

Viewpoint: Advancing the Roles of Women in the Church



The Church continues to be at a loss as to how to advance the roles of women in its administrative structures. While the Church does not see its way to the priestly and episcopal ordination of women, some responsible scholars have argued that there exist no doctrinal reasons impeding women from being ordained to the diaconate. Likewise, the question of appointing women to the College of Cardinals—since this does not require holy orders—has been raised intermittently since the Second Vatican Council.

Since the Council, women have become diocesan chancellors, and can do much of the work formally assigned to vicars general and moderators of the diocesan curia—offices currently tied to holy orders, but not necessarily so in the future, I would argue. Women canon lawyers can informally coordinate the canonical affairs of a diocese, including the marriage tribunal, where their gifts would be most profitably employed. Women now chair many of the advisory commissions of dioceses. They also hold positions of considerable importance in the agencies of national bishops' conferences.

Some women already hold prominent positions in the offices of the Holy See. While there are presently canonical impediments (which could be changed, since they are man-made), the possibility of appointing women as prefects (heads) of some Roman congregations (departments) might be further explored.

Were a woman to be appointed prefect of the Congregation for Religious, that gesture would surely be taken by women religious as a powerful gesture of goodwill and could reduce considerable tension in a very troubled area. (Women religious are now ultimately under the leadership of men!).

Appointing women as presidents of the pontifical councils for the laity, the family, social communications, Christian unity, peace and justice, inter-religious dialogue, and culture—for which holy orders are not even now a prerequisite—seems highly desirable.

In the opinion of some, there exists no fundamental theological impediment to the appointment of women as papal nuncios and apostolic delegates within the Church's diplomatic corps. Such roles need not be tied to ordination.

While the Holy See and bishops around the world would balk at the idea of having women play a central role in the appointment of bishops, perhaps the Church could separate out the role of apostolic nuncio (which deals in great part with the Vatican's relations with governments) and assign it to lay persons, while the role of apostolic delegate (which deals primarily with matters like the relationship

of the Holy See to local Churches and the appointment of bishops), could remain attached to holy orders.

Could such new roles for women in the Church be institutionalized? I believe so, and history provides some useful precedents.

For instance, soon after the fourth century, canonesses constituted an order of exemplary women dedicated to the Church. They were not nuns or sisters in the modern sense, but laywomen who owned property, lived in their own houses, did not wear religious insignia (except at formal ecclesiastical events), did not profess vows—and could be married.

Such an office—restored and updated—could be for life, have a formal blessing by the bishop, involve ceremonial insignia and dress, and the holder given a place of honor in the liturgies and gatherings of the Church.

There is, I believe, nothing theologically radical or unorthodox in these proposals. They could be effected with profound respect for the Church's hierarchical order and would involve no change in the fundamental doctrine of the Church. And they would go a long way toward showing that the Church is serious about advancing women's roles—something to which Pope Francis has repeatedly committed himself.

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