

What Catholic women want



When Pope Francis convened his now-famous press conference aboard the papal plane during his trip home from World Youth Day, international attention was seized on his comments on homosexuality, specifically his words, “Who am I to judge?” (Only the leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics.)

But many in the church are raising their eyebrows—and their hopes—over the first Jesuit pope’s call for a “deeper theology of women” and his note on “a lack of a theological development” when it comes to the female half of the world’s population.

Sure, Francis dismissed the possibility of women’s ordination to the priesthood, calling it a “closed door,” but he also said that “the role of the woman in the church mustn’t only end as mom and worker.” He said women are “more important than the bishops and priests” and referenced debates over women in the church, implying that the controversy over whether women can be altar servers, lectors and heads of major organizations is over. They can. They are. And Catholic women are eager for more.

There is no one “Catholic woman.” They are single and married, nuns and lawyers (sometimes both), liberal and conservative, gay, straight and bisexual. Some are even religion reporters. (Full disclosure: I am Catholic and a woman.) But in an age of the “nuns on the bus,” the “mommy wars” and the “war on women,” Catholic women leaders see in Francis’s call to action tremendous potential for new conversations about gender in the church and society, with possible consequences as vast as finding feminine ways to describe the divine to church support for paid maternity leave.

What do Catholic women want?

A seat at the table

“We don’t want a matriarchy to replace a patriarchy,” says Sister Carol Zinn, the new president of the Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR), the largest governing body of American Catholic orders of nuns, which was censured by the Vatican last year for questions about its orthodoxy.

For most of religious history, Zinn says, “the way religion in general has understood women in relationship to God has been through the lens of men.”

“The birthing images, the laboring images, those are just as valid to represent the incredibly capacity God has to love us” as male-generated images, Zinn says. In order to develop a theology of women, the first thing the Catholic Church would have to do is “in fact talk to the people about whom you’re trying to create a theology,” namely women.

Benedictine nun Joan Chittister, a prolific writer on many Catholic issues including gender, is more pointed on how to correct what she sees as the absence of genuine female experience reflected in Catholic theology: “Church men have got to begin to read good feminist philosophy, theology and science. They’ve got to understand that their positions [on gender] are embarrassingly groundless. Then we’ve got to pull women together. We have thousands of years of churches whose whole theology is built of half of the insights of the human race. And that supposed to be an adequate theology?”

No one denies that women have played a crucial role in the spiritual life of the church, from the often-thankless work of raising children and ministering to the needy in parishes, to the theological contributions of the four female “doctors of the church” (all named since the 1970’s) like Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. The church, as Francis referenced, already has a theology of women, centered in documents like ‘On the Dignity of Women’ and John Paul II’s work on what is called the “theology of the body,” the teaching that differences in gender point to differences in men and women’s nature. But even the pope says more must be done.

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, the first female director of media relations at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, says that “women don’t feel heard. So just being heard is a major move forward.”

Catholic writer, activist and new mother Ashley McGuire recommends the Vatican start by convening a council of women theologians, activists, educators and leaders at all levels to help the hierarchy address “the issues women are struggling with and then helping the church then to present church teaching back to women in a way that reaches women.”

Permission to lead

One issue Catholic women struggle with? The question of authority and leadership in the church. This is 2013, they say, and Catholic women want to lead, they want to be allowed to lead, and they want to be encouraged to lead.

“The feminine presence in the church has not been emphasized much, because the temptation of chauvinism has not allowed for the place that belongs to the women of the community to be made very visible.” The source of that quote? Jorge Bergoglio, the man now known as Pope Francis, in a 2010 book.

The exclusion of women from the priesthood is one highly-cited practice that is often seen, even within the church, as plainly discriminatory, and a 2010 poll by The New York Times/ CBS showed that 59 percent of American Catholics favor the ordination of women. But the church does not operate by popular opinion and the longstanding teaching on the all-male priesthood is one of the oldest traditions of one of the oldest religions in the world. Pope John Paul II said the question of female ordination was not open for debate and said the church “has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women”; Pope Francis, in his news conference, affirmed that teaching. For some Catholics, anything short of ordination means that women will never achieve equal status or influence as men.

“The church simply refusing [to ordain women] means that women will never exercise authority,” says Nancy Dallavalle, an associate professor of religious studies at Fairfield University. “They will never shape the institution. They are walled off from shaping” the church.

Others see nothing unfair about men and women having different roles, and identify huge potential for female leadership in the church, from the parish level all the way to the Vatican.

“The first step is to encourage what is already permissible,” says Walsh. In other words, deepening a theology of women would encourage the church to find ways to get women in positions of greater authority and influence. Catholic women have already proven their ability to lead major organizations like schools and hospitals. Can that authority extend to the Roman Curia?

Many Catholic women note that the number of women in church leadership is “no less bad than any secular institution,” as Janet Smith, who writes and teaches on Catholic sexuality and ethics, put it. “It’s the same reason women weren’t the head of Yahoo!,” adds George Mason law professor Helen M. Alvaré. In the church as well as society “there were old ideas about women’s intellectual competence, less education among women, less preparation. I don’t think it was anything different in the church that was preventing women from leading.”

Still, a church that institutionalizes teachings about gender difference may have even more to explain when it leaves women out of its leadership ranks.

Pope Francis says he wants to move beyond the image of the church as chauvinistic. Catholic women have some ideas on how to get there: Bring more women into key positions in the Vatican, as

consultants and theologians and heads of offices that don't require holy orders. Map an affirmative action plan for qualified females to infiltrate Curia positions, such as members of the Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith, where few women today serve. Encourage women to work as chancellors of dioceses around the world. Help them to prepare for careers as pastoral associates, who fill many of the roles of the traditional parish priest, a task needed more than ever due to the priest shortage in the West. Some even say that a theological argument can be made for women to serve as deacons, with a spate of articles in the Catholic world exploring the issue. Catholic women across the ideological spectrum, many of whom point to female leaders already working in the church like Harvard legal scholar Mary Ann Glendon, now serving as adviser to Pope Francis on Vatican finances, nonetheless agree that these are positions that women not only can fill, but should.

There's two types of tradition in the church, says Walsh: The kind believed to be revealed truth from God, and the kind that means "we've always done it that way." Plenty of Catholic women are eager to find ways to do it differently.

"You would have institutional change," if women were to radically re-populate the ranks of church leadership, says Chittister. "There would be no institution that would not be affected by a genuine equality."

Some say that one place greater female leadership might have made a difference is the sexual abuse scandal. Alvaré, who has worked extensively with the Vatican on issues of women and the law, headed the commission investigating clerical abuse in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. She says that during the decades of church inaction on the issue, many of the involved leaders—from those doing the intake on the complaints to the lawyers working on the cases—were men who "didn't actually grasp the horror of the sexual violation of a child or a young adult." Alvaré adds that "the lack of appropriate horror is not a mistake a woman would have made."

A church for women

Pope Francis wasted no time making poverty a key theme of his papacy. Only in office for five months, he's visited slums in Brazil, critiqued consumerism, and called for Catholics to find ways "to make a personal contribution to putting an end to so many social injustices." Many of those injustices are inflicted upon women.

"By putting [poverty] out front, that changes the game right away," Dallavalle says. "The majority of the poor in this world are women and their dependent children. By saying 'I am more concerned about that as our public face than I am about naming sexual sin,' Pope Francis immediately changes the game."

Chittister echoes that sentiment. "You cannot say you're for the poor and not be for women."

Pat Gohn, a Catholic author of a recent book on the church and women, sees the potential for a renewed theology of women to "have a ripple effect in civil society." Says Gohn, "I think this idea of the dignity of women has not been made universal yet. Women are still suffering on multiple levels from all types of injustice like abuse and sexual slavery." Because the Catholic Church has global reach, she says, the result of a deepening theology of women could "touch all of those problem areas

where women are in trouble and in need.”

The impact could not only touch those in desperate poverty, but also women in the developed world who still struggle in other ways.

For example, Alvaré says, “corporate culture, law and policy would have to do a whole lot more taking account of motherhood than it does now.” Paid maternity leave for all mothers is on the table. So is an invigorated cultural effort to support women who want to work part-time in order to spend more time with their families. Also just as relevant, says Janet Smith, would be a greater respect for women who choose to stay at home and raise children.

“Feminism didn’t fight the diminution of a woman who chose to spend her time dedicating herself to being a wife and mother,” Smith says. Enter: a theology of women, which she says “to some extent is meant to show that women don’t have to live life by the rules of men.”

Zinn, who took over as president of LCWR this month, notes that “women are already living out a theology of women.”

Pope Francis himself along with many leading female Catholic voices agree: It’s time for the church to catch up.

Elizabeth Tenety