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Donal Dorr

Women in the Church – or Out of It

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I have a good friend, a woman who is a very reflective and committed Christian believer. Up to about fifteen years ago she used to travel quite a long distance every Sunday to go to Mass in a particular church. The priest who celebrated the Eucharist there was very much in tune with the spirit of Vatican II and with the reality of present-day Ireland. He had the gift of celebrating the Mass and preaching in a way that provided real spiritual nourishment to my friend as well as to many others who made a point of coming to that church each Sunday.

Unfortunately, that priest was transferred and was replaced by a priest whose style was rather clericalist and out of touch with the spiritual needs of many of the congregation. Not very long after this took place I happened to visit my friend. I found that she had given up attendance at Sunday Mass. She had tried going to some other churches, but she couldn't find nourishment of her faith in any of them. In fact she found that the style of the celebration and some of the words of the priests were evoking real anger and alienation in her. While telling me about her pain about this situation and explaining why she could no longer go to church she said: 'I found that I just couldn't take it any longer.'

As far as I can judge, the experience of this woman is echoed by many other women in the Western world. They feel that the Church is patriarchal in its structures and they experience the attitudes of many, though no means all, of its priests as clericalist and patriarchal. Their rejection of this is not simply intellectual; it is a deeply visceral reaction. They sense that attendance at church services presided over by insensitive priests has been damaging their faith rather than nourishing it. They see that their various attempts to work for change are unwelcomed; they have proved fruitless and have left them feeling helpless. So they have simply given up on the Church, while they try to cling on to their Christian faith.

My friend knows from her own experience that it is difficult to hold on to Christian faith in isolation; this is because Christianity

Donal Dorr is a priest member of St Patrick's Missionary Society.
Address: 21 Leeson Park, Dublin 6.

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is a community religion. Without the support of a community, one tends to become increasingly withdrawn and alienated. My friend is fortunate in having recently found that she can find spiritual nourishment in a fairly small group of Christians who gather in a friend's house every few weeks to pray and celebrate together. But quite a lot of the women who have given up on going to church do not have this kind of alternative. Some of them have become so disenchanted with the Church that it does not even occur to them to look for a community in which their faith can be sustained, supported, and challenged.

POPE FRANCIS

This distancing by so many women from the official Church is one of the most serious and urgent issues facing the Catholic Church today. At the time of the industrial revolution in Europe the Church 'lost' the great bulk of the industrial working class. It may well be the case that something similar is happening to the Church today in relation to women, at first in the Western world but perhaps before long in other continents.

It is sad that many Church leaders seem to be unaware of the extent to which even those faithful women who continue to come to church experience some of the feelings of those who have left. Furthermore, some more conservative Christians, including priests and bishops, attribute the problem to what they see as the evils of feminism and secularism.

Pope Francis comes from a Latin American culture which is profoundly patriarchal. So it is quite remarkable that he has been, over many years, actively involved in combatting various injustices and abuses suffered by women. Since becoming pope he has taken some significant steps towards addressing the need to give leadership roles to women in the Church. But there is still a very long way to go.

Many women feel that their voices are not valued, or even heard, by Church leaders. This is a very profound visceral 'gut' reaction. It is not clear that Francis fully appreciates how many women feel so strongly about this issue—and what a challenge it poses for the Church. Does he fully accept that their sense of being invisible in Church decision-making springs from a genuine Christian faith? This is a pope who believes that the piety of poor people is a true carrier of revelation. Does he believe that the voice of voiceless women may be equally a carrier of a message from the Holy Spirit? When women hear him making dismissive remarks about feminism they find it hard to believe that he is fully in tune with their cry to be heard.

AMBIVALENCE

Many Catholic women are enthusiastic about most of what Pope Francis stands for. But they have a far more ambivalent opinion in regard to his views about the nature of women, and particularly about what he is doing in relation to the role of women in the Church.

They are glad that he has appointed some women to more senior positions in the Roman curia than they had in the past. But at least some of them feel that this is not much more than ‘tokenism’. They were moved and delighted when they saw how he started his meeting in May 2019 with the heads of Congregations of Religious Sisters (UISG). He asked that the high chair on which he was supposed to sit be removed and replaced with two equal-sized lower chairs; he sat on one of them and invited the president of UISG to sit beside him on the other chair. He also set aside his prepared speech and invited the Sisters to engage in dialogue with him.

However, later in the meeting he reported the outcome of the commission on diaconate for women—a commission which he had promised to set up during his meeting with the UISG three years earlier. There was bitter disappointment when he told the Sisters that the members of the commission could not reach agreement on the central issue of whether deacons in the early Church had really been ordained; and so the different members had to be left to continue their own individual studies. Francis did not say whether the commission had issued a majority report, and if so whether there had been just a relatively small ‘blocking’ minority on the issue.

Similarly, in his previous meeting (in May 2016) with the UISG many of the participants experienced a mixture of emotions. They were delighted that he agreed to their request for a dialogue with him rather than just a speech from him. And they were impressed by his openness and his willingness to listen to their experiences and views. But some of his comments left them with doubts about the extent to which he shared their serious theological concerns in relation to the role of women in the Church—and also about the very nature of women. A significant number were obviously not convinced when he said that the priest presides at the Eucharist ‘in the person of Jesus Christ’—with the implication that only a man can play that role.

Many women, in the UISG and beyond, were dismayed and angered when it was reported that Francis said: ‘We must not fall into feminism, because that would reduce a woman’s importance.’ And they are seriously perturbed by the fact that Francis has not

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removed the specific Church law which holds that only those who are ordained can exercise the power of jurisdiction or governance in the Church.

EQUAL?

Francis speaks out very strongly against the many injustices and abuses suffered by women in the past and at present. He insists that their rights must be respected. He has also asserted that women have an important contribution to make to theological reflection. However, many women are annoyed or angry that he has apparently accepted the Vatican line that the relationship between women and men should be seen not in terms of 'absolute equality' but rather in terms of 'reciprocity'.

Many women and men reject this 'reciprocity' language. They claim that once Church people refuse to say that women are *equal* to men, they are implying that women are *inferior* to men. They point out that the Church has an important role in the shaping of culture and the attitudes of people. So they argue that, when senior Church leaders substitute 'reciprocity' for 'equality', they are influencing how women are seen and treated in society; consciously or unconsciously they are effectively lending some measure of support or credibility to unequal treatment of women and the very serious injustices and abuses suffered by women.

Those who speak in terms of reciprocity say that they are not at all suggesting that women are inferior. What Francis is emphasizing is that women have different gifts and qualities from those of men, and that it is important to respect the specific 'feminine genius' of women. This way of speaking is rejected by a lot of women. They see it as rather similar to the 'separate but equal' language that was used in the past to justify racial segregation and which was used in practice as a 'cover' for shocking discrimination. Most women would probably accept that the majority of women are more likely to be caring than most men. But there is disagreement among the scholars about the extent to which this is a result of the genetic 'nature' of women or from cultural conditioning.

This difficulty becomes much more serious when Vatican people suggest that the 'nature' of women makes it impossible for them to be ordained as priests. It is not clear whether Francis himself fully accepts this argument or whether he holds that it is simply a matter of respecting the tradition of the Church, and the ruling of Pope John Paul II, that women cannot be priests. But he has insisted that the issue was closed by John Paul and cannot be re-opened. Very many women are not convinced that this is the case.

Some theologians have a particularly serious theological

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objection to the notion that the ‘nature’ of women is different from the nature of men. They say that this suggests that there are two versions of human nature which are essentially different from each other; and that the Word of God only took on the male version of human nature, and not the female version. They insist that there is just one human nature and that this was taken on by the Word of God in the Incarnation.

GENDER ISSUES

The talk about the distinct ‘genius of women’ is loosely connected with ‘The Theology of the Body’ which was propounded at length by John Paul II and which many theologians do not accept. This way of thinking is also linked to the strong opposition of the Vatican, including Pope Francis himself, to what they see as unacceptable theories of gender—in fact what they claim to be a false ideology of gender.

There is a very wide range of opinion among scholars on gender studies; and the issue has become highly polarized. At the heart of the issue is the difference between sex and gender. Most scholars recognize that there is a small proportion of people who have the sexual features of women but who feel at a deep level that they are, or should be, men—that their gender is male; and, on the other hand, there are people whose bodies are male but who feel that their gender is female.

This difference between sex and gender has led to serious practical disputes about transgender issues. Some gender theorists hold that femininity and masculinity are quite fluid identities. So they claim that even young children should be supported in ‘transitioning’. This involves having hormone treatment and surgery in order to bring their bodies into conformity with what they believe to be their true gender/sexual identity.

It is unfortunate that Vatican spokespersons, apparently including Francis himself, have adopted a strongly negative position on this whole gender issue—an issue on which we still have so much to learn. There is need for serious study and listening on both sides, rather than dogmatic pronouncements. What we have at present seems more like ‘a dialogue of the deaf’.

PATRIARCHY IN THE CHURCH

In some respects these issues about the nuances of the views of Francis about the nature and role of women pale into insignificance in relation to a very practical issue that he faces. This is the

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herculean task of ensuring that, at every level in the Church, women have their voices heard and are allowed and enabled to exercise real leadership. It can only happen if the Church succeeds in dismantling the patriarchy which is deeply entrenched in it.

Patriarchy is built into the institutional dimension of the Church. Male priests are the only ones who have the final authority for all important decisions made in the Vatican, in every diocese, and in every parish. It is true, of course, that some bishops and some parish priests have been willing to accept and act on the advice of women and lay men. But, technically, the role of the non-ordained is only advisory; the priest or bishop has the ultimate power.

Equally serious is the fact that patriarchal attitudes are deeply imbedded in very many priests and bishops. They are often quite unaware that quite a lot of their actions and words are deeply hurtful to women whose consciousness has been raised on the issue of the relationship between women and men. Women see that women play leading roles in the media and in non-governmental organizations, as well as to an increasing, though still inadequate, extent in business and politics. This is the situation not only in the West but to an ever-increasing extent in other continents. So women, and many men, are quite scandalized that the Church, as well as several other religions, still remains a bastion of patriarchy.

To the outrage about clerical sex-abuse of children we now have further anger about abuse of women by priests. People are becoming aware of the extent to which priests in many parts of the world have been sexually abusing religious Sisters. This was largely ignored or covered up by Church authorities, even though a detailed report of it was brought to the attention of the Vatican more than twenty years ago by Sister Maura O'Donoghue MMM.

But this abuse of religious Sisters is just one instance of the far more widespread sexual abuse of women by priests. There is now a heightened awareness of the extent of this abuse and the various ways in which it takes place. For instance, where the woman becomes pregnant it has been common practice for her to be left to rear the child on her own with little or no support from the child's father. Indeed this is probably still the situation, despite the recent rules from the Vatican which insist that the priest face up to his responsibilities.

There are many far less obvious ways in which women are being offended by insensitive priests who have no awareness of the hurt they are causing. Women who have devoted their whole lives to serving the Church now see lay men being chosen to be deacons, preaching and administering the sacraments, while women are still left kneeling in the pews. When priests visit religious Sisters they often share in their prayers and find the Sisters are using prayer-

books which use inclusive (non-sexist) language for the psalms. But when the Sisters occasionally join in the evening prayers of a priests' community they find that it has never occurred to the priests that they should use a translation of the psalms and other prayers which does not include sexist language.

I think, too, of a situation where a woman was the very best friend of a well-known bishop. When he died she found that at his funeral all the front seats in the church were occupied by bishops and priests while she knelt anonymously at the back of the church. Nobody thought of asking her to say a few words to the congregation about her dear friend whom she knew far better than any of his colleagues.

Furthermore, it is not unusual to find that there is a serious imbalance in the friendships that priests have with women. The priest is made welcome in her house or her community. But he never invites her to visit him because he is ashamed to acknowledge the friendship to his fellow-priests. He takes it for granted that she is putting up with various inconveniences to accommodate his continued exercise of his ministry; but he makes little or no effort to reciprocate this generosity.

All this suggests that the most intractable problem facing Pope Francis is to facilitate the radical change of clerical culture that is needed not just in the Vatican but in every part of the world. The sad fact is that many priests dismiss as relatively minor most of the kind of issues I have noted. It can happen that this dismissive attitude of the priest is 'the final straw' which leads women to give up hope that our Church can be reformed. They walk away; and we can only hope that they find nourishment for their faith in some other way.

What can those of us who are priests do about all this? There are many things we might look at. We need, of course, to reflect on the way we relate to our women friends, and to women in general. More specifically, we may need to examine whether there is a sound theological basis in liturgical tradition for the practice of concelebration as it has developed since Vatican II. Does the priest who vests to concelebrate the Eucharist think that it is important to show that he is a priest and that his concelebration is in some way superior to the celebration of 'ordinary' baptized members of the general congregation? Or is it just that he is taking a stipend and so feels that he must be seen to be playing a public role by concelebrating? Perhaps, too, we need to take more account of the hurt many women feel when we continue to use sexist language in our public prayers. And maybe we might agree with Pope Francis that the pastoral needs of people may at times take precedence over some details of strict Church liturgical rules. This might loosen

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us up in the way we lead our liturgical celebrations and in the wording we use for the Eucharistic prayers. However, the women with whom I have discussed this issue insist that there is just one fundamental thing they want us to do: they want *us* to really *listen* to them.

The Voices of Women. If there is to be a future church, these two paths will have to meet. It is not at all clear how this is to be done, but a necessary first step must surely be to attend to the voices of women throughout history and today. Four new women Doctors of the Church have taken their place – with very little pomp and circumstance – on the Christian calendar. That might be a place to start at an official level. But perhaps on an even more important level, the experience of the ordinary day-in, day-out women of Catholicism, can begin to be respected as among the primary bearers of the Faith, and respected, heard and treated as the significant theologians that they are. For women have always done theology, and ministry, in both word and deed. Their theology has not necessarily been expressed in tomes or lecture halls, but it is the daily living guide for more than half the Church. This is not to exclude lay men, but at least they can move freely in the male symbolic universe that is Catholicism. Women have had to create their own religious universe, and it is the uniting of these two universes, practically unknown to each other, that will save the Church of God in our time.

– MARY T. MALONE, *The Elephant in the Church*, (Dublin: Columba Books) p. 171.