**WOMEN - AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE CHURCH**

*Cardinal Mario Grech*

International Women’s Day, March 8, 2021

Webinar organized by the Australian Ambassador to the Holy See, H.E. Chiara Porro

Your Excellency

Thank you for your kind invitation to speak today on the occasion of the International Women’s Day 2021 which has the words “**choose to challenge” as its theme– a theme that invites us to reflect on how a challenge could be an occasion for change.**

When I received your invitation, I was immediately reminded of two Australian women who, despite encountering different hindrances, had the courage and strength to engage in processes that challenged existing thoughts and practices, ultimately leading to changes that have had a lasting impact not only on the life of other women, but also and in particular on society and the Church itself. The changes they provoked marked a point of no return. These two Australian women indeed inspire women and men, even today, to “choose to challenge” and thus participate in processes that broaden one’s horizon, open up new perspectives, and thus bring about change.

I am speaking of **Saint Mary of the Cross Mary MacKillop** as well as **Rosemary Goldie.**

The very first saint of Australia **Mary Mackillop** worked mainly during the second half of the 19th century. She was not only the co-foundress of the Sisters of St. Joseph, but together with her sisters she ran numerous schools and attended to the needs of orphans, women in need of protection, such as homeless and vulnerable women of all ages. Mary saw a need for her Church to do things differently and since this posed quite a challenge to the clergy, her road was paved with serious difficulties[[1]](#footnote-1). As Sr. Monica Cavanaugh, the present leader of the Josephite Sisters remarks “one of her (Mackillop) great qualities was her capacity to persevere in the face of adversity”[[2]](#footnote-2). In fact, the bishop of Adelaide even excommunicated her; however, months later when the bishop was on his death bed, upon becoming aware of her true intentions and admitting that he was ill-advised, he lifted the excommunication! Her inner strength helped her to persevere and overcome the numerous challenges put in front of her. Her canonization in 2010 implies an invitation to “choose to challenge” or to put it in Mary McKillop’s words to “never see a need without doing something about it” (1871)[[3]](#footnote-3).

The other Australian woman was **Rosemary Goldie.** She belonged to the small group of 23 women who for the first time in history participated as auditors in the Second Vatican Council. The invitation came after the Belgian Cardinal Léon-Josef Suenens, one of the moderators of the Council, in the second session of the council in 1963 spoke about the need to recognize charisms of all the baptized. He remarked that “systematically excluding women from active church participation made no sense in an age when they go almost to the moon”. He called for increasing the number and range of lay auditors. He continued: “Women too should be invited as auditors: unless I am mistaken, they make up half of the human race!’”[[4]](#footnote-4) Other bishops followed and Pope Saint Paul VI sent out the invitation to Rosemary Goldie, amongst others. Till then she had been heavily engaged in the lay apostolate.

After the council Pope Paul VI appointed her as the first female undersecretary of the then called Pontifical Council for the Laity. She held this position from 1967 till 1975. She also served as a consultant of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. She taught at the Pontifical Lateran University for nineteen years. She was the only women to be invited to the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985 which commemorated Vatican II, however this time as a guest, not as an auditor. (60)

Australia’s Rosemary Goldie too is an invitation to us all to “choose to challenge”, as in her own way she participated in and brought about changes within an ecumenical council and in the operations of the Holy See. So it is wonderful that today, at the invitation of the Australian Ambassador, we are reflecting on “choose to challenge”.

And yet, these stories also reveal how much perseverance is needed to embrace challenges that can bring about a lasting change. The appointment of women - be they religious or lay - in leadership positions of the Roman Curia as well as their participation in a synod of bishops still seem to be extraordinary. The recent appointment of Sr. Nathalie Becquart as Undersecretary to the Secretariat for the Synod received a lot of attention, particularly because of the right, that comes with this appointment, to vote in the Synod of Bishops. This is of course a major milestone. And yet, it should not be reduced to this one institution or to the voting rights alone. The intention of the synod is to reflect about the praxis of the people of God journeying together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, synodality. Indeed, the next synod will focus on how the Church can envision a permanent interaction of the different members in her midst in discernment processes. Such a reflection cannot be reduced to a mere intellectual exercise in which some *talk* about the possible involvement of other baptized but is in fact a lived experience of mutual listening and common discernment.

Recently, I was invited to engage in a conversation with the Irish Bishops’ conference about synodality. For me it was obvious to invite Sr. Nathalie to join me, and we both interacted with those bishops. I had the impression that those attending the meeting obtained new perspectives on the involvement of the whole people of God in processes of discernment in their own diocesan structures. I am pleased that Sr. Nathalie accepted my invitation to join me in speaking here as well, allowing us to listen to what she would like to say about “choose to challenge”, particularly in the new mandate entrusted to her by pope Francis.

1. Lyne Daniel, Mary Mackillop. Made in Australia, Sydney 2010, 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cfr. https://catholicleader.com.au/news/st-mary-of-the-cross-who-was-banished-and-excommunicated-for-a-time-can-teach-us-courage. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.sosj.org.au/our-foundress-mary-mackillop/legacy/introduction/> (access March 2, 2021) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carmel McEnroy, *Guests in their Own House: The Women of Vatican II* (Eugene, Oregan: WIPF & STOCK, 1996) 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)