Voices of Sisters

Spirituality



A group of women on a pilgrimage sponsored by FutureChurch views a ninth-century mosaic in Rome's St. Praxedis Church, in this 2006 file photo. The mosaic shows the Blessed Virgin Mary, Sts. Praxedis and Pudentia, and a woman, Theodora, who has the word "Episcopa" inscribed above her. FutureChurch advocates the ordination of women priests and dispensing with the celibacy requirement for priests. (CNS/Carrie Leonard)



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When I read the NCR story published Feb. 13, "Inside the Vatican's synod office: 'New style of leadership' for Catholic Church," I learned that Pope Francis aims to create "a new style of leadership" through the October synod. As I read, I started recalling the women leaders with whom I had the opportunity to attend conferences some years ago.

During those conferences I noticed a significant upsurge in feminine power and female leadership: Women are rising together, supporting each other and using their voices to lead the change.

Over the past few years, the world has been battered by multiple crises, which has devastated nearly every nation's economy. I hold male leadership responsible for it. The old guard leadership is an impediment with its hallmarks such as overreliance on tiered structures, inflexibility in approach, an unwillingness to adapt to new know-hows, and an all-encompassing resistance to change, stifling growth. The old systems are cracking one by one in the economic, political and spiritual arenas.

A 2023 study published by the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health analyzed "pandemic mitigation strategies in countries led by women during the pandemic," exploring "the presence and influence of female leadership in diverse national contexts, considering the traits of female leaders in their mitigation strategies and focusing on feminist leadership theories." In their conclusions, the study's authors report:

> Our findings highlight that gender is not the sole influencer, but there are common parameters associated with female leadership, such as decisive and timely action, clear communication, and risk-averse decision-making.
>
> Female leaders like Bangladesh's, Barbados's, Denmark's, New Zealand's, and Taiwan's presidents demonstrated exceptional crisis management qualities.



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden, front right, poses with church leaders and other officials during a meeting in Auckland March 12, 2021, to talk about COVID-19 vaccines, housing and poverty. New Zealand Cardinal John Dew of Wellington is pictured fourth from right. (CNS/Courtesy of Archdiocese of Wellington)

In 1960, Sri Lanka, the tiny island nation in the Indian Ocean, was the first country to elect a female prime minister. Soon after, in 1966, Indira Gandhi became the prime minister of India. In 1973, Argentina elected Isabel Perón and her husband Juan its vice president and president, respectively; when Juan died the next year, she became president. These are some examples of powerful visionary women leaders and those who are running armies, heading up parliaments, and overseeing the laws of the land.

Their competence extends to the highest sociopolitical offices, and they stand against injustices, offering glimpses of hope for a better tomorrow.

Women are breaking political glass ceilings in some of the world's most traditional and conservative nations, emerging as leaders from the midst of oppressive social, economic and religious circumstances. There are women who have begun to think differently. The assumption that women need to deny their feminine nature in order to make it in a "man's world," is also being challenged.

Let me briefly mention four compassionate women leaders whom I have personally met: Sharifa Khanum, a Muslim; Amma, a Hindu; Joan Chittister, a Christian; and Eve Ensler, a Jew. These female powerhouses have drawn inspirations from their respective religious traditions. While religion has been used to subjugate women, these daring women testify to the liberative power of their faith.

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Sharifa Khanum said in a 2010 interview that "the rising tide of communalism made me realize the desperate need to work with Muslim women." She is demanding and creating a space for Muslim women's voices and self-respect within the framework of Islam. In 2008, The Times of India reported that Khanum was "credited with forming the world's first all-women jamaat, a body of elders who decide on domestic disputes and religious matters."

She heads the Tamil Nadu Muslim Women's Jamaat Committee, a network of some 25,000 members working for Muslim women's rights and empowerment by spearheading the drive for women's mosques. As she told The Muslim News in 2004, "The male jamaats are unlawful kangaroo courts that play with the lives of women. A mosque-jamaat axis is a power center that controls the community. When women are refused representation here, we have no choice but to have our own jamaat. And since a jamaat is attached to a mosque, we have to build our own mosque."

Amma, or *Mata Amritanandamayi*, the female "hugging saint" of India, born into a Dalit (formerly called "untouchable") family, with little education, heals through her tender loving touch and dynamic presence. She is a charismatic leader who has brought about a sea of change in the perception of women as religious leaders in Hinduism. She is said to have hugged and comforted over 30 million people around the globe. She offers religious leadership and she formally initiates women disciples into Sannyasa. She stresses the feminine dimension of God, gender equality and genuine complementarity.

Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister, as Women's Ordination Worldwide says, "has been one of the Catholic Church's key visionary voices and spiritual leaders for more than 30 years." She serves as co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, a U.N. partner organization, that facilitates a worldwide network of women peace builders.

V, previously *Eve Ensler,* a storytelling activist who, as Grist says, "made it OK to say the word 'vagina' out loud," initiated the One Billion Rising global campaign to dance in protest against violence towards women. Through "The Vagina Monologues" she has encouraged women to openly discuss their sexuality and experiences of sexual violence.

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Each of these above-mentioned women have given a message to the world that when we access our spiritual intelligence, we move the unmovable. They have refused to surrender except to their truest self and wisest voice. These are servant leaders who have accomplished what the law is powerless to achieve.

I am glad Pope Francis is ordaining more bishops worldwide, but I wonder if the envisioned change by Pope Francis will include women leaders as bishops? This would follow the mission and work of organizations like Women's Ordination Conference and FutureChurch, to name a few.

There are already women priests who are experienced in leading and serving others. They serve the marginalized through their personal experience of being marginalized by the church and society at large.

Will Pope Francis hear the words of St. Oscar Romero? "In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, whose laments rise to heaven each day more tumultuous, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you, in the name of God: Stop the repression [of women]."

As long as a proportionate number of women around the world are not given leadership roles, the world will hurtle toward extinction and be greatly out of balance, not knowing peace.

As the saying goes, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world." There is an urgent need for a greater feminine voice, vision and leadership on a global level by tapping into the resources of women.