

## Nun says her Vatican appointment means ‘clericalist mindset is changing’

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Last May Becquart was one of six consultants appointed by Pope Francis to the general secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. Five of those appointed were women, and it was the first time women had served in that role.

ROME — A French nun who could potentially be the first woman to cast a vote in the Synod of Bishops said Wednesday that her appointment is evidence the “clericalist mindset is changing” as more and more women assume high-level decision-making responsibilities in the Catholic hierarchy.

Sister Nathalie Becquart told journalists that Pope Francis has been underlining the importance of including women in the decision-making processes, helping move the Church from a clericalist attitude towards a more synodal one.

“How can we somehow end with a clerical Church, where there have been abuses, of power and other kind of abuses,” she asked, during a conference transmitted live from Rome via Zoom. “By being like Christ, by being at the service of others and accompanying others.”

The Synod of Bishops is a product of the Second Vatican Council, and since the late 1960s it has been meeting in Rome semi-regularly to discuss a wide array of topics. It serves as an advisory body to the pope, with no actual decision-making power.

No woman has ever voted in one of these meetings, though they have regularly taken part as observers, advisers, auditors and experts. Becquart, appointed by Pope Francis as undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, could become the first woman to cast a vote. Though there’s no written rule that says the undersecretary does vote, it has been the tradition thus far.

Furthermore, Maltese Cardinal Mario Grech, told the Vatican’s in-house media that “a door has been opened” for her to vote in the upcoming synod, to be held in 2022, on the issue of synodality.

“We will then see what other steps could be taken in the future,” he said regarding the role of women in decision-making positions within the Church.

But Becquart does not see her appointment as being about power, but rather, service: “Now that I have been appointed, the question is, how can I be of service? How can I use this authority for the service of the Church?”

The French religious dodged the question of this being a “historic” moment in the life of the Church, saying that it’s not up to her to determine just how relevant it is: “The Holy Spirit is the one who is continually innovating. It is not for me to say whether my appointment is something historic. The big news is Jesus Christ, not me. I simply live it as a service.”

“Certainly, I believe that the pope shows with these things that he is close to the People of God and, above all, that he listens to them,” she added, acknowledging that she believes her appointment to have been a “brave signal and prophetic decision” by Pope Francis.

The Argentine pontiff has had an uneven record when it comes to women having greater say in Church governance.

On the one hand, he’s made appointments such as that of Becquart, and there are several women serving as undersecretaries, including Sister Carmen Ros Nortés, at the Congregation for Religious, and Linda Ghisoni and Gabriella Gambino, at the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

On the other hand, he's often made off-handed comments about women that many have found insensitive, including once calling female theologians the "strawberry in the cake."

Francis has repeatedly ruled out ordaining women to the priesthood, but earlier this year allowed women to be officially appointed as lectors and acolytes – ministries reserved for men, but bestowed on seminarians before ordination – and he's set up two commissions to look at women deacons in the Church.

The French woman called the pope's decision as an "encouragement to all the religious," and noted that she's received congratulatory notes from people from all walks of lives after her appointment was announced.

"I have welcomed the joy of so many Christian women upon learning of my appointment, but also of cardinals, bishops, priests, and also of Muslims, Jews," and other people whom she said she's encountered through her life as a religious.

Becquart took part both in the 2018 Synod on Youth and the 2019 Synod on the Amazon region.

"The Church has learned from the Synod of the Amazon the importance of empowering women," she said. The question of 'new ministries' was often raised in the synod floors, and she said the Church has to be open for women to be in these new ministries and "not necessarily the ordained ones."

Becquart also said that she hoped her appointment to the Synod of Bishops will inspire more women be appointed to councils in dioceses, parishes and the Church's ecclesial movements.

She added that with her appointment, what is being underlined by Francis is "collegiality," meaning not only bishops working together and collaborating with the pope, but all members of the Church doing so, both men and women.

The religious sisters said this collegiality, "that has now been engraved in the structure of the synod" is the result of the fact that "at the roots, we are all Christians, all alike."

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