Voices of Sisters



"The parable of the wise and foolish virgins" by Wilhelm von Schadow, 1842 (Wikimedia Commons/Städel Museum)



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The recently released Working Document for the Continental Stage, or DCS, of the Synod on Synodality is like a breath of fresh air, according to most women. It mentions that reports from all over the world display an urgency to critically rethink women's fullest participation in the life and mission of the church as "baptized and equal members of the People of God." This implies greater involvement in significant decision-making and administrative processes.

Hope of women receiving the sacrament of holy orders is also expressed in synodal reports. Its mention in an official document acknowledging the church's openness to listen and seemingly discern such a pathway came as a surprise to many. Some pro-women's ordination feminists in various WhatsApp groups seemed so happy about being heard (finally!) that they were dumbfounded and did not react for several days. It was like the silence of women who saw the stone rolled away and the tomb open after the resurrection, and the tomb open (Mark 16:1-8).

Initially, this silence made me suspect that they did not so much desire priestly ordination for themselves. They were hurt that the doors to discussion had been unjustly closed, and gender-based inequality seemed to have been definitively encrypted in the heart of the church. Today, hardly anyone wants to add to clericalism anywhere. Must there not be another way to deal with patriarchy, sexism and misogyny?

Through its title, "Enlarge the space of your tent" (Isaiah 54:2), the DCS seems to envision an inclusive and welcoming church with open doors. But how does this Old Testament imagery relate to the closed doors in the parable of the 10 virgins in the New Testament (Matthew 25:1-13)? How can a parable also be a mystery?

The two groups of five virgins not only signify God's grace upon the wise and foolish but also balance and harmony expected between them — like the Ten Commandments with two sets related to love of God and neighbor (Exodus 20:1-17). The symbolism of the number five is found in the multiplication of five loaves to feed the 5,000 (John 6:1-15). Moreover, 5,000 people hear the word and believe (Acts 4:4). It is mentioned 318 times in the Bible.

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One group of five virgins, by itself, seems independent but incomplete to make a story, a parable. All desire to meet the bridegroom. Jesus neither praises the wise ones (in the world's eyes) for having sufficient oil to keep their lamps alight nor excuses them for falling asleep (Matthew 25:5). In the end, he admonishes every listener to stay awake (Matthew 25:13).

I think five of them fail to refill their lamps with oil, and the remaining five virgins fail to be vigilant enough to newly evangelize them and remind them to keep their flames alive. What is the outcome? Only five enter the door when the bridegroom arrives. But can they celebrate? I feel Jesus narrates this parable sarcastically because he desires all of them to join the wedding banquet. Otherwise, the joy is incomplete.

The church Jesus desires must be an inclusive family. It is not supposed to be a museum of saints, but a field hospital on the border of existence, the edge of hope. Many people today express a desire for the joy of the Eucharistic banquet to be accessible easily, though not frequently, especially in remote parts of the world.

All over the world, conscientious Catholics are increasingly concerned about the sexual abuse crisis and the cover-up of these crimes against human dignity. This has led to people leaving the church in despair. Surely, deeper solutions to these problems are required. One cannot think of focusing on evangelizing the world if the baptized are themselves estranged from the church and not convinced about their faith.

We need another way of being church in today's world. Could the people of God be radically creative about this? An all-male hierarchical structure seems to be the root cause of several crises in the church. Pope Francis has rightly said that the situation improves when women are included in its leadership. Will opening the possibility of holy orders to women resolve the issues? Could there be alternatives?

For example, during recent synodal deliberations in women's groups, many wanted women to preach homilies during Mass but were apprehensive that having female deacons would only add to clericalism. Some noted a possibility that the ancient order of consecrated virgins in the Latin Rite included the diaconate, whereas the Eastern Churches had a distinct ministry of women deacons.

Adding to this, there were suggestions that the consecration of virgins, which was one of the 12 sacraments until the 12th century, should once again be recognized as a sacrament. It should be made accessible not only to nuns in monasteries that have the tradition and to women remaining in the world according to Canon 604 (1983 CIC) but also to apostolic religious women. Such a move would imply integrating the diaconate with various forms of consecrated life itself. Perhaps it would bring a springtime of vocations, too.

Another observation is that lay women in many parts of the world are already active in services similar to the diaconate. There is feedback that they should have fixed terms and give opportunities to others to also serve in their parishes. If a parish had many female permanent deacons, lay ministries would suffer. Hence, it would be ideal to drop this idea and instead open access to ordination of women for the priesthood.

Nevertheless, interestingly, it seems an increasing number of feminists support the possibility of groups of baptized persons celebrating the Eucharist together without requiring ordained ministers. Otherwise, according to them, how could the church address the problem of diminishing vocations to the priesthood in several parts of the world?

I have encountered women in various states of life who are apprehensive about the impact of the permanent diaconate for women being introduced, since clericalism is already a big problem everywhere. As a theologian, I do think it would help the church to return to its roots to review its sacramental economy and also reformulate the theology of ordination.