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# Pope appoints four women to top Synod jobs

by Christopher Lamb

**Sr Nathalie, told The Tablet that the appointments reflected the Pope's desire for greater female representation at senior levels**

Xaviere Missionary Sister  
**Nathalie Becquart**



Photo: CNS/Paul Haring

Pope Francis has appointed the first women consultants to the secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, which under his pontificate has become a crucial vehicle for setting the Church's pastoral agenda.

Four women – three religious sisters – will be tasked with offering advice and strategic direction to the body which organises the synod of bishops gatherings.

The new consultants to the synod's General Secretariat include: Sister Nathalie Becquart, the former director of youth evangelisation and vocations for the French bishops conference, Sr Alessandra Smerilli, an economics lecturer at the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences "Auxilium," Sr Maria Luisa Berzosa, the director of educational institute of the Spanish branch of "Fe y Alegría" and Professor Cecilia Costa, a sociology lecturer at Roma Tre University.

The synod office confirmed that they are the first female appointees to the secretariat's all-male board of priests and a bishop. Two priests, Fr Giacomo Costa and Fr Rossano Sala, were also named to the synod body as consultants on 24 May. The priests had served as special secretaries to last October's youth synod while the four women had also attended that gathering.

One of the new consultants, Sr Nathalie, told The Tablet that the appointments reflected the Pope's desire for greater female representation at senior levels in the Church.

"He is asking for more women in leadership positions," she said.

"I think Pope Francis, and many people [in Rome] are aware that things have to change."

She said that the importance of a voice for women in the Church came through powerfully during the last synod assembly and that changes were already underway with Synod for the Pan-Amazon region, 6 to 27 October. Women, religious and lay people, Sr Natalie, were already involved in the preparatory committees for the gathering, and the role of women is in the preparatory document.

The synod of bishops has come under pressure to allow to vote during its proceedings, although was not sure if this would change for the next gathering. As the rules stand, women can only attend the assemblies as advisers or observers.

The Xaverian sister explained that implementing “synodality” – a collective approach to mission and decision making – was essential for the Church’s future.

“My main expectation [for the new role] is to help promote a synodal church,” she said. “Synodality is key today for the reform of the Church, and we know it is key to Pope Francis.”

Sr Natalie added: “The great challenge is to implement synodality at every level of the Church’s life.”

Throughout his pontificate, the Pope has slowly set about trying to appoint more women to positions in the male-dominated Vatican. He named the first ever woman consultants to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, along with two female undersecretaries at the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. He also chose the first female deputy director of the Holy See Press Office, Paloma Garcia Ovejero - although she resigned her position at the end of last year.

Sr Alessandra, appointed today to the synod office, was last month named by the Pope as an adviser to the Vatican City State’s administration. She is the first women to hold such a position.

The synod General Secretariat, which includes a fifteen-member council of bishops, helps in preparing synod documents and in arranging the assembly gatherings.

Under this Pope, the synod has been strengthened and used as a key deliberative body for Francis in devising the Church’s global pastoral strategy. The synod assembly gatherings of 2014 and 2015 helped produce “Amoris Laetitia,” Francis’ family life document which offers an opening for divorced and remarried Catholics to receive communion.

In March, the Pope produced “Christus Vivit” a letter to young people following the synod on youth, while the Amazon gathering is expected to deal with a wide gamut of issues from protecting the environment, indigenous communities, the role of women and ordaining married men.

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