



“STIRRING THE WATERS: CATHOLIC WOMEN RESPONDING TO THE SPIRIT”

**“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you,
‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him,
and he would have given you living water.” (John 4:10)**

The Council for Australian Catholic Women convened a national conference in Adelaide on 22-24th February 2019 - with one hundred and sixty lay and religious women attending from across the country. Acknowledging the vast contribution of women to the Church, including the significant number with post-graduate theological qualifications, the opening liturgy invited the bringing and pouring of water from across the land, to stirring the living waters together.



L to R: Jo-anne van der Voort, Sr Denise Desmarchelier, Audrey Brown, Noreen McLeish, Trish Irving, Susan Crowe, Sr Helen Nolen
Representatives from the Ballarat Diocese

Dr Michelle Connolly RSJ, a lecturer at the Sydney Catholic Institute, gave the keynote address on Saturday morning titled "Inclusive and Synodal: Reflections from the New Testament," which focussed on aspects of the Gospel of Mark. With humour and great skill, Michelle described women as making "cameo appearances" and "never continuing from one scene to the next," nor "having the capacity to influence outcomes". Thus Michelle challenged the audience to reflect on what it is for women in the Church today; to walk the path of faith with others, seeking to include all who wish to belong but also to be included in the structures of the Church from which they have historically been excluded.

The second keynote was delivered by Debra Zanella, the Director/CEO of Ruah Community Services in Perth, Western Australia - an organisation that provides services principally in the areas of mental health, homelessness and housing, family and domestic violence. Drawing on her experience of working with those who typically fall through the cracks

of complex service systems, Debra reflected on what Pope Francis offers as a framework for how we are called to respond.

Elective workshops across the weekend included: Educating Women and Girls for Leadership (facilitated by Audrey Brown); Women and Leadership in Australia; Women and Leadership in the Church – past and present; Women and Our Church in Australia as Multicultural; Missionary and Merciful. A number of guest speakers were also invited to share their experiences as refugee; indigenous Australian; LGBTQI; homeless.

The final morning of the Conference was a panel session of women on the Executive Committee of the Plenary Council. These included Ms Lana Turvey- Collins, the Facilitator of the Plenary Council. Much time was spent on the processes involved in making submissions to the Council and the future processes involved in considering who would be direct participants in the Councils of October 2020 and May 2021.

Being in the company of such inspiring women; discerning the place of Church in contemporary Australia, while learning from the stories of many on the margins, was a great privilege. As one of seven women who attended from the Ballarat Diocese, I found the conference thought provoking, challenging and enlightening, where women of faith have much to offer in their role as living Church.

Jo-anne van der Voort