8th of March, Australian Embassy to the Holy See

Sr Alessandra Smerilli

Thank you for inviting me to such an interesting webinar and with such inspiring panellists. I'm going to speak in Italian because I think I can express my thoughts better.

This March 8 for me is the celebration of the resilience of women, who have been greatly affected by the pandemic. As a matter of fact, this crisis has had a disproportionate effect on women and the reasons are multiple: women work in the most afflicted sectors because they need to take care of their homes, also because they are increasingly victims of domestic violence. This pandemic has imposed unprecedented sacrifices on women and mothers that too many times have heard sentences such as “*what are you complaining about? He helps you at home*” or “*What are you complaining about? He took a day off*” as if they had to be grateful for the little time dedicated by partners too often engaged only in their “*work time*”.

Celebrating women means recognizing that equality is not achieved with quotas, but with the heart, in our everyday life, in the sharing of life. It is for these reasons that, on March 8, the Vatican COVID-19 Commission published a report. If, on the one hand, we want to highlight these difficulties, on the other we want to send the message that women can be protagonists in the regeneration of economic and social fabric - which must be a different fabric after the pandemic. Women know what it means to provide care and they can teach this to the community.

In our report we highlight three crucial areas where women can make a difference:

1. **Rethinking the Economy: toward a collaborative economy**. The large and rising number of women economists - leaders in their field – can contribute with insightful and innovative ideas, many of which concern a more inclusive economy that is more attentive to relational dynamics and ecological concerns. Many leading female economists share a clear focus on the inclusive, circular and regenerative economy. Their work is helping to elucidate the interconnections between different facets of economic analysis (production, consumption, protection of the planet) often ignored by their male counterparts. Some examples are: Elinor Ostrom, who received the Nobel Prize in 2009 for her work on the cooperative management of collective goods. In 2019, the Nobel prize was given to Esther Duflo, who continues to work on issues related to poverty. Kate Raworth has enhanced an innovative approach to the concept of development, which respects social and ecological boundaries to ensure that no one falls short on life's essentials (Donut Economics, 2017). Mariana Mazzucato proposes a new interpretation of the concept of economic value and a new role for the state in economic systems. Stephanie Kelton compares national and family budgets, offering valuable insights on debt and deficit issues. Carlota Perez contributes to redefine lifestyles and economic growth. Jennifer Nedelsky proposes new rules for harmonizing work and care as two areas essential for the development of a good life.
2. **Deepening an integral approach to peacebuilding.** Women could be easily presented only as victims, or idealized as peacemakers. However, as Archbishop Azua explained in 2018, the role of women as peacebuilders, as human rights defenders, should be expanded upon in coming years.
3. **Giving value to care.** Recognizing the importance of care in the public domain – and not just in the private sphere - offers a much-needed alternative to the current human system of domination over creation, including over women. *"A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power"* (Laudato Si’, para. 78).

This report presents some recommendations for governments and the Church, among which I will highlight: Mitigate the short- and long-term consequences that afflict women in this crisis through proper social policies and actively support women’s action in the realm of faith. Church peacebuilding efforts should model best practices by including more women and supporting their capacity for compromise and reconciliation.

The COVID-19 commission was able to produce this report because it has many women members and is designed for collaboration. It also fosters the exchange of ideas, cooperation and the ability to deal with issues, which could easily be overshadowed in a world that is somewhat too masculine such as the Vatican.

How was a commission with so many women set up? The selection process was fundamental. Initially, candidates for each position were equally distributed between men and women. Bearing in mind the role requirements, teamwork abilities were considered in addition to professional skills: perhaps this is the reason why women have proved to be more suitable for some roles?

And if the Church of the future is a synodal church, shouldn't women have an active part in this transformation process?

I believe that looking at the future, the contribution of women can be fundamental in some ways:

* Firstly, they can help to change the concept of leadership - the term leader suggests a follower. Is this what we have in mind when we talk about responsibility roles? Perhaps we do not need leaders, i.e. bosses, but people in charge of encouraging the advancement of teams and projects. Having a coordinator's role does not mean holding a position 'above' others but being at the service of the mission that needs to be accomplished - and doing it with the necessary skills relevant to the mission.
* Secondly, I believe that they can contribute to giving a new meaning to power: not power to manage, nor power over other people, but, as Pope Francis has repeatedly stated, the power to 'do' something, to enable thought and action.

With this logic in mind, those who take on certain roles are not and must not feel they are the best, but should feel that they are the person who in that context, for those processes, has the characteristics most suitable for coordinating, motivating and keeping people together. This also implies that careers should not be thought vertically: once a role has been concluded, one can return to other roles. Religious institutes, especially female ones, can teach something in this regard. Often a former Superior General would spend the years of old age still feeling useful, happy to still be able to provide her contribution.

In light of this dialogue, I dream that the Church and the Holy See of the future can have the evangelical flavour of the first Christian community, made up not by the best people, but by those who have experienced the resurrection and, moved by the Spirit, were a dynamic community that knew how to go against the grain.