

Women and Youth:



Nathalie Becquart, X.M.C.J., is undersecretary of the Vatican's Office on the Synod—which makes her the highest-ranking woman at the Vatican and a leader in promoting Pope Francis' vision of a more "synodal" church marked by listening and learning and inclusivity.

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On Tuesday, March 28th, Sr. Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ, undersecretary of the Vatican's Office on the Synod offered a talk entitled, "Women and Youth: The Driving Force of Synodality".

It was Fordham University's 2023 Russo Lecture and hosted by the parish of St. Paul the Apostle in New York.

Sr. Becquart is the highest-ranking woman at the Vatican and will be the first woman with the authority to vote when the first of two synods convene this October.

As a key authority, she has been working in Rome and traveling the world shaping the synodal process, reconceiving the structures of authority in the Church to be more inclusive of women and lay persons, and shaping the worldwide Synod gatherings in 2023 and 2024.

The New York Times called Sr. Becquart, "the nun reshaping the role of women inside the Vatican" and Catholics who have been working for reform in the Church for decades, especially in the area of women's ministry, leadership and authority, are pinning their hopes on Sr. Becquart's ability to carve out greater roles for women's faith, wisdom, and authority in the ministry and governance of the Church. FutureChurch board member and a Catholic Women Preach founding committee member, Rita L. Houlihan, attended and shared this report:

"To me, Sr. Nathalie's most significant recommendation is for us to "change mind-sets", that is, we can and should be clear that we expect to live in a Synodal church. She urged us to study the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15); to make it part of our deepest sense of being Catholic. When confronted with a potentially divisive culture war over admitting Gentiles, the earliest followers of Christ turned to the Spirit.

As I reflected on Acts 15, I remembered: they prayed, consulted and listened to hear and evaluate options for growing the community of followers. They followed Jesus' own path of evangelization. He constantly sought out people on the margins; he sent his followers out to extend the reach of his message - including, welcoming, healing, teaching.

Her talk was filled with examples of how the Amazon and Youth Synods set the stage for this global Synod. The Q & A was excellent. She tried to respond thoroughly to each of us.

One Fordham student (a young man) asked, "Will we get women deacons?" He was with a small group of four to five students. It was encouraging to see students there and to hear a young man say he needed to see women deacons. Because they will have an important role editing the Continental Document and planning the operations of the Synod, I voiced my concern about the make-up of the Preparatory Commission, which has just been appointed and includes only one woman religious.

The Driving Force of Synodality

I asked Sr. Becquart if this was a sign that the process was already reverting back to the status quo where male clerics overshadow women's influence and authority. Sr. Becquart assured the audience that this was only the beginning of the appointments and more people, including women, will be added.



Photo: Rita L. Houlihan (R) poses with Sr. Nathalie Becquart, XMCJ (R) and gives her a copy of *Catholic Women Preach: Raising Voices, Renewing the Church*.

When asked about her unprecedented authority to vote at the October 2023 synod, she quoted Pope Francis's interview from two weeks ago where he said everyone at the synod will vote. While some in the audience expressed an "I will believe it when I see it" attitude, Sr. Nathalie seemed confident of it.

My two major takeaways are: Our greatest lever is to adopt this mindset of expecting to live and grow in a Synodal Church. We can be Synodal in our home bases (parishes, universities, not-for-profits). This will include hearing what young people yearn for – they want a church that exists for service, a church that includes and draws on all our gifts, including the gifts of women.

In my own words, I see it is time for me to speak with others as if it is completely normal and expected for women to preach and minister.

We can also locally continue to take input from all on their hopes and dreams for a Synodal Catholic Church. The Spirit is essential: Sr. Nathalie emphasized that our Church needs to embrace the realities of our 21st century world, needs to pray together before discussing or condemning or deciding. This is a vision for our future.

She wove dependence on the Holy Spirit throughout her talk. Prayer is integral to the synod process. She modeled that by asking for one minute of silent prayer to reflect on what we bring to the Synod then share with a neighbor - for my part I kept seeing this phrase and this dream that I will bring "Honest Hope" to my work for a Synodal Church. Thank you, Rita, for attending this important lecture, giving voice to the concerns and questions that many of us have as the Synod process moves forward, and for reporting back to us!



"For those who prefer a Church with an exclusively male hierarchy, it is easier to deal with [Mary Magdalene] as a repentant sinner than as an apostolic woman who had a voice and used it."

ELIZABETH JOHNSON, CSJ

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