

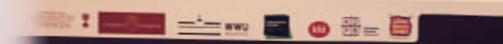


gods strong daughters

A summary of the
international hybrid
conference

Leipzig, 18th - 19th
September 2023

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Gottes starke Töchter





New wine in new wineskins

God's strong daughters (and sons) spoke out impressively at a groundbreaking conference in Leipzig, Germany

When Pope Francis initiated a worldwide synodal process in 2021 and asked the global faithful about their wishes, hopes and sore points, the women's question resounded loud and clear from all corners of the world. Not only in German-speaking countries, but all over the world - from India to South America - Catholic women suffer from discrimination, exclusion and marginalization and demand more justice and participation. In view of these clear signs of the times, it seemed urgent to bring together women's voices of the worldwide church on the eve of the World Synod and to engage them in an encouraging, fruitful and pioneering dialogue. To enable and promote such an international exchange, the Catholic Academy of the Diocese of Dresden-Meißen, having been invited by a group of women including Julia Knop (University of Erfurt), Dorothea Sattler (University of Münster), Margit Eckholt (University of Osnabrück) and Johanna Rahner (University of Tübingen), and in co-operation with major Catholic women's associations and the newspaper Christ in der Gegenwart, invited renowned women theologians, church leaders and synod participants from around the world to the hybrid conference God's Strong Daughters. Women and the Ministry in Catholicism in Leipzig. In his opening statement, Thomas Arnold, the Academy's director, emphasized, „The Church does not need to become more feminine, because it already is. But women need to be given the visibility that is appropriate.“

Approximately 500 participants (present and digitally connected) witnessed and supported the aim to „demonstrate to the synodal women the enthusiasm and frustration, the experiences and expectations that are driving female Catholics worldwide“ and „to make God's strong daughters heard“ as co-organizer Julia Knop put it. Ute Leimgruber, the representative of the Herbert Haag Foundation, emphasized that gender justice is crucial for the future of the church and called the conference a „small feminist world synod.“ Bishop Kohlgraf, who as chairman of the Pastoral Commission contributed a video greeting, stated, „People feel that church practice is an injustice and an obstacle to credible proclamation.“

Women in Ministry. The Question of Women in the World Synod

In the first roundtable discussion moderated by Margit Eckholt, entitled *Women in Ministry. The Question of Women in the World Synod*, Catalina Cerda-Planas (Chile), Susan Pascoe (Australia), Sr. Ana Thea Filipović (Croatia), Béatrice Faye (Senegal) and Sr. Birgit Weiler (Peru) reported on

their research and their experiences with the current World Synod. The speakers pointed out that despite some heterogeneity and regional differences on the issue of ordination, there is a strong desire for more equality and participation of women everywhere - especially in light of the fact that they are the „mainstay of the Church in evangelization,“ as Faye pointed out. In addition to general discrimination, contributors also cited problems such as clericalism, abuse, and extreme power imbalances. These grievances must be countered by more participation in leadership, by enabling unity in diversity, by spiritual discernment, by reform of church structures and by continued reference to the common baptismal dignity and the image of God in all people. Birgit Weiler reported on her positive experiences with the synodal process in Latin America, where bishops are already ordaining women to anoint the sick. Ordination is an important sign.

The organizers of the meeting had succeeded, at short notice, in winning and connecting Sr. Nathalie Becquart, the undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops and the only woman with full voting rights at a Synod of Bishops. She, too, reported on a great diversity among Catholic women, but also on a common call for more participation and on the processual path towards the participation of women at the World Synod.

Vocations, ministries, and ordained ministry

In the second roundtable discussion moderated by Dorothea Sattler on *vocations, ministries, and ordained ministry* Dagmar Heller (Germany), Jean Ehret (Luxembourg) and Regina Polak (Austria) sat on the panel. Heller, a Protestant pastor, described the journey of Protestant women of faith toward women’s ordination, in which factors such as the large number of well-trained female theologians, a shortage of men, and the simple realization of the need for women pastors had played an important role.

Jean Ehret from Luxembourg described a touching joint service with an Anglican friend, a woman priest, at which he had felt a deep connection with her: „Something happened. (...) I see God at work and that commits me.“ In the discussion that followed, he recommended deconstructing previous patterns of argumentation in the question of vocation and its criteriology and asking again how vocation can be justified theologically. In doing so, not only biblical evidence should be listed, but also the events of revelation should be taken into consideration.

In the context of the question of vocation, another organizer of the conference, the editor of *Weil Gott es so*



will, Sr. Philippa Rath, pointed out the many women who „know about their vocation“ (some of them present at the meeting). Their vocation is not officially examined, which is a great injustice and a „tremendous waste of charisms and talents.“ Some of the women from her anthology t made personal statements during the conference.

Ecumenical prayer service for peace

The first discussions were followed by an ecumenical prayer service for peace in Leipzig’s Nikolai Church, a place steeped in history. The subsequent discussion about women in church leadership positions was also ecumenical: Ilse Junkermann, retired bishop of the Protestant Church, and Beate Gilles, secretary general of the German Bishops’ Conference, outlined their respective paths to church leadership positions in personal reports.

Gilles, while admitting lingering clericalism, described her appointment as a „sign of hope“ for a changing Catholic Church, emphasizing, „I’m not the question, I’m part of the answer, and I’m here.“

In her response, Sr. Birgit Weiler again reported on the situation in Latin America, where the number of Catholics is declining and many feel that the Church is inconsistent in its message. Still, she has experienced movement and change, as well as an encouraging sense of togetherness with her fellow believers. Change is only possible together with them.

Therefore, she also referred to the need for „formacion“ - formation - (especially of men in the church), towards a new understanding of power, more empowerment of women and the promotion of all charisms. With a view to the next synodal steps, she wished that „the Holy Spirit may work powerfully and creatively.“





Gender justice

On Tuesday morning, Regina Franken-Wendelstorf of the Catholic Women's Council, Samuel H. Canilang (Philippines), Luis Carlos Aguilar Badilla (Costa Rica), and Nontando Hadebe (South Africa) being moderated by Julia Knop discussed the topic of *gender justice*. Regina Franken-Wendelstorf gave a voice to those women who had to endure sexism, violence, and abuse in the Catholic context, and still do.

In some cases, ecclesiastical language is used to even legitimize domestic violence – which come down to complicity with the perpetrators.

This is not pastoral care, but „failure to help“. Franken-Wendelstorf described how the „poison of sexism (...) everywhere in the church is whitewashed with gold and covered with incense and eats deeper and deeper into the structures“. Therefore a „detoxification“ of the church is necessary. Ute Leimgruber emphasized that gender-specific experiences of violence are a matter of „life and death“, which is why changes could save lives in a very concrete way.

Samuel Canilang stressed the key role of women in the renewal of the church. Nontando Hadebe also drew attention to violence, abuse and a second-class status of women in the church and contrasted this with the God-likeness and the equal baptismal dignity of all. The gap between social developments and the church must be closed, she said. She called for more participation, a change in sexual morality, more visibility, and women priests. In the digital chat, one participant commented, „It's not God who is behind times, - it's just the church.“

Luis Carlos Aguilar Badilla focused on the formation of priests and spoke in favor of moving away from a masculine image of leadership, from machismo, and towards the empowerment of women. In the following plenary session, he described the vocation of women as a „sign of the times“ and a „locus theologicus“.

Structures and Power. Women in Leadership

The subsequent panel, *Structures and Power. Women in Leadership*, moderated by Thomas Arnold focused mainly on the question of office and ordination. Helen Nambalirwa Nkabila from Uganda made a passionate appeal to the participants and called for more integration, participation, equality, and power for women in accordance with their likeness to God. Renata Asal-Steger emphasized in her contribution that „the change of the church must come from below.“ Serena Noceti from Italy was critical of simply ordaining women to existing ministries and argued instead for a transformation of structures according to the kingdom of God that embraces all. Virginia Saldanha from India also



argued against the continuation or expansion of the old church structures and for the creation of new ones, because „new wine needs new wineskins.“ The guiding principles for the necessary new structures, ministries and theologies should be the actions of Jesus („What would Jesus do?“), the Bible, the more gender-equal early church, and the *sensus fidei*.

Closing panel

During the closing panel, chaired by Johanna Rahner, Sr. Katharina (Germany), Julia McStravog (USA), Sr. Mary Nzilani Wambua (Kenya), Sr. Caroline Mbonu (Nigeria) and Tatjana Disteli (Switzerland) summed up the two-day conference. Sr. Katharina Ganz emphasized that it is a sin against the message of Jesus if the structures are not changed. The goal, she said, must be a more evangelical and synodal church. There was a plea for greater networking, especially with regards to the World Synod, for decentralized solutions, a „church of different speeds“ and a change in the magisterium.

Both the determination and the urgent need to continue working together on the women’s question was declared.

Julia Knop concluded the conference by summing up, „We empowered ourselves and stood up.“





The online dossier for the conference:
www.lebendig-akademisch.de/gods-strong-daughters



Katholische Akademie
Bistum Dresden-Meißen

A conclusion

Many international strong, impressive, wise, passionate and sometimes downright prophetic voices of God's strong daughters (and sons) were heard over two days. They mirrored diversity and were always nuanced. Together they called for justice, visibility, participation, and for systemic change. They spoke tellingly of faith in the God who created all people in his image and as free. The voices heard at the Leipzig conference reveal the richness, the potential, the wisdom - but also the suffering - of God's daughters. At the same time, despite the pain, they powerfully demonstrated what a treasure the Church is missing out on by excluding women from ordination. And they also clearly showed - as did the international feedback to the World Synod - that the pressing women's question cannot be dismissed as a fad purely of the German-speaking nations.

How, then, can the vision of a more gender-equal church be achieved and brought to life?

Some potential and pioneering answers were identified during the conference: There is a need for more intensive international exchange, for regular dialogue and closer worldwide networking among Catholic women. Men need to be made more aware of the women's question, must transform themselves and get on board as supporters of women.

A fundamental system change must be initiated, in line with the message of Jesus and relying on the Spirit, the power of God, so that in the future all Catholic women can develop their faith, their charisms and their vocations freely and for the good of the Church.

In this respect, the meeting as such represented a first great and performative step in the right direction. It should now be followed by many more joint measures.

While in October mainly consecrated men will gather in Rome for the upcoming World Synod, wise and committed women of the universal Catholic Church have already set new standards and markers for the future of the Church at the meeting in Leipzig.

