Women in the Church in the Age of Francis

by Anne E. Patrick, SNJM

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was ten years old when Argentina’s congress extended the vote to women in 1947, barely a generation after women’s suffrage had become legal in the United States in 1920. After secondary school training as a chemical technician, the 18-year-old Bergoglio began seminary studies in Buenos Aires, and three years later he entered the Society of Jesus in 1958, shortly before Saint John XXIII was elected pope. After eleven years of study and teaching in male institutions, he was ordained a priest in 1969, later serving as provincial superior of the Jesuits (1973-79) during the time of political turmoil known as Argentina’s “Dirty War.” There followed more years of study and service within his religious order, and then in 1992 he was named auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires, becoming archbishop in 1998. Although his pastoral work showed much concern for persons who are poor, sick and imprisoned, there is little in Pope Francis’ background to suggest he would become an advocate for women’s equality. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to hope that the papacy that began on March 13, 2013 with a request for people’s prayers will in time bring greater justice for women in the church.

To date, Pope Francis’ remarks about women have both pleased and confounded those seeking gender justice in the Church. They take heart when he declares, as he did to an audience in Rome last April, that women’s voices “must have real weight and recognized authority in society and in the church.” But they cringe when he goes on to dismiss “gender theory” as “aimed at cancelling sexual differences.” They grow hopeful when they read in The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium) that “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.” But they are discouraged when Francis adds that “the reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion.”

In assessing the pope’s first year in office, Vatican expert Thomas Reese, SJ praised Francis for “rebranding” Catholicism as a religion of mercy and service, and for taking significant steps toward reforming the Vatican bureaucracy. He also observed that “Francis does not know how to talk to educated American women. Even when he tries to say something nice, he sticks his foot in his mouth.” Reese accounted for this by noting that the pope comes from a “macho culture that is patriarchal and paternalistic,” and he has had little exposure to academic feminists. He reminds us that the future Pope Francis “spent his time in the slums of Buenos Aires, listening to poor women in their homes. These women were not concerned about Pope Francis’ remarks about women have both pleased and confounded those seeking gender justice in the Church.
glass ceilings in professions and corporations; they were concerned about whether they could feed their children. They also worried about their daughters being kidnapped and trafficked. As a result, he spoke out for the poor and was a leader in fighting human trafficking in Argentina. In his efforts against human trafficking, he was advised by a woman international lawyer who found it very easy to work with him.”

Is the Pope a feminist?

There are many definitions and types of feminism. I have defined the term “feminist” broadly to indicate a position that involves a solid conviction of the equality of women and men, and a commitment to reform society so that the full equality of women is respected, which also requires reforming the thought systems that legitimate the present unjust social order. Both aspects of this definition are important. Certainly affirmations of women’s equality show progress in a tradition that taught for centuries, thanks to Aristotle, that females were a lesser form of humanity than males. Affirmations of women’s equal human dignity achieve little, however, if they are not accompanied by efforts to remedy the twin injustices of sexism: namely patriarchy and androcentrism. Patriarchy literally means “father rule.” As an ethical term it designates social patterns of domination and subordination, especially—but not exclusively—those flowing from attitudes that do not respect the full humanity of females. Such attitudes, which revolve around the experiences of males, are termed androcentric.

Androcentric attitudes include not only viewing women as inferior to men, but also seeing them as so essentially different from men that their roles must be circumscribed, or “special.” In my judgment, many of Pope Francis’ statements about women are tinged by this “essentialist” understanding of human nature, which sees women as “complementary” to men in a way that effectively limits women’s contributions. Certainly there are women who share such an understanding of women’s nature, but the problems in this position quickly become evident if we imagine a situation in which all sacramental and decision-making power in the Church were in the hands of women. If such an imaginary female prelate were to call for an infusion of “the masculine genius” into this woman-dominated structure, would that not seem condescending?

In 2007 Marin Alsop became Music Director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, the first woman ever to head a major US orchestra. Was she recruited in order to bring a “feminine genius” to the symphony or because of her outstanding musicianship? Alsop is known for being highly effective in reaching out to audiences. Is this because of special “womanly gifts” or because she was influenced by a mentor, Leonard Bernstein, who made educating audiences, including children, a priority? To raise these questions is not to deny that there are differences between the sexes, but it is to suggest that there are many more differences among human beings than a rigid system of opposing gender roles tends to recognize, and to claim that both church and society will be all the richer when our institutions respect the gifts of everyone more fully. The Roman Catholic Church today is like all symphony orchestras were a century ago. Girls in the audience saw no role models on stage to encourage them to bring their musical gifts to the public. They were destined to entertain at home or teach young pupils.

I actually think it is beside the point whether or not Pope Francis is a feminist. What matters is whether he is a devout servant of God, alert to what God is doing in history, and whether he is a savvy administrator, able to use the power of his office to accomplish the good he believes should be done. On these points, it seems to me, his record is promising, and I find several reasons to hope that the papacy of Francis will contribute to greater justice for women in the church.

Some Grounds for Hope

In the first place, although his statements on women betray a tendency toward gender stereotyping, Pope Francis clearly recognizes that women should have greater influence in the Church. I think he can be trusted to act on this insight in ways that may not seem adequate to many feminists, but will nevertheless help prepare the global church for greater change in the future. I have long been intrigued by something communications expert Kathleen Hall Jamieson said at the time of Saint John Paul II’s visit to the United States in 1987. In response to a newscaster’s question, “Does papal teaching ever change?” Jamieson replied, 

...both church and society will be all the richer when our institutions respect the gifts of everyone more fully.
“Yes, papal teaching does change. But only after there has been a period of papal silence on the question.” I have interpreted Pope Francis’ unwillingness to discuss the possibility of ordaining women priests and bishops in light of this insight of Jamieson’s.* In saying “the door is closed” on women’s ordination, Pope Francis is not repeating the arguments of his predecessors, nor is he saying the door is nailed shut for all eternity. He is not going to discuss the matter, much less change the practice while he is in office. But he may be laying the groundwork for future change by setting in motion the consultative processes toward other reforms that will challenge the clericalism and careerism that have blighted ordained ministry in the past.6

Secondly, the pope’s actions give evidence that he is not rigidly holding to traditions of excluding or dominating females. Two young women were among the persons whose feet he washed during the liturgy on his first Holy Thursday as pope, in a gesture of service that transcended Canon Law. More recently he has allowed the much-publicized apostolic visitation of US women religious and the doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious to be amicably concluded without imposing strict new controls on women’s communities and their officers. Both investigations had begun during the papacy of Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis said little about them himself. It is not insignificant, however, that one of the Cardinals he appointed to advise him about the global church, Sean O’Malley of Boston, declared on national television that the apostolic visitation had been a “disaster.”

Thirdly, there is a refreshing degree of humility in Pope Francis’ writings, suggesting an openness to new possibilities. In The Joy of the Gospel he discuss- es women in a section about laypeople headed “Other Ecclesial Challenges.” Although his anthropology and position on ordination are disappointing to many, Pope Francis allows for the possibility that understandings of women’s nature and roles can improve, concluding the section on ecclesial challenges by stating, “I have not sought to offer a complete diagnosis, but I invite communities to complete and enrich these perspectives on the basis of their awareness of the challenges facing them and their neighbors.”7

Finally, something this pope seems to understand well is a point I tried to anticipate by beginning this article with a reference to the fact that the first fruits of feminism—voting rights for women—are relatively recent in history. Reforms are not instantly achievable. A century ago US bishops were opposing the 19th amendment, something none of them would dream of doing now. Pope Francis recognizes that women should have a more prominent role in the Church, but does not yet grasp, or does not feel it is the time to deal with, what many Catholics regard as a very problematic fact—namely that sacramental sex discrimination undermines claims to recognize our full human dignity. The gospel image of yeast hidden in dough, which gradually leavens the whole loaf, seems to describe the way reforms take place in church history.8 The leavening process requires time. Pope Francis says something to this effect toward the end of The Joy of the Gospel when he declares, “What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events.”9 The implication here is that God is acting in history, and our role is to be attuned to and contribute to this divine activity.10

* See “The Gift of Papal Silence” www.globalsistersreport.org/node/23291

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The Call of the Church to Lead

by Victoria Ries & Fr. James Eblen

When Victoria was appointed by the Archbishop to provide pastoral care and leadership for a local parish according to Canon 517.2, a priest assigned to work with her was uncomfortable with her participation in the liturgy. "You do not need to speak," he said, "You have a powerful presence."

The Roman Missal promulgated in 2010 imagines a speaking role for others besides the priest. At the start of the liturgy, "after the greeting of the people, the Priest, or the Deacon, or a lay minister may very briefly introduce the faithful to the Mass of the day."1 In the Sacramentary of 1970, the same rubric reads, "After greeting the people, the priest or other suitable minister may very briefly introduce the Mass of the day."2 Capitalizing Priest and Deacon, but not lay minister, introduces a hierarchical distinction in the new missal where before a variety of ministers worked together to celebrate liturgy. Official Roman Catholicism has become nervous about some of the collaborative work that came about after the Second Vatican Council.

Now fifty years after Vatican II, Pope Francis still affirms "the responsibility of the laity, grounded in their baptism and confirmation," but laments that "room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism that keeps them away from decision-making."3 He acknowledges that although women are involved in many ways in the ministry and mission of the church, "we need to create still broader opportunities for a more inclusive female presence in the church."4

In this article, we briefly assess the obstacle of clericalism and then go on to suggest strategies for greater inclusion of lay people, especially women, in the life and mission of the Church. Finally, we consider how transformation in the Church could lead to the transformation of the world.

I. Clericalism

In his excellent little book Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood, George Wilson insists on separating the language of "priest," a religious term with resonance of holiness and service of the divine, from talk about "clergy," a sociological term for a distinct group recognized within society for the role they play. In this careful use of words, "academics are clergy; lawyers and physicians and military officers are clergy; the society in which they function. But the distinctiveness, the special status, can easily lead to a sense of superiority. Pope Francis addresses the issue in Evangelii Gaudium:

The ministerial priesthood is one means employed by Jesus for the service of his people, yet our great dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all.... In the Church, functions "do not favor the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others." Indeed, a woman, Mary, is more important than the bishops. Even when the function of ministerial priesthood is considered "hierarchical," it must be remembered that "it is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members." Its...
key and axis is not power understood as domination, but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist; this is the origin of its authority, which is always a service to God's people.⁶

Pope Francis continually encourages bishops and priests to “smell like the sheep.” The leader’s place is in the midst, not apart. Clericalism is a violation of the whole people of God making their way together.

Notice that the laity are often complicit in the development and support of clericalism, much as enablers are in an alcoholic family. The comparison may seem harsh, but expectations about and excuses made for clerical status enable the system to persist.

Greeting people after Sunday Mass at the parish where James and Victoria worked together, James was asked, “Are you the priest named on the front of the bulletin under the parish staff?”

“Yes, that’s my name—Father James Eblen—right after Victoria’s name.”

“That’s the problem, Father. How come her name is first?”

“Well actually, she has the care of the whole parish as the Pastoral Life Director. I’m only here to preside at the liturgies on Sundays.”

“But, Father, you’re the priest…”

This visitor to the parish could acknowledge that the liturgy was prayerful. Victoria had been the preacher that week—that was not the problem. But somehow years of Catholic education about respect for the clergy seemed to be overturned in the ordering of personnel in the parish bulletin.

II. Strategies for Inclusion

Language is important. Though some will claim to understand that women are included when the word “men” is used to denote men and women, the very use of the word signals exclusion. If one were to ask the “men” at Sunday worship to stand up, no woman would join them. Those same men would struggle to find themselves in a text with exclusively feminine language.

For this reason, the liturgical readings and prayers need to be revised with inclusive language. Alternatives certainly exist to make clear that “men” usually means “men and women… people… mortals… they.” These changes do not alter the sense of the text, but allow women to find themselves included in the language of worship. One may point to the lectionary approved by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (1992) which uses an inclusive language translation for Scripture. In its introduction, that translation—New Revised Standard Version—presents a detailed argument for what can be done to render texts in inclusive language without sacrificing meaning.

Some will object that biblical and liturgical texts, especially in how they use God language, cannot be tinkered with. While the matter is delicate, one can, for example, often find ways to reduce the use of the male pronoun for God.

And the delicacy of the issue does not exempt those who speak about these texts. The language of preaching needs to be inclusive, and examples need to be diverse: for instance, balancing male images of God with other biblical expressions. God is beyond gender, but the preponderance of male images can send a message to women that they are not “made in the image and likeness of God.” Greater use of feminine images of God to supplement the abundant masculine pronouns will help women find their place in the Church and on the journey of faith.

The celebration of liturgy should reveal that same diversity.

Presence is important. The social world of the Pacific Northwest has a wonderful diversity of peoples and cultures. The celebration of liturgy should reveal that same diversity. Parish liturgical ministries should reflect the spectrum of ethnicity, gender and age that comprises the parish in general. The people in the assembly should be able
to recognize themselves in the liturgical ministers. A truly inclusive community will see men and women serving as ushers and greeters, Eucharistic ministers and lectors, choir members and altar servers. No ministry can be deemed appropriate for women and another for men, rather all ministries need to include men and women.

All would benefit... from the diversity of voices of faith.

In addition to working toward balance and inclusion in the liturgical ministries of a parish, Church leaders can also provide additional possibilities for participation, for example by asking a lay person to give an introduction to the liturgy of the day or to give a post-communion reflection on carrying the gifts of the Eucharist into daily life. Perhaps most significantly, because the ordinary preacher in the celebration of the Eucharist is an ordained male, a step toward greater inclusion is to invite lay women and men, on occasion, to break open the word for the community gathered. All would benefit, children included, from the diversity of voices of faith.

Consultation is important. Since the Second Vatican Council, many lay women and men have been educated in the various theological and biblical disciplines, a difference from the days when only priests and bishops had such training. These newly trained theologians bring new perspectives to the experience and articulation of the faith. While some find places in academia, few find roles as consultants in other church structures, for example on the staff of the bishop’s office. The International Theological Commission includes only five women among its thirty members. These few are the largest contingent ever.

Church leadership at the parochial, diocesan and curial levels must make a concerted effort to consult with women theologians on church matters. Greater participation of women theologians in theological discussion will enable the Church and Church leaders to speak more credibly to women, especially on issues of particular importance to women.

Decision-making is important. Church leaders sometimes do consult with the laity as they move toward a decision, and this is a step forward toward inclusion. However, many women argue for a move from mere consultation to actual participation in the making of the decisions. Today’s women are “women who, perhaps with great difficulty, have reached places of prestige within society and the workplace, but have no corresponding decisional role nor responsibility within ecclesial communities.”

For such inclusion to become the norm, priests, bishops and lay people will need training on collaboration. Collaboration between ordained leaders and lay people depends upon the recognition that appointed leaders—bishops and priests—sit in the circle of the community, not above or outside of the community. Decisions are made together through a process of community discernment and consensus building, not at a later time by the leader alone.

In 2005, the United States bishops issued a document entitled Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry. Though this document focuses primarily upon lay people in ecclesial ministry, it provides a helpful and hopeful template for collaboration between the ordained and lay women and men. The bishops honor the distinction between lay and ordained ministry, but they have done so in a way that avoids any elitism and bridges differences by noting that both are rooted in the sacraments of initiation. The bishops call upon all in the church “to learn the skills of collaboration, to value the benefits it brings to Church life and ministry, and to commit themselves to practice it in their places of ministry.” This important invitation still waits for response in many places.
III. The Transformation of the World

For Pope Francis, “The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples.” In a very personal statement, he continues, “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”

The new ordering of the “missionary impulse” makes evangelizing the world the top priority. Whatever impedes this task from within the Church’s traditional way of doing things will need to be “transformed.” For instance, when the New York Times and other print media correct news copy, requiring language to be inclusive, then the Church will need to use inclusive language for evangelizing such a culture.

Notice the role of the Holy Spirit. The community first invokes the Holy Spirit to transform the gifts brought for consecration, “that they may become the Body and Blood of your Son.” Then the community prays for a second transformation: “Grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ.”

The final action of the Eucharist is to send the community into the world as the Body of Christ, to bear Christ’s presence, and to continue his work in today’s world. This is the very mission of Jesus. The community transformed in the Eucharist is sent to transform the world.

The community transformed in the power of the Spirit, both as persons and as a body, and given the mission to transform the world, perhaps now is the time to engage the question of full inclusion of women in the Catholic Church. Pope Francis has said that “the Church has spoken and said no” to the ordination of women, but perhaps the Spirit has something else in mind.

In many cultures of the world, women are serving as executive leaders in politics and business. Some ecclesial cultures have embraced the reality of women as bishops and priests. If the “missionary impulse” toward such a world gives the work of evangelization priority over Catholic practices and customs that impede the mission, then perhaps the Spirit is calling for change for the sake of the world.

Perhaps the call that some women experience to priesthood is the work of the Spirit—a work of inclusion that will speak of equal dignity for all women and the transformation of all societies in which women are not included or valued as equals. Perhaps the Church is being called to take the lead in this full inclusion of women. If so, this is truly a message that will transform the church and the world.

May we have ears to hear and hearts to respond!

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Raising Children in the Catholic Church: Effects of the Inequality of Women on Our Children

By Heidi Schlumpf

“All institutions, including the church community, are called to guarantee the freedom of choice for women so that they might have the chance to take on social and ecclesial responsibilities...” ~Pope Francis, February 2015 in remarks to the Vatican’s Council for Culture

At the idealistic ages of six and seven, my children see their futures as full of possibilities. When asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” they cannot limit their dreams to just one. Sam, the seven-year-old, definitely wants to be a chef, but also a scientist and a musician and an inventor. Sophie, age six, wrote in her kindergarten All about Me book that she wants to be a “mom, a skater, a teacher and a cheerleader.”

Their career aspirations were the topic of conversation in the car one day when the idea of being a priest “like Father Dom,” our pastor, came up. Sam thought Sophie would make a good priest, perhaps picking up on her caring, pastoral nature. I had to point out that our church does not allow women priests.

“But I thought you said girls can do anything boys can do—and have a baby!” said Sophie. “That’s not fair, Mama,” added her brother. The next question, from both of them, was, “Why not?”

It’s a conversation every Catholic parent eventually has to have with his or her children—boys and girls alike—and most of us dread it. We want our young kids to have positive experiences and thoughts about God and church, as we know the “This is boring” complaints will come soon enough. Yet we have to explain that the church does not accept all of the gifts of all its members.

I was actually ready for this one and briefly explained that it’s an injustice we need to be part of fixing in the future. “Maybe by the time Sophie is a grown-up, women will be able to be priests,” I said.

What I was less prepared for was a comment from our son several years earlier. As a child with a stay-at-home dad and a mom who had studied feminist theology, Sam had been exposed to plenty of non-traditional gender roles and experiences of God. Yet at age 4, he still announced to me that God was “a man who lived in the sky.”

“Where did he get that?” I thought nervously, then realized that by dutifully bringing him to Mass, exposing him to Bible story books and taking him to vacation Bible school in the summer, he had absorbed that traditional—and masculine—image of God.

So What?

It’s too early to know how all of this will affect the spirituality and religious affiliation of our son and daughter. But there is plenty of evidence that young people perceive religious institutions in general—and the Catholic Church in particular—as judgmental and uncaring places, and that these negative impressions result from churches’ discriminatory practices and beliefs, primarily around gender and sexuality.

The rise of the “nones” or religious unaffiliated, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, can be attributed not to a lack of belief but rather to a view of churches as “too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules, and too involved in politics.”

For Sophie, the news that priesthood was off the table caused her to frown that day in the car and most likely to internalize the message that she wasn’t “good enough.” Sadly, research on girls and young women has linked low self-esteem to everything from domestic violence to a tendency not to choose high-paying math/science-related careers.

And Sam may have internalized the message that, by virtue of his gender, he is somehow better than his sister and other girls and women. We must re-
member that patriarchy and discrimination not only hurts girls but limits boys, too.

Of course, even my young children are aware that the world is not perfect or always just. For example, as naturalized citizens not born in the United States, they are also not eligible to become president—another injustice they see as “not fair” and worth working to change.

Yet, as important as their identity as Americans is, it pales compared to their identity as children of God and as Christians. If there is one area of their lives where I want them to feel worthy, accepted and loved, it’s in the church.

Some Suggestions

For many equality-minded Catholics, the solution to gender discrimination in the church has involved separating themselves from the institution. While I respect that often painful choice, my husband and I have decided instead to remain in what we see as our spiritual birthright.

Staying has meant having to find creative ways to work around patriarchy and discrimination. When it comes to our impressionable children, that task becomes all the more urgent and important.

Thanks to many thoughtful progressive parents who have gone before me, as well as an online support group of like-minded young families through Call to Action, I offer some ideas for raising kids in a more inclusive church:

Answer your children’s questions truthfully, but leave room for them to come to their own conclusions. Neither extreme—glossing over hard questions or overwhelming with information—is developmentally appropriate. So for example, I didn’t fib or avoid the question about women’s ordination, but neither did I give a complete history of patriarchy in the church to my 6-year-old. Older children and adolescents will be ready for more information, but take care to inform more than persuade.

Instill a sense of justice in your children. Point out injustices in the world and in your community, then work, as a family, to end them. Write letters, join protests, do direct service work. The church can be an ally in this important part of parenting, though children may then spot the hypocrisy in some of the Church’s own teachings. (See above suggestion.)

Balance honesty about the church’s failings with positive messages. While I am frank with my children about some of the injustices in the church, I also am careful to hold up what’s beautiful and admirable about God, our parish and the worldwide church. For many, the example of Pope Francis has been a refreshing example of what’s right with the church.

Share your own faith journey and beliefs with them. If children imagine that their parents’ faith lives have been easy or without challenge, they may feel guilty for their own questions and concerns. Again, I recommend honesty—within age-appropriate reason—about your own struggles with the church or even with faith and belief.

Expose your children to women in leadership positions and to multiple images of God. This is crucial, though it may require some research and effort on your part. Find a parish that raises up women’s gifts, even if it means traveling a bit. Our own parish is not perfect, but it features women preachers and presiders at various events, as well as other strong women in leadership roles. We also have attended Protestant churches, precisely because they have female ministers. Highlight Mary and female saints and read books and use prayers that feature feminine images of God. We also make a point of exposing our children to non-Christian religions, too.

Eventually, our children will grow up and make their own decisions. I pray that by then Pope Francis—and the church leadership who follow—will have made good on his promise for all of God’s people to have the freedom to take on the social and ecclesial responsibilities to which they are called.

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Voices from Within

My Catholic Identity

by Lorraine Cuddeback

My Catholic identity is both burden and blessing. It was the counter-cultural identity I thrived on as a teenager; it was the community identity I relied on in college. When I entered a Master of Divinity (MDiv) program, it was so I could be trustworthy in different Catholic circles. I prayed the Hours and read all the social encyclicals. I worked alongside protesters at the Schools of the Americas Vigil and the March for Life. I prided myself on crossing these borders, and I was blessed with a community that supported me, even in struggles and dissent with church teachings.

Yet doubt plagued me. Though my MDiv program was exclusively Catholic, the other graduate programs in my department were not. I became friends with people training for ministry in other denominations. I saw the blessings in their communities, though I heard frustrations too. I wondered if a part of my vocation that I had given up could be realized elsewhere.

My crossroads came when I was applying to PhD programs. I applied to a cross section of Protestant and Catholic schools, and ended up debating between my Catholic university and a Protestant one. It was a Catholic, female professor at my university who made the deciding insight. When I explained my doubts to her, she answered: “You’re Catholic, you think like a Catholic and people are always going to read you as Catholic.”

She was, and remains, right. In retrospect, this moment was my Rubicon; it was an act of obedience. Catholic is an inescapable part of my identity, and it does no good for me to believe that I can reject it outright. I can no more discard my Catholicity than I can discard my skin color or my economic background. It’s better to own it, to take up this identity with pride and do something constructive with it—because I love this church. I love it when prophetic inbreakings of the Kingdom are seen, and I love it when profound woundedness is visible. And out of love, I must call this church to be better, an ever more perfect communion.

A Meditation on Patience

by Debby Weidner

In a meditation on patience, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, writes that “All ways of living can be sanctified, and for each individual the ideal way is that to which God leads through the natural development of tastes and the pressure of circumstance.” While I was naturally led to my profession as a lay minister through desire, experience, education and skills, it is the pressure of my circumstances that currently keep me here.

Despite the obvious limitations in leadership and voice that a woman working for the Church experiences, my particular situation is good. I serve in a parish with a non-traditional model of leadership. We share our pastor with another Catholic Church. As a result, the pastor, staff and people have to collaborate creatively in order to minister to the needs of our community. This model has not only called forth my gifts as a lay minister in expanded ways, but a great percentage of the parishioners I work with each day are eager and happy to share their time and talents as well. I stay because our community is witnessing to a different organizational model to serve the needs of the parish.

Some days, when I have to navigate particular church teachings or sacramental requirements that I know are exclusionary or contrary to what I believe to be the lov-
ing response of Jesus, it is hard to stay. What sustains me though is the remembrance of the many lives that have been healed and transformed to the heart of Christ because of a positive relationship with the Church. I stay to witness to this reality that is sometimes hard to see. I hope that my presence will help to grow this reality of the Church and thus expand its capacity to include and love in our world.

In my impatience however, Teilhard’s meditation again speaks to my heart; “Trust in the slow work of God,” he writes, “We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.” I take a deep breath, remember the positive pressure of my current circumstances and give thanks.

Roman Catholic to United Church of Christ

by Tara Young-Brown

Leaving Catholicism, I packed my bags grieving with the knowledge of all I must leave behind—yet believing in the beauty and grace that grows from the muck of anger, brokenness and disillusionment. This has been a tearful and intentional journey, challenging me to remember that embedded in the cycles of departures are arrivals and new beginnings.

This Mother’s Day marked my 6th anniversary of leaving the Roman Catholic Church. At the time, I was employed by a parish doing social justice, outreach and women’s ministry. During the recession, the priest decided to end my position, and I was instructed not to inform the community I loved and served.

During my years of ministry in the Catholic Church, I experienced the hierarchical structure of the institution and authority of the male priesthood taking precedence over the radical teachings of our faith. I was exhausted of being told that God was calling me to ministry, yet I continued to hit the glass ceiling when it came to leadership.

I left the Catholic Church because I kept encountering systems that were more interested in power over people in place of empowering people for the Gospel.

After years of grieving, I slowly began to have the courage to be honest with myself. I did not leave the Church because of the suffering I encountered in the institution. I left because Catholicism had taught me to discern and inform my conscience.

Today I stand at the threshold of a new season, embarking on an unknown journey. Currently I am a “Member in Discernment” pursuing ordination in the United Church of Christ. No religious institution mirrors God’s Kingdom, yet the UCC has validated my gifts for professional ministry and invited me to continue to listen to God’s call. In an interview I was asked what I bring with me from my Catholic faith. As I look in the bags I packed, I am not surprised by the richness. I am grateful for these gifts as I am sent into a struggling world where the roles of churches are changing. I do not know the future, but I have experienced the breath of God, and I am trusting.

Resources


Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women’s Church Vocations, by Anne E. Patrick, 2013.


What’s it going to take to bring about a new consciousness in the Church that supports the equality of women? Three things: awareness, courage and co-creative action.

But let’s be clear—the equal treatment of women is a worldwide problem. The world’s culture in general is patriarchal, and organized religion has supported that mindset. From Adam having naming rights to the animals in the book of Genesis to the lack of inclusive language in our liturgies today, the male pronoun and male authority have been privileged in religion and culture.1 No matter how many theologians remind us that God has no gender,2 it’s difficult for most of us to think of God as anything other than male.

Awareness

In 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and collaborators wrote The Woman’s Bible. They identified concepts of God and treatments of women in Scripture that blatantly served the patriarchy. Stanton stated these ideas came not from God but “from the brain of man.”3 Her introduction ends with “all religions on… earth degrade her, and so long as woman accepts the position that they assign her, her emancipation is impossible.”4

Benedictine Ruth Fox offers a more current example of how Scripture can be used to limit women’s roles.5 She recounts that after praying from the lectionary for 24 years, she realized that “particular omissions of select scripture passages” consistently concerned the role of women. For example, in comparing the lectionary reading about “the worthy wife” in the Book of Proverbs to its counterpart in the Bible, the lectionary “omitted the passages that praised the women’s initiative, business acumen, dignity and wisdom (31:14-18, 21-29),” while including “passages praising her for serving her husband and staying home to spin.”6

Hopefully we’ve come a long way from equating Eve with E-vil, and from the ironclad rules of behavior that governed Victorian times. But subtle vestiges of “women’s inferiority” linger in the psyches of women and men today. Being aware of ideas, behaviors and attitudes that keep women small and “in their place” is the first step toward equality and justice. Women need to monitor destructive self-talk that keeps them mired in self-doubt. Men would do well to reflect on patterns of speech and action that protect their cultural dominance.

An easy exercise can deepen awareness. Next time you’re at a liturgy or time of public prayer, notice all the times God is referenced as “He” and how often the word “men” is used in prayers and creeds. Mentally substitute “She” for “He” and “women” for “men.” Or, instead of “men and women,” say “women and men.” Notice the effect these changes make on your consciousness.

Courage

Society and the Church have favored certain attributes in women. The feminine ideal preferred those who were self-effacing, served behind the scenes, sacrificed “all” for others, were non-assertive and didn’t make waves. However, there is a huge downside in the emotional and spiritual health of women who try to mold themselves to such a one-sided model. Susan Nelson Dunfee calls it “the sin of hiding.” Experiencing guilt for much of her life, a woman fails if she’s too feminine because she may be seen as seductive; if too assertive, she’s not staying in her place; if she doesn’t have children, she’s neglecting the role of mother; if working outside the home, she may be judged as neglecting her children. Mired in self-doubt and co-dependency, some women lack the time or ability to self-advocate. They may resort to indirectness, to manipulating behind the scenes instead of claiming their voices and owning their own authority. They are afraid to be who they are.

Fathers with daughters often see the need for more equitable treatment of women more clearly than most. They can champion their daughters in ways that serve them well. When a man—father, mentor, priest, brother, bishop or friend—sees a woman’s gifts and stands behind her, she will be empowered in a way she might never be alone. Negative messages that have grooved themselves into the feminine psyche can be undone...
by powerful male support. Masculine and feminine energies need one other for mutual growth and development.

Co-Creative Action

Many have experienced the joy that comes from working collaboratively on a creative project. Yet there are psychological barriers within women and men that impede co-creativity that would rejuvenate the Church.

In their book *Female Authority*, Young-Eisendrath and Weidemann hold that men and women alike are “ambivalent” about women’s authority. They analyze some of the psychological conditions that contribute to fear of women in positions of leadership.

Social conditions that contribute to fear of women in positions of leadership. In discussing the paradoxical nature of female emotional power, they note that a young male establishes an independent identity from the powerful mother of his childhood “by opposing feminine traits and refusing female authority.” Consequently, men often receive women’s strong expressions of anger, aggression and fear as “engulfing and overwhelming, impossible… to understand or to manage.” When a man uses a slur toward a powerful woman, he cuts her down and inhibits her self-esteem. In a moment she has been made less of an authority, less capable of working in partnership.

Women, on the other hand, may have defensive reactions to strong women in positions of authority because they also differentiate from their mothers. If they have internalized assumptions about the inferiority of the female gender that come from the culture, they may react mentally with, “Who does this woman think she is?” If a woman rejects the validity of female authority she may seek a powerful male to validate her convictions. By not risking stating her own opinions and beliefs—assuming she knows what they are—she avoids criticism, judgment and supposedly rejection. She also short-circuits her own growth and autonomy.

Where is the way through to healing these divisions? Men need to support women’s gifts, their freedom to use their talents and chart their own path, and encourage them to use their voices. The world and the Church need men secure in their identities to move over and share decision-making. Women need to learn to speak up and stand up for their truth. Fear lies at the core of these differences. We react to roles and projections of others instead of getting to know each other’s hearts. Trust develops with shared vulnerability. The person with the most power must be open to hearing and receiving what the less-powerful person has to offer. Co-creation is rooted in dialogue. Dialogue depends on true listening and openness to being changed by what one hears.

Signs of Hope and Change

Culture has been evolving in its appreciation of women’s gifts. Sometimes it pushes the Church to change. Here are some indicators that things are changing:

- Recent data shows that in most US dioceses, a third of the top jobs open to lay people are occupied by women: chancellor, chief financial officer and schools superintendent. This is a step forward in collaboration and shared decision-making.

- Young people today are questioning why women can’t be priests when barriers to other leadership roles are falling. Can we find more opportunities in our Church for these questions to be heard?

- The outcome of the recent investigation of American sisters by the Vatican is regarded by many as a tribute to the collaborative decision-making process within the LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious), who stayed at the table in graceful dialogue with their hierarchically imposed overseers. The outpouring of support the sisters received from the laity during the time of investigation demonstrated an awareness of the gifts American women religious consistently provide in their faithful witness to the Gospel.

- More and more theologians are women. As women study the ancient languages and texts, they are bringing fresh perspectives to the understanding of Scripture. They are telling us who and what got left out. Can the Church accept their intelligence and insight?

Pope Francis said, “God is not afraid of new things.” Perhaps there are new things in store for the Church if we can be open to the Spirit. Another Pentecost may be afoot.

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Teen Justice Circles

Two Circles for young women are beginning at Echo Glen in Snoqualmie, WA and Holy Family Parish in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Cashmere, WA

On Wednesday April 29, circle leaders met with Glenn Johnson, Cashmere School District Superintendent. Together they are addressing ways to include Latino parents in the district’s anti-bullying programs. Additionally, there was a positive dialogue about anti-bully best practices.

St. Benedict’s Tea

For the past ten years St. Benedict Parish in Seattle has held a women’s tea for education, spirituality and support for a ministry benefiting women. We are grateful that our Women’s Justice Circles will benefit from the proceeds of the tea. Thank you to the women of St. Benedict!

Human Trafficking

Washington, DC monthly vigil

Our Global Problem: Human Trafficking from a Philippine Perspective

IPJC co-sponsored speaker Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB who examined the issue of human trafficking from an economic, political, ecclesial and cultural point of view.

Young Adult Justice Cafés

Eco-Justice Action!

The Spring Café engaged many actions on climate change including workshops on small space gardening and bike repair; sending original art postcards to legislators; submitting an op-ed article; carbon footprint assessment; college campus composting; and educating with the film Island President.

Davidson Justice Café helping with campus composting.
Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment
Celebrating Corporate Change!

The Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) was established in 2010 to increase access to HIV medicines. Since that time faith-based shareholders have been working with pharmaceutical companies to license their HIV therapies to the MPP. This year AbbVie, Merck and Johnson & Johnson (Janssen) signed agreements with the MPP for key pediatric HIV drugs. These licenses are important milestones in the efforts to treat children living with HIV in low- and middle-income countries which are home to 99.8% of children and adolescents living with HIV worldwide.

Disney will “absolutely prohibit” depiction of smoking in films with a PG-13 rating or below.

Just Video Contest Winners!

1st Place: Water by Emma Rosenthal from St. Mary’s Academy, Portland, OR

2nd Place: Human Trafficking by Kialani Naputi Rule from Holy Names Academy, Seattle, WA

3rd Place: The Ability to Dream - A right or A Privilege by John Quinlan from Stuart Hall High School, San Francisco, CA

3rd Place: An Ethical Look at Vaccinations for Measles by Emily Velasquez from Holy Names Academy, Seattle, WA

Honorable Mention: Immigration in the United States by Becca Murrer from Presentation Academy, Louisville, KY

Donations


In memory of: Elinor Brennan, Mary Fleming, CSJP, Rae Skinner, SNJM, Kathleen Stupfel, SNJM

A Movement in Hope
Thank you!

We had a wonderful gathering of IPJC friends, partners and collaborators for our spring fundraiser to support and sustain our mission. Watch our new video A Movement in Hope at ipjc.org

Climate Change
Anticipating Pope Francis’ encyclical on Climate Change!

Be sure to get your copy of IPJC’s four-session process for faith communities to accompany your study of the encyclical and the issue of climate change.

Interfaith

IPJC participates in an interfaith panel on “Prosperity and Poverty,” May 17, 2015
This Issue: Women in the Church

Women in the Church: Ritual & Reflection

Invite a small group for contemplation and a conversation about the role of women in the Church. Ask them to read this issue of AMOS prior to the gathering.

Set Up: Arrange chairs for participants around a small ritual table. Put on the table a cloth, candle, a heart for each person.

Song: Open with a song such as “Woman of Grace” from Grace on the Margins or “All Are Welcome”

Leader: As we gather today, we take a few moments to appreciate and honor our own stories and experiences with the Divine and religion, aware of the multitude of voices and experiences that join us. (pause)

All: God of the expansive and of the specific, you challenge us in the world to be more radically loving. Be with us as we explore the challenges, pains, joys and paths of our own stories.

Leader: We now spend some time in quiet reflection on the role of women in the church and on our own personal experiences. Silently reflect on the following quotes and questions from this issue of AMOS. Then reflect on the question that speaks to you. After the silence, I will invite us to share in a conversation.

“What are good reasons to hope that the papacy that began on March 13, 2013 with a request for people’s prayers will in time bring greater justice for women in the church?” —Anne Patrick

“What have I heard from Pope Francis that gives me hope for greater justice for women in the church?”

“God is beyond gender, but the preponderance of male images can send a message to women that they are not ‘made in the image and likeness of God.’ Greater use of feminine images of God to supplement the abundant masculine pronouns will help women find their place in the Church and on the journey of faith.” —Victoria Ries and Fr. James Eblen

“What feminine images of God do I feel called to embrace at this time?”

“Dialogue depends on true listening and on openness to being changed by what one hears.” —Gretchen Gundrum

Where am I being called to deeper listening? How can I embrace that call?

Sharing: Hold a conversation about reflections.

Leader: Let’s end our time together with a word or phrase that is living in our hearts. As you share, take a heart from the table as a reminder of our journey together.

Closing Prayer: Holy and Living Spirit, thank you for the movements you make in our lives and being. Hear the movements of our hearts and help us to live into a more just world and church. Amen!
Women in the Church in the Age of Francis

3. Francis, Evangelii Gaudium. #104
5. There are of course, many types and degrees of “feminism,” a subject I discuss more fully in Anne E. Patrick, Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Catholic Moral Theology (New York: Continuum, 1996), pp. 7-8.
7. Francis, Evangelii Gaudium. #108.
8. Mt 13:33, Lk 13:21
10. My final two points draw extensively on “The Gift of Papal Silence.”

The Call of the Church to Lead

3. Francis, Evangelii Gaudium. #102.
4. Francis, Evangelii Gaudium. #103.
6. Francis, Evangelii Gaudium. #104.
10. Francis, Evangelii Gaudium. #27.
12. Eucharistic Prayer III.

Raising Children in the Catholic Church: Effects of the Inequality of Women on Our Children

1. References:

Be Not Afraid

1. Gn 2:18–23
4. Stanton 12.
9. Young-Eisendrath, 44.