

THE SYNODAL TIMES



“Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

THE HISTORICAL TRUTHS ABOUT WOMEN DEACONS IN THE CHURCH

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Fixed dialogue between Irish Bishops and laity is a good model says Mary McAleese

Former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, has opened up about her faith and hopes for the future of the Catholic Church at a special event at Mary Immaculate College. President McAleese was discussing 'On Being A Catholic' at the invitation of the Irish Institute for Catholic Studies (IICS) at MIC in front of an audience made up of the College's students, staff and community.

In a detailed and wide-ranging two-hour conversation with Dr Patricia Kieran, Director of the IICS, President McAleese spoke about her upbringing in a Catholic family in a Protestant neighbourhood in Belfast, her perception of the Church in her formative years, her work as a lawyer, and her renewed focus on Catholicism since leaving Áras an Uachtaráin in 2011, among other topics.

Dr Kieran thanked the President for her contemplative and honest reflection on her life and religion, and said: "It has been a huge privilege for us to be in your company and to hear your passion, integrity, honesty, openness and your connection with people. It's wonderful to hear you articulate - with that critical, intelligent, expert voice - your thoughts on Catholicism, on canon law, on various pastoral issues, and to share so generously with us".



Mary McAleese pictured with representatives of Mary Immaculate College.

Speaking of her reflection on Catholicism and her own faith, President McAleese identified a number of issues she hopes to see improved including the power imbalance in the Church, the exclusion of women from Church roles and the treatment of the LGBTQI+ community.

"I've read everything that has been written on theology that excludes women and I've read nothing yet that is

impressive," said President McAleese. "It's the kind of theology that is custom raised to meet the Magisterium teaching and to flatter it but not to integrate it, and I think that's a pity. The important thing about excluding women from priesthood is you also exclude them *ipso facto* from decision making because all decision making in the church is written through the Magisterium."

"There are a few

women in the aerial roles and I don't want to be mean about this but it just strikes me as minimalism. It's just enough to stop people from whinging and complaining and to look like you're doing something. But what you're doing is never really addressing the fundamental inequalities and the fundamental waste of talent.

"I think the Church has to change and the governance structure has to

change. The hierarchical construct belongs to an old empire. It's no longer fit for purpose and I think it will have to change.

President McAleese referred to "a synodal process that truly involves the laity" as something she would approve of.

"I would love to see something like what's happened in Germany, a synodal process that truly involves the laity. We've had synodal processes

in Ireland but at the end of the day the filtering is always filtered through the Episcopal conference. That's not to say the Episcopal conference got anything wrong, I actually think our Episcopal conference did quite a good job on the Synodal synthesis. But what we don't have is, if you like, a stable forum in which our bishops meet the people of God on the basis of equality. Our Episcopal conference, if it meets laypeople, they are brought in as invited guests or experts. I just don't think it's the right fit.

"I like the German Synodal set up in which the laity and the bishops are in a regular, stable, fixed dialogue and also have a kind of solidarity now between bishops and people that I don't see anywhere else. I think our bishops have had a massive problem because of the clerical abuse and trust being shattered. Of course, the same thing happened in Germany also but as an antidote to that they are sort of building from the grassroots up to this model of synodality in which there is equality between laity and episcopacy and clerics. And I like that it's not perfect. At the end of the day, due to the way its structured at the moment, the decision still ends up being filtered through the numbers of bishops, they have to have a majority. But it's on the way to something new."

NEXT WEEK - THE POPE'S FINAL RESTING PLACE

Other visions



Penelope Middelboe

My grandmother was a surprising person. She received an MBE for helping young Kenyan women in the 1950s and 1960s; became an ardent campaigner for recycling 35 years before it became compulsory in the UK; and mastered a crude, early word processor to write her last book, at the age of 81.

For more than 60 years she'd banged out books and articles on a typewriter, cigarette dangling from the side of her mouth. I remember her being particularly taken with the way the word processor, unlike a typewriter, could justify text (give the text straight edges on both sides of the paragraph). On one visit she suggested it might also 'justify' the existence of God to my atheist first husband.

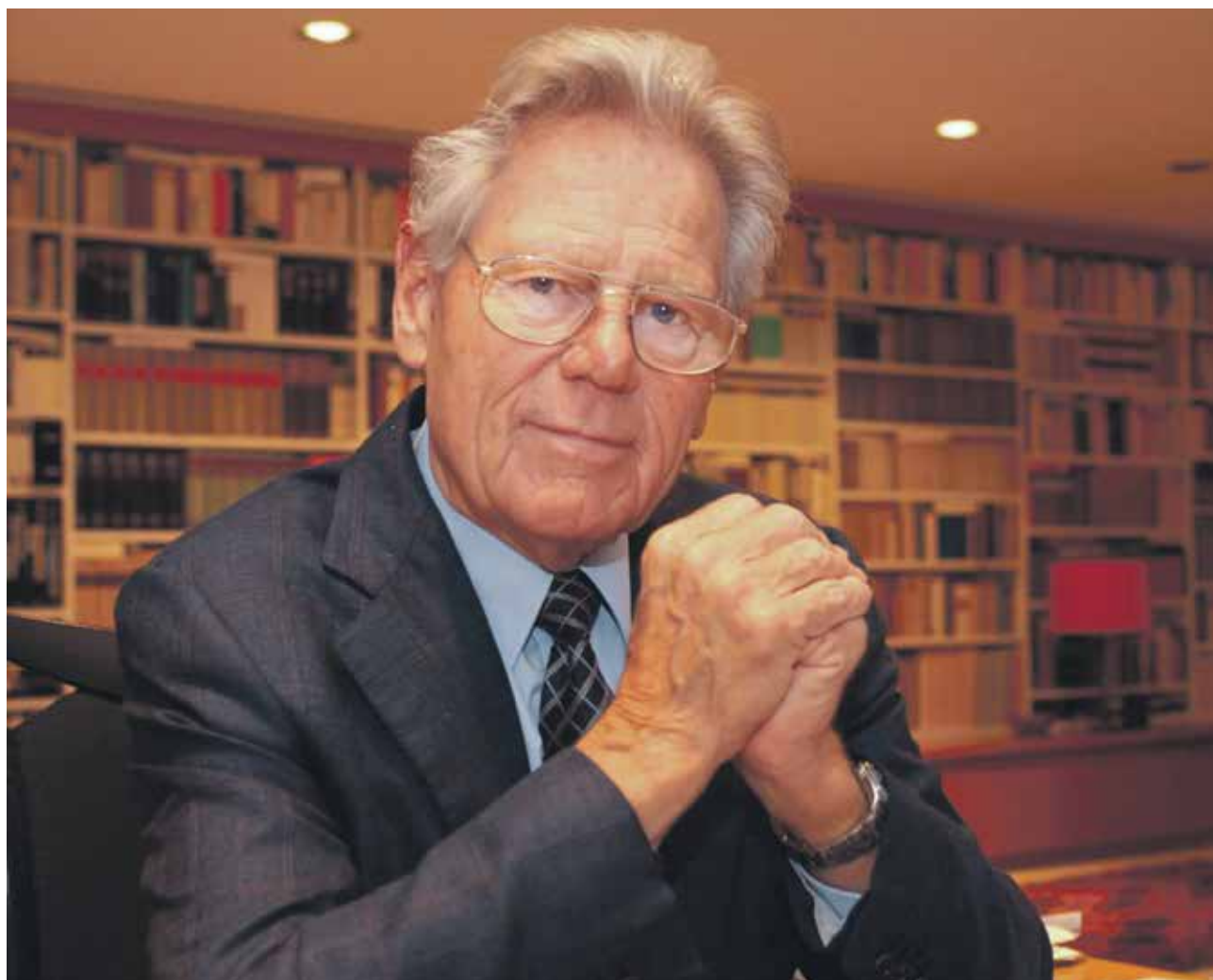
My grandmother was a Catholic convert with some distinguished Anglican clergymen in her family. She was not afraid to see things differently from other people. She believed that women priests would be accepted, but not in her lifetime, and that this would come before married priests because the Church wouldn't be able to afford partners of priests.

Underground

What she didn't know, is that while we sat talking about her spiritual guru, the Swiss priest and theologian Hans Küng, he was working with in an underground Catholic Church in Czechoslovakia. And in this secret church called *Koinótés* (meaning self-sufficiency) at least five women had been ordained.

Czechoslovakia was under Soviet domination for more than 40 years from the end of World War Two until November 1989. When a Czech Catholic priest, Felix Davidek, emerged from 12 years in prison for 'high treason' in 1964, he had a plan to continue a Catholic underground community and to provide priestly ministry covertly to prisoners.

His plan was to become a bishop himself (long story) and then to ordain married men and women to minister



Fr Hans Küng is pictured in his office in Tübingen, Germany. Photo: CNS/Harald Oppitz, KNA

to people in prison. After all, the communist authorities would never suspect that they could be Catholic priests.

The first woman he ordained was Ludmila Javorová. She was a childhood family friend and a theologian. Ever since his release from prison in 1964 she'd been the only person he trusted with the administration of his secret church.

He made her his vicar general in 1970 and ordained her on December 29 1970 with his brother as witness. Ms Javorová tells us that miraculously someone had smuggled in documents from Vatican II, and they used these as a fresh vision for a church community 'for the future', should freedom ever come.

By the time Fr Davidek died, one year before the collapse of the Berlin Wall, he had kept the underground church alive for 19 years, secretly ordaining 595 priests, at least five of them women. To protect their identities Ms Javorová was the only

witness. These priests daily risked imprisonment, torture and execution.

“There would be no opportunity for the post-Vatican-II church they'd nurtured at such great personal risk to emerge”

After the communist regime had been toppled, the Polish Pope John Paul II absolved all the priests who had openly colluded with the Czech Communists. But he declared all 595 ordinations of the underground church invalid. Single men were told they could attend seminary and pursue ordination all over again. Married priests were told they could join the Byzantine-Slav rite that accepted married priests. The ordinations of the five women

were simply ignored. There would be no opportunity for the post-Vatican-II Church they'd nurtured at such great personal risk to emerge.

Ms Javorová tells us that she wrote to John Paul II herself, but he never replied. She's just had her 92nd birthday and is blind and in poor health. When she last spoke in public she said she accepts she cannot function as a priest but maintains the validity of her orders.

Hans Küng, so revered by my grandmother, met Ms Javorová publicly in 2011 in Vienna. Küng openly deplored the potential that had been lost in the 'dismissal' of the underground priests. In an interview shortly afterwards, Hans Küng, mirroring God's answer to Job, commented "we ... must accept how little we ultimately know." My grandmother would have agreed. But she had died of leukaemia 20 years before.

Li Tim-Oi

I was reminded of all this when we went, on January 25, to a service at St Martin's-in-the-Fields in London. The occasion was the 80th anniversary of the priesting of the first Anglican woman priest during the Second World War, in China. Florence Li Tim-Oi

was a young woman deacon in the Portuguese territory of Macau, which was then occupied by the Japanese.

She was ordained by Bishop Ronald Hall on January 25 1944. There were no male priests in Macau and the wartime, Anglican 'ghetto' congregation was struggling. Her ministry was warmly welcomed by the community she was already serving and there's a lovely photograph of her wearing her priestly stole, seated calmly and happily in the centre of her church council. It's an image of a church envisioned differently.

“Li Tim-Oi was forced to undergo political re-education and to work in a factory. The Red Guard made her cut up her vestments”

But immediately after the war, when the Anglican Bishops' Conference met at Lambeth Palace, Bishop Hall recounted in person the action he had taken under Japanese occupation. There were immediate calls for his resignation.

At St Martin's, the Anglican Bishop of Dover, Jamaican-born Rose Hudson-Wilkin, took up the story. When Li Tim-Oi got wind of Bishop Hall's predicament, "it was Li Tim-Oi who showed courageous advocacy. She agreed to give up her licence so that Bishop Hall could continue his ministry." Their new vision of a church was, for the moment, obscured. It would take another 50 years before a woman would be ordained in the Church of England.

Li Tim-Oi would remain a priest but not practice. She was put in charge of a parish near the Vietnam border, where she started a maternity home to prevent girl-babies being smothered at birth. For years, during the Cultural Revolution in China, Li Tim-Oi was forced to undergo political re-education and to work in a factory. The Red Guard made her cut up her vestments.

Legacy

How I wish I had known these two extraordinary stories when my grandmother was alive. She would have understood the absurdity of the treatment of these women, silenced by people who believed we can put God in a box and know His mind.

She never agreed with the Vatican banning Hans Küng from teaching theology for the crime of questioning papal infallibility. For her other visions were always possible.

When my grandmother was diagnosed with incurable leukaemia, she was afraid she wouldn't finish the novel she'd mastered that early word processor to write. It was a very personal interpretation, based on the Gospels, of Jesus's missing years before he begins his ministry. She struggled against the constant pain of angina and fatigue and lived to see the book published. In the blurb she'd written for the back cover she said "...the book will appeal to all those who would like to be given a slightly different version of the Christian story".

In *Galilean Symphony* she imagines Jesus as a young shepherd. She never claims it is history. But the point is that, ultimately, we know very little about Jesus's childhood. Here, as in so many ways, other visions may renew and challenge us.

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