

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Introduction

Women are precious gift from God. They are creative, sensitive, compassionate, intelligent, talented and according to the Bible, equal to men. Our subject matter of discussion here is how women are empowered in the church. Women empowerment does not mean that women are to be the supreme power of the society or the Church, but it would mean that women should have equal role in decision-making process in every sphere of life. Throughout the history, we find that there were several men, who were the proponents of women's empowerment encouraging them to become what God expected them to be. We know many men, who have actually fought to restore women's right in the Church and have tried to bring out a balanced understanding of women.

As I address this subject, I would like to emphasize at the very outset that the Canon Law Society of India is giving me another opportunity to be empowered by requesting me to be one of the resource persons even in the midst of numerous scholars. Most of you are doctors in the church and many of you are teachers. Hence I am only opening up the area of our intellectual search to think collectively, positively and creatively to empower women.

Etymology and Concept of Empowerment

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "empowerment" as "the action of empowering; the state of being empowered" and it was first used in this form in 1849. However, the verb "empower" from which this noun is derived was first apparent in the English Language some two hundred years before. The word "empower" is of French and Latin derivation consisting of the preposition "em" and the noun "power". Etymologically it means to invest with power. The empowerment of women is a process that involves the development of 'power within', 'power to', and 'power with'. It aims at altering systems that are responsible for 'power over' other human beings both men and women.

The concept of empowerment is very delicate and at the same time indivisible. It is a way of acquiring the ability and opportunity to participation in decision-making and implementation; and influencing the decision with proper knowledge, self-dignity and self-confidence. The empowerment of a person or group of people is the mechanism of giving them power and status in a particular situation.¹ Ideologically it means emancipation of women and harmonious co-existence with men in the society. Women's empowerment is the process in which women develop and recreate what they are able to, and accomplish in a circumstance, which were hitherto denied to them. To quote Archbishop Bernardito Auza, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, "Empowering women means creating the conditions necessary for them to flourish, in full acceptance of and in accordance with their natural genius as women, and in harmonious complementarity with the gifts of men,"² [March 18, 2016].

¹Shelina Akhter, "Empowerment of Women: A Theoretical Overview" in *Man in India*, 86 (3&4): pp. 267-273.

²<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/empower-women-and-you-empower-the-world-vatican-tells-un-96733>.

Women in the Old Testament

God created man and woman in His image and gave them both authority to reign over the earth.³ The following are some of the women who played important role in the salvation history in the OT. The Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah⁴ dared to disobey the king who commanded them to slaughter the male babies of Hebrew women. Through their refusal to be oppressed, they became deliverers of many Hebrew babies. Three other brave women who dared to disobey the king in order to save the life of Moses are Moses' mother, his sister Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter.

Judith had the courage to rebuke the council of elders, with wisdom and prudence, for their lack of commitment to the covenant relationship with God and challenged their decision. As a committed daughter of Israel she took up the mission of saving Israel. She, thus, received the title of blessed among all the women of the earth.⁵

Judith's maidservant is another empowered woman. Judith's courageous endeavour was carried out by the supporting hand of her maidservant: she summoned the elders to Judith's house; assisted her for all the preparations before, during and after the defeat of their enemy; accompanied Judith to the enemy's camp and stayed with her in the tent of Holofernes; and she waited outside and guarded Judith while she killed the enemy and carried his head to the people of Bethulia.⁶

The next is Deborah, a prophetess and a woman judge⁷ who ruled the country. She was instrumental in defeating Sisera and redeeming Israel from the hands of King Jabin of Canaan. As a prophetess, she was a spokesperson for God. As a judge she made decisions on God's behalf.

The Lord commissioned Esther to rule as a queen⁸ and positively acknowledged the Queen of Sheba.⁹ Esther sacrificed her plans as a young woman and allowed herself to be taken into the king's harem in order to be in a position to speak on behalf of God's people at the appropriate time. Thus, she saved her nation and became a queen, who held a high position of leadership in the land and cared for the poor.

We have several women who are recognized as prophetesses in the Bible - women such as Anna, Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Philip's four daughters. Among them, perhaps, the most widely unknown female prophet is Huldah.¹⁰ After the discovery of the Book of the Law, King Josiah sent five prominent officials to Huldah and according to her oracle led the people in an act of covenant renewal. Apparently

³Genesis 1:27-28.

⁴Exodus 1:15-22.

⁵Judith 13:18 "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth."

⁶Judith 8:10 – 13:9.

⁷Judges 4:4-5.

⁸Esther 2:17.

⁹1 Kings 10:1-13 & 2 Chronicles 9:1-28.

¹⁰2 Kings 22:14-20; II Chronicles 34: 22-33; Herbert Lockyer, All the Women of the Bible, OM Books, Secunderabad, 2014, pp. 69-70.

the King did not seek out any of the leading male prophets of the day, such as Zephaniah and Jeremiah.

Women in the New Testament

Mathew's gospel presents a confident, bold and courageous woman who took the initiative to come out on her own and makes her request to Jesus to cure her daughter using the language of the Jewish prayer. The Canaanite woman during her dialogue with Jesus redefined Jesus' mission to the gentiles.¹¹ For, then, Jesus was of opinion that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is her direct and continued conversation that changed his attitude and extended his horizon. In the end, she is lauded by Jesus for her great faith.

The gospel of John presents empowered women, who play significant leadership role. Among them are Mary, mother of Jesus¹², the Samaritan woman¹³, Mary and Martha¹⁴ and Mary Magdalene.¹⁵

Mary, Mother of Jesus challenged convention in conceiving him and placed herself at risk of disgrace and death. At the wedding feast at Cana,¹⁶ she went ahead confidently to tell the servants to "do what he tells you" and was instrumental in letting Jesus perform his first miracle despite his statement "My hour has not yet come." She was there at the foot of the cross and again at strengthening the shattered apostles in the upper room.

The Samaritan Woman questions Jesus at every significant moment of the narrative. She challenges the religious association between the Jews and the Samaritans as well as the social association between men and women. She appears to be a woman well versed in her religious traditions. She was empowered to become a "missionary", a preacher of the good news to a whole community of Samaritans, who otherwise might not have received this good news!

Martha's sister Mary stepped outside her proper housewifely role and sat at the feet of Jesus to be taught by him.

The undaunted action of a woman enabled her to touch Jesus' garment and to experience the divine healing. She was considered an outcast - unclean, contaminating all whom she touched. She risked the fury of the crowd with the hope that if she could touch his garment she would be made whole. Her faith made Jesus not only heal her but also to bless her by addressing her 'daughter', and asking her to go in peace.

The bravery and audacity of Mary Magdalene made her the apostle of the apostles, the great announcer of the resurrection.¹⁷ According to Luke there were four women, who proclaimed and declared the good news of the resurrection to the

¹¹Matthew 15:21-28.

¹²John 2 & 19.

¹³John 4:4-42.

¹⁴John 11-12.

¹⁵John 20.

¹⁶John 2:1-12.

¹⁷John 20:1-18.

frightened disciples. “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other woman with them who told this to the apostles.”¹⁸ Jesus made them the harbingers of the good news, the bearers of the good news, the messengers of the resurrection and the new heralds of Christianity.

Jesus’ Attitude towards women

Jesus’ liberating presence is experienced by women despite the rabbinical tradition of which Jesus was a part of. He treated women as equals. He taught them, though the Jews denied women the right to study or discuss the Torah. He spoke to them in public though no Jewish man would even address his wife or mother or sister outside the home. He raised a woman to life at a time, when women were considered as essentially unimportant. He refused to stone the woman caught in adultery. He healed the haemorrhaging woman, who touched him and rejected the taboo of primitive times, which held her as untouchable. He used the feminine image of God in the parable of the woman- the widow who put all that she had into the treasury.

The Empowered Women in the Early Church

Joel prophesied about the future outpouring of the Holy Spirit, “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, ... Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”¹⁹ Further, Jesus said after his resurrection “when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you shall receive power to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and to the ends of the earth.”²⁰ When the 120 people gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost, the count included women.²¹ In the same way, both men and women participated in subsequent prayer gatherings, experienced the fullness of the Spirit, and preached the Word of God with boldness.²²

Women served together with men in the early years until the institutionalization of the church transformed leadership into the sole prerogative of men. In the Acts of the Apostles we see Priscilla and her husband, Aquila teaching more accurately in the way of God to Apollos, a man who was already mighty in the Scriptures.

Paul introduced Phoebe extolling her noble virtues, a woman of calibre and worth in the Christian community in Cenchrea, where she served as **deaconess**.²³ Paul encouraged Euodia and Syntyche to keep cooperating and stated that they had toiled along with him in spreading the Gospel.²⁴

Women Deacons in Post-Apostolic Period

In the second and third centuries the church had women deaconesses along with male deacons.²⁵ These women ministered to other women in variety of ways,

¹⁸Luke 24:10.

¹⁹Joel 2:28-29.

²⁰Acts 1:8.

²¹Acts 1:14-15.

²²Acts 4:23-31.

²⁴Philippians 4:2-3.

²⁵Christian art from the first and second centuries depicts women performing various ministerial activities – administering the Lord’s Supper, teaching, baptizing, caring for the physical needs of the congregation and

including instructing catechumens, assisting with women's baptisms and welcoming women into the church services.²⁶ The tradition of women deacons was kept alive until the 12th century A.D. The early church councils and synods as well as the writings of the ante-Nicene and Nicene Fathers approved it.

The first ecumenical council of Nicea held in the year 325 AD, in passing, mentioned the existence of deaconesses. Canon 19 of its declaration reads:

In this way one must also deal with the deaconesses or with anyone in an ecclesiastical office. With regard to the deaconesses who hold this position²⁷ we remind [church leaders] that they possess no ordination [=cheirotonia], but are to be reckoned among the laity in every respect.²⁸

The Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) not only recognized women deacons but set the minimum age for deaconesses and deacons. Canon 15 of its declarations pointed out that no woman shall receive the 'laying on of hands as a deaconess' if she is below the age of forty. In the same council the age for the male deacon was put at twenty-five.²⁹ Eventually, the Council of Trullo, which was convoked in Constantinople in 692 AD reconfirmed the age requirement for female deacons.

The third century *Didascalia Apostolorum* unambiguously made clear the office of women deacons in early Christianity. It contains elaborate information on the ordination and duties of the deaconess:

Wherefore, O bishop, appoint thee workers of righteousness as helpers who may cooperate with thee unto salvation. Those that please thee out of all the people thou shalt choose and appoint as deacons; a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women.³⁰

The document further points out the reason for ordaining women and some of the duties assigned to them. They are: (i) there are some houses where male deacons cannot be sent to minister to women. In such cases female deacons are best suited. (ii) during the baptismal immersions women ought not be seen by men. Women who go down into the water ought to be anointed, received and taught and instructed as to how the seal of baptism ought to be kept unbroken in purity and holiness by a deaconess.³¹

leading in public prayers. See Stanley J. Grenz & Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*, IVP Academics, Downers Grove, Illinois p. 39.

²⁶Constance J. Tarasar, "Women in the mission of the Church: Theological and Historical Reflections," *International Review of Mission* 81, no. 322 (April 1992): 195.

²⁷The position referred here is the heresy of Paul of Samosata (260-272 AD). It denied the three persons of the Trinity. He was excommunicated by the local Council of Antioch (268 AD).

²⁸Council of Nicea, canon 19. As quoted in Adolphus Chinedu Amadi-Azuofu, *The Empowerment of Women in the Church Today, The Relevance of the New Testament Charismatic Churches*, Outskirts Press, Inc. Denver, Colorado, 2007, p. 209.

²⁹Adolphus, *The Empowerment of Women*, p. 210.

³⁰*Didascalia Apostolorum*, chapter 16, in *The Didascalia Apostolorum*, R. Hugh Connolly (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929, pp. 146-147. See also Adolphus, *The Empowerment of Women*, p. 211.

³¹*Didascalia Apostolorum*, chapter 16.

Book VIII of the 4th century Apostolic Constitution deals with the ordination of the deaconesses and states that the bishop should lay his hands on the deaconess in the presence of the presbytery, the deacons and deaconesses.³²

Women in the Monastic Period

In the 4th century Jerome bore witness to the importance of Paula, an abbess of the women's monasteries and expressed high praise for her learning, admitting that her mastery of Hebrew was better than his own. Together, Jerome and Paula established monasteries for men and women.³³

During the monastic period Abbesses held great power within the monastic movement. In addition to governing their own lands, abbesses appointed local parish priest, heard confessions and cared for the material and spiritual needs of their people. Nuns and monks, as well as male and female laity, submitted to abbesses' authority. "These women leaders attended and participated in church councils, nominated priests, appointed and licensed priors, and received vows of obedience from those who were under them. ... The popes sanctioned, supported and acknowledged the right of these women to exercise this authority and receive the obedience of those under her care."³⁴

Apparently abbesses were originally ordained. They received the symbols of the office of a bishop- the mitre, ring, crozier, gloves and cross. However, later translations obscure much of the earlier written evidence surrounding the ordination of abbesses by rendering the Latin term 'blessed' rather than 'ordained.'³⁵

The Abbesses authority and power declined from the twelfth to sixteenth century. The council of Trent requested them to submit themselves to the male abbot.³⁶

We can enlist several women like Joan of Arc, St Teresa of Avila, Mary Ward, Mother Teresa, Mother McCauley who let themselves be used by God to do major things in God's Kingdom. St Joan of Arc led a French military campaign against the English. St Clare of Assisi played an important role in the Franciscan movement. St Teresa of Avila brought about reformation in the church, in the Carmelite monasteries and founded the Discalced Carmelites. Blessed Mariam Theresia though faced fierce criticisms broke the custom in travelling the roads unaccompanied by men in order to access to new opportunities and create change.

There are women, who ventured out to found religious congregations so as to empower others. For instance, Mary Ward was convinced that the Gospel would be unfulfilled until poor young women were educated. Mother McCauley sensed that the Gospel would be unfulfilled until the sick were treated with dignity. Mother Teresa of Kolkata recognized that Gospel would be unfulfilled until the dying poor are treated as human beings and evoked the conscience of the society.

³²*Apostolic Constitution*, Book VIII, no. 19.

³³Jerome *Epistle* 108, 5-6, 26 quoted in Ruth A. Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987). pp. 118-119.

³⁴Boccia "Hidden History of Women Leaders", pp. 64-65 as quoted in Grenz & Kjesbo, *Women in the Church*, p. 41.

³⁵Grenz & Kjesbo, *Women in the Church*, p. 41.

³⁶Boccia "Hidden History", p.66.

There are empowered women who sacrificed themselves in order to empower others. Blessed Rani Maria and Sr Valsa John are clear examples. **Sr Sudha Varghese**, a Notre Dame Sister, known among the tribals as *didi* [elder sister] has devoted herself to the Musahar, the Dalit of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, one of the Scheduled Castes considered "untouchables". Her tireless effort to empower this tribal children, women and men won her the Padma Shri award on 26 November 2006. She resides and works with two other sisters in Jamsaut, a village in Patna district.

Women saints: Doctors of the Church

Until 1970, no woman had been named a doctor in the church. In the 20th century, three female saints—Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Saint Therese of Lisieux—were added to the list. A fourth, Saint Hildegard of Bingen, a Benedictine abbess, was added in the 21st Century.

Catherine of Siena (1347 - 1380) by Pope Paul VI in 1970

Teresa of Avila (1515 - 1582) by Pope Paul VI in 1970

Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) by Pope John Paul II in 1997

Hildegard of Bingen (1098 - 1179) by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012

Theological Education for Women

The first Theological Institute granting master's and doctor's degree in Sacred Theology to religious and lay women, was established in 1943 by Sr Mary Madeleva Wolf, then president of St Mary's College, Notre Dame, Indiana.³⁷ In 1953 Regina Mundi Institute was opened for the theological education for women in Rome. After Vatican II, the seminaries were opened to religious and lay women for theological studies.

Ecclesia in Asia emphasised the need for women to learn theology, "To enhance their service in the Church, there should be greater opportunities for women to take courses in theology and other fields of study; and men in seminaries and houses of formation need to be trained to regard women as co-workers in the apostolate."³⁸ Today, we have several women, who teach and serve as dean of Theology in the seminaries and ecclesiastical universities.

On 3 July 2014 Congregation for Catholic Education appointed **Sr Mary Melone**, member of the Franciscan Sisters of Blessed Angelina, as rector of the Pontifical University Antonianum.³⁹

Women in the Second Vatican Council and after the Council

Twenty-three women auditors eventually attended Vatican II council. In the first session there was no female representation. In the second session (beginning on

³⁷Helen R. Graham, M.M., "Vatican II and Women" in *Landas* 26:1 (2012) 79-97.

³⁸John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, November 6, 1999, no. 5.

³⁹<https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/.../woman-appointed-rector-pontifical-university-rom>.

29 September 1963) women were allowed to be present for the opening ceremony each day. Through the intervention of one of the council fathers, women were taken as auditors for the third and fourth sessions:

On October 23, 1963, during the discussion on the church as people of God (*Lumen Gentium*), Leon Josef Cardinal Suenens, archbishop of Milines and a council moderator, said that systematically excluding women from active church participation made no sense in an age when they go almost to the moon. He called for increasing the number and range of lay auditors. He continued: 'Women too should be invited as auditors: unless I am mistaken, they make up half of the human race.'⁴⁰

Thus Pope Paul VI admitted twenty three women auditors who were to be 'seen and not heard'. At this juncture one of the council theologians, Bernard Haring intervened saying, "If women were invited, they should have a place in the commissions formulating the documents." Thus three women were invited to attend commission meetings and were allowed to speak as freely as they wished. They are: Rosemary Goldie, a lay leader from Australia, Mere Guillemin, a Sister of Charity of St Vincent de Paul from France, and Loretto Sister Mary Luke Tobin, president of the conference of Major Superiors later known as Leadership Conference of Women Religious [LCWR].⁴¹

The 1960s brought significant changes in the understanding of the Church on the theology of womanhood. Speaking on women, Pope John XXIII stated in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* 41, "Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life." This was resounded in *Gaudium et Spes* 29, "With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent."⁴²

At the conclusion of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI addressing specifically to women said:

The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women 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. ...

Women ... make it your task to bring the spirit of this council into institutions, schools, homes and daily life. Women of the entire universe, whether Christian or non-believing, you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world.⁴³

On 6 December 1976 at the national meeting of the *Centro Italiano Femmine*, Pope Paul VI further affirmed,

Within Christianity ... since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity, of which the New Testament shows us many important aspects ...; it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so

⁴⁰Carmel Elizabeth McEnroy, *Guest in their own house: Then Women of Vatican II*, reissued (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), p. 41.

⁴¹Sister Mary Luke Tobin, "Women in the Church: Vatican II and After," *Ecumenical Review* 37/3 (1985): p. 296.

⁴²Sr Mary Luke Tobin was a member of the committee that drafted *Gaudium et spes*.

⁴³Ivy A. Helman, *Woman and the Vatican: An Exploration of Official Document*, Mary knoll, Orbis Books, 2012, p. 1.

prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear.⁴⁴

On 15 August 1988 quoting Genesis 1:27 Pope John Paul II cited in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* 6, “The human race, which takes its origin from the calling into existence of man and woman, crowns the whole creation; both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God’s image.”

Ecclesia in Asia adjudged:

...the wider participation of women in the life and mission of the Church in Asia to be an especially pressing need. ... Women should be more effectively involved in pastoral programmes, in diocesan and parish pastoral councils, and in diocesan synods. Their abilities and services should be fully appreciated in health care, in education, in preparing the faithful for the sacraments, in building community and in peace making. ... the presence of women in the Church’s mission of love and service contributes greatly to bringing the compassionate Jesus, the healer and reconciler, to Asian people, especially the poor and marginalized.⁴⁵

Women in the Codes of Canon Law

“The expression of language in the masculine gender also regards the feminine gender unless the law provides otherwise or it is evident from the nature of the mater.”⁴⁶ CCEO is more explicit in its general norm that wherever the law makes use of the expression ‘he’ it is also applicable to ‘she’. It means before the law, in general, women are treated as equals having equal rights and obligations just as men. CIC treats this equality with regard to consecrated life, i.e., “Provisions concerning institutes of consecrated life and their members are equally valid in law, for both sexes, unless it is established otherwise from the context or from the nature of things.”⁴⁷

CCEO defines in positive terms who the laity are, “The designation of ‘lay persons’ is applied in CCEO to the Christian faithful whose proper and specific quality is secularity and who, living in the world, participate in the mission of the Church, but are not in sacred orders nor ascribed in the religious state.”⁴⁸ According to CIC “By divine institution, among Christ’s faithful there are in the Church sacred ministers, who in law are also called clerics; the others are called lay people.”⁴⁹

Only in one instance in CIC as well as in CCEO gender difference is shown. It is in the question of sacred Ordination. “Only a **baptized man** can validly receive sacred ordination.”⁵⁰ Consequently, wherever the power of order is to be exercised women are excluded. At the same time women can co-operate with the clergy wherever the power of order is exercised by the clerics. “Lay members of

⁴⁴Paul VI, Address to Participants at the National Meeting of the Centro Italiano Femmine as cited by John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, August 15, 1988, no. 5.

⁴⁵*Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 45.

⁴⁶CCEO c. 1505.

⁴⁷CIC c. 606.

⁴⁸CCEO c. 399.

⁴⁹CIC c. 207 § 1.

⁵⁰CIC c.1024; CCEO c. 754.

Christ's faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power in accordance with the law."⁵¹ Though the Pontifical Biblical Commission held the view that there is no biblical basis to deny priesthood to women⁵², on 15 October 1976 the Sacred Congregation for Divine Faith in *Inter Insigniores*, and on 22 May 1994 Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, declared that Ordination is reserved to men alone. "I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."⁵³

The section that deals with the Obligations and Rights of All Christ's Faithful as well as of the Lay Members of Christ's Faithful apply equally to all Christ's faithful.⁵⁴ Women have equal rights to be sponsors at Baptism⁵⁵ and Confirmation.⁵⁶

In Matrimony, they are treated and regarded as full, equal partners with their husbands.⁵⁷ Speaking on the mutuality and equality of the man and woman in marriage CIC states, "Matrimonial consent is an act of the will by which a man and a woman by an irrevocable covenant mutually give and accept one another for the purpose of establishing a marriage." and CCEO, "Matrimonial consent is an act of the will by which a man and woman, through an irrevocable covenant, mutually give and accept each other, to establish marriage."⁵⁸

Women are members of the parish pastoral council and diocesan pastoral council.⁵⁹ They can be appointed as the finance administrator⁶⁰ and finance committee members.⁶¹

Women can be lectors, commentators and cantor at Mass and extraordinary ministers of baptism⁶², extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion⁶³ and extraordinary ministers of the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.⁶⁴

They can work in the parish office; impart religious education, and so on, just like their male counterparts. Today, many parishes have women *pastoral associates* – usually religious sisters who help a parish priest with many spiritual and pastoral duties.⁶⁵

⁵¹CIC c. 129 § 2; CCEO c. 979 § 2.

⁵²Arlene Swidler & Leonard Swidler (ed.), *Women Priests*, Paulist Press, 1977, pp. 338-346, Republished with permission in <http://www.womenpriests.org/classic/appendix.asp>.

⁵³*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, no. 4.

⁵⁴CIC cc. 208-231; CCEO cc. 11-26.

⁵⁵CIC c. 873.

⁵⁶CIC cc. 892-893.

⁵⁷CIC cc. 1055 § 1, 1057 § 1, 2; CCEO cc. 776 § 1, 817

⁵⁸CIC c. 1057 § 2; CCEO c. 817 § 1.

⁵⁹CIC c. 512, CCEO c. 273.

⁶⁰CIC c. 494 § 1, 2, CCEO c. 262.

⁶¹CIC c. 492 § 1, CCEO c. 263 § 1.

⁶²CIC c. 230 § 2, CCEO c. 403 § 2.

⁶³CIC c. 910 § 2, CCEO c. 709 § 2.

⁶⁴CIC c. 943.

⁶⁵CIC c. 517.

The Church has women who are theologians⁶⁶ and canon lawyers; judges⁶⁷ and chancellors⁶⁸; promoter of justice and defender of bond.⁶⁹ The Church has allowed local bishops and pastors the option to permit female altar servers at Mass. Now, many parishes have both altar girls and altar boys.⁷⁰

Thus it is obvious that in both Codes men and women ought to enjoy the same rights and obligations in very many areas. This clearly shows that law is genderless.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) on Empowering Women

The 2008 General Body Meeting of CBCI had its theme "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society." This resulted in the 50 page document 'The Gender Policy for the Catholic Church in India', which was released in the 2010 General Body Meeting held in Guwahati.

The then President of the CBCI Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, in a written message said that the Gender Policy was a very important step towards the empowerment of women in our country and urged the Church in India to translate the policy into concrete action. He urged the whole body of the church to 'graciously wish and will' the execution of the policy in every sphere of life.

Pope Francis on Empowering Women in the Church

On 15 April 2015, Pope Francis stated during his weekly audience that women and men should complement one another based on their distinctive traits, rather than competing with one another. He reiterated, there is still much to be done to strengthen the reciprocity between men and women. "Women must not only be listened to, but also given real weight and authority." He further added that society has not yet understood what the female mind is capable of giving. Women see things differently than men in a way that complements a man's way of thinking. "Women can also become fully involved in exchanges at the religious level, as well as those at the theological level," the Pope affirmed, noting that many women "are well prepared to face encounters of interreligious dialogue at the highest levels and not just from the Catholic side."

On Thursday, 22 December 2016, Pope Francis urged the Curia, to become more inclusive: "The development of the role of women and lay people in the Church and their appointment to leading roles in the dicasteries, with particular attention to multiculturalism, is furthermore of great importance."⁷¹

On 7 November 2017, Pope Francis appointed two Italian women as under-secretaries in the Vatican Dicastery. They are Professor Gabriella Gambino - office for the family and Dr Linda Ghisoni- office for the laity. They are, now, the third ranking officials in the department and are further evidence of Pope

⁶⁶CIC c. 229 § 2; CCEO c. 404 § 2.

⁶⁷CIC c. 1421 § 2, CCEO c. 1087 § 2.

⁶⁸CIC c. 482.

⁶⁹CIC c. 1435, CCEO c. 1099 § 2.

⁷⁰<https://www.dummies.com/religion/christianity/catholicism/the-role-of-women-in-the-catholic-church>.

⁷¹<https://www.dw.com/en/pope-tells-vatican-to-appoint...women...curia/a-36884929>.

Francis' determination to assign important positions in the Roman Curia to women.

On 21 April 2018, Pope Francis appointed three women—two Italians and one Belgian—as consultants to the Congregation for Divine Worship as part of his ongoing effort to give a greater role to women in the work of the Roman Curia offices. These are the first ever appointments of women or laity as consultants in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

On 17 June 2018, Pope Francis reiterated the need for more women in the Roman Curia, "Women have an ability to understand things, they have a different vision of things," further "I do not have any problem naming a woman as the head of a dicastery, if the dicastery does not have jurisdiction." Two other positions not tied to the sacraments or priesthood are Secretary of State and Secretary for the Economy, where women could be appointed.⁷²

Conclusion

Women have their own unique role to play in the economy of salvation. They are fully human beings with faculties of the mind, emotions and the spirit. This affirmation of women's human dignity as persons of their own right, with their biological differences with men, is important for positioning them on an equal footing and partnership with men. It is the need of the pilgrim church to discern whichever area women can be empowered. Women are visible in all spheres of society even those fields considered in the past to be male bastions.⁷³ For example in the civil world we have women president, prime minister, governor, defense minister, secretary of state, finance adviser, renowned scientists, police and defence forces including air force and many more.

As members of CLSI and responsible persons in the dioceses and parishes, what more can we do at the grass root level: to empower women; to include women's experience and expression of God; to bring about a change of attitude through a proper understanding of the role of men and women in the family, society, and in the Church and to bring about a greater awareness of the original mutuality between men and women? Do we have the courage to take risk as pioneers just as Jesus did?

⁷²<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/empower-women-and-you-empower-the-world-vatican-tells-un-96733>.

⁷³For instance Dr Tessy Thomas is an example of a woman making her mark in a traditionally male bastion and decisively breaking the glass ceiling. She is fondly called 'Missile Woman and Agni Putri' while Abdul Kalam is called 'Missile Man'. She was the associate project director of the 3,000 km range Agni III Missile project; the project director of Agni IV which was successfully tested in 2011; project director and key scientist for Agni V which was successfully tested on 19 April 2012. See Jeanette Pinto, *Wonder Women of India: Beacons of Light to the Next Generation*, St Paul Publications, Bandra, Mumbai, 2015, pp. 161-165.