

“A Community of Faith: Why the Catholic Church should open all ministries to women”

Text of talk by Josepha Madigan at *We Are Church – Ireland* meeting in Stillorgan Talbot Hotel on 11 February 2019.

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Go raibh maith agaibh as ucht an fáilte a chuireadh romham anocht.

I would like in particular to thank Ursula Halligan and *We Are Church* who invited me to speak this evening. I know they have worked really hard to organise this worthwhile event. I know it has attracted more attention than originally expected. Rather than focus on the negative aspect, I think we should look at this as a good thing. This is a topic that is not alone worthy of discussion but of increasing importance in this twenty first century.

Last June I stepped in at the last minute to help lead prayers with two other female Ministers of the Word at my local parish church in Mount Merrion. It was a six o'clock Saturday mass. Just before the mass commenced the sacristan told us that there was no priest available and that we would have to step in. I felt it was important that those who had chosen to attend the church for Mass that evening could partake in prayers as a faith community, even if it was not in the way that they had expected. I believe the other two ladies were of the same view. The Catholic Church after all is a people's church, and the community of faith is at its heart. What I did not expect, was the ensuing headlines, media comment, and reaction, to what was perceived in some quarters to be a controversial act. It was claimed that I had crossed a line. It was joked, or erroneously noted, that I had “said Mass”.

This is of course, not the case at all. Although I opened the prayers it was the three of us women together who shared the elements of the mass that we could still perform as lay people. It would have been a terrible shame after making the effort to attend mass that the congregation then had to return home with no instruction whatsoever. We only did what many other women and indeed men are doing around Ireland. Our involvement was a reminder of the role of women in Church Ministry in general. I received letters, cards and emails from all around the country from Clare Island to Dublin where more women but some men told me of their daily, weekly and monthly involvement in assisting in their local parish church. The Church calls for us all to break bread together at Mass, and women are playing a role in Ministry and the liturgy at several levels across the country and the world. In my view, as a Catholic, it should not come as a source of surprise to see a woman on the altar including in the priesthood itself.

I read with interest the recent letter by the Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Middlesbrough, John Crowley, who wrote in support of women priests:

“Men and women have complimentary gifts,” he said, *“neither competitive nor simply stereotypical. Humanly and spiritually speaking, therefore, it seems a crying shame not to tap in fully to this rich treasure of talents for God's greater glory.”* Bishop Crowley speculated whether married or single status, or male or female gender need to be determinative in regard to priesthood.

He suggested there were more pertinent issues such as a genuine desire to offer one's life in a spirit of service, a willingness to embrace a certain simplicity of lifestyle and special concern for those trapped on the underside of life. Bishop Crowley went on to say that his desire for an inclusive priesthood has little to do with arguments about rights for equality;

In his view no one has a right to priesthood; We respond to His summons, a summons which the Church has then to discern in the light of the kind of leadership he modelled. I would agree with Bishop Crowley that it is indeed a calling from God that will set one on a path to the priesthood. It is then up to the Church to discern the suitability or otherwise of that person. But what happens if the person receiving the calling to the priesthood is a woman? Do we really believe that God would

discriminate against her (assuming she fulfils all the other criteria) as the Catholic Church does purely based on her gender?

The role of women in the priesthood is still considered a taboo topic at the highest levels of Catholic Church. What is the church afraid of?

As ever, the views among the laity are different and more nuanced. One only has to look at the various Protestant Churches in Ireland, where over 400 women are in Ministry at various levels in Ireland, including as ordained members of the clergy, among them Bishop Patricia Storey. Nobody finds this unusual because in those church communities it is considered quite the norm. Why can't the Catholic Church be the same? Where does this determination to block women in leadership positions stem from? Why are women forbidden from even being considered as members of the clergy not to mention become an integral part of a new dynamic, representative, equal Church? What can we do to challenge this?

This evening I speak about my own personal relationship with the Catholic Church, the role of the community in the Church, and the need for women to be free to play a role at all levels of the Clergy.

I do not speak as a theologian, or a canon lawyer, or even a priest – for I do not claim to be any of those things. I speak as a member of the Church community, one of millions around the world.

For me, and I am sure for many others, faith is closely connected to very personal aspects of my life – my childhood, my family, important memories of my life to date. I believe faith should be active not passive. Faith is best served by clearly participating in life in order to make it better for not just ourselves but for others. I try to live by that code every day of my life in everything that I do. Sometimes I succeed, sometimes I fail.

The practice of my faith is not a duty or an obligation, a chore or even tradition. It is a living embodiment of my relationship with God. It is intensely personal—a place where my spirituality finds its wings either in the privacy of prayer or a community celebration of the Mass. It is at the core of who I am. It is the very essence of who I am. My faith in God allows me, on the one hand, to enjoy and appreciate the joys and wonders of life and on the other hand, endure and suffer its trials and tribulations. No one escapes either but it is faith, in my view, that helps us recognise any success for just what it is, an impermanent accolade and any suffering bearable with the comfort of God's beneficent whispering of "this too will pass". A true, deep, tested faith is a blessing beyond words.

Last year I was at the Tenement museum at 14 Henrietta street. The old slums of Dublin from a hundred years ago have been re-created with a tender precision and loving attention to detail. What struck me in the midst of it all was that in their darkest hours, these ordinary Irish families clung to their faith when all else had failed them. The crosses on the walls, the paintings of Jesus Christ and the blessed virgin all served as reminders to those living in desperate times that God was with them no matter what. For faith is the greatest gift. When all else has failed, it is often the only thing that can offer sustenance, a gentle even timid hope that there will be better days. Faith matters to people.

The Church is not just a collection of beautiful buildings – it is a community of faith, from the Pope to the laity, and all in between. I believe everyone should feel valued as equal members of this community. Ireland has a rich diversity of religious traditions and an increase in those who profess no religious affiliation. This great mix is to be celebrated and yet it remains true that for over 78% of the people on this island, our Catholic faith matters. It *still* matters. That's why the Catholic Church and the message it wants to convey still matters.

Just like all community life, Catholicism is shaped by unity in diversity. Catholics come in all shapes and sizes - there is no one size fits all. I think any church worth its salt should be big enough to provide a shared pew for the gay couple, the Opus Dei man, the divorced and the newly married couple, the single parent and the large traditional family. We are all the many faces of Catholicism

as it is lived, rather than imagined. We don't need an exclusively right-wing or left-wing Church. We need one that is focused on living the faith and working for social justice every day. As it stands I feel many are airbrushed out of this picture. The Catholic Church has a blind spot when it comes to the real inclusion of the marginalised or the stigmatised. The deeds of the Church speak volumes. Words are not enough. Should Church dogma not reflect the actual reality of its people? Include rather than exclude? Tolerate rather than discriminate? This utopian world that the Church wishes to reflect does not in fact exist. In fact it never did but its only now in the twenty first century that many have found the courage to proclaim who they really are out loud. They have found a way to extricate themselves from a dense smog of shame into the light of truth.

The love of most of their fellow human beings shield them from the certain sharp word from the few. They have found the courage to stand up and say that they are perfect in their imperfection. Just like us all. Is that not what Jesus Christ would want for our Church? A Church based on equality, non-judgement and solidarity. Everyone should feel valued, cherished and respected.

For many, the revelations of sexual and physical abuse scandals, and the denigration of marginalised people within the Church has shaken their faith and sense of belonging to its core. With catastrophic moral failures at many levels, many members of the Church community want to see renewal, and the role of the community reasserted. We should put this drive for renewal at the heart of Church life.

We have a responsibility to speak up for the values we expect our church to uphold. Irish public life in general has been well served by those who speak out against injustices, even when their actions are not appreciated or welcomed. In our daily lives— in the office, the school, the Dáil and yes the Church— if we see something, we are morally bound to say something. We have to call out injustices, weed out discrimination and try to espouse and adopt the seven major virtues that Pope Gregory spoke of: Faith, Hope, Charity, Fortitude, Justice, Prudence and Temperance. Everyone struggles with these virtues at times. That's OK. That's human.

I ask everyone here, could you imagine a world in which the media, the business community or the Oireachtas, were comprised only of men?

We would miss out on so many insights and perspectives.

We know women are still discriminated and excluded in many areas the world over. And until relatively recently in this country women could not serve on juries, work after marriage or have a say in the sale of her home. We may have come a long way from that wrong-headed thinking, but at present, women are not being fully heard in Church leadership – this has an impact on the whole community, and makes the Church weaker. What kind of example is this to our young girls? We want to tell them that the world values who they are but we don't even do this in their own parish. Yes, we say, to our daughters, you can be an altar girl but don't get too ahead of yourself, you will never be a priest. Even if you feel that God has called you, you are forbidden. That vocation is only for a man. You are not welcome here. You are not welcome here because you are female. We value you but only in certain roles, oh and yes we do still want you to keep the faith alive for future generations.

Does that sound fair to you?

A Church without women in its leadership, is a weaker Church. A paradigm shift in thinking in Church leadership is badly needed. If the Church wants to be strong, it needs to evolve.

Evolution and change need not be seen as a loss. In fact, much of human history is a striking example of the good that evolution achieves.

There are so many women in the church who are leaders in waiting. Don't think for a moment that women are not holding this church together. Between 1975 and 2008 the world's Catholics increased by 64%, but the number of priests increased by only 1%. In 2008, nearly 49,631 of the world's 218,865 parishes did not have a resident priest. Bishop Crowley says that his hope for an

inclusive priesthood is not driven by a desire to stem the present decline in vocations as his reasoning is propelled by a different desire which I eluded to earlier. He does write, however, that it might well be that to open up the priesthood to women would make the priesthood more widely attractive and indirectly contribute to such an upturn in possible candidates.

I hope he is proved right since only this weekend we heard from Bishop-elect of Clogher Larry Duffy how lay people will be required to perform funeral duties due to the declining number of priests. Bishop Duffy acknowledged that parishes with no resident priest were a big change for people and a big change for the diocese. How long will it take for the Catholic Church to realise that their prohibition on women priests is not just at best brazen discrimination but at worst could lead to the slow death of their beloved Church in its entirety?

You can walk into any parish in this country and around the world - More often than not, it is women who are holding parishes together, doing the lion's share of the work. According to the Vatican's Pontifical Yearbook, 2017, women comprise a majority – 56% – of all consecrated people within the Church. So let's be clear, women are in the Church. Women work for the Church. They simply face a glass ceiling that bars them from being able to apply for, or be appointed to, important leadership positions. And glass ceilings are being broken in many sectors, politics, science, so why not in the Church?

It is not that women need church leadership positions; it is that Church leadership needs women! A church that discriminates against hearing 50% of its wisdom is not as smart as it could be. That is a disservice to Catholic men and women around the world. It is not a Church that is truly representative of the world we live in.

So why are women not regarded as leaders in the Church? It may be the impact of centuries of traditional norms. We know that women played a crucial leadership role in early Christianity, particularly in early-Irish Christianity. Our Marian traditions remind us of this in our prayers and in our saints. The early church considered Mary Magdalene “apostle of the apostles.” In the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria wrote that apostles were accompanied on missionary journeys by women colleagues, who served as fellow ministers to women. These early Christian communities knew that our faith would widen and deepen if we engaged our societies with the empathy and perspectives of both female and male leaders.

Yet today, while many areas of life are opening up to women, the role of women in the Church has been relegated by an exclusively male clergy. This form of clericalism is hurting all of us. We have strayed from the pastoral approach that guided our early church, and that still guides many of our female and male members in the global south where the Church is growing. As part of the spirit of renewal, a return to our pastoral roots, grounded in the lived realities and leadership potential of all of our members, is critical to our future church. It is how our leadership can best be of service, especially to the poorest among us.

I want you to imagine a church fit for our daughters, as well as our sons.

Should women be deacons, on committees at the Vatican where they have been excluded or under represented? Should women be present, speaking and voting at a synod? Should women be priests? Should women around the world be properly recognized for holding parish life and religious family and community life together?

I firmly believe that the answer is yes.

I am a daughter, I am a wife, I am a mother. I am a woman. And I can tell you now that if we want a church that is fit for our daughters, hearts and minds need to change. Women are waiting. Women are watching. But if we want our daughters to be there in future generations, we need to open the Church fully to them, as fully equal members in the community of faith.

Gabhaim mo bhuíochas libh as ucht cuireadh a thabhart dom labhairt libh anocht. I thank you for your invitation, and I look forward to the discussion.