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Religious Life



Sr. Nathalie Becquart poses for a photo during an interview with the Associated Press, in Rome, Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021. Pope Francis has named the French nun to a Vatican position that should give her a vote in any upcoming meeting of bishops, a small step forward in the long campaign of Catholic women to have a greater say in Catholic decision-making. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Amid Pope Francis' attempts to reform the hierarchical structures that have defined the Roman Catholic Church for centuries — structures that have in many ways limited the influence of lay people and especially women — few have had such a decisive say on shaping the future of the institution as Sr. Nathalie Becquart.

In February, the pope named the French religious sister of the Congregation of Xavières to become the undersecretary of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, a summit of church leaders at the Vatican set to address the most cogent topics facing the institution.

Becquart played an important role in the synod dedicated to young people, which set out to understand the demands, concerns and hopes of new generations. In 2019, she was made a consultor to the synod on the Pan-Amazonian region, tackling the challenges created by climate change and promoting the respect and care for creation and the most vulnerable.

When Becquart became the No. 2 officer at the synod, she also became the first woman with a right to vote during the summit of bishops, which has traditionally only been reserved for men. In 2023, bishops will convene at the Vatican for a synod on the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission," which has the potential to reshape the power dynamics in the institution with an emphasis on listening to the entirety of the faithful.

But for Becquart, having a right to vote in the proceedings is only the tip of the iceberg.

"The most important thing is to have women from the beginning involved in the process, bringing their views, taking part in the discernment, writing the text," she told Religion News Service in a lengthy interview Oct. 28 inside the offices of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, a stone's throw from the Vatican.

In the following interview, Becquart discusses the role of women in the church and how it's changed under Pope Francis, her thoughts on female ordination, her hopes and aspirations for a new way of being the church and which women inspired her as she set out to enter the oldest boys club in Europe.

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The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Pope Francis' pontificate has distinguished itself by placing an emphasis on the poor and marginalized, including women. How has the role of women in the church changed since his election in 2013?

When I think back to 12 years ago, the issue of women and the question of women in the church was mainly, or only, a question or issue brought by women. Nowadays it's more and more an issue carried also by men, including priests, bishops and cardinals. Even the pope. The pope is talking a lot about the importance of the role of women.

There are more and more women appointed at the Vatican in leadership positions, like Sr. Alessandra Smerilli as secretary — that means No. 2 — at the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

There are many cases where you have more and more women who work as staff at the Vatican. You can see a change. There are examples of new roles, not only in leadership positions, but also in the fact that women have a say now at the Vatican. During official meetings at the Vatican they can give commentary or meditations on the Gospel. Ten years ago I never, never saw that.

Debates on women in the Catholic Church often halt at the question of female ordination. What are your thoughts on female ordination and does this issue play a big role in the synodal discussions?

During many years and centuries the governance of the church was linked to ordination. The bishops and priests had leadership positions. Now we can see more and more — and that's the line Pope Francis is taking — the disconnect between the exercise of leadership from ordination. I'm an example of that. The undersecretary at the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops used to always be a bishop. Now it's me, a nonordained religious woman, who occupies that same role.

Business companies that are successful usually have women in leadership positions, not because they are women but because they add difference and diversity. That is the key. If you have only the same kind of men, the same kind of training, the same kind of mindset to understand this very complex world, you have a very limited

view.

It is always more fruitful to have teamwork with diversity, men and women, different vocations, young people and the elderly.

I think the change is happening with a new acceleration. You can see that many younger bishops said during the synod on youth and the synod on the Amazon that women have played a major role. They were recognized. Many bishops said we work better together if we are not only bishops and men. Now with all the crises, the abuses and problems that arise, bishops feel and express more that they need others, they need to collaborate with lay people, women.

Which women do you look up to at the Vatican and who were your inspirations in terms of female leadership in the church?

We all need, especially the young people, role models. For the women who are pioneers there is not often such a model. But I have benefited from a good number.

Before coming here, I spent one year in North America studying ecclesiology. In Chicago and then at Boston College, I received a lot of empowerment from women in leadership positions or in theology in the United States, especially from religious sisters. There you have more women like that, as in France. I was the first woman to be appointed director of the national office for youth and vocation in France. There were often not so many women like me, so to meet some others in the United States was very helpful.

I was at the synod on youth with six other women religious. That was also very helpful because you can share your experience about what we are dealing with. The synod was for me, but also for other women, a place of empowerment.

Do you think female diaconate offers an alternative to female ordination? Is this topic discussed in the synodal process?

It's still in discernment. Truly the purpose of this synod ... is to listen to each other, all the diversity of the church, and to discern together. Pope Francis will then decide how the Holy Spirit is calling the church to be today and tomorrow. Many things have evolved in the history of the church, so now it's rather clear that during the early church we had the experience of the female diaconate. It's not really clear what was their role or what kind of ordination they received exactly.

What is very obvious today is that it can't only be men who can be in ministry — but there are many different ways to be in ministry.

The issue is to discern if the way to have that is to have women deacons or another type of ministry. … Now we have women who can be catechists, lecturers, acolytes. We also need some creativity to think about ministry.

What are the main challenges in your opinion to the promotion of women in positions of power in the church?

It's clericalism. But women also need to have the possibility to be trained in theology, to bring their gifts. In many places it's possible; in other places it's more difficult. As Western women, we can easily access higher education, but when you look at the situation of women in the world, in many countries many women are still married under 16. That's the reality. In many countries like that, the church is working for the promotion of women, for education. We need to keep that in mind when we look at the global church.

In the Vatican and during synodal discussions, what are the primary concerns of the Curia and the bishops when it comes to increasing female leadership?

I have a rather good experience of discussion and collaboration. Some priests, bishops or cardinals have been in minor seminary since they were teenagers, entered seminary and then worked in the Curia or worked mainly with priests or in a primarily male environment. If they have to work with women, it's something very new. Some adapt pretty well, even when they are old. For others, yes, it can be more difficult. Other priests who entered the seminary later or worked in the professional world with women before, often do very well.

Many believe the Catholic Church was and continues to be an institution that is hostile to women because they are not allowed to fully voice their opinions and be decision-makers. What would you say to these critics?

I will say the Catholic Church is very diverse in many different cultures and countries. You have many places where there are very good relationships between men and women. My order is an Ignatian order, so in France we collaborate a lot with the Jesuits. I have studied with the Jesuits, we have done ministry together, we have worked with young people together. I have friendships with many of them.

If we still have the mindset to look at the church only through the institution of priests, bishops and parishes, it's just a part of the church; but the church is also the Caritas, the Catholic schools, the Catholic universities and so many lay movements. Now you have many more women who are presidents of Catholic universities, which was not the case before.

I don't want to minimize the fact that in some places there are some problems, there are women who are not recognized or listened to by the parish priest, etc. It happens, I won't deny that. I also want to underline that there are many places where already women can really express themselves. In many theological faculties you have both men and women. It's an evolution. I have seen that the first generation of women theologians were mainly religious sisters ... who got doctorates in theology or biblical studies. They were the first ones and they felt like they had to do theology like men. Because that's what they were told. Now you have a second generation, and with the new generation, things are changing.

When bishops convene to vote on the synodal process at the Vatican in 2023, you will be the only woman with the right to vote. What does this mean to you and how important is it for you that women have a say in this exclusively male forum?

For me the most important thing is not to have a woman or man who can vote at the end. A synodal process is a process of listening and discernment to reach a consensus.

The most important thing is not to have women who at the end get to vote. The most important thing is to have women involved in the process from the beginning, bringing their views, taking part in the discernment, writing the text.

I understand, in our society it's very symbolic. But if you just vote at the end and you are not part of the process it's not what's important. It's important to be involved and bring your ideas, your voice and to shape and contribute, collaborate from the beginning in the entire process. That's why it's very important to have women at all stages.

For example, we strongly recommended — and I've been very happy to see — that we've asked every diocese to have a synodal reference member, a contact person and preferably a team. We recommend a model of co-leadership with women. Now in many dioceses the person who is responsible for the synodal consultations is a

woman working with the bishops at the conference table. That is a key place. It's very important to have women who will contribute to lead the process, to involve other women.