

# Woman at the helm

The Religious sister at the centre of the global synodal process tells **Joanna Moorhead** that synodality is the people of God journeying on the Earth – but the way forward remains unclear

**S**AILING IS CLOSE to the heart of Nathalie Becquart: so much so that when people ask her where she's from, she often replies, "The Sea." She tells me, "It's where I feel most at home. I've been shaped by the waves, the winds, the ocean."

So it's easy to imagine how devastated she must have felt when she went out on the sea for what she believed would be the final time. She'd felt called to the religious life; and, hard though it was, she'd come to terms with the sacrifice of her sailing career. "I remember my last race," she says. "I knew it would be the final time I was out there on the waves."

Only it wasn't. Because four years later, having completed her noviciate, Becquart got a surprise call. "It was my superior, who said she'd heard about a new project centring on retreats on boats. They were looking for people who knew about sailing." For Becquart, the Holy Spirit was giving her back sailing, this time as part of her ministry.

We'll return to the Holy Spirit later; for now, we are talking in a meeting room in a building on the Via della Conciliazione, the grand thoroughfare that connects Rome and the Vatican, built by Mussolini in the 1930s. Becquart's office is at number 34; the doorman ushers me up to the second floor, through a courtyard painted in the ubiquitous terracotta hue that seems to coat Vatican properties. Number 34 isn't on Vatican City land, though all Vatican departments (they're scattered throughout Rome) count as being the territory of the Holy See. I arrive on a long corridor with a gleaming tiled floor, a couple of Vatican flags and a poster emblazoned with Pope Francis, hand cupped to his ear.

**THIS IS SYNOD HQ;** it's the beating heart of Pope Francis' Big Idea, which is to press "reverse" on centuries of "Do as you're told", and move instead into "Tell us what you think" mode. "A synodal church is a listening church," says the caption on the poster; though if you were to think Pope Francis, brow furrowed, is looking a little perturbed in that picture – well, you might be on to something. The truth is there's no clear next chapter for the Synod: its future is murky. Which is presumably what the black-suited, dog-collared American priest (or perhaps he was a bishop) in the queue behind me outside St Peter's Basilica earlier that morning had in mind. What, his sidekick asked him as we waited to go through the security checks, did he think about what people were saying about the German synod – that it would end in schism? The senior priest, or maybe bishop, replied: "Well, if it does, Francis has only himself to blame."

PHOTO: ALAMY/ABACA, ERIC VANDEVILLE

**NATHALIE BECQUART**



This was delivered sotto voce, said priest (or maybe bishop) having ascertained by a quick glance around him that no one of consequence was listening. There were only a few of us in the queue at 7 a.m.; I'm sure he barely registered me, the middle-aged woman ahead of him. Neither, I'm guessing, would he have noticed Nathalie Becquart if she'd been around: she's a tiny, grey-haired woman, today wearing a dark top and skirt and flat suede shoes.

But Becquart means business. Born into a Catholic family in Fontainebleau in 1969, the eldest of five, she is today one of the highest-ranking officials at the Vatican, and certainly the most senior woman at the Synod; the first woman with the right to vote in the Synod of Bishops, and one of the BBC's top 100 women globally in 2022. Since 2021 she's been a Synod Office under-secretary, the first non-prelate in the role. She was, she says, very surprised when she was offered the job; although, actually, everything in her CV pointed to her being eminently suitable. A Religious sister of the Congregation of Xavières, she spent a decade working for the French episcopal conference before becoming a convenor for the 2018 Youth Synod, on which she was also an official observer. She then went to the United States to research synodality. "I'd never imagined [doing this job]," she says, "but I can see that all my work prepared me for it."

**UNUSUALLY** for a top Curial official, Becquart had never lived in Rome before taking up her post: indeed, the hardest thing about the job for her is that she now lives alone, for the first time in her life. Home is a flat inside the Vatican City, because her congregation has no Rome community. "There was a kind of mourning because we are shaped by our community life. It's been the biggest challenge [of taking the job]." Another has been adapting to the Vatican's Italian-centric culture. Her native France probably has one of the best-developed lay Catholic landscapes in the world; her youth was shaped by her membership of the Catholic Scout movement, where she was later employed. The Vatican has been "a cultural shock", she says; "completely another way of operating". In some ways she's felt

like a missionary, negotiating a foreign culture. "I continue to learn," she says. "It's an adventure – but it's not an easy path."

Her first-ever visit to Rome was in 2000 for World Youth Day, and she arrived by boat, which now seems apt. "The synodal Church is like a boat. We're all together, and we're a Church on the move. Synodality is a dynamic vision of the Church – it's the people of God, journeying on the Earth." And being at the helm has taught her many useful lessons for her present role. "I've learned how to navigate storms," she says. "How to take risks."

Which takes us, neatly, to the German Synod, currently at loggerheads with Rome over its ambitious reform programme, which embraces the ordination of women, lay governance, and the blessing of gay relationships. It's true that the *Synodaler Weg* pre-dates the global synod, but the principles are similar: it is opening the door to what the non-ordained think, and that comes with a whole raft of red-light content warnings for the Curia. So not surprisingly, though certainly significantly, Becquart politely declines to discuss events in Germany. All the same, there's no getting away from the central question when it comes to the wider Church: what, ultimately, is the way forward?

Candidly, Becquart isn't sure – yet she doesn't see that as a difficulty. What synodality is all about, for her, is the Church opening up to listening to other people's experiences. "What's new with the Synod is that we're talking about the issues, they're all on the table. We're not sweeping things under the carpet." She certainly doesn't underestimate how tough the future will be. "I understand that the problem is we've some people who want fast change, and there are others who are afraid of change."

One overriding call for change has been where women's contribution is concerned: but even there, she points out, there are some – including women – who are happy with the status quo. For her, working together is what matters most, and she says that in a Vatican culture in which people often seem stuck in

separate silos, female leaders tend to be more collaborative. A graduate in business studies, Becquart points out that organisations that have brought in women at the top reap the benefits. "Why? It's because it brings diversity. We take better decisions if we don't take decisions alone." What doesn't work for an organisation, she says, is to have people who are all the same making the big calls – especially in the complex world of today. In the male-heavy world of the Vatican, where most leaders are not only male, but also ordained male, it's pretty clear what she means by "all the same". And it's pretty clear that, though she has to toe the line to a certain extent to fit in here, she's pro-change.

All the same, at this point Becquart says that no one ever imagined being part of the Catholic Church's journey meant having an easy ride (she's back on the high seas, at the helm of her boat again). It's a paschal journey, she says, like Christ's; if you look back over 2,000 years, the Church has been far from perfect –

and yet here it still is, continuing to function. And then comes her killer card: the Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit who opened the way to her sailing again is the same Holy Spirit who can blow the wind of unimaginable change through the Church. She's mentioned the Holy Spirit several times during our conversation: the bottom line is this is where she invests her faith. "Things are changing, and in the long term I believe in the Holy Spirit." The obvious point is that those like the priest/bishop in the queue behind me also believe in the Holy Spirit – but think the Spirit is beavering away to shut up shop on the entire listening exercise.

So here's a final thought for Becquart: you hear talk, in Rome and elsewhere, that Francis' successor, if he comes from a different head space, might decide to close the whole Synod experiment down. Is that possible? She shakes her head. "There's no going back on synodality," she says firmly. "It's a sign of the times. This is the hour of the women. Even the Pope said recently how much women are bringing to leadership in the Church."

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### Opening the door to what the non-ordained think ... comes with a whole raft of red-light content warnings

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#### The famous cellist, Pablo Casals, never lost his sense of wonder, and at the age of 93 could write:

*"For the last eighty years I have started each day in the same manner.  
I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach.  
It is a sort of benediction on the house.  
But that is not its only meaning.  
It is a rediscovery of the world in which I have the joy of being a part.  
It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life,  
with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being human".*

#### An Ashanti Prayer (from central Ghana):

What a wonderful world you have made out of wet mud,  
and what beautiful men and women!  
We thank you for all the beauty of this earth.  
How strong and good and sure your earth smells,  
and everything that grows there.

Bless us.  
Bless our land and people.  
Bless our forest with mahogany, wawa, and cacao.  
Bless our fields with cassava and peanuts.  
Bless the waters that flow through our land.