

Pink Smoke Rising: The Struggle for Women's Equality in the Catholic Church

May 2, 2013 by Lauren Davidson

ROME — The surprise resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in early February ignited a flicker of hope in Catholic women who have long yearned for greater equality within the Church, or at least a platform on which to discuss it with the Vatican — a dialogue that many women feel was quashed under Popes John Paul II and Benedict.

"In 1994, the Vatican declared female priests off the record," said Chris Schenk, executive director of Future Church, an advocacy group for opening ordination. In "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," John Paul's apostolic letter on barring women from the priesthood, the pope explained that priestly ordination has "from the beginning always been reserved to men alone," citing Jesus' choice of only male apostles.

Many theologians, however, have raised issue with this reading of the Bible. For example, the Catholic Theological Society of America, the principal association of Catholic theologians in North America, issued a report in 1997 outlining "serious doubts" with the Vatican's understanding of Scripture and the Bible-based reasons it outlined for excluding women from ordination.

"There has been a great deal of theological disagreement," said Schenk. "It's really much more of a political issue than a theological or a biblical one."

Advocacy groups flocked to Rome during the conclave to protest the Vatican's ban on women's ordination. Photo courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference.

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With the prospect of a new pope came the hope that this would be addressed. But speaking to a group of journalists just days after Francis' election, Luis Francisco Ladaria Ferrer, the secretary for the Congregation of the Faith, stamped down on any green shoots of optimism. "There cannot be women priests, that's impossible," he said. "It's established doctrine," meaning that the law is divinely inspired and cannot be changed.

Whether this was the old guard talking or the new is not entirely clear, as Francis has yet to comment directly on the issue of women's ordination since he became pope. Within the first few weeks of his papacy, Francis impressed the more progressive members of his flock by several actions, including washing and kissing the feet of two female prisoners — one of them Muslim — on Maundy Thursday, marking the first time that women have been included in this pre-Easter ritual.

But this growing confidence took a hit in mid-April, when the Vatican affirmed the new pope's support of his predecessor's investigation of progressive nuns in the U.S. After a doctrinal assessment that culminated last April, Seattle Archbishop Peter Sartain was appointed as an overseer of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the umbrella body representing around 80 percent of women religious in the U.S. that was criticized by the Holy See for not promoting official church teachings on subjects such as abortion and female ordination.

Many saw this as a hard blow. A relaxation of this decree had been considered an achievable first step in ending the "old boys' club" attitude, as Schenk called it, of the Vatican.

This attitude was best summarized in John Paul's numerous reasons for denying women a place in the priesthood in his 1994 apostolic letter. He cited "the example recorded in the Sacred Scriptures of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men; the constant practice of the Church, which has imitated Christ in choosing only men; and her living teaching authority which has consistently held that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is in accordance with God's plan for his Church."

Conservatives see his arguments for the status quo as convincing. But the arguments for change are compelling.

The number of Catholics in the world is growing rigorously – it has climbed by more than a fifth to 1.2 billion in the 20 years since the apostolic letter was published – but the number of priests has grown by less than two percent, reaching around 412,000 in 2010, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate. Only a priest can lead mass, so many parishes around the world, particularly in Latin America, don't have access to communion.

"Bishops have chosen the least desirable option to deal with the priest shortage," said Schenk, who was in Rome during the conclave, which happened to coincide with a women's pilgrimage she was leading. "Mass is the center of the Catholic Church, so you should be opening ordination to women and married men, rather than losing access to mass."

This practical approach encompasses Future Church's mission. Recognizing the futility of arguing with doctrine – at least at this stage – one of the group's main goals is the acceptance of women into the diaconate, which has not been doctrinally forbidden by the Holy See. While only priests can bless and minister the sacrament of communion, deacons have liturgical roles, can preach from the altar and are involved in serving the community and caring for the poor. On the other hand, the diaconate has traditionally been the first step toward priesthood.

Unlike the Vatican ban on women priests, "the female diaconate has not been taken off the table," said Schenk. While it would not fully address the priest shortage, it would allow women to preach "and then the whole Catholic community will be able to hear the gospel through the lens of female experience, and not just through the lens of male experience."

For other spiritual suffragists, a female diaconate is not a satisfactory solution. Deborah Rose Milavec, co-vice president of Catherine of Siena Virtual College, a non-profit school that promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women through gender and women's studies, flew to Rome to speak up for half of the Catholic population during the conclave.

"My primary purpose was to draw attention to the fact that 115 men were locked in a room to elect the new pope and there were no women in that room as electors or candidates," Rose Milavec said. "The church is one of the last bastions of patriarchy: [there exists]"> a huge lacuna in women's leadership in the Catholic Church."

Responding, in the days before the conclave, to a question about the number of women involved in the papal election process, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican's spokesperson, said that several women work in service jobs – such as cooking and cleaning – at the Santa Marta hotel, where the cardinals stayed while in Rome, and thus played a vital role in the conclave.

"I'm horrified," said Rose Milavec. "It sounds to me like [he]> doesn't live on this planet, that's how out of touch it sounds." She said the men at the higher echelons of the Church are "insulated against what most Catholics are living and breathing."

While the Catholic Church does not claim to be a democracy, "it has to function in a world that is democratic," said Rose Milavec. "It cannot live as if it's functioning in the Middle Ages... When somebody sits in Rome and tells me that it's a sin to take a birth control pill, it's almost laughable. It doesn't touch my real life at all." Organizations for gender equality in the Church held pink smoke vigils in Rome during the conclave to draw attention to the lack of women involved in the papal election process. Photo courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference.

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In a bid to raise awareness of the current opportunity to change the Church's attitude to women, advocacy groups conducted pink smoke vigils around the U.S. and in Rome during the conclave. Playing on the iconic image of the white smoke that billows from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel upon election of a new pope, these organizations for women's ordination gathered to chant and pray over puffs of pink smoke.

The Women's Ordination Conference, the main group behind these protests, also produced a video of a song called "Ordain A Lady" – set to the chart-topping tune of Call Me Maybe by Carly Rae Jepsen – that has garnered almost 140,000 hits on YouTube. The choice of music was more traditional at the vigils, where supporters of women priesthood sang the church hymn "Ubi Caritas." The lyrics translate as, "Where charity and love are, there is God."

Women's advocacy groups have criticized the Church for its move in 2008 to excommunicate female priests and the male bishops or priests who ordained them. They note that there is no similar sanction for others who violate church teaching, including for priests who are found to be guilty of sexual child abuse.

"It's scandalous," said Schenk. "It just shows the present dysfunction of the Catholic Church." As a result, she added, "many women have written off Christianity altogether as hopelessly sexist. Why would they be part of a religion that discriminates so blatantly?"

As part of her work with Future Church, which aims to retrieve the memory of early women leaders, Schenk runs a woman's pilgrimage to Rome. This year's trip happened to be planned for mid-March. "Pope Benedict had a lot of nerve resigning right before my pilgrimage," Schenk joked.

On the day before Francis' inauguration mass, Schenk led a group of women around the Domitilla Catacombs, pointing out the frescoes of Veneranda and Petronilla – two women from around the fifth century who are depicted with signs of apostolic ministry, such as a crown or a ring. But Christians are not taught about this part of their history, she said.

"Even less do we learn about women leaders like Prisca or Phoebe," said Schenk, referring to two of the ten female leaders mentioned by Paul in Romans 16. Prisca, also called Priscilla, is described as Paul's "co-worker in Christ Jesus... all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to [her.]"> Paul calls Phoebe "a deacon of the church in Cenchreae" and "a benefactor of many people, including me."

"If it wasn't for those women in the Pauline communities, Christianity would not have spread as it did throughout the Greco-Hellenist world," said Schenk.

Schenk also recounted the story of Pope Joan – the woman who, according to legend, ruled the Catholic Church around the 13th century. “She has since been wiped out from the history... There is no tradition of women in leadership. What the church has is a tradition of suppressing women in leadership,” said Schenk.

“It’s systematized discrimination and sexism.”

The election of a new pope gave some advocates of women’s ordination fresh hope that now might be the time for change, or at least dialogue. “Not only do I have great hope, I think it’s the future of the church and it’s one of these ideas whose time has come,” said Rose Milavec.

Ruth Steinert Foote, who represents the female empowerment group Women-Church Convergence, is less confident about her hopes for a positive response from the Vatican anytime soon.

“I’m not holding my breath,” she said. “But I’m going to keep plugging along.”

She said that she was hopeful that Francis will be open to dialogue regarding women’s place in the Church, and said that as a Jesuit, his concern for the poor could be his gateway into gender issues.

“If he looks at the statistics of poverty in the world, he will see how disproportionately the poverty is among women,” said Steinert Foote. “And he will find that the misogynist attitudes of men have caused this poverty... This is how I see Francis getting to the women question, through what touches his soul the most: the poverty issue.”

Many Catholics hope that Pope Francis will relax the Church's decree against women's ordination. Photo courtesy of Women's Ordination Conference.

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While Steinert Foote would like to see women ordained to the priesthood, she said “we have to solve the earthly problem of women before we get to the heavenly problem.”

Others counsel patience, noting that change in the church will take time. Christian Weisner, a representative of the international movement We Are Church, an activist group for Church reform, said after his recent return from Rome: “We shouldn’t expect everything in the first few weeks. We have to give (Francis) time.”

Casting his eye over the Catholic Church, Weisner said, “Like a big ship, it was really in trouble. But it takes some time to get on a new course. We are not a speed boat.”

While the ship is hardly in danger of sinking completely, it remains to be seen whether its new captain will follow the wake left by his predecessor or allow these increasingly large waves to steer him towards a new horizon – with a female crew on board.

<http://coveringreligion.org/2013/05/02/pink-smoke-rising/>

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