

MEDIA RELEASE  
17 January 2018  
Rome, Italy

## **More and more Catholic women - determined to work for equality - insist that Church leaders realize why women matter**

**We live in times marked by change, but there are places where gender equality is being systematically overlooked. The Catholic Church is one of them. The crises we must confront in our world today demand leaders, women and men, who are prepared to think the unthinkable and who will risk upsetting powerful vested interests and take bold steps forward for the greater good.**

2018 marks the fifth year of the only International Women's Day (IWD) event ever held inside the Vatican. However, this year organisers of the prestigious event have decided to hold it outside the Vatican walls and inside the nearby 'Aula' of the Jesuit Curia. The event brings Catholic women from across the globe to share their experiences and create dialogue with leaders at the headquarters of the Catholic Church on gender equality, inclusion and leadership.

The event is coordinated and led by 'Voices of Faith' (VOF), an initiative that exists to empower and advocate for Catholic women to have a seat at the table of decision making in the Church. Executive Director of VOF, Chantal Götz, says it has not been an easy road to organise a women's event inside the Vatican, even if International Women's Day is a globally recognised day. *"It has been a challenging experience so far, but one we have learnt a lot from. This year we have chosen speakers that are playing important roles in their communities, guided by their faith, but who want to challenge the status quo of a system that has denied women roles based on their gender, rather than their expertise."* says Ms Götz.

### **Young people and women are leaving the Catholic Church**

The most recent papers published by the Pew Research Centre\* on the changing religious landscape show a continuous decline in numbers of people identifying as Catholics, especially amongst young people. Ms Götz says this is true for a multitude of reasons but, in particular, she cites a lack of vision from current leaders on what the Catholic Church is missing by failing to listen and engage women in dialogue, right at the top of that leadership structure.

One such young woman is Zuzanna Radzik, an outspoken young Polish theologian who will speak about the Church's need for transformation in order to bring more young people towards the faith rather than alienating them. *"Women are the Church, more than half of it, and yet they have been excluded from shaping it for most of history. Why should the Church matter in women's lives if it keeps discriminating them?"*.

Another keynote speaker is Ssenfuka Joanita Warry, who understands the tragedy that can happen when the Church excludes persecuted groups rather than joining them in seeking protection, dignity and justice. As a lesbian Catholic woman she leads the fight for LGBT rights in Uganda, a country where same-sex relations are punishable by life in prison.

### **Eighth president of Ireland, Mary McAleese to open the event**

No stranger to the spotlight, the eighth president of Ireland, Mary McAleese will open the event, speaking as a Catholic woman who has worked hard to reach the top of the male dominated political sector in her

country. "God gave us two wings so that humanity could soar to great heights and feel the power and see the beauty of his creation in all its wonder. Yet our Church insists on flying on one wing, overlooking and wasting the talents and insights of so many wonderful, faithful, Godly women. Why? Can this tragic dysfunction really be what God wants? I think not. Let us now begin to imagine a completely different future." says Ms McAleese.

### **Voices of Faith needs more space**

Voices of Faith hopes the 250 seats at the 'Aula' will be filled by students and young professionals from various faiths, who are struggling with the relevance of religion and what it means in a modern day society. The event will be interactive with questions from the audience as well as live-streamed globally, last year's event attracting over 3500 live viewers from various countries. In preparation for the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis made it clear he wanted to listen to the voices of young people. "*The Church wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and criticisms. Make your voice heard,*" (Letter to the youth, Jan 2017). Will Pope Francis and his pastoral leaders hear this critical message on the most symbolic day for women globally?

Although the last four International Women's Day events have been held inside the Vatican, no cardinal has ever attended, though each year many have been invited. Ms Götz says that it's time for those cardinals who have spoken in support of women's increased influence in the Church to act on their words. "*Many say Pope Francis is the leader who can and will bring change to the age-old, traditional Catholic structures, but if the cardinals fear to set foot inside a simple event within the Vatican walls, what hope do we have for the real changes many Catholics are seeking, before it's too late?*"

For more information on speakers or to attend this free event, please visit [www.voicesoffaith.org](http://www.voicesoffaith.org)

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### **For more information or interviews please contact:**

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### **Available for interviews:**

Chantal Götz

Mary McAleese

Zuzanna Radzik

### **Event Details:**

**All journalists are welcome, please email [info@voicesoffaith.org](mailto:info@voicesoffaith.org) to organise a media pass.**

Thursday 8th March

2 pm-6.30pm

The Aula, of the Jesuit Curia

Borgo Santo Spirito 4, Rome

**Footnote:** \*Pew Research Centre Report findings on "The changing global religious landscape"

<http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>

