Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Pope Francis speaks to women participating in or assisting the Synod of Bishops in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Oct. 1. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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As the second round of the synod on synodality discussions got underway, the door to women deacons in the church quickly closed. I suppose women might resign themselves to the fact that the church will not change its position on women, unless there is an apocalyptic event. I imagine the final scene of Dan Brown's novel, *Angels & Demons*, might be one possible scenario, with the Vatican devoured by flames. I, for one, do not hope for such a drastic outcome. Yet there is something deeply disturbing about the entrenched resistance of women in the church, as sufficient reasons for full inclusion are lacking in terms of theology, biology and culture.

Theologians have argued over the years that no doctrine supports the exclusion of women from full service in the church. I recall receiving a note in the late 1990s from Jesuit Fr. William Dych, who translated Karl Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith*, stating that his study on women and ordained ministry came up theologically empty-handed. "There is simply no theological ground for excluding women from ordained ministry," he wrote. Dismissing women from full engagement in the church reflects a much deeper resistance within the church.

What is the source of this resistance? It is difficult to pinpoint any one source, so rather than try to dissect the obstacles to the full inclusion of women, a better approach might be to simply ask: How does the church cope with change? Cardinal John Henry Newman once said: "To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often." Indeed, his maxim is an affirmation of biological evolution: To live is to change. Evolution is all about change. A combination of genes, environment and culture influence nature to seek vital relationships to optimize life. As such, life is never quite finished; it is always in a process of — well — change. In this way, life "evolves" or "unfolds" over time, which means we humans are fundamentally creatures of change.

One has only to reflect on our personal lives or the world over the last 20 years to realize we do not stay the same. Our minds develop new insights, our relationships shift; friends and family members die or move on. Life is a constant flow of dynamic relationships that are always assembling, disassembling and reassembling. The concept of emergence undergirds this process of assembling and reassembling life on higher levels of organization. We humans are "unfinished," always moving toward more life ahead. Since life never stays the same, we always exist on the cusp of the new.

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While mystics and saints have embraced change as the basis of the spiritual life, the institutional church has clung to the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato and their metaphysics of being in an effort to maintain structure and order. Aristotle, in particular, espoused ideas on matter and form, essence and existence, that helped the church define its underlying principles of personhood. Thomas Aquinas incorporated Aristotle's philosophy into Christian doctrine. In 1879 Pope Leo XIII declared Thomas Aquinas the official theologian of the Catholic Church in his encyclical *Aeterni patris*, thus approving Thomas' use of Aristotle for Catholic theology.

While Aristotle's philosophy was officially sanctioned in the 19th century, his ideas were influential on the formation of church doctrine. Aristotle said that humans are essentially rational animals. However, human rationality is built on top of our "sensitive" nature, including our feelings, sensations, and emotions, and the basics of being alive. Aristotle thought that women were essentially incomplete males with incomplete intellects and thus prone to emotional and irrational behavior. It is not a stretch to suggest that Greek philosophy helped inscribe patriarchy into the cultural DNA of the church. Whether Jesus had 13 male apostles, dozens of women disciples or exactly who was present at the Last Supper seems irrelevant to the Greek metaphysics that undergirds ecclesial life. Aristotle's notion of essentialism, however, is now outdated in the face of modern science.

Indeed, the idea of biological essentialism belongs to the pre-Darwinian era of science. Today, systems biology and quantum biology point to a deeply interconnected web of life in which the human person is embedded and from which we emerge. Boundaries are continuously transgressed, as life emerges in new structures and more complex relationships. John Haught called evolution "Darwin's gift to theology" because evolution debunks Aristotle's God and returns us to the biblical God of promise and vision. God is relationship, and life is constantly seeking new and deeper relationships. As the Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart wrote: "God is the newest thing there is, the youngest thing, and when we are united to God, we become new again." To be alive is to change, and to change is to become new. From

Eckhart's perspective, God is becoming new, which means essence is newness, not sameness. God is ever-newness in love.

We are a species in evolution and the rate of evolution is accelerating today with computer technology and artificial intelligence. The term "posthuman" reflects a new understanding of personhood being formed by the networked world of digital connections, as well as ecology and the embeddedness of the human person within the wider world of relationships. The posthuman signals the end of a certain conception of the human as an autonomous being exercising one's will through individual agency and choice. Instead, the person emerges from and is integrated into a chaotic world rather than having a position of mastery and control over it. The posthuman does not mean that we are transcending nature or becoming other than human; rather, it points to the fact that we are nature transcending itself. Rather than losing personhood, we are, in fact, more connected today than ever before in human history. The boundaries which define our humanity are shifting. Artificial intelligence and cyborg life are changing the way we think about ourselves in relation to the other and thus changing the way we think about personhood and identity.

While the church is aware of artificial intelligence and posthumanism, it chooses to remain faithful to the Aristotelian philosophy Christianized by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. The church has the intellectual tools needed for change, but it lacks the will to change, despite the shifts in culture and society. To think of the church as unchanging in an otherwise changing world is to incur what Alfred North Whitehead called a "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (*Science and the Modern World*). The fact is, all life is in evolution, including the church. The Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "Evolution is a general condition to which all theories, systems must conform; a 'dimension' to which all thinking in whatever area must yield" (*Phenomenon of Man*).

Pope Francis has gently nodded in the direction of evolution, but now an explicit affirmation of evolution is necessary, signified by the full inclusion of women in ecclesial life, if the church is to remain credible in the 21st century. This is no time to be hanging on to old philosophies of matter and form or outdated notions of gender: The cosmic Body of Christ is at stake. Either the Catholic Church will make a vital contribution to God's ongoing creation or find its niche in the museum of history. The glory days of Aristotle are over. A new world is arising.

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