

24 April 2020 – Mary Ring

(An extract from The Tablet)

Two religious speak during Pope Francis's visit to the church of S. Spirito, 19 April 2020

"I am going to take up the challenge," said Pope Francis at the closing of the Amazon Synod, last autumn, "... that you have put forward, that women be heard."

But has he? On the contrary, looking at the composition of his second Commission to study women deacons, announced on 8th April, must we conclude that yet again, far from being heard, women are to be told? His previous Commission, formed in 2016 in response to a heartfelt request from the UISG, the International Union of Superiors General of nuns, contained experts renowned in their field. Most notably Dr Phyllis Zagano, whose work showing that women deacons were validly ordained throughout the first millennium is widely considered incontrovertible. However, their report of January 2019 was kicked into the long grass and has never been publicly released. The Pope has said informally that they were "unable" to reach a conclusion.

This second Commission, however, bears all the appearance of an 'ABC strategy'. He has jovially remarked to reporters in the past that when you cannot make a decision, you create a commission to study the problem. You create, in effect, "ABC" - "Another 'Blessed' Commission".

The track record and publications of this new Commission's members appear to be focused almost exclusively on men and the male diaconate. Which - forgive me - should not be the point at issue in a body tasked with examining what could be a step towards women's equality. Unless, of course, its unwritten sub-text is to keep them out, or to create a subservient 'deaconette' brigade.

But even as the Pope announced the new Commission a fortnight ago, many of us paused to consider its context. Covid-19 had already stopped the world in a heartbeat. Here was not the Church of Commissions, theologies, prelates and hierarchies. Here was not the old 'certainty'. Here is a world stood on its head.

None of us has ever seen St Peter's Square so achingly empty, with a little lone white figure lost amongst the pigeons, dwarfed by the vastness of the church's structures. The Pope's grief at his lonely Urbi et Orbi blessing was almost tangible. Worldwide, churches are locked, collection plates gather dust, rust and moth grow bold. Many priests try valiantly to grapple with Zoom and Facebook and loneliness.

I had wondered what was wrong with me for feeling so disengaged, until I realised that I am not alone. Sr Christine Schenk in the NCR this week (16th April,) recounts how she struggled to find herself (or God) whilst watching a solo male priest say a solo Mass to an empty Church, taking all the parts himself. What did work, she then realised, was the online collective, the Zoom interactivity, the 'Jesus tribe.'

Thousands of us across the world will be preparing bread to break and wine to drink, as she is, in these online communities. There is "no epiclesis," as she points out, "so no one could accuse us of attempting to say Mass. But there were many priests around our virtual table."

Is not this what the followers of the Way, the original 'Jesus tribe', did to assuage their grief and to remember their dearest friend? "These remained faithful... to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers," says the Acts. "They went as a body to the Temple every day, but met in their houses for the breaking of the bread."

We must remind ourselves that Jesus ordained no-one. Indeed, his opinion of the priestly caste was pretty critical, to put it mildly. You must not lord it over one another, he constantly reminded his people; the greatest must behave as if they were the least, for "here am I among you as one who serves." And is not that the meaning of 'deacon', the 'one who serves'?

Who is ministering now worldwide, if not women? Who is showing to "the least and the last, the loving and compassionate face of God," if not women? Virginia Saldanha answers our question, that it is women, "living this model of priesthood... Where you may not find a sacramentally ordained priest, many women around the world are living the priesthood of Jesus... Women live their priesthood where they are planted." What real relevance do theological Commissions have when hospitals are overwhelmed, when bodies are stacked in cardboard boxes, when the virus takes parents and grandparents and leaves the babies orphaned?

Post-pandemic, although everything may seem the same, nothing can be the same again. When and whilst the grief subsides, wonderful new opportunities are opening doors, setting wide the windows, letting in the sunlight.

Many of us already breathe in this new air, this refreshing spirit. Do we - really - care whether the one who serves is called Deacon, or Priest, or Bishop or Pope? I cannot believe that St Peter's present incumbent, who styles himself the Bishop of Rome, is moved by titles. Let the greatest be the least, as Jesus taught us.

We in CWO have never sought to sign up to an existing club, a patriarchal structure, or just to "add women and stir." We have worked throughout the last quarter-century for a

renewed understanding of priesthood, an inclusive, a welcoming, a joyous service that doesn't need status, that holds fast to Jesus's words. We don't have titles amongst ourselves; we just get on with it. We're ready with our time, our attention, our love and our welcome. With respect, we probably don't feel that we need Commissions; we'll just be glad that you've joined us.

Can our Church really do without us? Are we not already priests and deacons? Let a new awareness begin!

Mary Ring is a lifelong Catholic, teacher, catechist and parent. She is a member of the national co-ordinating committee of CWO, Catholic Women's Ordination. She serves on the leadership circle of WOW, Women's Ordination Worldwide, and is a founder member of the grassroots campaign for shared ministry, Parishioners Call.