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THE BRISTOL TEXT TO REFORM

International synodal feedback

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The Bristol Text: Introduction

The Bristol Text to Reform is a document that embodies some of the discoveries we have made in our journey of discernment. It exists both in a readily accessible and in more complex, learned forms. It is intended to give ordinary Catholics the reassurance that there are changes we can make in our practice that are in keeping with the best of Catholic tradition and have the endorsement of deep, pastorally sensitive and well-informed thinkers and theologians, including some who are clergy. It also offers practical and often challenging visions for the Church, calling it to be Christ-like in its structures, its thinking and its practice. It is offered in the spirit of Canon Law 212.3, 'the Christian faithful have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters that obtain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known.' It is a statement of fundamental principles, not an exhaustive wish-list of matters that need addressing.

The Bristol Text: Abstract

1. Moral theology

The Church has to accept the unruly freedom of the word, speaking afresh in different cultures and contexts. Church teaching should be not rules but ways of thinking, formed in dialogue with all seekers after truth in each age and place. Our moral vision should embrace the entire person, a living response to the prophetic vocation to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

2. Church authority

'What touches all must be discussed and approved by all.' This ancient precept of the church requires democratic structures at every level, a restatement that the magisterium belongs to all the faithful, and leadership that is accountable and based on consent. Canon Law urgently requires transformation into a useful and accessible template, using the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its benchmark.

3. Redefining and reclaiming liturgical ministry

Every baptised person is clothed, without any distinction, in Christ. All belong to a royal priesthood. Jesus's call to celebrate his presence in the Eucharist requires no priestly caste. All ministries are open to all, as they were in the early church.

4. Embracing diversity

Hierarchy, and especially an all-male leadership, precludes the church from affirming the goodness in the diversity of creation, and the dignity and sanctity of all. The Church effectively has no coherent teaching on gender, but instead only contradictory and scientifically outdated statements. Those who, for example, are gay should not be co-opted into lying about who they are in order to preach the Gospel, and the Church must acknowledge and apologise for the harm it has done to them and to those it has similarly damaged.

The Bristol Text: 1. Moral theology

1.1 Historical consciousness

The Gospel speaks of a seed which, once sown, grows by itself. The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word. Appeals to unchanging laws and unchallengeable authorities stifle this creative freedom in the Spirit. We should 'appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel.' (*Evangelii Gaudium* 22 & 168). This calls for faith that continually evolves to embrace encounters with different contexts and cultures, journeying together in every age as the people of God, forming our consciences, maturing in faith and character.

1.2 Ways of thinking

Rather than asserting authoritative moral rules to be obeyed, church teaching should be concerned with ways of thinking, helping us to understand our lives as a process of continuous Christian formation along the path 'of wisdom, self-fulfilment and enrichment' (*Evangelii Gaudium* 168). This moral vision is not defined by fear but by dialogue with all seekers after truth. The Good News is 'marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness ... readiness for dialogue, patience, warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental.' (*Evangelii Gaudium* 165)

1.3 A holistic vision

We call for a holistic vision of the good life that is not dominated by issues of sexuality, but seeks the flourishing and dignity of the entire person, encouraging each individual to discover their personal vocation to holiness. The moral vision we seek has been manifest throughout history in the lives of all who have incarnated the hope and love of Christ; seeing God in others, welcoming the stranger, loving their neighbours as themselves, rejecting all forms of exploitation, abuse and violence, and living in harmony with the rest of creation. It is a vision that is rooted in biblical values of love, forgiveness, healing and acceptance, of 'faith working through love' (Gal 5:6). It is our living response to the prophetic vocation to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:8)

The Bristol Text: 2. Church Authority

2.1 Equality and justice for all

Jesus preached the Good News of the historical advent of the Kingdom of God, which brings justice and peace to all human beings, and liberation to the oppressed. For the Catholic Church to cooperate with God's Kingdom, it needs to model its organizational structure, and its Canon Law, on those principles of equality and justice for all. Independent scrutiny, investigation and recompense are required in particular for situations of clerical abuse and cover-up. The Church's Canon Law urgently requires renewing both wholly and frequently, transforming it into a useful and accessible template, using the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its benchmark.

2.2 Agreed by all

'What touches all must be discussed and approved by all' [*Decretum Gratiani*, foundation of Canon Law from the 12th century.] By virtue of their common baptism as followers of Jesus, all adult Catholics have the fundamental right to participate and vote in all decisions: on matters of doctrine, value, action, and any other issue concerning the common good of their community. Unity is not through fear but love. There is no teaching church or learning church but one, shared magisterium. 'The whole church, laity and hierarchy alike, bears responsibility for, and mediates in history, the revelation which is contained in the scriptures and in the apostolic tradition.' (International Theological Commission, 2014) Discernment belongs to all. It cannot be confined to the few. It follows that, at every level of church communion, representative councils should serve as the principal decision-making bodies, with the inalienable right and responsibility to determine what decisions and actions fall within their competence.

2.3 Elected by all

'The one who is to preside over all should be elected by all.' [Pope Leo I, 'The Great', 5th century, and many others since.] Legitimate authorities in the church must be based on the consent of the people. It follows that the church community has the right to evaluate, approve, and commission all those putting themselves forward for a ministry. It also follows that every adult Catholic, whatever their gender identity, sexual orientation, race, marital or social status, has the right to offer themselves as a candidate for election to any church ministry. And that all Catholics also have the right to have their leaders render an account to them.

The Bristol Text: 3. Redefining and reclaiming liturgical ministry

3.1 Every baptised person is clothed in Christ. (Galatians 3:27)

‘There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or gender, because ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ (*Lumen Gentium* 32, Vatican II). We should add, ‘people of all abilities and genders.’ We must learn to be open to all, and especially the destabilising influence of people not like us. ‘Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all.’ (Mark 9:35)

3.2 The Church is the community of God.

‘For when two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.’ (Matthew 18:20) It is not an individual, but the community of saints, living and dead, who celebrate the act of thanksgiving to God, which is the Eucharist. Jesus has made it easy to celebrate his presence with us, since the ritual of simple eating and drinking together is inscribed within us as human beings. It does not require a separated priesthood. St Peter states clearly of all the baptised, ‘you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.’ (1 Peter:9)

It follows from these that

3.3 The Holy Spirit’s call to ministry may be heard by all people.

We need a clearer understanding of vocations. All the baptised are eligible to answer God’s call to every ministry. That call is discerned within and by the community of God, which is a companionship of empowerment. Current research makes it clear that in the earliest Christian gatherings, women and men, single and married, led communities in worship, exercising their baptismal calling.

The Bristol Text: 4. Embracing diversity

4.1 Hierarchy distorts the beauty of diversity

Affirming diversity is imperative for attesting the dignity and sanctity of every form of life, valuing the uniqueness and contribution of each person. This calls for a radical re-imagination of the way of being Church, jettisoning inessential hierarchy, and any authority based on all-male leadership.

4.2 Engage with the complexity of sex/gender

Male-female gender binaries are in practice institutionalised through the historical understandings of 'family life' and 'natural law.' Transgender individuals challenge sex/gender binary norms, but scientifically we now know that sex/gender is complex and that we also establish our identities through the stories we tell. The Church's teaching and ideology on sex/gender is confused, out of date and contradictory, leaving the faithful with little useful guidance. It urgently requires renewing, both wholly and frequently, becoming a pastoral response to diverse family forms.

4.3 Redefining 'we'

For Catholics who are other than male/female and heterosexual, evangelization under current Catholic dogma implies being truth tellers in one sphere and liars in another, preaching an 'objective' Gospel that does not touch the real person. Our bodies and our spirits long for truthfulness, and come alive when we allow them to bear witness to it. All the faithful must see themselves in their differently-aged, differently-abled, differently-gendered, differently-bodied, differently-sexually-oriented, differently-coloured, differently-tongued neighbour. Then we can create affirming, equality-expressing theologies where no one is excluded from the 'we' that is the Christian community.

4.4 Accountability and apology

Accountability means taking responsibility for the ways in which our beliefs, theology and practices have contributed to the dehumanization and persecution of many people who are seen as 'other'. 'What have you done? Listen. Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground' [Genesis 4:10]. The words spoken to Cain after killing his brother Abel point to the critical need for accountability, restitution and transformation, restoring the dignity and rights of all as equal before God. Then the harm done by the Church can be acknowledged in ways that include the participation of those who have been harmed.

The Bristol Text: 5. Contributors

Our thanks also to the many lay parishioners and scholars who have contributed anonymously or off-the-record.

Dr Kochurani Abraham

Indian feminist theologian, researcher, writer, and trainer on issues related to gender, sexuality, spirituality, and ecology. Dr Abraham is currently Vice President of the Indian Theological Association and is active in the Indian Women Theologians' Forum. She is author of *Persisting Patriarchy: Intersectionalities, Negotiations, Subversions*.

Dr James Alison

Catholic theologian, priest, and author, Dr Alison has a mission to bring the work of French historian and polymath Rene Girard to a wider public. His books include *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*. He is known for his pastoral outreach in the LGBTQ+ community.

Ruby Almeida

Born in Jodhpur, India, Ruby was brought up with an Almeida identity that was both strongly Catholic and Indian from an early age. After moving to England and attending a Catholic school she embarked on a decades long career in the media industry. This included making documentaries for the Indian Space Organisation; working primarily with the community sector, NGOs and colleges in India under her own video production company; and being Senior Lecturer in Film and Broadcast at London Metropolitan University. Ruby has worked for many years on LGBTQ+ rights. She was Chair of Quest for 8 years, and is the Co-Chair of the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics. She set up Rainbow Catholic India and Bridge and Embrace, the first LGBT groups in India; and is on the LGBT+ Catholics Westminster Pastoral Council. Ruby works for Landings, a programme to support baptised Catholics, who, once distanced from their faith, now wish to return to it.

Dr Luca Badini Confalonieri

Director of Research at the Wijngaards Institute, Luca Badini has a special interest in the governance of the Roman Catholic Church, and is author of *Democracy in the Christian Church – A Historical, Theological and Political Case*. He is also the lead author of the report 'Christian Objections to Same Sex Relationships: An Academic Assessment', and its accompanying 'Academic Statement on the Ethics of Free and Faithful Same-Sex Relationships', which have achieved substantial international media coverage recently.

Professor Tina Beattie

Emerita Professor of Catholic Studies at the University of Roehampton, Tina Beattie is an independent researcher and writer, one of the familiar voices on *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio 4. She is also Director of Catherine of Siena College, at the University of Roehampton, offering online courses in theology, gender and social justice. In addition to her many academic publications, Tina is the author of a novel *The Good Priest*. A second novel *Between Two Rivers* is due for publication later this year. Her academic and media interests are in the areas of sacramentality, mysticism, gender and psychoanalytic theories of desire; Marian theology

Revd Anthony Cassidy

and devotion; theology and art, and women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Parochial Administrator at St Matthew's Catholic Church in West Norwood, London, Tony Cassidy trained in biblical studies at the Biblical Institute in Rome, although most of his theological studies were in mixed-sex classes at the University of Kent at Canterbury. It was an experience of education which he says was 'not typical of many (or most) of my clerical brethren'. He has a special interest in 'creeping infallibility' something about which he says, 'we should all be aware'.

Dr Nontando Hadebe

A woman theologian based in Johannesburg, South Africa, Dr Hadebe has recently been appointed as International Co-ordinator for Side by Side: Faith Movement for Gender Justice. Her membership includes The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Future Church and Catholic Women Speak/Preach. She hosts a weekly radio program on Radio Veritas; facilitates an ecumenical programme with Fellowship of Christian Councils in South Africa that brings church leaders into dialogue with LGBTQ+ persons. She's co-editor of *A Time like No Other: Covid-19 in Women's Voices*.

Dr Martha Heizer

Educationalist and psychologist at the University of Innsbruck, Dr Heizer's special interest is in Feminist Theology. She was co-founder of the Austrian Kirchenvolks-Begehren, the initiative which led to the establishment of We Are Church International, and has been Chair of We are Church - Austria since 2014. She and her husband also received notice of excommunication from the Archdiocese of Innsbruck in 2014.

Dr Claire Jenkins

A trans woman and convert to the Catholic Church, Dr Jenkins was married with four children until in 1999 she transitioned from male to female, aged 50. Prior to this Claire was a deputy headteacher of a secondary school. She has a PhD from the University of Sheffield. Her research was into the effect of transitioning on the family members of transsexual people. She has advised a number of research projects; and spoken at Catholic and university conferences. Currently she is actively involved in the pastoral care to LGBTQ+ Catholics where she co-ordinates a team (lay and ordained) within her diocese. She also gives ongoing support to LGBTQ+ Muslim asylum seekers and refugees some of whom have become her close friends. She belongs to a small working party advising the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales on transgender issues. In May 2020 Claire was awarded a Senior Fellowship at Margaret Beaufort Institute, Cambridge, where she is researching Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) young people in schools.

Baroness Helena Kennedy QC

Helena Kennedy is one of Britain's most distinguished lawyers and a Labour peer, renowned for championing civil liberties and promoting human rights. She has published two books on how the justice system is failing women. Helena is the founding force behind the establishment of the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights at the University of Oxford. She is currently Director of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, directing the Institute's work in upholding the rule of law and human rights globally.

Dr Cristina Lledo Gomez

Cristina Lledo Gomez is a systematic theologian and the Presentation Sisters Lecturer for BBI - The Australian Institute of Theological Education. She is also pastoral associate for staff at Australian Catholic University and a religion and society research fellow for Charles Sturt University's Public and Contextual Theology Centre. She is the author of *Church as Woman and Mother: Historical and Theological Foundations* (2018).

Kate McElwee

Kate McElwee is Executive Director of the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC), the oldest and largest organisation working to ordain women as deacons, priests, and bishops into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic Church. WOC is a grassroots movement that promotes activism, dialogue, and prayerful witness to call for women's full equality in the Church. Kate, recently based in Rome, has an MA in International Human Rights from SOAS (London) and is also a member of the leadership circle of Women's Ordination Worldwide

Gina Menzies

Gina Menzies is B BD from the Milltown Institute, Dublin with post graduate studies in Feminism and Moral Theology. She also has an MSc in Ethics and Law from the Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin, where she currently lectures in Healthcare Ethics. She served as Chair of the Irish Government Taskforce on Women in Sport and is a frequent guest on the Irish Broadcaster RTE

Professor Thomas O'Loughlin

Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology at the University of Nottingham, Professor O'Loughlin is Director of *Studia Traditionis Theologiae*. He is a presbyter of the Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton. A sought-after speaker, Tom is the author of *Eating Together*, *Becoming One*, and *The Rites and Wrongs of Liturgy - Why Good Liturgy Matters*, amongst others.

Dr John O'Loughlin Kennedy

Dr O'Loughlin Kennedy is a retired economist, 'serial social entrepreneur', and author. His book *The Curia is the Pope*, examines what he calls the 'self-serving bureaucracy that manages the Pope and controls access to him'. He proposes some remedies for the problems which he says the Church, as currently managed, is chronically unable to deal with.

Revd Diarmuid O'Murchu

Diarmaid O'Murchu is a member of the Sacred Heart Missionary Order, a social psychologist, and an author. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin, most of his working life has been spent in social ministry in London, most recently with homeless people and refugees. His latest book is *Doing Theology in an Evolutionary Way*.

Revd Christina Rees CBE

Writer, broadcaster and practical theologian, specializing in women and religion, Christina Rees was a leading campaigner and spokeswoman for women bishops and Chair of WATCH (Women and the Church) for over 13 years. She was a lay member of the Church of England's General Synod for 25 years and a founder member of the Archbishops' Council, the body that advises the Archbishops of Canterbury and York on matters of policy and resources. She has sat on numerous national church committees and is an Honorary Fellow of Ripon College Cuddesdon, a leading Anglican theological college. In 2016 she was made CBE for services to the Church of England. She is a school chaplain and was ordained in September 2021.

Dr Patricia Rumsey

Abbess of a Poor Clare Monastery, Dr Rumsey has a PhD in Historical Theology. Her areas of expertise include the history of religious life for women and the history and spirituality of the Franciscan Order. She is the author of *Lest She Pollute the Sanctuary* in which she examines the perception of women in Christianity through the centuries.

Virginia Saldhana

Virginia Saldhana is a woman activist, writer and theologian, living in Mumbai, India. She is the founder member of the Indian Women Theologians Forum and was executive secretary of the Commission for Women in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India and Secretary of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Women's Desk/Office of Laity & Family. She has campaigned to bring attention to abuse of women within the Catholic Church.

Kathleen Gibbons Schuck

Kathleen Gibbons Schuck serves on the pastoral team at the intentional community of St Mary Magdalene in south-eastern Pennsylvania. She has been a member of Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) since 2015. Kathleen was previously Director of International Marketing for the Sisters of the Holy Child, raising awareness and funds to build a clinic and organic farm in West Africa.

Dr Jon Rosebank - Editor

Jon Rosebank was a fully accredited Methodist local (lay) preacher before becoming a Catholic. For a number of years he wrote model homilies for the American Catholic homily magazine *Good News*. A former fellow of New College, Oxford and BBC Executive Producer, he has more recently returned to academic work and to writing and presenting history, in both academic and popular contexts.