unwitting victim of her many tasks.

61. In John, the two sisters reappear in the account of Lazarus' resurrection. The passage is profoundly moving, charged with emotion. Martha kneels at Jesus' feet, weeping desperately over her brother's death. Jesus himself is deeply stirred. The crowd surrounds them, accompanying the scene and guiding the Master to the edge of the tomb. His consoling words ring out with power: "I am the resurrection and the life." In this moment, the two sisters become the very embodiment of friendship and welcome offered to the Master. Full of trust, even in the face of Lazarus' death, they never cease to place their faith in the work of Jesus, their friend.

The Woman Who Anointed Jesus

62. This character is important, since the story of the anointing of Jesus is present in all four Gospels. Here are the precise references: Mt 26:6–13; Mk 14:3–9; Lk 7:36–50; Jn 12:1–7. The texts are not entirely identical, and each adds details and particulars. For Luke, the woman was a "sinner." For Matthew and Mark, the anointing took place in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper. The time is specified: two days before Passover. For Luke, however, the episode took place before the beginning of public preaching. There are also notable differences in the plot of the story. The one thing they all have in common is that Jesus is sitting at the table. Then the differences begin: the woman anointed Jesus' head, according to Matthew and Mark, while for Luke and John, she anointed the Master's feet. In all the texts, the reaction to what the woman did is one that we could describe as sensational. Simon, who is hosting the banquet, criticizes it; Judas, pretexting that money is being wasted, criticizes it; the disciples, also scandalized by the excessive expense, criticize it. Jesus, taking the woman's side, rebukes those present, pointing out that not only did the woman's intentions show respect and concern for him, but that her gesture also transcended the immediate circumstance, foreshadowing and preparing for Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Samaritan Woman

63. The episode is recounted in John 4:7–42. The well is near Sychar, in the heart of Samaria. From Galilee, Jesus intends to travel to Judea and follows the route through the central hills. The place indicated in the text also has its own traditional significance. The fourth Gospel presents it as being near the land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. That is why it was called "Jacob's well." Jesus remains alone to talk with a woman, having previously sent his disciples into the city with the task of getting food. At the hottest hour of the day, the woman goes to draw water and there she encounters Jesus, who is sitting alone by the well. A conversation begins between the two, a dialogue woven with irony. When the disciples return, they are surprised to see Jesus talking to a woman, but Jesus' reaction does not suggest any kind of annoyance at talking to the Samaritan woman. The rest of the conversation focuses on the true worship of God, the only true "husband" for the woman.

64. In the story, alongside this sensitivity and openness to dialogue, the Master's attitudes of welcome, closeness, and hope toward the woman's human experience are remarkable. Equally

striking is how the woman is able to engage her fellow villagers, bringing them to meet Jesus and welcoming him into their home for two full days.

The Widow and the Adulteress

65. The Gospels attest not only to well-known female figures but also to a multitude of anonymous individuals, both women and men, who had the opportunity to experience the Master's mercy. Many episodes could be cited; as examples, we recall Jesus' encounters with a widow and with an adulteress.

66. The first passage is Lk 21:2–4. The context is the temple, where Jesus is teaching and observing how religious practices are carried out. He notices a poor widow approaching and putting a couple of coins, two copper coins, into the treasury. Jesus considers and appreciates the gesture. The woman has given more than anyone else. She shines as an example of generous poverty: she who had nothing to keep for herself for the next day manages to offer "her whole life" and give everything, without keeping anything for herself.

67. The episode of the adulteress takes place in the same context as that of the widow, i.e., in the temple in Jerusalem. This is the well-known account in Jn 8:3–11. Although the text confirms the scene of a real trial—where guilt is clear, evidence indisputable, and the assembly of elders ready to pronounce a verdict—Jesus not only overturns a fate that seemed sealed and inescapable, but also restores to the woman under accusation her true dignity, her worth as a beloved person, and her value as a human being.

Women Healed by Jesus: Simple References

68. There are numerous encounters attested to in the Gospels. In summary: in Lk 8:2, it is said that some women who followed him had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities; the Gospels speak of Peter's mother-in-law being cured of fever (Mt 8:14; Mk 1:30; Lk 4:38); there is the well-known episode of Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter, containing one of the *ipsissima verba Iesu (talit' kum)* (cf. Mt 9:18–19, 23–25; Mk 5:22–24; Lk 8:41–42, 49–56). Also embedded in the same story is the episode of the woman with the hemorrhage (cf. Mt 9:20–22; Mk 5:25–34; Lk 8:43–48); the Syro-Phoenician woman, who overcomes Jesus' initially caustic response, thereby revealing great trust in the work of the Master (cf. Mt 15:22–28; Mk 7:24–30); and the woman healed on the Sabbath, who had been bound by an evil spirit for eighteen years (cf. Lk 13:10–13, 16).

The Female Figure in Jesus' Teachings

69. In Jesus' teachings, certain paradigms inherent in the way of life and relationships of the early centuries within Semitic culture are abandoned. The Gospel manages to leave behind those social patterns and common opinions that characterized the development of ancient societies, especially with regard to women. With this in mind, it is worth noting that:

- a) Jesus seems to go beyond the mere category of "pure/impure." An eloquent example is his famous encounter with the woman suffering from hemorrhages.
- b) A transcendence can also be observed in the discussion about repudiation, where in the act of breaking the marital relationship, it seems that the possibility of adultery is not only related to the man who chooses to live with another woman, but also to the woman who goes to live with another man. It is as if, in the specific text, Jesus observes in the background that the woman was also given the opportunity to repudiate her husband. This was not only a male prerogative, which was in fact provided for by Mosaic law.
- c) As already mentioned, even in the case of female discipleship, Jesus seems to stand out from the practice of his time. Women were allowed access to teaching, service, and sharing the journey. They stand out in the Gospels for their fidelity to the Master, for

their ability to go to the Cross without running away or backing down, bearing witness, first among the first, to having seen the risen Jesus. Female discipleship reaches maturity in the first, fundamental, and original testimony of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

- d) There is also use of the female profile in many passages of Jesus' teaching, within the parables, for example: Lk 15:8–10 speaks of the anxiety of the woman who has lost her coin and, once she finds it, invites her friends to celebrate with her; of the yeast that female hands have been able to work into the dough, according to Mt 13:33 and Lk 13:20; and of the wise and foolish virgins in the parable intended to teach vigilance in Mt 25:1–13. These episodes not only highlight a sensitivity to the female world, but also make explicit Jesus' perspective, which leaves nothing realistically human unnoticed. He does not offer abstract or theoretical teachings; rather, he engages with concrete realities, speaking of existential experiences and authentic lived life. What occurs in a woman's life is not merely observed—it is elevated to the level of instruction about the Kingdom.

Female Figures in the Acts, the Letters, and Revelation

70. The list would be long, and we must limit ourselves to a few references. Some of these female figures are so well described that they stand out as iconic images that remain etched in the reader's mind. Let's start with the names found in the text of Acts:

- a) Acts 9:36–41: Tabitha, “gazelle,” who was brought back to life by Peter in Joppa.
- b) Acts 12:12–17: Rhoda, “rose,” who left Peter outside the door and ran to call the others in the house. Peter had just been freed from prison.
- c) Acts 16:1 (cf. 2 Tim 1:5; 3:14): Eunice, “good victory,” Timothy's mother. She was a Jewish woman who married a Greek. In his letters, Timothy highlights her for the instruction in Scripture she imparted to him.
- d) Acts 16:13–15: Lydia, “of Lydia / labor.” In Thyatira, near Ephesus, Lydia was a merchant of purple cloth. She heard Paul speak and preach in Philippi, was impressed, and chose to convert herself and her entire household.
- e) Acts 18:2–3, 26 (cf. Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19): Prisca/Priscilla, “ancient / primitive,” wife of Aquila, a resident in Rome. In the wake of Claudius' edict banishing Jews from the city, she and her husband took refuge in Corinth. Paul stayed with them and participated in their trade of tent-making. He also met Apollos there and instructed him in correct doctrine. The local Christian community gathered in their house.
- f) Acts 24:24: Drusilla, “bathed in dew,” wife of the Roman procurator Antonius Felix. She was the second daughter of Herod Agrippa I and the granddaughter of Herod the Great. She attended Paul's interrogation in Caesarea.
- g) Acts 25:13, 23, 30: Berenice, “victorious,” sister of Drusilla. She also witnessed Paul's interrogation in Caesarea and later became the mistress of Vespasian, and subsequently of Titus.

71. In the Letters:

- a) Rom 16:1–2: Phoebe, “pure.” Paul speaks of her as serving the Church of Cenchrea. Was she a deaconess? Paul recalls the strength of this woman who protected him as she

protected many other Christians along with him. In the opinion of some scholars, it seems that she was the one who delivered the letter to the Christians in Rome.

- b) 1 Cor 1:11: Chloe, “gazelle.” A member of the community of Corinth. It was she who informed the apostle of the divisions within the community, and it was thanks to this information that Paul decided to write to the Corinthians.
- c) Phil 4:2: Evodia and Syntyche. They are mentioned by Paul because of their disagreement. The apostle recalls that they fought for the Lord.
- d) 2 Tim 4:21: Claudia, “lame.”
- e) Phil 2: Apphia, “fruitful/abundant,” an active member of the community in Colossae.

72. In Revelation:

- a) Rev 12:1–6, 13–17. The woman clothed with the sun. The wondrous sign appearing in the sky is accompanied by the red dragon with ten horns. In the author’s intention, the woman represents the Church. “Later tradition gave the text a Mariological reinterpretation.
- b) Rev 17:1–24. The great prostitute. The name of this unclean woman, drunk with all kinds of prostitution, drunk with the blood of the saints, is Babylon, or “the great city that reigns over the kings of the earth.” Rome? The earthly city that aspires to power?
- c) Rev 19:7–9 (21:2, 9–10; 22:17). The New Jerusalem, descending from heaven, radiant in the beauty of a bride. This image encapsulates all the beauty of salvation and redemption brought to the height of its fulfillment.

The New Testament scriptures bear witness to a multifaceted female presence, strong and capable of protecting Christianity in its early stages of development. Among those listed above, some women emerge as the true souls of the community, while others dedicate themselves to forming others in the faith by teaching Scripture. Still others take the unity of the Church to heart, striving to overcome divisions and factions. Finally, the female figure, as contemplated in the apocalyptic context, rises to symbolize the feminine beauty of the entire Church.

APPENDIX II

IMPORTANT WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Premise

The following profiles aim to highlight, through concrete examples, how the charism of authority has been passed down throughout history through the lives, thoughts, and works of important female figures, whose testimony has not been obscured by time or oblivion.

From a methodological point of view, far from carrying out comprehensive and complete research, the aim is to provide for each historical profile: *a*) a series of essential information about their lives (some biographical notes); *b*) to show how the charism of authority animated and sustained their life journey.

1. Empress Helena (c. 248 – c. 329)

The details of the life of the woman best known as the mother of Emperor Constantine are uncertain. According to St. Ambrose, she was born into a humble family and from an early age devoted herself to the business of *stabularia*, or innkeeper. In this context, she met Constantius Chlorus, an officer in the Roman army, who made her the mother of the future emperor, her only son. As a woman and mother, she experienced years of isolation followed by years of service to the Empire. Once Constantine had attained the highest authority in the state, he called her to his side, granting her privileges and honors, which she used for the good of Christians and to care for them, especially the poor and needy. Tradition also remembers her journey to the Holy Land and her commitment to the construction of the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Basilica of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. On her return from Jerusalem, she died in 329, leaving behind a cult in both the East and the West that has been perpetuated and strengthened over the centuries.

Her life became an image of Christianity's strength (and no less of its triumph). Her influence expressed itself in her ability to overcome the obstacles that history placed in the way of the development of the Christian religion. On more than a few occasions, Helena managed to raise her voice even against the emperor himself. It has been written of her that she remains "a great soul and one of the most active founders of Christian society."¹⁷

2. Spiritual "Authority": Macrina the Younger and Theodora "Episcopa"

Another example of spiritual authority, which in some cases seems to take the form of a true *munus docendi*, is that of Macrina the Younger, sister of the more famous Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa.¹⁸ She devoted herself, as was customary at the time, to the ascetic life, founding one of the first women's monasteries in Cappadocia and distinguishing herself through works of charity—for example, during the famine that struck the region in 369. What makes her worthy of mention, however, was the spiritual and intellectual influence, if not authority, she exerted on both Basil and Gregory, as evidenced by the role the latter attributes to her in his dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection*,¹⁹ written after his brother's death, comparable to that of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*.

A further example of such "authority" can be found in Rome, inside the Basilica of St. Praxedes. In the chapel of St. Zeno, which preserves the column on which, according to tradition, Christ was scourged, a mosaic depicts four female figures: the Virgin Mary; the sisters St. Praxedes and St. Pudentiana; and Teodora (Theodora), shown with a square halo to signify that she was still

¹⁷ Cf. A.M. ROUILLON, *Sant'Elena* (I Santi, 030), Desclée & C, Rome 1908, 38.

¹⁸ Cf. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Vita Sanctae Macrinae*: PG 46, 960–1000.

¹⁹ Cf. ID., *De anima et resurrectione*: PG 46, 11–160.

alive when the chapel was constructed. What attracts attention is the inscription above this figure: “*Theodora episcopa.*”

The reason for this unusual title is not to be found in any presumed episcopal dignity held by this woman, although this has fueled some debate among historians: she is, in fact, the mother of Pope Paschal I (817–824), who built this chapel in her honor. At the time, *episcopus* was not yet used in a technical sense to refer to bishops, but had mainly an honorary value. Despite the scarcity of sources on the subject, it would seem reasonable to assume that Theodora enjoyed considerable prestige in the Roman Church of the time, presumably, if not for an official ecclesiastical role, at least for her influence on the Christian community.

3. Mixed monasteries in Ireland and England (5th-9th centuries)

Throughout history, there have been cases in which some female abbeys have effectively exercised what would appear to be governing power, enjoying, by privilege of the Holy See, complete exemption from the jurisdiction of bishops, thus constituting themselves as abbeys *nullius*.

A first case of interest is the phenomenon of mixed or “double” monasteries, typical of the monastic experiences that characterized the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon world in the early Middle Ages, thus affecting the territories of Ireland and Great Britain, as well as those of present-day Germany. These were mixed abbeys divided into two separate structures: one dedicated to monks, the other to nuns. What is noteworthy is that these monasteries were often governed by a single abbess, who therefore also had jurisdiction over the monks.

It suffices to mention two cases in this regard, whose importance is also attested to by the inclusion of two such abbesses in the canon of saints: St. Brigid of Ireland and St. Hilda of Whitby.

Brigid, born approximately in the middle of the 5th century, founded and governed one of the first Irish abbeys, in Kildare (about 60 km southwest of Dublin). The abbey, composed of two branches—one male and one female—was under her authority as Abbess and played a significant role in the evangelization of the island after the fall of the Roman Empire. Beyond the great prestige Brigid enjoyed during her lifetime, which made her one of the most venerated saints in Ireland, it is noteworthy that Kildare Abbey, through its abbesses, exercised quasi-episcopal jurisdiction over its region. A similar phenomenon would be repeated a few centuries later within the context of Benedictine monasticism for women, as will be discussed in the following section. Regarding Brigid in particular, it is important to highlight the aura of legend that surrounded her and shaped her popular hagiography in the centuries that followed. She was often portrayed as a female bishop, both in terms of her insignia and her prerogatives as Abbess. Historically, however, it seems exaggerated to equate *simpliciter* the Abbess of Kildare with a bishop; this likely reflects the “color” of folkloric narratives. Yet such portrayals also testify to the real authority these abbesses exercised over the local clergy, giving the impression of a power comparable to that of a bishop.

“Whitby Abbey in 7th-century Northumbria (northern England) presents a similar case; it was founded by Ilda, who belonged to a noble branch of the then royal family. Beyond its spiritual authority, the prestige of Whitby Abbey is also linked to the synod of 664, convened by the king of Northumbria, which brought the insular Church into alignment with the Roman Church. This, in addition to the aspects already noted for Kildare Abbey, highlights the political significance of the Abbesses of Whitby. The abbey, however, was abandoned in the 9th century during the Viking raids. It was later refounded in the 11th century, only to be permanently suppressed in 1540 during Henry VIII’s campaign to dissolve monastic institutions in England.

4. Abbesses with de facto authority also exercised over clerics (12th-18th centuries)

Some time after the experiences of mixed monasteries in the British Isles, cases of episcopal-like authority were also recorded on the European continent, in the context of Benedictine female monasticism and its reforms.

A notable early example of this is the Cistercian monastery of Santa Maria Regina in Las Huelgas (Burgos, Spain), founded in 1180, whose abbess had responsibility for several villages and exercised genuine canonical jurisdiction. For example, she received the solemn professions of the monks who owed her obedience; she gave permission for the celebration of sacraments and for preaching in the churches and parishes subject to her; she issued letters of *dimissoria* for ordinations and marriage licenses; she could impose canonical censures, pass judgment on priests, and even appoint parish priests. Such jurisdiction was exercised until the mid-19th century.

Another well-known case concerns the Benedictine Abbey of Conversano (Bari, Italy), which, from 1266—the year in which the nuns took over from the Cistercian monks, inheriting their privileges—until the 18th century, exercised effective jurisdiction over the secular clergy of the area, who were required to obey the abbess according to a ritual with strong episcopal overtones (for example, the abbess sat on a throne with a canopy, wearing a mitre and carrying a crosier). This government could also be exercised through vicars, as attested by a *Motu proprio* of St. Pius V in 1569.²⁰ However, at the beginning of the 18th century, the Sacred Congregation of Bishops and Regulars began to limit the power of the abbesses of Conversano, until the King of the Kingdom of Naples, Joachim Murat, abolished all their privileges in this area.

Las Huelgas and Conversano are the two most relevant examples of women exercising some power of government, even over clerics. To these could be added the names of other abbeys which, albeit in a less conspicuous manner, nevertheless exercised some of the prerogatives of the hierarchy: the Abbey of San Pedro de la Puellas (Barcelona); in Germany, the Abbeys of Elten, Quedlinburg, and Essen; the Abbey of Santa Giulia (Brescia, Italy). In these cases, benefiting from papal exemption from episcopal jurisdiction, these abbesses had the power to confer benefits and appointments on clerics, as well as to impose certain canonical penalties, such as suspension from office.

5. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

She was born in Rhenish Hesse during a historical period marked by great struggles and difficult living conditions. From a young age, she received a special education that allowed her to express herself in a wide range of talents, ranging from the fields of study (philosophy, theology, cosmology, and natural sciences, medicine, botany, pharmacology) to the more strictly artistic ones (music, poetry, art, drama). She was also committed to converting the clergy through intense preaching. By the will of Pope Benedict XVI, she was declared a Doctor of the Church. She left behind countless writings that earned her the nickname “Teutonic prophetess.”

She is remembered as a strong woman capable of reconciling and mediating between priests, bishops, and hierarchical superiors; the recognition that cultural commitment was no longer and not only the exclusive preserve of men; the strength of a woman capable of governing and calling everyone to a responsible lifestyle. In her “are expressed the most noble values of womanhood.”²¹

6. Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373)

The daughter of a Swedish aristocratic family, she is known not only as the founder of the Order of the Most Holy Savior and for her marked mystical sensitivity, but also for her ability to have a profound impact and concrete influence on the political events of her time. The authority of her life led her on several occasions to express herself with words of appeal to secular rulers as well as popes and bishops. The strength drawn from the mystical roots of her spiritual journey led her to frequently emphasize obedience to God’s will. She traveled extensively, including throughout Italy—especially the south—spreading her message and invitation to prayer wherever she went. In the final stage of her earthly life, she also journeyed to the Holy Land. Upon returning, she

²⁰ Cf. S.J. LEDERHILGER, “Abadesa,” in J. OTADUY – A. VIANA – J. SEDANO (eds.), *Diccionario General de Derecho Canónico*, I, Pamplona 2012, 54–55.

²¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Letter* (July 10, 2012).

died in Rome in 1373. Canonized in 1391, she was proclaimed patroness of Europe by St. John Paul II in 1999.

“The figure of Brigida, wife, mother, pilgrim, founder, writer, attentive to transmitting divine messages, suggests the image of the woman-Church, invested with a unique ecclesial mission for the Christians of her time”.²²

7. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380)

Catherine of Jacopo di Benincasa was born in 1347 in Siena, the daughter of a cloth dyer. From an early age, she matured in her religious vocation, but, lacking the necessary dowry to enter a monastery, she approached the Dominican tertiaries (known as “mantellate”), who, in 1363, after some difficulties related to the young age of the candidate, welcomed her into their order. Catherine soon devoted herself to a public mission: to offer the Church a sure guide in turbulent times. Her political activity, surprising for a woman of humble origins and, above all, illiterate, took place mainly through a rich correspondence (368 letters, many of which were written under dictation) addressed to the popes and concerning both religious and social life, as well as moral and political issues affecting the Church, the empire, and the kingdoms of the time. Committed to mediating between the city of Florence, which had been struck by a papal interdict, and the Holy See, Catherine traveled to Avignon in 1376 to speak with Pope Gregory XI. In the schism that broke out after his death (when some cardinals elected Clement VII as antipope), Catherine sided with the legitimate pope, Urban VI, addressing decisive words to the cardinals and obliging the faithful to recognize him. She died in Rome in 1380. She was proclaimed a saint in 1461 by Pope Pius II, patron saint of Rome in 1866 by Pope Pius IX, co-patron saint of Italy in 1939 by Pope Pius XII, recognized as a Doctor of the Church in 1970 by St. Paul VI, and co-patron saint of Europe in 1999 by St. John Paul II.

Her commitment to peace and reconciliation seem to be the dominant themes of her spiritual journey. Her ability to call the clergy and rulers to a sober lifestyle, less dependent on various forms of vice, balancing admonition and consolation, advice and warning, made her a courageous and daring woman, capable of loving the suffering Christ (*Christus patiens*) in a suffering Church (*Ecclesia patiens*). Catherine’s appeal resonates with particular relevance today and stands as a model and testimony of high spiritual life.

8. Joan of Arc (1412-1431)

This figure combines holiness and heroism. The “Maid of Orleans” is still considered an important French heroine, as well as a testimony to the holiness of her time. She was born in Burgundy during a turbulent period in relations between France and England, later known as the “Hundred Years’ War.” She defended the Dauphin, Charles VII, against the ambitious claims of Henry V, who had proclaimed himself king in Paris, by leading the French armies and defending the city of Orléans. The mission of army commander, entrusted to her by the Dauphin, was revealed in a vision, accompanied by the assurance of success through special heavenly assistance.

The particular story of this young girl also includes the deception plotted by her enemies, the trial marked by significant injustices and traps set in a tendentious manner on the theological front, with the bloody finale of her death sentence and public burning at the stake on May 30, 1431, in Rouen, when Joan of Arc was 19 years old.

Pius X proclaimed her blessed in 1909, followed by her canonization in 1920 by Pope Benedict XV. She was declared patron saint of France in 1922. The liturgical memorial of Joan of Arc is celebrated on May 30.

Although she was a woman of arms, her treatment of the enemy, avoiding bloodshed, inviting them to lay down their arms rather than engage in direct combat, in an attempt not to inflict harm on the enemy’s body, made her one of the forerunners dedicated to the ‘humanization of war’.

²² A. ANDERSSON, *Brigida di Svezia. Santa, profeta e patrona d’Europa*, Città Nuova, Rome 1997, 111.

Even during her trial, her choice of frankness and sincerity, together with her patient attitude inspired by Christian fortitude, portray her as an authentic woman, extraordinarily courageous and passionately devout.

9. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Born in Avila in 1515, her secular name was Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda Dávila y Ahumada. She was one of the greatest Spanish mystics and a reformer of the Carmelite order. In 1536, struck by a “great crisis,” she entered the Carmelite monastery of the Incarnation, against her father’s will; there, she took her vows in 1537. Her spiritual growth was rapid in a woman of high intellectual culture, a lover of music, poetry, reading, and writing. Starting in 1562, the year of the foundation of the first (small) monastery of St. Joseph, Teresa would go on to establish eighteen monasteries throughout the Iberian Peninsula during her lifetime. Together with St. John of the Cross, the reform also spread to the male branch of the order. In 1582, during a journey, she died in Alba de Tormes. Proclaimed blessed in 1614 by Pope Paul V and canonized in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV, Pope Paul VI declared her a Doctor of the Church in 1970, thus becoming the first woman in Christian history to hold this title.

Teresa focused on the dynamism of grace and described the spiritual journey of the soul that sets out on the path of God. A marked sensitivity can be felt when she places love for the Church, the feeling *cum ecclesia*, at the center of her reflection. The last words of her life were: “I die a daughter of the Church.” She stood up to prelates and theologians, confessors, and high religious authorities in strenuously defending the work of reform: “In a misogynistic world such as that of the 16th century, Teresa of Jesus knew how to mark her boundaries and assert her status as a woman, wherever she was. Her feminism is proverbial. She is the one who chooses men. In Medina del Campo, at the beginning of her foundations, she noticed the young John of the Cross: an excellent hire! In Beas, she was fascinated by Jerónimo Gracián, who would become her man, the man who could control the men in the male foundations. / [...] Teresa of Jesus was a founder of women and men, which was unusual at that time.”²³

10. Louise de Marillac (1591-1660)

Born in Paris. Together with St. Vincent de Paul, she was the founder of the “Daughters of Charity.” In 1625, upon the death of her husband, she decided to devote her life to generous service to the poor and needy. Her spiritual growth was based on her friendship with both St. Francis de Sales and the aforementioned St. Vincent de Paul. There were no limits to her charitable activity. Her frequent choice to act through popular missions allowed her to encounter the most wounded and humble people. The birth of confraternities eager to follow her example attests to the charismatic strength of this strong and determined woman. Her motto is still fascinating today: “do good well.” This resulted in a true pedagogy of charity, consisting of prayer, listening, formation, and concrete works (education of foundlings, relief for war victims, assistance to the sick at home and in hospitals, service to convicts and the mentally ill, education for poor girls, etc.). In 1646, the Confraternity of the “Daughters of Charity” received its first ecclesiastical approval from the Archbishop of Paris, followed by the approval of King Louis XIV in 1657. Louise died in 1660, a few months before her mentor, spiritual guide, and friend Vincent. She was beatified in 1920 by Benedict XV and canonized in 1934 by Pius XI. John XXIII proclaimed her patron saint of social works in 1960.

Louise de Marillac represents a novelty in the history of the Church with regard to charitable service. In particular, her approach to charity seems unique: to prepare a group of consecrated women, no longer confined to a monastery, but capable of going “anywhere” to devote themselves to the service of the needy. Seeing God in the poor, the sick, and orphans seems to be the best and

²³ C. ROS, *Teresa d’Avila. Coraggio al femminile* (Donne e uomini nella storia 44), Paoline, Milan 2012, 8-9. A sign of this unique relationship with the male world is Pope Sixtus V’s assessment of Teresa in 1590, after her death: “a woman named Teresa of Jesus... whom they honor as the mother and founder of sixty monasteries and convents, more of men than of women.”

most genuine insight underlying her style, which bases all behavior on the “mysticism of the poor,” expressed in her words: “In the name of God, sisters (...) be very affable and gentle with your poor. You know that they are our masters and that we must love them tenderly and respect them greatly.”

11. Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695)

She was born in San Miguel Nepantla, near Mexico City, then capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain. She combined an intelligence of faith, which made her an important theologian, with an aesthetic sensibility that made her a poet, a woman of letters, and a lover of song and the arts. From an early age, she displayed a strong desire for knowledge, which led her, around the age of nine, to study Latin and compose her first rudimentary religious work. At thirteen, Juana became lady-in-waiting to Vicereine Leonor, wife of Viceroy Antonio Sebastián, Marquis de Mancera, bringing her into contact with the most prominent jurists, philosophers, theologians, and poets of the region, all welcomed in the viceroy’s cultural salon. In 1666, at just fifteen, she brilliantly passed an examination organized by the viceroy himself before forty scholars—experts in various disciplines—who subjected her to a rigorous series of questions.

In 1669, she was admitted to the convent of the Sisters of St. Jerome, where she remained for the rest of her life. Her home became a true cultural center, where she wrote compositions of all kinds: in addition to theological and philosophical writings (for which she deserves to be named the first theologian of Latin America), She composed occasional poems, love poems, and other works, employing the Gongorian and conceptualist style, according to the trends of the Baroque era, while maintaining her own original style. She also undertook to set up a large library, earning her the title of ‘Tenth Muse of Mexico’.

Her life was not without conflict and trials, even with ecclesiastical authorities. When she was ordered to sell the library and distribute the proceeds to the poor, she obeyed. While caring for a sister in her convent, she became infected and died in 1695.

Her literary output, the subject of numerous debates among posthumous scholars, allows her to be considered a sort of feminist *ante litteram*, a true icon of emancipation and even a true myth for the nation.

The lack of knowledge considered a true sin of heresy; love for the Holy Scriptures; her choice of study as a service to the needy and as a form of charity, made her one of the first women to work for women’s right to intellectual life, in explicit contrast to her times. It has been said of Sister Juana: “Men who deal with her fall in love with her. She is a great role model for women” (I. Leonard).²⁴

12. María Antonia de San José (1730-1799)

“Mama Antula,” born María Antonia de Paz y Figueroa, was born in 1730 into a noble family in the province of Santiago de Estero (Villa Silípica), then the Viceroyalty of Peru, now Argentina.

Inspired by Ignatian spirituality, from a young age she began to gather a group of friends around her. With them, during the years of the suppression of the Jesuit order from Spanish domains, she began to spread the practice of the Ignatian exercises. At first in private homes, then, as the initiative spread, the first retreat house for spiritual exercises was purchased in Buenos Aires, called “beatorio” (blessed) because of the blessed spiritual atmosphere that reigned there. That was in 1792. She was proclaimed blessed in 2016 and saint in 2024 by Pope Francis.

Her charisma as a guide is found in her desire to help and advise souls through the pious practice of the Ignatian exercises. She thus appears as a true friend of the people, a generous and compassionate mother to vulnerable people such as farmers and workers, turning her contacts

²⁴ N.M. SCOTT, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz und die Liebe zum Wissen,” in W. KASPER (ed.), *Sanft und Rebellisch*, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1990, 118.

with important personalities, rich and powerful men, to the favor of her cause.²⁵ The Jesuits themselves considered her charisma a worthy substitute during their absence and a providential “wake-up call” to remember them.

In the funeral eulogy in honor of María Antonia, a few months after her death, Fr. Julián Perdriel, O.P., found sublime words to emphasize her greatness: “a heroic woman who aroused admiration, a woman pious in her virtue, a woman of spirit in her fervor, useful in her undertakings, necessary in her rare constancy in carrying them out, apostolic in her zeal for the salvation of souls.”²⁶

13. Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821)

She was the first American saint and a pioneer in the field of women’s education. Born in 1774, she was baptized in the Episcopal Church. She had five children with her husband William Seton. After her husband’s death, thanks to the friendship of an Italian family, she traveled to Italy, where she began a gradual journey toward Catholicism. The year 1805 marked her conversion, when she received the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confirmation. After moving to Baltimore, thanks to the wise advice of a priest of French origin, Ann decided to start a school for girls, and in a short time she founded a religious community called the “Daughters of Charity of St. Joseph.” This marked the beginning of a period of great missionary zeal with the establishment of new educational institutions. She died in Emmitsburg in 1821. John XXIII proclaimed her blessed in 1958, and she was canonized a few years later, in 1975, by Pope Paul VI.

Elizabeth’s extraordinary nature can be summarized as follows: “In the history of the United States and the Catholic Church, Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton is a unique figure. In her many roles as wife, mother, companion, and friend, widow, educator, and founder of a religious community, Elizabeth is a particularly significant model of womanhood for the universal Church. In short, E.A.S. was a woman of faith, inspired by the Word of God and filled with the Holy Spirit.”²⁷

14. Francesca Cabrini (1850-1917)

She was born in 1850 in a village in the province of Lodi. From a young age, she felt drawn to her vocational calling. At the bishop’s invitation, she became a sister at the Casa della Provvidenza in Codogno, caring for poor girls, and took her vows in 1877. Nevertheless, as she continued to aspire to missionary work, she accepted the bishop’s proposal and, in 1880, founded the Institute of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Codogno. From there, an extraordinary adventure began. Providence took her to New York, where she began her apostolic work by founding schools for Italian immigrants. She founded institutes in Panama, Argentina, Brazil, and Europe. Her sphere of action increasingly expanded: needy people of all kinds, from schools to prisons, were all welcomed and integrated by her. Nurseries, schools, boarding schools, orphanages, retirement homes, and hospitals were built. Francesca Cabrini crossed the Atlantic 28 times. There were no limits to her movement: from New York to Chicago; from the Andes to Buenos Aires. She was tireless and worked at an impressive pace. She died in Chicago in 1917. She was proclaimed blessed in 1938 and saint in 1946 by Pope Pius XII, and in 1950 she was invoked as the patron saint of emigrants.

Francesca Cabrini, a “heroine of modern times,” stood out for her extraordinary apostolic and missionary fruitfulness on a vast continent. She also became a reference point for modern social service and used the principles of American democracy to integrate Italian emigrants into society. Francesca’s tenacity can be summed up as follows: “she offers us [...] an image of herself in continuous growth, both in human awareness and spiritual depth, a model of female emancipation

²⁵ Cf. M. EZCURRA, *Vida de sor Maria Antonia de La Paz*. Posthumous edition copiously annotated by Fr. Justo Beguiriztain, S.J., Sebastian de Amorrortu e hijos, Buenos Aires 1947, 7.

²⁶ J.M. BLANCO, *Vita documentada de la sierva de Dios Maria Antonia de la Paz y Figueroa fundadora de la Casa de Ejercicios de Buenos Aires*, Sebastian de Amorrortou & hijos, Buenos Aires 1942, 382.

²⁷ M. CELESTE, *Ann Seton. Vita della prima santa di America (1774-1821)*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2001, 348.

on a social level and of essential lucidity on a spiritual level. An extraordinary model not only for the sisters of her congregation, but for all modern women”.²⁸

15. Maria Montessori (1870-1952)

World-renowned Italian educationalist. She invented an innovative educational method that is still used today in different educational settings. Born in 1870, she had a talent for studying and enrolled at the *La Sapienza* Faculty of Medicine in Rome. She was the third Italian woman to graduate in a predominantly male environment. She developed an interest in pedagogy, taking courses in experimental psychology, gaining experience in hygiene, psychiatry, and pediatrics, doing internships in hospitals, traveling extensively, and discovering authors with creative ideas in the field of psychology. She also obtained a degree in philosophy, becoming increasingly involved in the field of pedagogy. Thanks to her work in the clinic, she came into contact with English and French scientists, taking an interest in the re-education of so-called feral children. In 1907, she opened the first Montessori school in Rome, called the *Casa dei Bambini* (Children’s House), where she applied the results of her research, shaped in part through her work with children with developmental delays. In 1909, the first Italian edition of her book *The Montessori Method: Scientific Pedagogy Applied to Child Education* was published, becoming the foundational text for her subsequent pedagogical work and for Montessori courses around the world. In 1913, she visited the United States, arousing interest in North America. From 1914 to 1924, she lived in Spain, opening the first Spanish *Casa dei Bambini* in Barcelona in 1915 to apply the method to religious education. Her pedagogical success gave rise to an entire “Montessori Movement.” She was also committed to the emancipation of women, participating in several women’s congresses and advancing, among other things, the issues of equal pay and women’s suffrage. She died suddenly in Noordwijk in the Netherlands while organizing a trip to structure the school system in Ghana.

Although she was not involved in Catholic apostolate, the influence of her method on ecclesial pedagogy can still be traced. Many of her insights were accepted by the Italian Episcopal Conference for catechetical renewal in Italy. In 1947, Montessori wrote a touching letter in which she expressed her faith in children: “We must consider children our collaborators. They have one part of the work, we have another. Their task is to give us the first light of true love. Human society can only change if adults and children collaborate. [...] True education involves not only the child being educated, but also the adult who is being transformed”.²⁹

16. Armida Barelli (1882-1952)

Best known as co-founder of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, the Missionaries of the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Work of the Kingship. She also directed the Catholic Action Youth Movement, distinguishing herself for her talents. She attended her early studies in Switzerland, where she chose to devote herself to social work. She became a Franciscan tertiary in 1910, after forming a significant friendship with Father Agostino Gemelli. In addition to the above, in 1922, with the help of the Catholic Action Youth Movement and Bishop Eugenio Massi, she established the Benedict XV Institute in northern China to support Chinese girls with a religious vocation, also managing to set up a number of charitable organizations. Her political commitment led her to fight for women’s suffrage. Struck by illness, she dedicated the last years of her life to an apostolate of suffering. She died in the province of Varese in 1952. Pope Francis will add her to the list of the blessed in 2022.

In her numerous initiatives, especially in the field of women’s advancement, throughout her life she proved to be innovative, emancipated, open-minded, intelligent, forward-thinking, and courageous, often crossing the boundaries imposed by customs that were no longer appropriate for the times and seeking to bring out and realize the potential of her own gender. She herself

²⁸ L. SCARAFFIA, “Note bibliografiche e presentazione,” in F.X. CABRINI, *Lettere di san Francesco Saverio Cabrini 1868-1889*, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Rome 1996, 31.

²⁹ P. GIOVETTI, *Maria Montessori. Una biografia*, Edizioni Mediterranee, Rome 2009, 138.

distanced herself from a sentimental, devout religiosity, centered for women on sacrifice and self-denial, in favor of a deep faith, based on liturgy and theology, aware of a mission to serve the kingdom of God in every area of social life. Her activity in the Church traces a true trajectory of liberation of the potential for good, lying in the hearts of people, in the service of the common good.

17. Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

Born in New York, she distinguished herself early on for her social activism, defending the poor and promoting social justice. Baptized in the Episcopal Church, she later renounced her Christian faith after coming into contact with radical and socialist thought, immersing herself completely in political activism and working on the editorial staff of *The Call*, a socialist-inspired newspaper.

While in prison in 1917, she had the opportunity to read the Bible. This was the beginning of a journey that slowly led her to conversion. From her autobiography, we know that it was the poor, the faces of those who suffered from a lack of everything, who showed her the true face of Christ. However, she maintained a critical attitude towards a “bourgeois Christianity” that lacked attention to the marginalized in society. In 1933, together with Peter Maurin, a social activist of French origin, she founded the Catholic Worker Movement, based on the newspaper *Catholic Worker*, a movement of workers with principles of non-violence and hospitality for those whom society had reduced to poverty. She later opened a house of hospitality in the poor neighborhoods of New York. The movement soon spread to other cities in the US, Canada, and Great Britain, creating a network of independent organizations, all affiliated with the *Catholic Workers*. She died in New York in 1980. In 2000, Pope John Paul II conferred on her the title of Servant of God, while Pope Francis mentioned her in his speech before the US Congress in 2015 as an example of a woman committed to helping the needy.

On the first centenary of her birth, Cardinal O’Connor clarified the “revolutionary” approach of this emblematic figure: “Dorothy Day saw the world at large turned into a huge commercial marketplace where money means more than anything else. She saw people turned into tools of commerce. She saw the family treated as a marketplace. She reminded us frequently enough that the Church herself could become simply a marketplace. She loved the Church, and she was immensely faithful to the Church. She had no time for those who attacked the Church as such, the Body of Christ. [...] But she recognized that we poor, weak human beings—people like you, people like me—could turn the Church into nothing but a marketplace.”³⁰

18. Madeleine Delbr el (1904-1964)

She was born in Mussidan, New Aquitaine. She spent her life helping workers in need. At the age of 17, she wrote a manifesto against God, in which she stated, among other things: “God is dead... long live death.” Something began to change in her when the boy she fell in love with decided to leave everything behind and enter the Dominican Order. It was probably in 1924 that she definitively converted to Catholicism. She graduated and began working as a social worker. In 1933, together with two other women, she settled in Ivry-sur-Seine, placing herself at the service of the local parish and dedicating herself to a community of workers living under difficult conditions. This community, which had no official name, came to be identified as “11 Rue Raspail” or simply “11.” In her vision, the Church must be “pioneering” and able to go “into the streets,” for it is precisely there—in the streets—that holiness is found and where God calls us to act. Her commitment proved decisive both during the years of the Second World War and in the postwar period. Her voice was also heard during the preparatory phase of the Second Vatican Council. She died in 1964. In 2018, Pope Francis recognized her heroic virtues and proclaimed her venerable.

³⁰ J. O’CONNOR, “On the idea of holiness and Dorothy Day. Homily on the centenary of the birth of Dorothy Day (November 9, 1997),” *Catholic New York*, Nov. 13, 1997, 13; <https://catholicworker.org/on-the-idea-of-sainthood-and-dorothy-day/>

Madeleine offers a prophetic anticipation of the Second Vatican Council. She promotes reflection on the role of the laity within the Church, together with the new concept of the *People of God*, the mystical body of Christ: “Her love for the Church [holy and sinful] never abandoned her: attentive to the questions of her time, but also to the answers of the magisterium and culture, she offers, through her writings, the image of an era of great ferment and gestation for the Church, an era that would culminate in the Second Vatican Council.”³¹

The legacy of her life can be described as follows: “If Madeleine left ‘a legacy’, it is neither a new movement nor a new form of spirituality. [...] The only conclusion that can perhaps be drawn is that Madeleine Delbr el’s life was born of the very mystery of Christ’s love and was built around him. In him she saw the only love, the source of all creativity, irreducible to any system and beyond all boundaries.”³²

19. Wanda P oltawska (1921-2023)

Born in Wojtasik in 1921. Polish psychiatrist, writer, activist, and friend of Karol Wojty a. As a young woman, she joined the scout movement. She took part in the national defense in 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. She was arrested, tortured, and imprisoned in the Ravensbr uck concentration camp, where she endured pseudo-medical experiments and forced labor. She was freed a few days before the end of the war. The postwar years were marked by her studies at the Jagiellonian University, where she formed a friendship with the young professor Karol Wojty a. These were also the years in which she married Andrzej P oltawski. She pursued an intense academic career, participating in numerous conferences and courses, publishing primarily in the fields of ethics and morality, and producing significant writings on pedagogy and experimental research. She died in Krakow in 2023.

Described as a “woman of steel” (F. Grignetti), she lived through some of the darkest chapters of the last century. Yet, rather than succumbing, she devoted her life to understanding the nature of the man capable of committing evil in history.

In 2010, F. Grignetti described Wanda (then still alive) as an “emancipated woman”: “She is an unyielding and severe woman. She does not like the new times, today’s life, which she says somewhat contemptuously is ‘too inclined towards comfort’. [...] In her own context, however, Wanda Poltawska is an example of an emancipated woman. Just look at her personal history: a degree in medicine in the late 1940s, an independent personality, full-time political and pastoral commitment, a mild-mannered husband who is ridiculed for devoting himself to his wife’s cause [called a ‘widower’], [...], almost despotic control over young seminarians, a frank relationship with the Vatican hierarchy.”³³

Conclusions

At the end of this gallery, which offers some portraits of women who have played a leading role within the Church, it is legitimate to identify some points of interest which, when duly taken into account, can shed light on the discussion regarding the possible leadership role of women in various ecclesial contexts.

- 1) First of all, it is important to emphasize the fundamental theological fact: the faith that unites these women, their personal bond with Christ, often referred to as spouse, friend, brother. A level of relationship capable of giving strength and guidance even in difficult moments of life, in times of darkness and suffering.
- 2) A great love for the Church. Although at times their temperament marks a distance from the hierarchy’s way of thinking, while remaining obediently faithful, the strength of

³¹ E. NATALI, *Madeleine Delbr el. Una chiesa di frontiera* (Teologia viva 66), EDB, Bologna 2010, 21.

³² C.F. MANN, *Madeleine Delbr el. Una vita senza frontiere*, Gribaudi, Milan 2004, 237.

³³ G. GALEAZZI – F. GRIGNETTI, *Karol e Wanda* (Saggi), Sperling & Kupfer, Milan 2010, 208.

these women has been expressed in favor of and for the love of the Church. Such a bond, both affective and sentimental at the same time, has never allowed divisions and definitive ruptures to arise, but has always been capable of rebuilding the edifice of ecclesial communion in a positive sense.

- 3) A constant need for reform and the building of something new. The diagnosis of these noble spirits never stopped at the hardships and difficulties, but dug into the ground, purified it, plowed it, and sowed it in view of a new harvest. The proactive aspect, translated concretely into initiatives, realities, constructions, community foundations, works of concrete service and relief for human frailties, etc., was at the center of their understanding of their charism and its development in service to their brothers and sisters.
- 4) Love for God and the Church spontaneously translated into love for one's neighbor, especially those most in need. Hence the sensitivity and concern of these women towards the poor, the sick, prisoners, the wounded, the condemned, the marginalized, women, children, and the elderly, in all the different fields in which they worked.
- 5) A final aspect, of a relational nature, highlights how the bond of friendship with a male figure helped many of them to develop a mature vision of their spiritual journey, paving the way for the proper implementation of the charismatic gifts they had received.

The examples of "enlightened women" in history are able to show the good that the Spirit accomplishes in the course of human events, placing these testimonies as lamps to illuminate the path of the faithful.

APPENDIX III

CURRENT TESTIMONIES FROM WOMEN WHO PARTICIPATE IN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CHURCH

1. This Appendix aims to offer a summary of the varied material received by the Dicastery (testimonies, reflections, articles, etc.) regarding the current situation of women’s involvement in leadership roles in the Church. These contributions allow us to depict a rich and complex situation, which cannot be reduced to a simple recipe to be applied once and for all, but show how this journey must be rooted in the history and culture of each particular Church. On the one hand, the valuable contribution that many women already make in pastoral, catechetical, and liturgical activities is clearly evident; on the other hand, there is also a perception of a certain tension in some ecclesial contexts and reports of various difficulties. This tension calls for careful discernment that listens to the various voices present within the ecclesial community, while remaining faithful to tradition and open to the signs of the times. The text is divided into two sections: the first outlines, without claiming to be exhaustive and on the basis of the material collected, some of the principal situations in which certain leadership roles in the Church are already entrusted to women; the second focuses on the Roman Curia and the innovations introduced by the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*.

Some Attempts at Innovation

2. A significant development affecting the French-speaking world in Europe—especially France, but also Belgium and Switzerland—is the appointment, in an increasing number of dioceses, of a “*Déléguée générale*” (General Delegate). This innovation should be understood within a broader framework of reform, which does not concern women per se, but rather the entrusting of diocesan roles of pastoral responsibility to lay faithful—a development that is particularly important in the European context.

3. In this case, as in others that will be evoked, these are examples of “bottom-up” reform, in which a diocesan bishop establishes a juridical figure, not provided for in the current juridical system, in response to the actual needs of the local Church, with the intention of taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the Code of Canon Law. It follows that the prerogatives of this innovative figure are not defined in a clear and definitive way, but are, so to speak, tailored to particular contexts, which also explains a certain variability in the name by which this figure is referred to – general delegate, episcopal delegate, co-moderator of the curia, etc.

4. It is important to emphasize the term used: delegate. This clearly indicates that the general or episcopal delegate is distinct from, for example, the vicar general. The latter holds ordinary vicarious power (i.e., power attached to the office by law); in the case of the general delegate, however, the juridical instrument is the delegation by the diocesan bishop, whereby power is granted to the person and not through the office (cf. CIC, can. 131). This delegated authority is therefore exercised by virtue of the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, in accordance with the guidelines set out by the bishop in the letter of mission.

5. Referring to some concrete examples will help to better define this figure, in the knowledge that new ones may always be added as time goes by. One of the first dioceses in France to name a woman to the office of General Delegate was the Diocese of Nantes, explicitly taking as its model the reform of the Roman Curia brought about by *Praedicate Evangelium*.³⁴ In this case, the General Delegate assists the bishop in the governance of the diocese alongside the vicars general, enabling her to participate actively in the various diocesan councils and *équipes*. Her mission is purely pastoral and consists primarily of coordination tasks: she evaluates the organization of the diocese’s pastoral “centers” and their collaboration with the parishes, and is

³⁴ Cf. L. PERCEROU, “Nouvel office de délégué général. Message de Mgr Laurent Percerou, Évêque de Nantes (May 23, 2022)”: <https://diocese44.fr/nouvel-office-de-delegue-general/> (accessed: Sept. 29, 2025).

thus able to propose to the bishop any necessary interventions to ensure that the pastoral centers can better respond to the needs of evangelization. In addition, the delegate is responsible for following up on various pastoral initiatives in conjunction with the relevant diocesan offices, both to support them and to raise awareness of them. Finally, she oversees certain administrative tasks on behalf of the vicars general or the diocesan bishop. Notably, the first appointment as General Delegate in the Diocese of Nantes was made to a woman.

6. Other dioceses that have such a figure are Troyes, Saint Briec, Montauban, and Lille in France, which have also established a corresponding office. In Belgium, the Archdiocese of Malines-Brussels appointed a woman General Delegate who carries out her service together with a priest. In other regions, still within French-speaking Europe, other juridical solutions have been implemented, but always with the intention of enhancing the participation of the lay faithful, and in particular women, in leadership roles in local churches: in Switzerland, since 2021, some diocesan bishops have appointed lay representatives in place of episcopal vicars (albeit with different functions), but as personal appointments indicating a function, without the establishment of a specific office.

7. However, this experience is not limited to French-speaking Europe, but also includes some innovative attempts in Austria. For example, on March 1, 2025, the first female episcopal vicar, a theologian, began her ministry in the area of “synodality and the development of the Church” in the Diocese of Gurk-Klagenfurt.³⁵ This appointment is, in fact, part of a series of initiatives that have long been underway in Central European dioceses, where women hold leadership positions in administration and pastoral care, often in teams (as in the Archdiocese of Vienna), under the direction of a priest or, more recently, working alongside ordained ministers at the diocesan level.

8. The material collected shows that the first efforts to follow this path date back several decades, in the Archdiocese of Adelaide in Australia, and mainly concerned the period between 1986 and 2001.³⁶ This is, in fact, a unique case in the history of the Church in that country,³⁷ but it did not arise out of nowhere. Rather, it benefited from the fruitful work carried out in previous years in preparing to receive the reform movement initiated by the Second Vatican Council.³⁸ Between the 1980s and the early 2000s, women were actively involved in executive government tasks—understood as positions of collaboration with the diocesan ordinary—which were not markedly different from those that characterize the more recent role of the General Delegate. These innovations were part of a synodal ecclesiological renewal *ante litteram*, which envisaged including the diocesan bishop’s collaborators in pastoral commissions rather than assigning them to isolated roles, thereby fostering a more collegial—or, if you will, synodal—model of leadership. This naturally required that the responsibilities of these collegial bodies of pastoral governance be clearly defined. Furthermore, there was an explicit awareness of the distinction between priestly authority and the various tasks involved in diocesan governance, which allowed ample space for participation by lay people—and in particular, women—while remaining within the possibilities provided by canon law. This experience has continued, to some extent, with the appointment of women to the office of chancellor or other senior administrative roles, reflecting a practice that has become relatively widespread in the English-speaking world, with examples in Australian dioceses such as the Archdiocese of Sydney, and in the United States.

³⁵ Cf. PRESS OFFICE OF THE DIOCESE OF GURK, Bishop Marketz appoints Austria's first female vicar general: Pastoral theologian Velik-Frank takes on leadership responsibility for “Synodality and Church Development” (Feb. 26, 2025): <https://www.kath-kirche-kaernten.at/dioezese/detail/C2488/bischof-marketz-ernennt-oesterreichweit-erste-bischoeffliche-vikarin-pastoraltheologin-velik-frank-uebernimmt-leitungsverantwortung-fuer-bereich-synodalitaet-und-kirchenentwicklung> (accessed: Nov. 11, 2025).

³⁶ Cf. J. TRINIDAD, “Women’s Participation and Collaboration in Ecclesial Leadership in the Local Church of Adelaide,” in *The Australasian Catholic Record* 102 (2025), 32–53.

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 34.

³⁸ Cf. P. FOX, “Power and Leadership of Women Within the Catholic Church in Australia,” in *The Australasian Catholic Record* 95 (2018) 12.

9. Obviously, attempts to broaden women's participation in the life and leadership of the Church, often to compensate for the shortage of priests, are not limited to the so-called Western Churches. Pope Leo XIV himself was able to offer his valuable testimony regarding a style of synodal participation *ante litteram* that characterized Peru many years ago.³⁹ For example, in the 1980s, in the Diocese of Chulucanas, probably as the first attempt in this direction in all of Latin America, a pastoral program called "*Nueva Imagen de Parroquia*" was established with the intention of creating small ecclesial communities in which the parish was not understood as an institution providing services, but as an authentic community in which to practice solidarity and mutual aid.⁴⁰ To this end, the active participation of the faithful in parishes was promoted, including in pastoral leadership roles, for example by forming groups of lay people for this purpose, while the parishes themselves were divided into smaller units precisely to facilitate this community experience,⁴¹ so that the parish could "walk alone" even in the absence of priests. This style, deeply in line with the Augustinian method, was then proposed again by the then Msgr. Prevost in his Diocese of Chiclayo (and previously experimented with in Trujillo), entrusting various types of responsibilities to groups of lay people, often led by women, offering a fruitful ecclesial model for the whole of northern Peru that is still valid today.⁴²

10. Another recent example, still in Latin America, comes from Cardinal Leonardo Ulrich Steiner, Metropolitan Archbishop of Manaus, Brazil, who reported to the Dicastery that not only in his archdiocese, but also in numerous other Brazilian dioceses and prelatures, the majority of ministers of the Word and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist are women—just as in many other contexts, women take on the task of coordinating local pastoral activities.⁴³

11. Another noteworthy example comes from nearly the other side of the world: the Philippines, which, as is well known, is the only Asian country with a Catholic majority—although this does not translate into a corresponding abundance of vocations. On the contrary, there is widespread disaffection with religious practice. In this context, in the Diocese of Koolokan, led by Cardinal Pablo Virgilio S. David, in an area of the Manila metropolitan suburbs marked by widespread urban poverty, some religious women have been appointed to pastoral positions in diocesan missions among the poorest of the poor, working alongside—and in some cases replacing—priests. Added to this is the rich contribution of lay movements and basic ecclesial communities, which help to compensate for a serious shortage of clergy.⁴⁴

Testimonies from the Roman Curia

12. In the final years of Pope Francis' pontificate, following the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, an initial process of reform was launched to increase the presence of women within the Roman Curia. The testimonies collected by the Dicastery—voices of women who love the Church and wish to serve it generously—reveal, alongside inevitable struggles, numerous signs of grace and hope that merit recognition as manifestations of the Holy Spirit's action in the Church of our time. The overall picture that emerges is naturally one of a reality still in evolution, from which, however, some significant progress can be discerned. This progress reflects a growing ecclesial awareness of the value of women's presence, though it still calls for further reflection on the ecclesial reciprocity between men and women.

13. First, there is an increasingly qualified presence of women in areas that have traditionally been male-dominated, with the assumption of roles of responsibility across various Dicasteries. Many testimonies express gratitude for the sensitivity of superiors who have recognized and promoted talents regardless of gender, fostering work environments marked by genuine

³⁹ The various references are taken from E.A. ALLEN, *León XIV. Ciudadano del mundo, misionero del siglo XXI*, Debate, Barcelona 2025.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 66–67.

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 96.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, 153.

⁴³ Cf. L.U. STEINER, Letter to the Dicastery (Mar. 10, 2025).

⁴⁴ Cf. P.V.S. DAVID, Verbal testimony at Feria IV on October 22, 2025.

collaboration and mutual respect. This is a further indication that when ecclesial structures genuinely open themselves to female participation, positive results follow for the entire Church. At the same time, a certain disparity remains in some areas, which should not be seen as an insurmountable obstacle but rather as an invitation to deepen discernment. The challenge lies in overcoming the logic of competition so deeply rooted in certain work cultures, with the aim of creating a climate of solidarity and collaboration. It is evident that women—with their unique histories, experiences, skills, and sensibilities—can enrich decision-making processes and internal relationships within the workplace. From an organizational perspective, this greater differentiation enables a more fruitful, multilateral approach to the complex issues that characterize contemporary society.

14. The recent appointments of women to positions of responsibility in some Dicasteries constitute a prophetic sign of both symbolic and practical significance. They represent a first step toward opening new spaces for participation, acknowledging that the capacity for governance and discernment is not the prerogative of the male gender alone. The testimonies of the women involved reveal a deep sense of responsibility for the roles they have assumed, as well as an awareness of the historical significance of the moment the Church is experiencing. Their presence is gradually transforming organizational culture, opening new perspectives and demonstrating that synodality can be translated into concrete practices of co-responsibility. At the same time, reports indicate that certain attitudes marked by clericalism persist: women, even in positions of responsibility, sometimes struggle to be involved and listened to on equal footing with male colleagues, particularly in interactions with ordained ministers. Nevertheless, many women have noted a growing recognition among male leaders of the valuable contributions women make in curial roles. In numerous cases, superiors have understood that women's participation is not a concession or an adaptation to passing cultural trends, but responds to a profound evangelical need—a genuine sign of the times. Indeed, this awareness may be the most significant change, as it is a prerequisite for lasting structural transformation. Related to this point, there are frequent calls for a revision of canonical norms that restrict certain decision-making processes to ordained ministers, thereby limiting the service of women engaged in such tasks. It is important to emphasize, however, that the contribution of women to the Roman Curia is not confined to top positions—although these are particularly visible—but extends to service at every level of curial institutions, all of which must be valued.

15. The testimonies regarding the vocational and spiritual dimension of curial service are particularly significant. Many women express a deep sense of calling to serve the universal Church through their work in the Roman Curia, experiencing this commitment not merely as professional activity, but as an authentic ecclesial mission, rooted in baptismal grace and nourished by the Eucharist and personal prayer. This spiritual awareness provides the most solid foundation for the presence of women in the Church's central bodies, showing how curial service can and should take the form of genuine ecclesial diakonia. These testimonies also reveal profound engagement in the Church's mission and a sense of belonging that transcends contingent difficulties, grounded in the certainty of participating in the common vocation of all believers to expand the Kingdom of God. This awareness imbues the daily work of these women with an undeniable spiritual dimension.

16. In terms of professional skills and academic qualifications, many women serving in the Roman Curia possess a level of preparation that often excels in rigor and depth. Encouragingly, this expertise is increasingly recognized and valued, with women being entrusted with tasks requiring specific skills in diverse areas: from theology to canon law, from communication to administrative management, and from historical research to diplomacy. The growing and increasingly visible presence of women—not only in the Roman Curia—contributes to enriching theological and pastoral reflection with unique perspectives, capable of addressing dimensions of the experience of faith that are sometimes overlooked from exclusively male viewpoints. This qualified contribution is a gift of the Spirit, which the Church is called to acknowledge with gratitude.

17. In this sense, it is useful to point out, in terms of formation and professional growth, the presence of significant opportunities that allow women to acquire high-level skills and to keep themselves constantly up to date. There are ongoing formation programs, opportunities to participate in conferences and seminars, and access to specialization courses that foster professional and spiritual development. Several testimonies express appreciation for the Superiors who have encouraged and supported these formation paths, recognizing their importance for the integral growth of the person, not only on a professional level. Ongoing formation is also an opportunity for ecclesial communion, fostering the exchange of experiences and the building of a network of relationships.

A Look to the Future

18. From a theological and ecclesiological perspective, the growing presence of women in the Roman Curia and in many other ecclesial contexts challenges the Church to consider its capacity to incarnate the Gospel fruitfully, without diminishing the richness inherent in the multiplicity of charisms. The baptismal vocation, which constitutes all the faithful as a priestly, prophetic, and royal people, finds in women's participation a significant expression that transcends distinctions linked to Holy Orders. These testimonies further illustrate that the complementarity between men and women—repeatedly affirmed by the Magisterium, though not always fully embraced in theological debate—does not imply subordination, but reciprocity and mutual enrichment, oriented toward the common good of the Church. The presence of women contributes to a fuller manifestation of the maternal and spousal face of the Church, essential dimensions of ecclesial identity that must also be reflected in structures of governance and service.

19. Hence, looking to the future, the testimonies gathered on the involvement of women in the leadership of various ecclesial realities clearly represent seeds of hope, while also demonstrating what is already possible in the Church today. Many women express confidence in the potential for further progress, trusting in the action of the Holy Spirit and in the commitment of those—both men and women—who believe in the need for a more synodal and inclusive Church. There is a sense of living in a time of grace, in which the Spirit calls the Church to renew itself in order to be more faithful to the Gospel and more credible in its witness to the contemporary world (cf. Mt 5:16).

20. In light of these findings, it is more appropriate than ever to continue with confidence along the path already undertaken, consolidating the progress achieved and deepening reflection in view of new opportunities for participation. At the cultural level, formation should be promoted that fosters a full awareness of the baptismal dignity of every believer and the value of legitimate diversity as an expression of ecclesial richness. At the structural level, efforts should be made to create conditions that further support women's participation in decision-making processes, valuing the skills and experience they have acquired. At the pastoral level, the presence of women should be lived and presented as a sign of the motherhood of the Church, capable of inspiring hope and manifesting God's tenderness toward his people.

21. In conclusion, what emerges is a reality rich in signs of hope and positive dynamics that merit recognition and encouragement. The growing presence of women is a gift of the Spirit, which the Church is called to welcome with gratitude and discernment. The progress achieved offers encouragement to continue along this path, with the awareness that such a journey—when guided by authentic evangelical motivations—yields abundant fruits of communion and pastoral effectiveness. The challenges that remain should not overshadow the many positive developments, but rather inspire renewed commitment toward greater equity in ecclesial relationships. The contribution of women is not an accessory, but a necessary service to the community of the faithful, rooted in the sacrament of Baptism and expressed in the diversity of charisms. Fully appreciating this contribution will render the Church more beautiful, more credible, and more faithful to her vocation as the universal sacrament of salvation.

APPENDIX IV
The Marian Principle and the Petrine Principle.
A Critical Look

1. One of the themes emerging in the documents examined by Group 5 concerns the concept of the “Marian principle,” often associated with the related notion of the “Petrine principle.” Since the second half of the 20th century, four popes have invoked these “principles” in various contexts, for example, to illustrate the relationship between the charismatic and hierarchical dimensions of the Church.

2. The “Marian principle” is also sometimes used to refer to the contribution of women in the Church. In this latter usage, in particular, the concept of the “Marian principle” has attracted some criticism.

3. All things considered, this appendix presents various perspectives that emerged from the documentation available during the study of this question.

The Development of the “Marian principle” and of the “Petrine principle”

4. The so-called “Marian principle” is often attributed to Hans Urs von Balthasar, who developed it in the context of his ecclesiological writings. The Swiss theologian based the “Marian principle” on Mary’s “*fiat*” at the Annunciation (cf. Lk 1:38), as her complete openness to the Word, as one who has “the will to make her own being, withdrawing into openness, the field of a possible encounter between human need and divine grace.”⁴⁵ Although Mary’s total and active “*fiat*” to the Word of God is “unrepeatable in its perfection,”⁴⁶ Balthasar ultimately sees it not as a “private event” but as something that the Mother of God “pronounced ‘on behalf of the whole human race’.”⁴⁷

5. While Balthasar speaks of the universal dimensions of Mary’s “*fiat*,” he considers Mary as the model of the Church’s response to God’s will: “The Church begins with the yes of the Virgin of Nazareth, which synthesizes the faith of Israel and brings it to an immeasurable completion: unreserved readiness to accept, in complete freedom, which makes available the entire spiritual and physical fruitfulness of woman.”⁴⁸ Mary is a “real symbol” of the Church because of her form of active faith and her availability to God, which is normative for the whole Church, and she is “the interior figure of the *communio*” of the Church.⁴⁹ Her permanent and continuous role in relation to the Church allows us to speak of her “*fiat*” not only as an event, but also as a principle in relation to the Church.

6. If Mary represents a “principle” characterized by the reception of the Word of God, for Balthasar, Peter represents a second principle, linked to the exercise of office and ministry in the Church. In particular, the Swiss theologian sees the “Petrine principle” as an indication of the ministerial and hierarchical dimension established by Christ in Peter, which he identifies as a “masculine ministry, received by Peter [...] from the ‘Prince of the pastors,’ Jesus, to feed his flock.”⁵⁰

7. For Balthasar, the link between these principles and femininity and masculinity, respectively, is not accidental, as the theologian explains: “just as the incarnation of the Word required the yes of a woman—who represents in embryo an ecclesial communion—so the human

⁴⁵ H. U. VON BALTHASAR, *Il complesso antiromano*, Nuovi saggi Queriniana 20, Brescia 1974, 207.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ ID., *Esistenza sacerdotale*, Brescia 2010, 36.

⁴⁸ ID., *Nuovi punti fermi*, Già e non ancora 201, ²Milan 1991, 109–10.

⁴⁹ ID., *Il complesso antiromano*, Nuovi saggi Queriniana 20, Brescia 1974, 207–08.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

figure of the Word corresponds to its realization in an objective and social, ‘institutional’ form that remains accessible over time”⁵¹—a role associated with Peter.

8. Although distinct, according to Balthasar, both “principles,” the Marian and the Petrine, are indispensable and “complement each other and highlight their true purpose.”⁵² For this reason, he can affirm that “Mary and Peter are two real symbols of the one and only Church.”⁵³ Not only are both necessary, but, importantly, the Basel theologian affirms that Mary’s faith, “who loves and hopes, in her feminine availability to the divine, divine-human Spouse, *is coextensive with the masculine principle*, inserted into the Church, of ministry and sacrament.”⁵⁴ However, the Swiss theologian clarifies that, in the order of holiness, the *Marian* dimension has priority: “The Marian element in the Church embraces the Petrine without claiming it for itself.”⁵⁵

9. Although the “Marian principle” refers fundamentally to the *whole Church*, in some writings Balthasar explicitly links this principle also to questions concerning the roles of women and men in the Church. While he classifies the tasks of leadership and “the authority of consecration and absolution” as “masculine,” the Swiss theologian considers the Church itself to be “feminine, Marian,” with “a perfectly feminine fruitfulness.”⁵⁶

10. With this, he argues that “the priest, as male, stands in the realm of Peter: he shares in the mission of the apostle, which is to represent the Lord before the Church and the community (which are ‘feminine’ in gender).”⁵⁷ However, even in this case, Balthasar is clear that the “Marian principle” still takes precedence, since “in the Gospel, Peter’s role becomes relevant much later than Mary’s; the origin of the Church does not lie in the calling of the apostles, but in the little room in Nazareth, when the Son’s yes to the Father became one with the mother’s yes to the incarnation of the Son.”⁵⁸

11. For Balthasar, this is linked to the way she lived her “*fiat*” from the Annunciation and throughout her life, and to her motherhood towards the Church. In the unique role she plays in the life of the Church, Mary teaches the apostles how to fulfill their role in fidelity to Christ. For this reason, “she does not need to give us any special sign to make us look to the Son rather than to her: her spirit of dependence manifests this. She is therefore able to show the apostles themselves and their successors how it is possible to be at once a fully effective presence and a ‘service fully accomplished.’ For the Church was already present in her before men were invested with office.”⁵⁹

12. Therefore, Balthasar clarifies that, when considered from this perspective, it can be understood that the “Petrine principle” serves to guarantee unity and ensure the sacramental mediation of that holiness which the Church already possesses in its Marian form: “As an envoy, he is destined for the holy, loving, Marian Church,”⁶⁰ and even in that case he adds that “Peter remains a member of the Marian Church.”⁶¹

From this, we can see the fundamental contours of the two Balthasarian “principles,” which serve to highlight, on the one hand, Mary’s perfect receptivity and the motherhood of the Church, and, on the other hand, the office and institution carried out by Peter and his successors.

⁵¹ ID., *Esistenza sacerdotale*, Brescia 2010, 47.

⁵² ID., “Che è la Chiesa?”, in *Sponsa Verbi. Saggi teologici*, II, Milan 2015, 14.

⁵³ ID., *Esistenza sacerdotale*, Brescia 2010, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 144 (italics added).

⁵⁵ ID., *Nuovi punti fermi*, Già e non ancora 201, Milan ²1991, 112.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁷ ID., *Esistenza sacerdotale*, Brescia 2010, 53–54.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 54. For this reason, Balthasar continues: “the ministerial (masculine) Church is not directly opposed to the loving (feminine) Church” (*ibid.*).

⁵⁹ ID., *Punti fermi*, Milan 1972, 130–31.

⁶⁰ ID., *Esistenza sacerdotale*, Brescia 2010, 50.

⁶¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 57.

The Use of the “Marian Principle” in the Magisterium of the Recent Pontiffs

14. The “Marian principle,” as formulated by von Balthasar, has been adopted and interpreted by subsequent popes, who have consistently incorporated it into their teachings from the latter half of the 20th century to the present.

Popes St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI

15. In his 1987 Christmas address to the cardinals and prelates of the Roman Curia, St. John Paul II spoke of how Mary—through her divine motherhood, virginal integrity, and total docility to the Holy Spirit—became an “archetype of the Church.” The Church therefore strives to live “this authentic ‘Marian profile’ [...] this ‘Marian dimension’.”⁶² In this context, St. John Paul II, directly quoting Balthasar’s ideas, made the Swiss theologian’s insights his own, using them to teach about the relationship between this “Marian dimension” and the “Petrine dimension” of the Church:

*The Marian dimension of the Church emerges from the similarity of tasks with regard to the whole Christ [...]; the Church, like Mary, also lives in grace, in submission to the Holy Spirit, interprets the signs and needs of the times in his light, and advances on the path of faith in full docility to the voice of the Spirit. In this sense, the Marian dimension of the Church precedes the Petrine dimension, while being closely united and complementary to it. Mary, the Immaculate One, precedes all others [...] because their threefold “munus” aims at nothing other than to form the Church in that ideal of holiness which is already preformed and prefigured in Mary. [...] This link between the two profiles of the Church, the Marian and the Petrine, is therefore close, profound, and complementary, even though the former is prior both in God’s plan and in time, as well as being higher and more preeminent, richer in personal and communal implications for individual ecclesial vocations.*⁶³

16. With this, St. John Paul II invited his co-workers in the Roman Curia, in the context in which he delivered this speech, to “preserve and enhance the Marian dimension of their service to Peter,” always “consciously in this symbiosis between the Marian and the apostolic-Petrine dimensions.”⁶⁴ The Holy Father exhorted the leaders of the Curia, teaching that “attention to Mary and her example brings more love, tenderness, and docility to the voice of the Spirit, so that each person’s dedication to the service of Peter’s ministry may be enriched interiorly.”⁶⁵

17. St. John Paul II took up the reflection on the “Marian principle” again in his 1988 Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, stating that “Although the Church possesses a ‘hierarchical’ structure, nevertheless this structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members. [...] The Second Vatican Council, confirming the teaching of the whole of tradition, recalled that in the hierarchy of holiness it is *precisely the ‘woman’*, Mary of Nazareth, who is the ‘figure’ of the Church. She ‘precedes’ everyone on the path to holiness [...]. In this sense, one can say that the Church is *both ‘Marian’ and ‘apostolic-Petrine’*.”⁶⁶

18. Pope Benedict XVI continued his predecessor’s reflections on the “Marian principle” and the “Petrine principle.” Taking up a Balthasarian theme, the Holy Father, in a homily addressed to the new members of the College of Cardinals in 2006, stated that “everything in the Church, every institution and ministry, including that of Peter and his Successors, is ‘included’ under the Virgin’s mantle, within the grace-filled horizon of her ‘yes’ to God’s will. [...] The theme of the relationship between the Petrine principle and the Marian principle is also found in the symbol of

⁶² JOHN PAUL II, *Discorso ai cardinali e ai prelati della Curia romana ricevuti per la presentazione degli auguri natalizi* (22 dicembre 1987), n. 2: *Insegnamenti* X/3 (1987), 1484.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, n. 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ ID., *Apost. Lett. Mulieris dignitatem* (Aug. 15, 1988), n. 27: AAS 80 (1988), 1718 (original italics); English: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

the *ring* which I am about to consign to you. [...] So the two dimensions of the Church, Marian and Petrine, come together in the supreme value of *charity*.”⁶⁷

19. We can see, therefore, how St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI took up Balthasar’s reflections on the “Marian principle” of the Church, focusing on its understood in an ecclesiological sense rather than a sexual one, namely that the Marian dimension precedes and founds the Petrine dimension. Furthermore, Mary’s “*fiat*” and docility to God’s will are valid for all members of the Church, including those in roles of authority.

20. It should also be noted that this concept was not invoked in informal speeches, but in formal speeches by the Successor of St. Peter to the leaders of what Balthasar would identify as the “Petrine dimension” of the Church: such as the heads of the Roman Curia, by St. John Paul II, and the members of the College of Cardinals, by Pope Benedict XVI, in both cases entering into the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* or the volumes of their respective *Insegnamenti* (Teachings).

Pope Francis

21. The documentation examined by Group 5 also confirms a clear and consistent use of the concept of the “Marian principle” by Pope Francis. In general, Francis has continued the reflections of his predecessors on the “Marian” dimension of the Church, but he has modified the emphasis. Instead of linking it to the entire Church, he often considered the term “Marian” as referring to women.

22. This is evident in his Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* of 2020, in which he sees the contribution of women as part of the “Marian” face of the Church, which, he emphasizes, also touches on the very structure of the Church: “Women make their contribution to the Church in a way that is properly theirs, by making present the tender strength of Mary, the Mother. As a result, we do not limit ourselves to a functional approach, but enter instead into the inmost structure of the Church. In this way, we will fundamentally realize why, without women, the Church breaks down [...]. This shows the kind of power that is typically theirs.”⁶⁸

23. In this sense, Pope Francis understands the “Marian” dimension of the Church as that which refers specifically to the *feminine*, linked to the *presence and contribution of women in the life of the Church*. In a 2022 interview, Pope Francis elaborated on this interpretation of the “Marian” dimension of the Church in relation to the specific contribution of women within it. Explicitly referring to the language of the “Marian principle” and the “Petrine principle,” Pope Francis explained:

*The Church is woman. The Church is a bride. We have not developed a theology of women that reflects this. The ministerial dimension, we can say, is that of the Petrine Church. [...] The Petrine principle is that of ministry. But there is another principle that is even more important, which we do not talk about, and that is the Marian principle, which is the principle of the feminine in the Church, of women in the Church, in which the Church sees itself reflected because it is a woman and a bride. A Church with only the Petrine principle would be a Church that could be thought of as reduced to its ministerial dimension, nothing more. Instead, the Church is much more than a ministry. It is the whole people of God. The Church is woman. The Church is bride. For this reason, the dignity of women is reflected in this way.*⁶⁹

⁶⁷ BENEDICT XVI, Homily during the Eucharistic Celebration with the new Cardinals in the ordinary public consistory for the creation of new Cardinals (Mar. 25, 2006) (original italics); English: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060325_anello-cardinalizio.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

⁶⁸ FRANCIS, Apost. Exhort. *Querida Amazonia* (Feb. 2, 2020), n. 101: AAS 112 (2020), 269; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

⁶⁹ ID., “Il Papa: la polarizzazione non è cattolica, cerchiamo sempre l’armonia delle differenze,” *Vatican News* (Nov. 28, 2022): <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/papa/news/2022-11/papa-francesco-intervista-rivista-america-stati-uniti.html>.

24. Here we can note how the Holy Father defines the “Marian principle” precisely as “the principle of the feminine in the Church, of woman in the Church, in which the Church sees itself reflected because it is woman and bride.”⁷⁰ With this in mind, Pope Francis reiterated in the preface to a study on von Balthasar’s “principles,” published in 2024, that “we have not listened enough to the voice of women in the Church” and that “the Church still has much to learn from them.”⁷¹

25. Pope Francis took up these reflections in an interview in September 2024. Making explicit reference to von Balthasar’s thought and his articulation of the “Marian principle” and the “Petrine principle,” Francis used this as a basis for arguing that women have an essential role in fulfilling a specific “Marian ministry” in the Church:

*the Church is woman; she is the Bride of Jesus. [...] Woman is equal to man. In fact, in the life of the Church, woman is superior because the Church is feminine. Regarding ministry, the mysticism of woman is greater than ministry. There is a great theologian [Hans Urs von Balthasar] who studied this, asking which is greater: the Petrine ministry or the Marian ministry. The Marian ministry is greater, because it is a ministry of unity that involves others; the other is a ministry of management. The maternal nature of the Church is the maternal nature of a woman.*⁷²

26. It can be noted that, for Pope Francis, Balthasar’s “Marian principle” refers to a specifically feminine task in the Church, linked to the “mysticism of woman” and the “motherhood of the Church,” which is “a motherhood of woman.” This feminine and Marian dimension is distinct from the “ministry of leadership, of guidance,” which belongs to the “Petrine ministry.”

27. In fact, all these elements of Pope Francis’s thinking on the “Marian principle” and the “Petrine principle” are evident in his address to the Plenary of the International Theological Commission in 2023. In that context, and with explicit reference to von Balthasar’s thought, the Holy Father explained to the members of the Commission his own convictions regarding the theological reasons why greater involvement of women in the Church’s theological reflection is desirable:

*Women have a capacity for theological reflection that is different from that of us men. [...] The Church is woman. And if we do not understand what a woman is, what a woman’s theology is, we will never understand what the Church is. One of the great sins we have committed is to “masculinize” the Church. And this cannot be resolved through the ministerial route; that is something else. It can be resolved through the mystical route, through the real route. Balthasar’s thinking has given me a lot of insight: the Petrine principle and the Marian principle. This can be debated, but the two principles exist. The Marian principle is more important than the Petrine principle, because there is the Church as bride, the Church as woman, without masculinizing herself. And you may ask yourselves: where is this argument leading? Not only to tell you to have more women here—that is one thing—but to help you reflect. The Church as woman, the Church as bride.*⁷³

28. In light of this, Pope Francis has stated that appreciation of the feminine nature of the Church implies that women have a permanent role in it, which must be maintained so that the properly feminine nature of the Church can shine forth. In this context, we see once again how

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ ID., “Preface,” in “*Smaschilizzare la Chiesa*”? *Confronto critico sui principi di H.U. von Balthasar*, Paoline, Milan 2024, 5.

⁷² ID., Press conference during the return flight from the apostolic journey to Luxembourg and Belgium (Sept. 29, 2024): *L’Osservatore Romano* (= *Oss. Rom.*) (Sept. 30, 2024), 7; English: <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/in-flight-press-conference-29-september-2024-27249> (Mar. 5, 2026).

⁷³ ID., Address to the members of the International Theological Commission (Nov. 20, 2023); English: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/november/documents/20231130-cti.html> (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

the Holy Father has linked the “Marian” dimension to the principle that “in the life of the Church, woman is superior because the Church is feminine”⁷⁴ and then applied it to women within the Church. While the “Marian principle,” as discussed above, concerns the motherhood of the Church, the “ministry of leadership, of guidance,” for Pope Francis, belongs to the “Petrine principle.”⁷⁵

26. From the above, it is clear that Balthasar’s thinking on the “Marian principle” and the “Petrine principle” has played an undeniable and indispensable role in Pope Francis’ understanding of the feminine nature of the Church, the essential importance of women’s contribution to the life of the Church, and how these contributions are essentially distinct from the roles played in the “Petrine” dimension of the Church. Given the consistent and insistent manner in which Pope Francis has taught on this subject, some have proposed that it constitutes part of his magisterium.⁷⁶

Pope Leo XIV

30. The use of the concept of the “Marian principle,” invoked by the three previous popes, has already been taken up by Pope Leo XIV.

31. Indeed, shortly after his election, the Holy Father, in his Homily for the Jubilee of the Holy See in 2025, reflected on the Marian dimension of the Church. Speaking about the Apostles in the Upper Room at Pentecost, Leo XIV emphasized that the *Acts of the Apostles* “presents Mary’s motherhood towards the nascent Church, an ‘archetypal’ motherhood that remains relevant in every time and place” and that manifests itself as a “fruitfulness” in the Church that is “always linked to the grace that flowed from the pierced heart of Jesus, together with blood and water, symbolizing the sacraments (cf. *Jn* 19:34).”⁷⁷ Moreover, precisely because “the fruitfulness of Mary and of the Church are inextricably linked,”⁷⁸ the Holy Father observed that:

*In the Upper Room, thanks to the maternal mission she received at the foot of the cross, Mary is at the service of the nascent community [...]. In this text too, the apostles are listed by name and, as always, Peter is the first (cf. v. 13). But he himself, in truth, is the first to be supported by Mary in his ministry. In the same way, Mother Church supports the ministry of Peter’s successors with the Marian charism. The Holy See experiences in a very special way the coexistence of the two poles; the Marian and the Petrine. It is precisely the Marian pole, with its motherhood, gift of Christ and of the Spirit, that ensures the fruitfulness and holiness of the Petrine pole.*⁷⁹

32. In this context, the concept is reestablished mainly from an ecclesiological perspective, considering the “Marian principle” in relation to the entire Church, including those who are visibly involved in the Petrine ministry in the Roman Curia. This recalls the way St. John Paul II

⁷⁴ ID., “Il Papa: la polarizzazione non è cattolica, cerchiamo sempre l’armonia delle differenze,” *Vatican News* (Nov. 28, 2022): <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/papa/news/2022-11/papa-francesco-intervista-rivista-america-stati-uniti.html>.

⁷⁵ ID., Press conference during the return flight from the apostolic journey to Luxembourg and Belgium (Sept. 29, 2024); English: see above, n. 72.

⁷⁶ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium* (Dec. 7, 1965), n. 25: AAS 57 (1965), 29–30; English: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026), which indicates that the authentic teachings of the Roman Pontiff “may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking;” CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Instruction *Donum Veritatis*, nn. 17, 23, and 24: AAS 82 (1990), 1557–58, 1559–61.

⁷⁷ LEO XIV, “Homily for the Mass for the Jubilee of the Holy See (June 9, 2025):” *Oss. Rom.* (June 9, 2025), 2; English: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250609-omelia-giubileo-santa-sede.html> (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; quoting H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Cordula ovverosia il caso serio*, Brescia 1969, 45–46. LEO XIV, “Homily for the Mass for the Jubilee of the Holy See (June 9, 2025):” *Oss. Rom.* (June 9, 2025), 2.

referred to the “Marian principle” in his 1987 address to the heads of the Roman Curia, nearly forty years earlier.

33. From the contributions of the popes considered above, it is evident that—despite differing emphases—the two principles of the Church, the “Marian” and the “Petrine,” have also been recognized by the last four popes as part of their teaching on the nature of the Church and on the relationship between its hierarchical and charismatic dimensions. Given the repeated reference to the Marian principle by several successive popes, including in solemn contexts, it has been proposed that it now forms part of their respective magisteria.⁸⁰

Critical Considerations and Other Viewpoints

Critical Perspectives

34. Although the concept of the “Marian principle” has been repeatedly invoked in papal teaching in recent decades, it cannot be ignored that various criticisms have been raised against it.

35. Some have criticized the “Marian principle” because it is based on a gender stereotype that is too reductive in relation to the concrete experiences of women and men. These critics argue that all generalizations about the difference between the gifts of men and women in the Church should be avoided, since, like all human beings, women are very different from one another and cannot easily be placed into rigid categories.

36. Furthermore, along the same lines of criticism, it has been observed that various attributes associated with Mary—and, consequently, with women in general—such as responsiveness, are not characteristics exclusive to women but can also be applied **to men, and vice versa**. In fact, as has been pointed out, Jesus in the Gospels shows tenderness and care, and St. Joseph, as Pope Francis emphasizes in his Apostolic Letter *Patris corde* (2020), manifested tenderness, welcome, and hospitality.⁸¹ Therefore, within the family as well, the roles of men and women “can be flexibly adapted.”⁸² Therefore, they argue, one should not impose on sexual difference what belongs to all people by nature, or what can be true for all by grace.

37. Others have argued that the gendered reading of submission, with Mary, and authority, with Peter, may imply a hierarchy between masculine and feminine that would tend to justify the limitation of women’s roles in the Church. As a counterexample, these critics point out that Mary had a certain authority in the early Christian community and that, from the beginning, women have held significant roles of ecclesial leadership.

38. In response, some have emphasized the need for a theological articulation of the uniqueness of the specifically feminine gifts that women bring to the Church. Others, however, have proposed moving beyond any schematization based on gender difference in favor of a model of participation based on shared baptismal dignity and co-responsibility. In fact, these proponents have argued that it is divine filiation, not sexual differentiation, that should constitute the theological foundation of the identity and mission of every disciple.

39. Those who support this latter thesis have also proposed that a new appreciation of charisms is needed in their own terms, by virtue of baptismal equality (cf. Gal 3:28) and the complexity of experiences. With this, it has also been argued that a new appreciation of the reciprocity between men and women is necessary, a recognition of the Church as mission and

⁸⁰ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium* (Dec. 7, 1965), n. 25: AAS 57 (1965), 29–30; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Doctrinal Note on the Concluding Formula of the “Professio fidei”* (June 29, 1998), n. 11: AAS 90 (1998) 550–51.

⁸¹ Cf. FRANCIS, Apost. Lett. *Patris corde* (Dec. 8, 2020), nn. 2, 4: AAS 113 (2020), 16–17, 19–21.

⁸² ID., Apost. Exhort. *Amoris laetitia* (Mar. 19, 2016), n. 286: AAS 108 (2016), 286; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html (Mar. 5, 2026).

service, and a reflection on the structures of ministry and authority, based on co-responsibility, respecting the vocations, charisms, and competencies of each person.

40. Such a perspective, they argue, will make it possible to understand how the Marian and Petrine dimensions apply to all Christians. In fact, *all the baptized* are called to imitate Mary's fidelity and obedience to the word of God, as well as to participate in a structured way in ministry and governance.

41. Ultimately, some have argued that overcoming gender stereotypes and recovering communion based on divine filiation would offer a more solid Christological and sacramental foundation. For this reason, some have proposed a return to a third principle, also present in the writings of Balthasar, i.e., the "Johannine principle." In this principle, the figure of the beloved disciple is taken as a model for his following of Christ and his contemplative closeness to him, founded on love.

42. However, others have argued that many of the attributes that would be attributed to John, such as living in the acceptance and return of love, have been attributed by the long tradition of the Church, including in the liturgy, to Mary. Others have pointed out that shifting the principle of perfect discipleship from Mary to John loses the Mariological emphasis of the Second Vatican Council, which sees her as "a pre-eminent and singular member of the Church, and as its type and excellent exemplar in faith and charity."⁸³

Still others emphasize that shifting the principle of perfect discipleship from Mary to John loses the emphasis on the feminine dimension of the Church and risks further attributing all the principles of Christian life to male figures, in contrast to the centrality of women in the nature and history of the Church.

Other Opinions

44. Considering the various opinions expressed on this subject, it should be noted that there are also those who did not share the opinions expressed above, instead expressing their support for the principles adopted by Pope Francis and other pontiffs.

45. These voices have argued that, if interpreted correctly, the "Marian principle," used by several popes, referring to Mary's willingness to accept and respond to God's will, applies to all the baptized. It has also been emphasized that the "Petrine principle" does not aim to indicate the superiority of men over women, but rather, as Balthasar explained and as Pope Francis understood, service to the holiness of the Church, which is Marian. This would help reinforce the idea that the call to holiness is not reserved to the clergy but extends to all the baptized.

46. In this context, some noted that the "Marian principle" helps clarify the nature and purpose of ecclesial power and encourages a fruitful reception of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, which describes Mary in similar terms as the "mother" of the whole Church: "The Church indeed, contemplating her hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, by receiving the word of God in faith becomes herself a mother."⁸⁴ For this reason and because of her exemplary correspondence to God's will in her life, the faithful, the Council continues, "turn their eyes to Mary who shines forth [...] as the model."⁸⁵

47. Others have pointed out that, in the context of a "attentive recognition of the difference and reciprocity between the sexes where this is relevant to the realization of one's humanity, whether male or female," with which "the defence and promotion of equal dignity and common

⁸³ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium* (Dec. 7, 1965), n. 53: AAS 57 (1965), 59; English: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 64: AAS 57 (1965), 64.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

personal values must be harmonized,”⁸⁶ the “Marian principle” can contribute to protecting the role of women in the life of the Church. Some have also emphasized that, in light of baptismal dignity and personal gifts, this perspective offers an opportunity to discuss the unique contributions of women to ecclesial leadership, a theme that, as already noted, is dear to Pope Francis.

In this perspective, one can appreciate the many testimonies of women who have played a prominent role in history, such as Mary Magdalene, a symbol of authority; Hildegard of Bingen, an example of missionary zeal; Thérèse of Lisieux; and figures of reform such as Catherine of Siena. They conclude that the model of the “Marian principle” can help the Church’s efforts to create spaces in which women’s co-responsibility is fully recognized and their contributions are heard and valued.

⁸⁶ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World (July 31, 2004), n. 14: AAS 96 (2004) 684; English: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

APPENDIX V ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY

Introduction

1. The question of power is as old as the Church itself: “When he was in the house, [Jesus] asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they remained silent, for on the way they had argued among themselves about who was the greatest” (Mk 9:33-34). Indeed, one could even say that a certain “struggle” for power can already be glimpsed in the Gospel passages, which the Master immediately seeks to remedy: “You know that the rulers of the nations lord it over them, and the leaders oppress them. Among you it shall not be so; but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave” (Mt 20:25-27), pointing to himself as a model: “If I, therefore, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (Jn 13:14). According to the Gospel teaching, therefore, true power is service.⁸⁷

2. Although the close link between power and service has been repeatedly emphasized throughout Church history, the Christian community has long perceived it as problematic. A lack of clarity about the nature of power in the Church can, in fact, foster the belief that its exercise is a privilege reserved for a few, thus appearing to contradict the Gospel understanding of service, where the exclusion of certain groups from positions of responsibility constitutes an unjust discrimination that is unacceptable.

3. Everything depends on the meaning attributed to the term “power.” A well-known definition describes it, in a general sense, as the ability to “influence another, or to be influenced by another,”⁸⁸ thus showing its connection with the theme of authority. This concept has certainly influenced the canonical tradition of the Church, according to which may be defined as the exercise of an authority that arises from a condition significant on both juridical and ecclesiological levels. These are formal definitions that do not go into the merits of such a “capacity to influence,” and can therefore also be adapted to contexts that are very far from the Gospel. The strict regulations governing the exercise of power in the Church have their *raison d’être* precisely in the awareness that its use can easily deviate from a primarily pastoral purpose, namely that of “building up” the people of God “in truth and holiness.”⁸⁹

4. The word used to designate power in the Latin Church is *potestas* (power, authority), which, in turn, translates the Greek ἐξουσία (*exousía*), which could be rendered as “authority” or “authorization.” This term is also found in the Bible, where in its general sense it refers to the possibility for someone to do something on the basis of a conferred right. In particular, in the New Testament, *exousía* is the authority that Christ gives to his disciples (cf. Lk 10:19), especially to the Apostles (cf. Mt 10:1; Mk 3:15), to subdue the powers of evil. Such authority is also attributed to the community, although this is expressed through the phrase “to bind and to loose” (cf. Mt 18:18). At its core, however, there is the “power” (*exousían*) given to those who accept Christ to “become children of God” (Jn 1:12).

5. From what has been said, it is clear that in the Church authority should not be thought of as the mere exercise of power, but rather as the capacity and responsibility to give and preserve life in a supernatural sense (cf. Jn 17:2). From this arises the identification of power with service and its consequent and radical distinction from civil power. Therefore, where there is service, there can be no discrimination, while remembering that “equality is in no way identity, for the Church is a differentiated body, in which each individual has his or her role. The roles are distinct,

⁸⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, “Il vero potere è il servizio” (Meditazione quotidiana del 21 maggio 2013): *Oss. Rom.*, May 22, 2013, 8; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2013/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20130521_service-power.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

⁸⁸ PLATO, *Sophist*, 247e.

⁸⁹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium*, n. 27; English: see n. 83. Cf. CIC, can. 1752.

and must not be confused; they do not favour the superiority of some vis-a-vis the others, nor do they provide an excuse for jealousy; the only better gift, which can and must be desired, is love (1 Cor 12–13). The greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven are not the ministers but the Saints.”⁹⁰

Historical Development of the Concept of Authority

6. The idea of power or authority, in its current understanding, is the fruit of a long historical development in ecclesial reflection, suggesting that one cannot hope to resolve it once and for all. As is easy to imagine, this has led to very different approaches to its exercise across various eras, with new challenges arising as historical conditions change. Yet, even if a definitive solution is unattainable, this does not imply that the question of power and authority should be seen as a knot to be untied or an obstacle to overcome; rather, it is a prerogative intrinsic to the Church’s mystery itself.

7. “Reflection on the nature of power in the Church developed from the need to address certain contingent issues tied to specific historical periods. Some of these issues lasted for a long time, leading to their conceptualization and subsequent generalization. The earliest questions mainly concerned the sacraments. For example, as early as the third and fourth centuries, there arose the question of whether sacramental acts performed by schismatics and heretics could be considered valid. It was also asked whether such clerics, by separating from the Church, had lost the power conferred by the sacrament of Holy Orders.⁹¹ Another issue addressed by the Magisterium concerned the possibility of ordaining a cleric without any reference to a community of the faithful, and in some cases such ordinations were declared null and void.⁹² In that period, no explicit distinction was made between the authority derived from the sacrament of Orders and that which depended on the Church’s governance structure.

A Distinction that Becomes a Separation

8. There are basically two practical issues that led to the traditional distinction between *potestas ordinis* and *potestas regiminis*. The first concerned cases in which a legitimately ordained bishop left one office to assume another, for example, due to a transfer. The question was whether episcopal ordination alone was sufficient to legitimize the exercise of authority in the new office once the previous one had ended. The second question, by contrast, concerned the time that elapses between the appointment of a bishop to a particular Church and his taking possession. In the period between appointment, episcopal consecration, and installation, how should the exercise of authority be regulated? Was the papal decree of appointment sufficient to authorize valid acts of governance even before sacramental ordination?

9. The attempt to resolve these problems led juridical and dogmatic reflection to distinguish between two types of power, even though there is only one *sacra potestas* conferred by Christ on the Church: the power of order (*potestas ordinis*) and that of jurisdiction or government (*potestas iurisdictionis seu regiminis*). The first is the power linked to the sacrament of Holy Orders. It is indelible and cannot be invalidated, nor can the holder be deprived of it, even though its exercise may be limited by law. The second, on the other hand, consists in the ability to authoritatively bind those subject to it in an external forum and derives from a conferral by legitimate authority. It is clear that all these considerations focus on the power held by members of the hierarchy.

10. However, starting from this acquisition, the subsequent development of doctrine turned this distinction into a real *separation*. This led to the theorization of two autonomous powers, that is, of different origins, normally united in the person of the ordained minister, but which could be

⁹⁰ SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Inter insigniores* (Oct. 15, 1976), n. 6: AAS 69 (1977) 115; English: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

⁹¹ Cf. DH 110; CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE, *Ep.* 74,5,4: CCL 3C, 570

⁹² Cf. ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON, can. 6: *Conciliarum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, Bologna 2013, 90.

separated according to the needs of the life of the Church. For example, the 1917 CIC proposed a twofold division of the hierarchy: as regards the sacrament of Holy Orders, by divine institution it was divided into bishops, priests, and ministers, while as regards jurisdiction, it was divided into the supreme pontificate and the subordinate episcopate.⁹³ The Code specified that the power of jurisdiction or government was also of divine right.⁹⁴ As late as 1954, Pope Pius XII could write: “By virtue of [God’s] Will is established the twofold sacred hierarchy, namely, of orders and jurisdiction,”⁹⁵ the former deriving from the sacrament of Holy Orders, while the latter is conferred directly on the Roman Pontiff and, through him, on the Bishops.

The Restoration of Unity with the Second Vatican Council

11. The Second Vatican Council sought to overcome this clear separation of powers, without rejecting the distinction between the powers of order and government, and without entering into a definitive definition. In essence, the sacrament of Holy Orders was linked not so much to the exercise of power as to the three *munera* of Christ: “Episcopal consecration, together with the office of sanctifying, also confers the office of teaching and of governing, which, however, of its very nature, can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and the members of the college.”⁹⁶ This passage is further clarified by what is expressed in the *Nota explicativa praevia* to the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*: “In his consecration a person is given an ontological participation in the sacred functions [*munera*]; this is absolutely clear from Tradition, liturgical tradition included. The word ‘functions [*munera*]’ is used deliberately instead of the word ‘powers [*potestates*],’ because the latter word could be understood as a power fully ready to act. But for this power to be fully ready to act, there must be a further canonical or juridical determination through the hierarchical authority.”⁹⁷

12. Furthermore, in line with its discussion of ecclesial power, the Second Vatican Council also restored value and dignity to the common priesthood of the faithful, although this remains qualitatively distinct from the ministerial priesthood of the hierarchy: “the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.”⁹⁸ In particular, “The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join (*concurrunt*) in the offering of the Eucharist. They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity.”⁹⁹

A Comprehensive Theological Framework

13. This new appreciation of the role of the lay faithful is part of a conceptual rethinking of the understanding of the priesthood. First of all, the priesthood proper is unique, that is, that of Christ,¹⁰⁰ in which all members of the people of God participate through baptismal anointing. Therefore, that of “priest” is a more original category than that of “ministry,” being of an ontological and existential order, in the sense that it qualifies the entire existence of believers in a Eucharistic sense and makes them participants in the three ‘functions’ or “offices.” Therefore,

⁹³ Cf. CIC (1917), can. 108 §3.

⁹⁴ Cf. CIC (1917), cann. 196 and 219.

⁹⁵ PIUS XII, Enc. *Ad sinarum gentem* (Oct. 7, 1954): AAS 47 (1955), 9; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_07101954_ad-sinarum-gentem.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

⁹⁶ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium*, n. 21: AAS 57 (1965), 25; English: see n. 83.

⁹⁷ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), “Nota explicativa praevia,” n. 2: AAS 57 (1965), 73; English: see n. 83.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 10: AAS 57 (1965), 14; English: see n. 83.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: AAS 57 (1965), 14–15; English: see n. 83.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

in the conciliar *mens*, the concept of priest has a broader scope than that of member of the hierarchy. As mentioned, however, the conciliar documents also specify that the common priesthood and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood differ from each other not so much in terms of degree as in terms of essence, and one difference is precisely the possession of *sacra potestas*:¹⁰¹ these are, therefore, two distinct modes of participation in the one priesthood of Christ.

14. Another similar clarification concerns the category of mediation: as with the priesthood, here too Christ is the only Mediator between God and humanity, so the ministerial priest is not, strictly speaking, a mediator, but a *minister*, in the sense that he acts as a “representative” of Christ himself (*in ejus persona*). The ministerial priest participates *ex officio* in the unique mediation of Christ, so that his ministry can be considered theologically as mediation in a broad sense. The specific meaning of this mediation can be understood by considering the difference with how it was conceived among ancient pagan peoples, for whom priestly mediation was “ascending,” that is, as a gateway to the divine. Instead, “the priesthood of Christ is first and foremost a descending mediation, that is, it expresses and realizes in a visible way the benevolence of the Father’s grace for his own,”¹⁰² since the Lord is already in the midst of his people (cf. Mt 1:23; 28:20; Acts 9:4). This, of course, does not exclude the intrinsic “ascending” dimension of Christ’s priesthood toward the Father, but allows it to be understood more broadly—as offering, mediation, and communion—within which the work of the Holy Spirit is essentially involved.¹⁰³ This is the general theological framework for reflecting on the nature of ecclesial power.

Recent Developments and Open Questions

Two Lines of Thought

15. With regard to authority, the reconsideration of the baptismal dignity of every believer and their vocation to active participation in the life of the Church¹⁰⁴ has raised the question of whether and to what extent the lay faithful can also exercise some form of authority. In principle, the latter is considered to be based on the sacrament of Baptism and exercisable independently of Holy Orders

16. This question acquired juridical substance with the Motu proprio of St. Paul VI, *Causas matrimoniales*, which provides for the possibility of a lay faithful also exercising the office of ecclesiastical judge.¹⁰⁵ This situation has led to the formation of two lines of thought regarding the origin of authority, both of which can be supported by theological and juridical arguments.

17. The first line of thought considers a dual origin of ecclesiastical authority, thus linking back to the traditional conception. In particular, according to this view, it is believed that the power of order originates from episcopal consecration, “the fullness of the sacrament of Orders,”¹⁰⁶ while the power of governance derives from the *missio canonica* conferred on bishops by the Roman Pontiff.

18. Authors adhering to the second line of thought, on the other hand, believe that ecclesiastical power has a single origin, even though it is exercised in two different ways. According to this approach, *potestas* and *munus* therefore coincide and are both rooted in the sacrament of Holy Orders. The *missio canonica* would therefore be the condition for the exercise

¹⁰¹ “The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people” *Ibid.*: AAS 57 (1965), 14.

¹⁰² B. SESBOÛÉ, *N’ayez pas peur ! Regards sur l’Église et les ministères aujourd’hui*, Paris 1996, 85.

¹⁰³ Cf. M. OUELLET, *Parola, sacramento, carisma. Chiesa sinodale, rischi, opportunità*, Siena 2024, 123–24.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium*, n. 32: AAS 57 (1965), 38–39.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. PAUL VI, Motu Proprio *Causas matrimoniales* (Mar. 28, 1971): AAS 63 (1971), 441–46.

¹⁰⁶ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Christus Dominus* (Oct. 28, 1965), n. 15: AAS 58 (1966), 679; English: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html (accessed: Mar. 5, 2026).

of authority connected with hierarchical communion: it would not confer authority, but would activate and determine it juridically.

19. How, then, should we consider, at the present stage and starting from these two points of view, the participation of the laity in the government of the Church? As a starting point for reflection on this subject, we can consider canon 129 of the Code of Canon Law: “§1. Those who have received sacred orders are qualified, according to the norm of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction. §2. Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate (*cooperari possunt*) in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law.” The first paragraph of the canon repeats the wording of canon 109 of the previous Code, while second paragraph incorporates the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council on the promotion of the laity’s role in the Church.

20. Those who support the dual origin of authority hold that the laity, by virtue of baptism, share in the juridical capacity of the clergy and thus also participate in the *munera* of Christ. It would follow from this that the lay faithful could exercise a power of jurisdiction, by virtue of Baptism, in roles and tasks that do not require the exercise of Holy Orders, while they would be enabled to exercise this power through the canonical mission conferred on them by the Pastors with whom they cooperate. It has been argued in support of this thesis that Baptism would give the laity the canonical *capacitas* to receive an ecclesiastical office that may also involve the exercise of governing power, while the *missio canonica* would confer on them the *habilitas* for such an office, which clerics would have by virtue of their ordination.¹⁰⁷ Those who adhere to the position of a single origin of power do not exclude the participation of the laity in functions of government, but would see their role as rather reduced, since it remains doubtful whether any power exercised by them is an effective *potestas sacra*.

A Missionary and Synodal Church

21. At this point, in order to understand the latest developments in the discussion on the nature of ecclesial authority, it is appropriate to place the latter in the context of the deepening of the role of the laity that has taken place in recent decades, especially along the lines of the missionary and synodal nature of the Church. As noted, the Second Vatican Council, later reflected in the new Code of Canon Law, describes the participation of the lay faithful in the Church’s life through the concept of “cooperation” (*cooperatio*). However, this should not be understood as merely a supporting role in the mission carried out by the pastors. In fact, the lay faithful, as “. As sharers in the role of Christ as priest, prophet, and king,” have “have their work cut out for them in the life and activity of the Church,” to the point that “within the Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness.”¹⁰⁸ Mutual collaboration between clergy, religious, and laity must take place in a variety of fields, especially in those of “evangelization and sanctification.”¹⁰⁹ It is, therefore, a true collaboration in the mission: “The Church has not been really founded, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men, unless there is a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Cf. G. GHIRLANDA, “L’origine e l’esercizio della potestà di governo dei Vescovi. Una questione di 2000 anni,” *Periodica* 106 (2017) 608.

¹⁰⁸ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Apostolicam actuositatem* (Nov. 18, 1965), n. 10: AAS 58 (1966), 846; English: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651118_apostolicam-actuositatem_en.html (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 26: AAS 58 (1966), 858.

¹¹⁰ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Ad gentes* (Dec. 7, 1965), n. 21: AAS 58 (1966), 972; English: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026)

22. This means that the Church can be defined as an organic and living “missionary communion,”¹¹¹ characterized “at one and the same time [...] by a *diversity* and a *complementarity* of vocations and states in life, of ministries, of charisms and responsibilities,”¹¹² in which every baptized person can make their own unique contribution. Therefore, following this line of thought, it would be reductive to limit the baptismal priesthood “to the aspect of offering according to the expression in Romans 12:1,” since it “also includes the aspect of mediation [...]]. Baptism, in fact, consecrates the person as a member of the Body of Christ, bringing about an ontological and ecclesial identification that associates him or her with the whole of his priesthood, inasmuch as his Body is the instrument of his filial offering and his redemptive sacrifice.”¹¹³

23. The cooperation of the lay faithful in the work of the pastors is thus understood as genuine *co-responsibility*. The Second Vatican Council emphasized in particular the “secular character” of the apostolate of the laity,¹¹⁴ although this does not exclude forms of active participation in the life and mission of the Church. Such co-responsibility assumes even greater importance in the context of a synodal Church, in which, as Pope Francis has reminded us, “The lay faithful are not “guests” [...]; [this] is their home and they are called to care for it as such.” In fact, “the layperson is more than a ‘non-cleric’ or a ‘non-religious’; he or she must be considered as a baptized person, a member of the holy People of God,” and laypeople are therefore invited to “leave behind ways of acting separately, on parallel tracks that never meet. Clergy separated from laity, consecrated persons from clergy and the faithful,” since the Church is “a people united in mission.”¹¹⁵ It follows that “co-responsibility implies [...] *participation*, that is, involvement. [...] We must take the initiative, we must take risks, walk, meet. Only in this way can we develop communities with a maternal face and a style of effective fraternity, where all have ‘one heart and one soul’.”¹¹⁶

Some Recent Measures

24. It must therefore be acknowledged that, “from the beginning, the Christian community was characterized by many different forms of ministry carried out by men and women who, obedient to the working of the Holy Spirit, devoted their lives to the building up of the Church,”¹¹⁷ as attested in the *Motu proprio Antiquum ministerium*, which recently instituted the ministry of Catechist. With this measure, Pope Francis sought, on the one hand, to acknowledge the essential contribution of all the baptized to the Church’s evangelizing mission; on the other hand, he clarified that this contribution does not depend directly on the ordained ministry—as a restrictive interpretation of lay *cooperatio* might suggest—but is rooted in the Church’s rich charismatic tradition. This, of course, in no way diminishes the mission of the Bishop as “as the primary catechist in his Diocese, one which he shares with his presbyterate,”¹¹⁸ although it should be

¹¹¹ Cf. FRANCIS, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium* (Nov. 24, 2013), n. 31: AAS 105 (2013), 1033; ; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹¹² JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Exhort. *Christifideles laici* (Dec. 30, 1988), n. 20: AAS 81 (1989), 425; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹¹³ M. OUELLET, *Parola, sacramento, carisma. Chiesa sinodale, rischi, opportunità*, Siena 2024, 127–28.

¹¹⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Const. Dogm. *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), n. 31b: AAS 57 (1965), 37–38; SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Apostolicam actuositatem* (Nov. 18, 1965), n. 29: AAS 58 (1966), 859–60; English: see n. 83.

¹¹⁵ FRANCIS, Address to Participants in the Conference promoted by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life (Feb. 18, 2023): AAS 115 (2023), 302-304; English: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/february/documents/20230218-convegno.html> (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹¹⁶ FRANCIS, *Discorso ai Responsabili del Servizio per la promozione del sostegno economico alla Chiesa cattolica della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana* (Feb. 16, 2023): AAS 115 (2023), 296

¹¹⁷ FRANCIS, *Motu Proprio Antiquum ministerium* (May 10, 2021), n. 2: AAS 113 (2021) 527; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 5: AAS 113 (2021) 529.

emphasized that the official recognition of a baptismal ministry linked to the *munus docendi*¹¹⁹ requires the attestation of a specific vocation, which as such must be submitted to the discernment of ecclesial authority.¹²⁰ Furthermore, the fact that the catechist is “a witness to the faith, a teacher and mystagogue, a companion and pedagogue, who teaches *for the Church*,”¹²¹ his/her mission is inevitably connected to a form of authority—though not of actual power—which permits the catechist to fulfill the mandate

25. The recent reform of the Roman Curia implemented by Pope Francis with the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*¹²² should also be read in the missionary and synodal context. It emphasizes in particular the vicarious nature of the Curia itself, whereby each curial institution receives from the Roman Pontiff the power to fulfill its mission.¹²³ In this regard, the document specifies that “any member of the faithful can preside over a Dicastery or Office, depending on the power of governance and the specific competence and function of the Dicastery or Office in question,”¹²⁴ it being understood that all these institutions have equal juridical dignity.¹²⁵ This explicit clarification highlights how the power exercised by the bodies of the Roman Curia is vicarious in nature, and therefore transmitted through the office. Therefore, in view of the co-responsibility mentioned above, the only obstacle to a lay person presiding over a Dicastery, with the associated power of governance, in addition to the competence for such a task,¹²⁶ is the juridical capacity with regard to offices that require Holy Orders.

26. However, there has been a development with regard to the aforementioned issue raised by the Motu proprio *Causas matrimoniales* with the reform of the matrimonial process implemented by the Motu proprio *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus* (for the Latin Church)¹²⁷ and *Mitis et misericors Iesus* (for the Eastern Churches),¹²⁸ which provide for the possibility that, in matrimonial cases, two judges of the competent collegial tribunal may be lay persons. Without prejudice to the principle that the judge of a diocese is the diocesan bishop, this means that, if a tribunal is composed of three judges, the judgment could, in principle, be determined by the two lay judges. It would thus appear that they are not merely participating in the judicial authority exercised by ordained ministers, but possess their own distinct authority.

27. Another provision that opens the discussion to further developments regarding some form of power to be attributed to the lay faithful is the *Rescriptum ex Audientia* of May 18, 2022,¹²⁹

¹¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 1: AAS 113 (2021) 527.

¹²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 8: AAS 113 (2021) 532.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, n. 6: AAS 113 (2021) 531 (italics added).

¹²² Cf. FRANCIS, Apost. Const. *Praedicate Evangelium* (Mar. 19, 2022): AAS 114 (2022) 375–455.

¹²³ Cf. *Ibid.*, II, n. 5: AAS 114 (2022) 383. This aspect is not new; it has, however, at times been expressed in different terms. To confine ourselves to the more recent documents, cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Christus Dominus* (Oct. 28, 1965), n. 9: AAS 58 (1966), 676: “the departments of the Roman Curia [...] perform their duties in his [the Roman Pontiff] name and with his authority;” PAUL VI, Apost. Const. *Regimini Ecclesiae universae* (Aug. 15, 1967), I, art. 1 §1: AAS 59 (1967), 890: “The Roman Curia, through which the Supreme Pontiff administers the affairs of the universal Church, consists of Congregations, Tribunals, Offices, and Secretariats.” St. John Paul II’s reference is more explicit: “Beyond this ministerial character, the Second Vatican Council further highlighted what we may call the *vicarious character* of the Roman Curia, because, as we have already said, it does not operate by its own right or on its own initiative. It receives its power from the Roman Pontiff and exercises it within its own essential and innate dependence on the Pontiff. It is of the nature of this power that it always joins its own action to the will of the one from whom the power springs.” (JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Const. *Pastor bonus* [June 28, 1988], n. 8: AAS 80 [1988], 850-851).

¹²⁴ Cf. FRANCIS, Apost. Const. *Praedicate Evangelium* (Mar. 19, 2022), II, n. 5: AAS 114 (2022) 383; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, III, art. 12 §1: AAS 114 (2022) 387.

¹²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, III, art. 7: AAS 114 (2022) 386.

¹²⁷ Cf. FRANCIS, Motu Proprio *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus* (Aug. 15, 2015): AAS 107 (2015) 958–70.

¹²⁸ Cf. FRANCIS, Motu Proprio *Mitis et misericors Iesus* (Aug. 15, 2015): AAS 107 (2015) 946–57.

¹²⁹ Cf. *Rescriptum ex Audientia SS.mi of the Holy Father Francis concerning the derogation from can. 588* §2 CIC (May 18, 2022): Communications 54 (2022) 194–95.

which derogates from the provisions of can. 588 §2 concerning religious institutes and societies of apostolic life of clerical and pontifical right, admitting the possibility, in specific cases and with due caution, of appointing a major superior who is not a cleric. In this case, the question remains open, with various legitimate hypotheses for a solution, which in any event appear to support the genuine capacity of major superiors who are not clerics to exercise authentic governing authority, even if by delegation..

Some Future Perspectives

28. In summary, it can be said, as has already been observed,¹³⁰ that two forms of lay apostolate can be identified, often overlapping but distinguishable by virtue of the sacrament from which they originate. The first is that of a specific ministry, which can be defined as baptismal or lay, in that it derives from the sacrament of Baptism¹³¹ and can be further specified, in a vocational sense, through the sacrament of Matrimony¹³² or some form of consecration,¹³³ as well as in the consecrated life proper.¹³⁴ The second form of apostolate, on the other hand, refers to the sacrament of Holy Orders, and it is to this that much of the debate surrounding the “cooperation” of the lay faithful with the hierarchy is directed.

29. Therefore, beyond the theological school of reference regarding the nature of *sacra potestas*, in light of the reflection following the Second Vatican Council and the recent measures illustrated above, it seems that the discussion on the participation of the lay faithful in the life and leadership of the Church cannot be exhausted by simple participation in the mission of the hierarchy. Instead, the apostolate proper to the baptized would seem to avail itself, at least in some cases, of its own *auctoritas*, founded on the sacrament of Baptism, which confers on the faithful participation in the priesthood of Christ and in the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. It is therefore up to theology and canon law to deepen the theological and ecclesial status of this *auctoritas*, its concrete forms of expression, and its possible framework within the juridical order of the Church.

¹³⁰ Cf. B. SESBOÛÉ, *N'ayez pas peur! Regards sur l'Église et les ministères aujourd'hui*, Paris 1996, 116.

¹³¹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Apostolicam actuositatem* (Nov. 18, 1965), n. 3: AAS 58 (1966), 839.

¹³² Cf. *ibid.*, n. 11: AAS 58 (1966), 847–48.

¹³³ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 22: AAS 58 (1966), 855–56.

¹³⁴ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decr. *Perfectae caritatis* (Oct. 28, 1965), n. 5: AAS 58 (1966), 704.

APPENDIX VI

THE CONTRIBUTION OF POPE FRANCIS AND OF POPE LEO XIV ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH'S LIFE AND LEADERSHIP

30. As indicated in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), Pope Francis wanted to “to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.”¹³⁵ In line with this, he has made the role of women in the Church and their unique contribution to the life of the Church one of the priorities of his pontificate, a line that Pope Leo XIV has followed.

31. This appendix considers these contributions, beginning with an analysis of the dynamics that the Holy Father has sought to address.

Critical Tensions Regarding Clericalism and Male Chauvinism

32. Various documents and interventions examined by Group 5 highlighted the phenomena of clericalism and male chauvinism. Some recounted experiences of exclusion from opportunities and systemic underestimation, either because of gender, in the case of male chauvinism, or because of not belonging to the clerical state, in the case of clericalism.

33. Examples of *clericalism* include confusing sacramental power (*potestas*) with domination, an authoritarian leadership style that hinders the sharing of power with the laity, and a certain difficulty in recognizing the contributions of the laity. With regard to *male chauvinism*, examples highlighted include the exclusion of women from decision-making, regardless of their competence; the refusal or reluctance to recognize women's theological contributions; and the low regard for women's ministry.

34. Some have observed that these problems do not concern only the clergy, but rather stem from cultural assumptions and habits shared by both men and women. Both ministers and the faithful are influenced by family and social contexts that shape ecclesial attitudes toward the role of women. Consequently, there have been calls for explicit recognition of the problems, a review of relationships, and the initiation of processes oriented toward change, not only at the individual level, but also at the cultural and systemic levels.

35. In this regard, some have highlighted the need to correct the behaviors underlying clericalism and male chauvinism through a renewed theology of the human person, which recognizes men and women as created in the image of God. Others, emphasizing the equal importance of baptismal dignity and ecclesial communion, sought to base this participation on a renewed appreciation for the equality of the baptized, on a vision of the Church as the People of God, and on an interpretation of the Church's mission from a pneumatological perspective, in which the Holy Spirit generates charisms in each person so that every person may participate in the Church's mission.

36. Others have argued that the correction of such behaviors should include a reform of the language used in the Church, such as the use of expressions referring to collective groups exclusively in the masculine form, regardless of the presence of women, or expressions that refer to specific roles only in masculine terms, even if they are held by women. With this, some argue that certain liturgical and magisterial formulations reinforce stereotypes, rather than recognizing baptismal equality and the contribution of women. However, others have noted that this issue may depend more on specific cultures and languages, observing that some contexts have already made significant progress in adopting “inclusive language” in liturgical and magisterial formulations.

37. Finally, others have argued that only a renewed theological foundation—in its anthropological, Christological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological dimensions—can purify the distortions of sexuality and power. From this perspective, they argue, the task is to recover the ministry inherent in every vocation and to ensure the recognition of women in their ecclesial responsibility. This implies,

¹³⁵ FRANCIS, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 103: AAS 105 (2013), 1063; English: see n. 111.

they say, a renewed appreciation of the Eucharist as service and an investment in formation, to correct erroneous cultural conceptions and renew anthropological and ecclesial relationships.

Contributions from the Teachings of Pope Francis

Pope Francis' Contribution Concerning Women

38. In his writings and speeches, Pope Francis has sought to highlight the value and importance of women's gifts, committing himself to promoting their role in the Church in general.

39. For example, already in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), Pope Francis stated that "the Church 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. I think, for example, of the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood."¹³⁶

40. In developing Pope Francis' thinking on this subject, as can be seen in Appendix IV, he linked the importance of this feminine contribution to the image of the Church as woman. This can be seen, for example, in his address at the beginning of the 18th General Congregation of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2023, where the Holy Father linked the image of the Church as woman with the importance of women in his life, stating:

*in the holy, faithful people of God, the faith is transmitted in dialect, and generally in a feminine dialect. This is so not only because the Church is Mother, and it is precisely women who best reflect her (the Church is woman), but because it is women who know how to wait, who know how to discover the resources of the Church, of the faithful people, who risk beyond what is possible, perhaps fearfully but courageously, and in the light and shade of a dawning day, they approach a tomb with the intuition (not yet hope) that there might be some life. The women of the holy faithful people of God are a reflection of the Church. The Church is feminine, she is bride, she is mother.*¹³⁷

41. Accordingly, Pope Francis has consistently emphasized the significance of women's contributions to the Church and has praised contexts where they already assume leadership roles. As he stated in *Evangelii gaudium*: "I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection."¹³⁸

42. In another of his Apostolic Exhortations, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), Pope Francis praised female leadership, highlighting how some communities in the Amazon, lacking priests due to a shortage of personnel, have maintained their faith thanks to "strong and generous women who, undoubtedly called and prompted by the Holy Spirit, baptized, catechized, prayed and acted as missionaries."¹³⁹ For many years, the Holy Father continued, "women have kept the Church alive in those places through their remarkable devotion and deep faith."¹⁴⁰

43. While acknowledging the progress already made in this regard, in *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis emphasized that "we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because 'the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society,

¹³⁶ ID., Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 103: AAS 105 (2013), 1063; English: see n. 111.

¹³⁷ ID., "Address to the 18th General Congregation of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (Oct. 25, 2023)": *Oss. Rom.* (Oct. 26, 2023), 6; English: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231025-intervento-sinodo.html> (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹³⁸ ID., Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium* (Nov. 24, 2013), n. 103: AAS 105 (2013), 1063; English: see n. 111.

¹³⁹ ID., Apost. Exhort. *Querida Amazonia*, n. 99: AAS 112 (2020), 268; English: see n. 68.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace' and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures."¹⁴¹

44. This appeal was echoed in the *Final Document of the Synod on Synodality* in 2024, approved by Pope Francis, which notes that, although women have historically exercised—and continue to exercise—leadership roles within the Church, they “continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation and place in all the various areas of the Church’s life. This is to the detriment of serving the Church’s shared mission.”¹⁴² Some of these obstacles manifest themselves as clericalism and male chauvinism, as already mentioned.

Pope Francis’ Contribution against Clericalism and Machismo

45. In promoting the role of women in the Church in general, Pope Francis has also sought to address the issues of clericalism and male chauvinism.

46. Pope Francis has often denounced the phenomenon of *clericalism*, explaining that the sacramental authority of the priest is based on service, not on greater honor or personal superiority. From the beginning of his pontificate, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), the Holy Father explained, “Even when the function of ministerial priesthood is considered ‘hierarchical’, it must be remembered that ‘it is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members’.”¹⁴³ Since, he added, the priesthood is ordered to service and our dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all, it is better “to recognize more fully what [is entailed] with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.”¹⁴⁴

47. In his criticism of *male chauvinism*, Pope Francis addressed the mentalities, attitudes, and culture that consider masculinity naturally superior to femininity or that equate authority with masculinity. In this regard, Pope Francis spoke out against discrimination against women, stating that “a society that erases women from public life is a society that becomes impoverished [...] Equality of rights, yes. But also equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunities in order to move forward, otherwise we become impoverished. I think that what I have said says what needs to be done globally. And there is still some way to go because there is this chauvinism.”¹⁴⁵

48. This reflects what Pope Francis also stated in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (2016), where he observed that “even though significant advances have been made in the recognition of women’s rights and their participation in public life, in some countries much remains to be done to promote these rights. Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated.”¹⁴⁶ Among the injustices he denounced, he criticized “patriarchal cultures that considered women inferior” and “lack of equal access to dignified work and roles of decision-making.”¹⁴⁷

49. Pope Francis also highlighted these facts in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), when he stated that “the organization of societies worldwide is still far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men. We say one thing with words, but our decisions and reality tell another story. Indeed, ‘doubly poor are those women who endure situations of exclusion,

¹⁴¹ ID., Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 103: AAS 105 (2013), 1063; quoting the PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, n. 295; English: see n. 111.

¹⁴² XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document* (Oct. 26, 2024), n. 60; English: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹⁴³ FRANCIS, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 104: AAS 105 (2013), 1063–64; citing JOHN PAUL II, Apost. Exhort. *Christifideles laici* (Dec. 30, 1988), 51: AAS 81 (1989), 413; English: see n. 111.

¹⁴⁴ FRANCIS, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 104: AAS 105 (2013), 1064.

¹⁴⁵ ID., Press conference during the return flight to Rome (Nov. 6, 2022): *Oss. Rom.* (Nov. 7, 2022), 3; English: <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/pope-francis-13645> (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026). Pope Francis reiterated a similar commitment in the context of the opening of the XVIII General Congregation of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2023: cf. ID., Address to the 18th General Congregation of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (Oct. 25, 2023): *Oss. Rom.* (Oct. 26, 2023), 6.

¹⁴⁶ ID., Apost. Exhort. *Amoris laetitia* (Mar. 19, 2016), n. 54: AAS 108 (2016), 333; English: see n. 82.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

mistreatment and violence, since they are frequently less able to defend their rights’.”¹⁴⁸ For this reason, Pope Francis has also drawn attention to the ways in which women suffer various forms of abuse (sexual abuse, abuse of power, abuse of conscience).¹⁴⁹

50. Finally, for Pope Francis, defending the dignity of women is a way in which the Church can show that it is “alive,” as he recalled in his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* (2019): “A living Church can look back on history and acknowledge a fair share of male authoritarianism, domination, various forms of enslavement, abuse and sexist violence. With this outlook, she can support the call to respect women’s rights, and offer convinced support for greater reciprocity between males and females, while not agreeing with everything some feminist groups propose.”¹⁵⁰

51. In response to clericalism and patriarchal attitudes, Pope Francis has called for a Church in which all members respect one another, where dignity is rooted in being created in the image of God and in baptismal identity, and where the individual gifts and talents of both women and men are recognized. In his address to the International Theological Commission on November 30, 2023, he encouraged greater female participation and underscored the importance of reflecting on “The Church as woman, the Church as a bride. And this is a task that I ask of you, please. To make the Church less masculine.”¹⁵¹

52. In this sense, Pope Francis’ proposal was to promote greater admiration for the role of women in the life and leadership of the Church. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (2020), Pope Francis observed that the presence of women in lay leadership in parishes in the Amazon region “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 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.”¹⁵²

53. In this regard, Pope Francis has emphasized the need to promote “encourage the emergence of other forms of service and charisms that are proper to women” to respond to the needs of the local population.¹⁵³ To this end, he indicated that “those women who in fact have a central part to play in Amazonian communities should have access to positions, including ecclesial services, that do not entail Holy Orders and that can better signify the role that is theirs”—positions that “entail stability, public recognition and a commission from the bishop.”¹⁵⁴

54. Although the Holy Father wrote *Querida Amazonia* in response to pastoral needs in the Amazon region, many of his observations on the role of women in the life of the Church could also be extended to his appreciation of the contribution of women in other contexts—as can be seen from Pope Francis’ discussion in Appendix IV of this document—and which can be well summarized in this quote of his, also taken from the same Apostolic Exhortation, where he attested that women have “a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions, and the leadership of communities, but without ceasing to do so in the style proper to their feminine imprint.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁸ ID., Enc. *Fratelli tutti* (Oct. 3, 2020), n. 23: AAS 112 (2020), 977, citing ID., Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium* (Nov. 24, 2013), n. 212: AAS 105 (2013), 1108; English: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹⁴⁹ Cf. ID., Address to members of the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See for the presentation of New Year’s greetings (January 8, 2024): *Oss. Rom.* (January 8, 2024), 3; Address on the occasion of the Marian Celebration – Virgen de la Puerta (January 20, 2018): AAS 110 (2018), 329.

¹⁵⁰ ID., Apost. Exhort. *Christus vivit* (Mar. 25, 2019), n. 42: AAS 111 (2019), 402; citing the XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document* (Oct. 27, 2018), n. 150.

¹⁵¹ ID., Address to the members of the International Theological Commission (Nov. 20, 2023); English: see n. 73.

¹⁵² ID., Apost. Exhort. *Querida Amazonia*, n. 100: AAS 112 (2020), 268; English: see n. 68.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, n. 102: AAS 112 (2020), 269.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 103: AAS 112 (2020), 269.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Cf. XVI ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document* (Oct. 26, 2024), n. 60.

55. He praised this contribution of women in an interview in 2022 for their ability to “manage things in a different way, which is not inferior, but complementary. [...] Women have their own way of solving problems, which is not the same as men’s. And both ways must work together: women, equal to men, work for the common good with the intuition that women have.”¹⁵⁶

Pope Francis’ Administrative Contributions

General Administrative Contributions

56. Taking up the invitation made in his own writings and speeches, Pope Francis has undertaken a series of administrative reforms aimed at expanding the contribution of women within the Church.

57. On January 21, 2016, the then Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published a decree formally modifying the rubric of the Roman Missal to allow women to be included among those chosen to receive the washing of the feet during the Mass of the Lord’s Supper. In doing so, the Pope’s accompanying letter emphasized that representatives should be chosen from among the People of God and not only from among men.

58. On June 10, 2016, on the instruction of Pope Francis, the then Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a decree elevating the liturgical celebration of St. Mary Magdalene to that of Apostle and elevating her liturgical celebration from an obligatory memorial to a feast.¹⁵⁷ It also confirmed her title of “*apostola apostolorum*” (“Apostle of the Apostles”) in recognition of her role as the first witness of the risen Lord and the first messenger of the Resurrection to the Apostles.

59. On December 1, 2020, in his book, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, Pope Francis shared his desire to “create spaces where women can have leadership roles, but in ways that allow them to shape the culture and ensure that they are valued, respected, and considered.”¹⁵⁸ The Pope also explained the personal reasons behind this conviction: “In my diocese of Buenos Aires, the treasurer, the chancellor, and the director of the archives were women. In my experience, the advice of women in pastoral and administrative meetings is more valuable than that of many men.”¹⁵⁹ This experience led him to believe that “women are generally better than men as administrators. They understand processes better, such as how to carry out projects.”¹⁶⁰ For this reason, Pope Francis has been concerned with “how to better incorporate the presence and sensitivity of women in the Vatican’s decision-making processes.”¹⁶¹

60. In 2021, with his *Motu proprio Spiritus Domini* (January 10, 2021), Pope Francis amended Canon Law to allow women to receive the instituted ministries of Lector and Acolyte. He based this decision on the priesthood of the faithful. Later that year, with his *Motu Proprio Antiquum ministerium* (May 10, 2021), he established the lay ministry of catechist, explicitly opening it to both men and women.¹⁶²

61. In May 2022, in his Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate evangelium*, Pope Francis amended the legislation so that “any member of the faithful can preside over a Dicastery or Office, depending on the power of governance and the specific competence and function of the Dicastery or Office in

¹⁵⁶ ID., Press conference during the return flight to Rome (Nov. 6, 2022): *Oss. Rom.* (Nov. 7, 2022), 3.

¹⁵⁷ CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, Decr. 257/16, by which the celebration of St Mary Magdalene was elevated to the rank of feast in the General Roman Calendar (June 10, 2016).

¹⁵⁸ FRANCIS, *Ritorniamo a sognare: la strada verso un futuro migliore*, Piemme, Milan 2020, 76.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

¹⁶² Cf. ID., *Antiquum ministerium* (May 10, 2021), nn. 1-8: AAS 113 (2021), 527-32. Cf. CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, *Letter 627/21 to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences on the Rite of Institution of Catechists* (Dec. 13, 2021), nn. 14-15.

question,”¹⁶³ meaning that a woman can now head a Vatican dicastery or become a prefect, roles that were previously reserved for cardinals and archbishops.

62. In 2023, Pope Francis made women full members, with voting rights, in the Synod for Synodality (2021-2024), so that, for the first time, women participated with voting rights in a Synod comprising bishops.¹⁶⁴ It was also the first time that a woman presided over a session of the Synod. Among the members with voting rights, 54 were women. In addition, 75 other women were invited to participate as experts or facilitators without voting rights.

63. In his address to the International Theological Commission on November 30, 2023, Pope Francis encouraged the presence of more women in the Commission. After reflecting on the feminine nature of the Church, he asked: “And you will ask me: where does this discussion lead? Not only to tell you that you should have more women here – that is one thing – but to help reflect. The Church as woman, the Church as a bride. And this is a task that I ask of you, please.”¹⁶⁵

Appointments of Women to the Roman Curia

64. Pope Francis has sought to increase the presence of women in the Roman Curia and in Vatican institutions, and from the beginning of his pontificate he has made a number of significant appointments to leadership positions. During his pontificate, the number of women employed in the Vatican has risen from 846 in 2013 (19.3% of employees) to 1,165 in 2023 (26.1% of employees).¹⁶⁶

65. In addition, it is noteworthy that Pope Francis has appointed women to prominent roles within the administrative structure of the Vatican and the Holy See. This has been evident from the beginning of his pontificate and has continued throughout his leadership of the Church.

On April 12, 2014, Pope Francis appointed Prof. Margaret Scotford ARCHER as President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

On July 11, 2016, Pope Francis appointed Dr. Paloma GARCÍA OVEJERO as the first Deputy Director of the Holy See Press Office. This position was again entrusted to a woman on July 25, 2019, when Dr. Cristiane MURRAY was appointed.

On December 20, 2016, Pope Francis appointed Dr. Barbara JATTA as Director of the Vatican Museums and Cultural Heritage, making her the first woman to hold this office.

On November 7, 2017, Pope Francis appointed two Italian women, Dr. Linda GHISONI and Dr. Gabriella GAMBINO, as Undersecretaries of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life.¹⁶⁷

On February 23, 2018, Pope Francis appointed Reverend Sister Carmen ROS NORTES, N.S.C., as Undersecretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.¹⁶⁸

On January 15, 2020, Pope Francis appointed Dr. Francesca DI GIOVANNI as Undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs in the Section for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State. She thereby became the first woman to hold a position of Superior within the Secretariat of State.

¹⁶³ FRANCIS, Apost. Const. *Praedicate evangelium*, II.5: AAS 114 (2022), 383; English: see n. 124.

¹⁶⁴ Although women participated in the Second Vatican Council as non-voting auditors and in subsequent Synods of Bishops as non-voting experts, this was the first time that women were able to vote in a Synod of Bishops.

¹⁶⁵ FRANCIS, Address to the members of the International Theological Commission (Nov. 20, 2023); English: see n. 73.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. VATICAN NEWS, “Ten years of Francis, more women working in the Vatican,” published March 8, 2023.

¹⁶⁷ In this, Pope Francis followed Pope Paul VI, who in 1967 appointed Dr. Rosemary GOLDIE as Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, a position she held until 1976.

¹⁶⁸ In this, he followed St. John Paul II, who on 24 April 2004 appointed Rev. Sister Enrica ROSANNA, F.M.A., as Undersecretary of the then Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. He also followed Pope Benedict XVI, who on 17 December 2011 appointed Rev. Sister Nicoletta Vittoria (Nicla) SPEZZATI, A.S.C., as Undersecretary of the same Congregation.

On February 6, 2021, Pope Francis appointed Rev. Sister Nathalie BECQUART, X.M.C.J., as one of the Undersecretaries of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, thus becoming the first woman to have voting rights in the Synod of Bishops.¹⁶⁹

On March 9, 2021, Pope Francis appointed Prof. Nuria CALDUCH-BENAGES as Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

On March 24, 2021, Pope Francis appointed Rev. Sister Alessandra SMERILLI, F.M.A., as Undersecretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.¹⁷⁰ Subsequently, on August 26, 2021, he appointed her Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, making her the first woman to hold this office.

On November 4, 2021, Pope Francis appointed Rev. Sister Raffaella PETRINI, F.S.E., as Secretary General of the Governorate of Vatican City State.

Subsequently, on March 1, 2025, he appointed her President of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State and President of the Governorate of Vatican City State, making her the first woman to hold these positions.

In 2022, Pope Francis appointed Prof. Emilce CUDA as Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America within the Dicastery for Bishops. At a press conference on November 6, 2022, Pope Francis observed:

I have seen that in the Vatican, every time a woman comes in to do a job, things improve. For example, the Vice Governor of the Vatican [Secretary General of the Governorate] is a woman, and things have changed for the better. In the Council for the Economy, there are six cardinals and six lay people, all male: I changed that and appointed one man and five women as lay people. And this is a revolution, because women know how to find the right path, they know how to move forward.¹⁷¹

Shortly thereafter, on November 25, 2022, Pope Francis appointed Prof. Antonella Sciarrone ALIBRANDI as Undersecretary of the Dicastery for Culture and Education.

On the same date, the Holy Father appointed Dr. Raffaella GIULIANI as Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Archaeology.

On October 7, 2023, Pope Francis appointed Rev. Sister Simona BRAMBILLA, M.C., as Secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Then, on January 6, 2025, the Holy Father appointed her Prefect of this Dicastery, making her the first woman to hold this office in the Vatican.

On October 14, 2023, Pope Francis appointed Rev. Sister Piro SILVANA, F.M.G.B., as Undersecretary of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See.

On December 13, 2024, Pope Francis appointed Rev. Sister Simona BRAMBILLA, M.C., then Secretary of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and Dr. María Lía ZERVINO as members of the XVI Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod. Prior to this, all four members appointed by the Pope to serve on the General Secretariat had been bishops.

66. In addition, Pope Francis has appointed women as members of numerous dicasteries of the Holy See, granting them voting rights in plenary assemblies, a role previously reserved to cardinals and certain archbishops. Among these is the Dicastery for Bishops, where in 2022 Pope Francis appointed two sisters and a lay woman as members of the dicastery that assists the Holy Father in discerning candidates for the episcopate. He has also continued to appoint women as consultors to various

¹⁶⁹ Previously, in 1987, St. John Paul II appointed Rev. Sister Mary MILLIGAN, R.S.H.M., as Special Secretary of the Synod of Bishops on the Laity; however, she did not have the right to vote.

¹⁷⁰ In this, Pope Francis followed the example of Pope Benedict XVI, who on 21 January 2010 appointed Dr. Flaminia GIOVANELLI as Undersecretary of the then Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, thus becoming the first woman to hold this position in the Council, the predecessor of the aforementioned Dicastery.

¹⁷¹ FRANCIS, Press conference during the return flight to Rome (Nov. 6, 2022): *Oss. Rom.* (Nov. 7, 2022), 3.

dicasteries, thereby strengthening their participation in moments of study and discernment that are significant for the work of the Holy See.

Pope Leo XIV's Contributions

67. Pope Leo XIV demonstrated his support for the role of women in the Church, both in words and in deeds. For example, in an audience with representatives of women's religious institutes, he praised religious women for their willingness "care for the weakest: children, poor girls and boys, orphans, migrants, and more recently for the elderly and the sick as well as many other ministries of charity."¹⁷² The Holy Father added: "Your response to the challenges of the past and the vitality of your present make clear that fidelity to the ancient wisdom of the Gospel is the best way forward for those who, led by the Holy Spirit, undertake new paths of self-giving, dedicated to loving God and neighbor and listening attentively to the signs of the times."¹⁷³

68. Then, in an audience with the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the Holy Land and the participants in the general chapters of the Sisters of St. Catherine, the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, and the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, Pope Leo XIV once again praised:

*[the] many strong and courageous women who did not hesitate to take risks and confront problems in order to embrace his plans and respond "yes" to his call. Moreover, they paved the way for many others who [...] have followed Christ in his poverty, chastity and obedience, carrying on his work, sometimes even to the point of martyrdom. We are speaking of extraordinary women who went forth as missionaries in difficult times. They stooped down to care for those suffering moral and material misery, reaching the most neglected areas of society [...].*¹⁷⁴

69. When the Peruvian-American pope was asked to speak about the discussion that arose from the Synod on the role of women in the life and leadership of the Church, he replied that "the understanding that the role of women in the Church has to continue to develop" and that "I hope to continue in the footsteps of Francis, including in appointing women to some leadership roles at different levels in the Church's life, recognizing the gifts that women have that can contribute to the life of the Church in many ways."¹⁷⁵ In fact, this intention is already evident in his earliest appointments.

70. On August 28, 2025, Pope Leo XIV appointed as Consultors to the Dicastery for the Clergy the Rev. Mother Martha Elizabeth DRISCOLL, O.C.S.O., Superior of the Community of "Santa Maria alle Acque Salvie" in Rome, and the Rev. Sister Iuliana SAROSI, C.M.D., Professor at the Institute of Psychology and at the "San Pietro Favre" Center for Priests and Religious Life of the Collegium Maximum of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

71. Furthermore, on September 6, 2025, Pope Leo XIV appointed Dr. Cristiana PERRELLA, Artistic Director of MACRO – Museum of Contemporary Art in Rome, as President of the Pontifical Insigne Academy of Fine Arts and Letters of the Virtuosi al Pantheon.

¹⁷² LEO XIV, Audience with representatives of several female religious institutes (June 30, 2025): *Oss. Rom.* (June 30, 2025), 4; English: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2025/06/30/250630b.html> (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ ID., Address to the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the Holy Land and to the participants in the general chapters of the Sisters of St. Catherine, the Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, and the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres (Sept. 22, 2025): *Oss. Rom.* (Sept. 22, 2025), 4; English: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/september/documents/20250922-capitoli-general.html> (accessed: Mar. 6, 2026).

¹⁷⁵ ID., "Interview with Eileen Allen," published on Sept. 18, 2025: <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2025/09/pope-leo-speaks-to-cruxs-elise-ann-allen-about-lgbtq-issues-and-the-liturgy>.