

# Catholic Women in a Man's Church: Should We Stay or Should We Go?

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Early this year, I wrote something special for our then new and utterly captivating pope, the former Jorge Mario Bergoglio. From the moment he stepped out onto the Vatican balcony, with that warm charismatic smile, and didn't talk at us but asked us to bless him, I was smitten. I stood looking at the TV in my kitchen with tears in my eyes. Then I learned more that gave me even more hope. I saw that:

- He was eloquent on poverty,
- He criticized trickle down theories.
- He talked about hunger as the result of a poor distribution of goods and income.
- He criticized “private ownership of goods” unless they serve the common good.
- He called not just for nourishment and sustenance for people, but for education, access to health care, employment and a just wage.
- He cautioned us not to turn the earth into a wasteland.
- He described the church as all the people of God, even acknowledging that the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief.
- He called the hierarchy on its preciousness, elitism, and narcissism, reminding priests and bishops and all clerics that their job is to serve the people, not judge and condemn them.
- He went to confession to an ordinary priest and washed the feet of women as well as men.
- And he called for attacking the structural causes of inequality, saying that quote: “inequality is the root of all social ills.” Inequality. Hold that thought.

But then I began to listen more carefully, more closely, for what he was saying about women, and I grew concerned. I felt that he might need a little bit of nudging. So I sat down to write him a special “to do list on women.” It was published in the [Huffington Post](#) and quickly flew around the internet. People liked it, and it's what led to my invitation to talk here tonight. So, I want to begin with my 9 point—not sure why I didn't make it 10, it could easily have been 10 or more—To Do List on Women”:

Dear Pope Francis:

As this New Year unfolds, I've decided that, with all due respect, it is time for me to share with you my suggested “Papal To-Do List on Women.” I've been deeply moved by your passionate defense of the poor; your willingness to call unbridled capitalism what it is, a spirit-killing machine for those to whom its bounty fails to trickle down; your symbolically and not so symbolically throwing the money changers—in the form of remote, rich, recriminating hierarchs—out of the church temple. But I have been far less moved by what you have been saying about women. So, here are my recommendations:

1. **Please stop talking about the role of women in the church.** That conceptualization implicitly allocates the place of a subgroup of human beings to designated corners of the institution. We never talk about expanding the role of men in the church because they are expected to be players in the whole church. The subject is justice, and equality.
2. **Recognize women’s God-given moral authority.** You’ve argued that the confessional should be a place of mercy not a “torture chamber,” and talked about a woman who had a failed marriage, remarried, and had five children, but whose abortion “weighs heavily on her conscience and she sincerely regrets it.” The moral of your story was that the confessor’s job was to show her mercy. But what if she didn’t regret that abortion? What if she said it was the right thing for her to do? What if she knew in her bones she could not care for a sixth child? Would you apply to her those heartfelt words that you applied to homosexuals, those words heard round the world: “Who am I to judge?” Abortion can be a difficult decision, we agree, but God obviously trusted women to make that decision: Look where she put the embryo.
3. **Study feminist theology.** You have said several times now that “we need to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman.” Actually, what we need is for you and your brother prelates to stop demonizing leading Catholic feminist theologians and integrate their analyses into mainstream Catholic theology. I implore you to heed the words of brilliant Catholic feminist theologians like Fordham’s Sister Elizabeth Johnson—who has said that “Christ is the source of revelation, and we learn about Christ through scripture and tradition...feminism is a way of interpreting scripture and tradition from the viewpoint of women,” making this: “a new moment of revelation in the church.”

This one, Pope Francis, I’m afraid, will require that you let go of your image of feminists as potential “chauvinists in skirts” waging a “vindictive battle,” suffragists who “after the feminist campaign of the 20s,” after they quote: “got what they wanted,” essentially should have hung up their signs and gone home. Surely, you understand the urgency of the continued fight for women’s equality worldwide—against rape and battery, forced sex and forced pregnancy, unequal access to jobs, financial resources, food and basic human rights—all elements of a feminist agenda.

4. **Bless the use of contraception.** It’s time to stop insisting that there is anything intrinsically evil about responsible parenthood, human beings using their God-given brains to determine when and how many children to have—a belief that the vast majority of Catholics who use birth control apparently hold. Furthermore, to insist—as do the US bishops in their “religious freedom” crusade--that birth control is not health care, when every major health organization maintains that it is crucial to the health of mothers and babies—is downright medieval. If the church could quietly erase an 800-year-old belief in limbo from church doctrine, no longer marooning unbaptized babies out of God’s sight, then surely you can finally embrace the majority recommendation of the Papal birth control commission and approve the use of artificial contraception.
5. **Leave behind the Virgin Birth.** Good Catholic women have two choices: they can be virgins or mothers. Embodying both, the Virgin Mary is a sterling, unattainable emblem of womanhood. That idea—of a mother unsoiled by sex—is a terrible burden for Catholic women who can never measure up. But this myth survives, despite Biblical references to Jesus’ siblings (vehemently denied by church fathers who are loathe to admit that Mary ever had sex) and the widely held view that the virgin birth was incorporated into early Christianity to win over converts from the pagan/goddess religions, which already accepted divine progeny springing from all manner of human/spirit couplings.

6. **Appoint a woman to the College of Cardinals.** Ordaining women is crucial to the future of the church, and while you have insisted that the ban on women's ordination is a settled question, the church's defenses are thin as air:

- a papal commission found no evidence in Scripture to rule out women's ordination;
- the failure-to-resemble Jesus argument, which assumes Jesus saw male genitals as integral to priestly ministry, is absurd;
- Jesus didn't ordain anybody;
- Paul refers to "Junia the apostle" and "Phoebe the deacon"; and
- dramatic archaeological evidence exists of women's clerical roles in the early church.

If you believe that advocating for a woman cardinal smacks of "clericalism," as you have said, then what does an all-powerful, all-*male* college of cardinals smack of? If you are against clericalism, then dismantle it. If you are not, then end the church's indefensible gender apartheid and open the doors of sacramental and executive power to women.

7. **End compulsory celibacy.** Replenishing the vanishing ranks of priests is only one reason to let all priest marry. As Father Anthony Padavan, a Catholic priest banished from the priesthood for marrying, founder of Corpus for married priests, said, the other reason to end compulsory celibacy is because "It is based on the belief that women are inferior, and marriage is a second-rate way of being Christian." Enough said.

8. **Hold your brethren accountable.** There is no question but that the Catholic Church hierarchy represents the world's oldest and largest surviving boys club and that, if women are ever to be equal in this church, you must hold the men accountable. The most urgent area for accountability regards your brother bishops' complicity in decades of child sexual abuse. You were roundly applauded for suspending a German bishop for extravagant spending on his opulent residence, including installing a \$20,000 bathtub. What about castigating the bishops who were complicit in the rape and sodomizing of children instead of keeping them safe and secure in the arms of holy mother church? And, I must ask: Do you really think that the bishops would have had such an easy time turning away the mothers who came asking for justice for the brutal crimes against their offspring if women had been equal players in the church?

9. **No more meetings about women without women.** Until all of this can be achieved, vow to bring women into any meeting that involves discussion and decisions about women, children, families, sex, marriage, divorce, love, and life.

Finally, before I sign off, I have to add a note about my mom. She was named Frances, for her beloved grandfather Francisco. She would have loved you—in part because you two have the same name. My mother was a Catholic in revolt, too, but unlike me, she was a private, quiet revolutionary. As I got madder and madder about what I saw as the church's injustice to women, she saw beyond my anger to the deep hurt, advising me again and again: "Don't let them keep you away."

She meant you. Her relationship was with God, with Jesus, not with the hierarchy. But I'm afraid I've not been able to do that. I've long been church shopping, searching for another way to be spiritual, to love God, to recognize the divine in people—including and especially women—and in this ailing world. I long ago stopped sitting at Mass in Catholic churches, listening to priests' diatribes against abortion, terrified that the parishioners would soon turn into an angry mob and set the guilty among us on fire.

But in all honesty, as towering Catholic author and orator Sister Joan Chittister has said, it is very hard to change spiritual symbol systems late in life. They seep into the bones, run through the blood. "Despite everything," wrote author Sue Monk Kidd, of the difficulty of leaving behind the patriarchal church of her childhood, "the deep song that played inside Christianity played inside me." Turning one's back on all that leaves you bereft, and there are countless bereft Catholic and formerly Catholic women out there. Some have found new spiritual homes. Many have not. Yet, we are invisible to you and your brethren. You have left us alone, to roam in the desert.

So in the end, these changes I seek are for my mother and my mother's mother and her mother before her and all the women back through the ages who have been deeply wounded by this church. This isn't an incidental issue, it's fundamental, for what becomes of women in the church will determine what becomes of the church itself.

As for me right now, I plan to keep watching you. I get the sense you're willing to listen. You're accessible to ordinary Catholics, making impromptu phone calls to people who write to you—I like that.

So if you want to talk about any of this, Pope Francis, I'm here. Call me anytime. Unlike the nuns you tried to reach on New Year's Eve, I'm usually home.

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*End of letter*

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If you read the description of my talk tonight, you probably suspect I'm madder now than I was back in February. You're right.

As the year has progressed, we've seen that despite decades of agitation for change, the birth of VOTF in an anguished time, the disgrace of priest child sexual abuse worldwide, and the great promise of our new Pope, the Catholic Church today remains what Sister Joan Chittister recently called "a man's church," closed tightly against the exercise of women's agency. Feminism is abhorred, feminist theology dismissed, advocates for women's ordination excommunicated, and women damned for exerting moral authority in the most intimate matters in their lives.

Where does this leave today's women reformers, and the men who support them? Have we finally reached the end of our ropes? And if we have, what's next? *Should we stay, or should we go?*

Obviously, for tonight at least, I'm staying. And before I give you my thoughts on what might be next, **I want to talk about three developments since I wrote that letter that helped put me over the top--again.**

## **First, we saw the escalating assault on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.**

It's been two years since the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its "Doctrinal Assessment," which I wrote about for [The Nation](#). In that assessment, the CDF attacked LCWR for failing to provide "allegiance of mind and heart to the magisterium of the bishops." Specifically it attacked LCWR for:

- focusing on the "the exercise of charity" instead of lambasting lesbians, gays, and women who need birth control or an abortion;
- refusing to accept the ban on women's ordination;
- allowing "dialogue" on contentious subjects; and
- tampering with God "the father" while promulgating other "radical feminist" theological interpretations.

The CDF's solution? Turn oversight for an organization of nearly 60,000 women to 3 men.

Unfortunately, two months into his papacy, Pope Francis disabused us of any hope that he would change this ugly state of affairs. In May, head of the CDF Cardinal Gerhard Müller announced that Francis had affirmed the findings of the DA. Not only had Francis taken no action to end the assessment, he elevated Müller to cardinal.

A few months later, the same Cardinal Müller attacked LCWR in his opening remarks to the meeting of the superiors of the CDF and the presidency of LCWR sounding as if he were talking to a classroom of defiant 8<sup>th</sup> graders. He maligned LCWR for failing to get approval for this year's speaker, for failing to avail themselves of the assistance of the Holy See's delegate –Archbishop Peter Sartain--whose only goal was to help LCWR "avoid difficult and embarrassing situations wherein speakers use an LCWR forum to advance positions at odds with the teaching of the church."

His anger was in large measure over LCWR's bold choice of Sister Elizabeth Johnson for their Outstanding Leadership Award. That's the same Elizabeth Johnson who the US bishops had publicly sanctioned and castigated for "the gravity of the doctrinal errors in her writings." Not only did LCWR select Johnson for the award; they rubbed salt in the wound by publishing a glowing biography of her. They attested to the recognition by many of Johnson as today's leading US Catholic feminist theologian, as one of the architects of feminist theology. They applauded her keen intellect, excellence in teaching, and *dedication to challenging traditional ways of thinking.*"

It read like a special dispatch to Pope Francis, a bold reply to his deeply insulting insistence that what the Catholic Church needs is a quote "profound theology of the woman."

In response, Müller described LCWR's decision as an "open provocation against the Holy See and the doctrinal assessment. There is no other way to interpret this." And Müller is right.

LCWR is cautious, cagey you might even say, as are many of the Catholic sisters who do not in principle agree with church positions, but know better than to come out and say so directly. It's a survival technique, and it takes a lot of finesse. But this particular act of provocation brought the sisters to the edge of the cliff.

Müller followed up his diatribe with a promise: In the future, all LCWR speakers and presentations had to be approved; the mandate would be "fully in force." The takeover was on.

Many were irate, including me. I echoed everything Benedictine Sisters Joan Chittister and Mary Lou Kownacki recommended LCWR do in their *National Catholic Reporter* piece entitled “Cry Out Sisters, Cry Out!”

Actually, they didn’t cry out in their own voices—there’s that caution again, that caginess—but rather, they put fiery words in the mouth of the “Old Monk”—the Old Monk’s Journal is the name of Sister Mary Lou’s blog.

“Dearest sisters, writes the old monk: Be proud of the questions you have asked, the speakers you have invited to your assemblies, the statements you issued, the liturgies you celebrated. Go to the microphone and say: We believe in feminist theology and in women’s ordination; we believe in the rights of gay, lesbian and transgender people and we will continue to speak aloud on these issues. Respectfully, we will not comply with the order to submit names of speakers to our annual assembly to Vatican representatives for approval. If this means that the LCWR is no longer recognized by church authorities, so be it. Though we have given our lives to the church, we have not given our consciences to anyone but God.”

The annual LCWR assembly took place, and there was no radical action. There was no quote “shoot out at the ok corral.” That’s how “Nuns on the Bus” Sister Simone Campbell (in an article I did for *Ms.*), described to me what the sisters were *not* ready for in 2012. Clearly, sadly, they were not ready for that radical action in 2014 either.

On one level, I feel we should be encouraging the sisters to take radical action. But at the same time, I wonder: Are the sisters actually out-Chittistering Chittister?

When the subject of why stay to make change comes up, Chittister talks about the value of a “ministry of irritation.” Is this what the sisters are doing, by belligerently staying in the room? By doing that, can they force enlightenment? Can they intellectually wrestle the men in the room to the ground, make them see that the very survival of a Catholic Church rides on a rethinking of the meaning of church, of doctrines, of revelation itself? We’ll have to wait and see.

### **The second development that had a great impact on how I feel today concerns the Bishops’ Synod on the Family.**

With the announcement of the Synod, it felt to me that Pope Francis was making good on his commitment to open and frank discussion in the church. I hoped, as many others hoped, that this might prove to be a desperately needed path to change. But as time went on, as I looked at the questions, the process, the reports, my enthusiasm turned to ire.

It made me crazy to see nearly 200 theoretically celibate men charged with coming to terms with matters of sex, reproduction, birth control, marriage, divorce, and remarriage. And while the men did invite several married couples to speak, that is not the same as having *speaking, voting* women bishops in the room. Nor is it the same as having *speaking, voting* lay women and men in the room—gay, straight, married, single, mothers, fathers, husbands, wives.

As to how it actually went (and as I wrote in an [essay](#) published at the Women's Media Center):

- There was jubilation over early reports out of the Synod hailing the possibility of an end to the condemnation of homosexual activity and same sex unions, and to the banishment of the divorced and remarried from the sacraments. But we soon saw the first version of the preliminary document quickly “corrected” by the Vatican to dial back that language.
- In the final document, nearly twice the number of bishops supported the position that “there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.” As for the divorced and remarried, there was no agreement on even the possibility of giving them access to Penance and the Eucharist.
- Fully 169 bishops supported—while only five rejected—the teaching that “openness to life is an intrinsic requirement of married love,” which translates to continued opposition to anything other than natural family planning. The bishops defended their position based on current church teaching and on a demand that couples had to do their part to counter declining fertility rates, without any mention of the fact that in some countries, fertility rates aren’t declining at all.

That continued anti-birth control position represents a disturbing failure to respect the right of all women to manage their fertility; a failure to respect science, the indisputable fact that voluntary family planning prevents maternal deaths by helping women delay risky early pregnancies, space births, and reduce HIV transmission; and a failure to acknowledge the devastation that rising birth rates can cause in countries that even now cannot feed, clothe or house the populations they have.

- In that final report, the grounding for contemporary teaching on the family is traced to several troubling Scriptural passages. There are various references to *Genesis*, thereby keeping alive the image of Eve the temptress, who lured Adam into sin, brought the pain of childbirth upon herself, and led to our banishment from Eden. And, to illustrate how “marriage and the family have been redeemed by Christ,” we are pointed to *Ephesians*, where it says, of course, “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything...for the husband is the head of his wife.” With the body of feminist theology we now have, any one of a number of Catholic feminist theologians would have been only too happy to help the church fathers find less misogynistic grounding for contemporary teaching on the family.
- In that final Synod document, too, there were passing references to violence against women, which is good, but apparently there is no room in church teaching to counsel a beaten woman to leave an abusive husband. In addressing “those who have been subjected to the maltreatment of a husband or a wife,” the document reads: “to forgive such an injustice is not easy, but grace makes this journey possible ...pastoral activity then needs to be geared towards reconciliation or mediation of differences.”
- The word rape appears not once in this document, even though raping one’s wife remains a prerogative of husbands in many countries worldwide, where women have nothing to say about when or how they have sex. And this omission is doubly concerning coming from a church that forces childbirth on unwilling women by doing everything it can to support laws that block access to birth control and to safe, legal abortion.

- Finally, nothing in this Synod document on the family dealt with the cost of the hidden sexuality of Catholic priests or the families they begat. While the bishops freely called lay men and women to account for their unapproved sexual practices, they said not one word about the many priests and bishops who have violated their promise of celibacy and left a trail of wounded women and children in their wake.

Calling the church fathers to account on the costs of this situation fell to a UN panel on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Earlier this year, that panel interrogated representatives from the Holy See on the church's failure, as a signatory to this convention, to abide by its terms. In addition to holding the Holy See's feet to the fire for failing to acknowledge the extent of sexual crimes committed by clergy against children, for failing to protect children, and for failing to hold the perpetrators and enablers accountable, the UN Committee called on the Holy See to "assess the number of children born of Catholic priests, find out who they are, and take all the necessary measures to ensure the rights of these children to know and to be cared for by their fathers." The committee also argued for putting an end to the bargain many mothers seeking child support from their child's priest father are forced to strike with the church—that is, signing a confidentiality agreement in exchange for financial help.

All of which is to say that an end to compulsory celibacy is a family issue that should have been on the Synod agenda.

**The third development that concerns me is the apparent inability of Pope Francis and other church leaders to engage in serious, substantive, respectful conversation on the subject of women in the church.**

Perhaps the most disheartening illustration of this inability was when Pope Francis had his first interview with a woman journalist, Franca Giansoldatia, a Vatican correspondent for a Rome daily, back in June. She broached the subject of women in the church. Said the pope: "without an understanding of femininity, one cannot understand the church herself." Women "are the most beautiful thing God has made. The church is a woman."

Recognizing the problem with turning a human being into an institution and using that analogy to justify all kinds of beliefs and practices, the journalist asked if such language might be a bit misogynistic. Completely not getting it, and in a revealing non sequitur, Pope Francis reminded the journalist that women came from and I quote: "a rib." When the journalist didn't laugh along with the Pope, he added: "I'm joking. That was a joke."

The journalist followed with a question about whether the pontiff would appoint a woman to head a Vatican department. That inspired another revealing non sequitur. Said the pope: "Priests often end up under the sway of their housekeepers." What that means is anyone's guess, but he sounds as if he might think that women – because they serve as priest's housekeepers – already have plenty power in the church.

And recently, when Cardinal Müller was asked about the doctrinal assessment of LCWR, he blurted out: we are not misogynists. We don't want to gobble up a woman a day."

In a great piece highlighting all of these incidents, Jamie Manson wrote in *NCR*: "With both Francis and his doctrinal watchdog yukking it up about misogyny, it becomes harder to imagine any substantive treatment of issues related to women is on the horizon."



So here we are. This is a critical moment. Arguably, with inequality soaring, the world needs the Catholic Church to pursue its social justice mission more than ever. But the church is shrinking before our eyes. In New York City, it was just announced that 31 of 112 parishes will effectively close. Of an estimated 2.8 million Catholics in New York, 12% attend Sunday Mass. An estimated 10% of all Americans --30 million people --are former Catholics.

Women have been crucial to the development and strength of the church, and they are integral to its survival. So what can be done?

- I began this talk with a quote from Pope Francis: Calling for an attack on the structural causes of inequality, he said: “Inequality is the root of all social ills.” Let’s remind him.
- Let’s also remind him of something else. According to her new biography of Pope Francis, Elisabetta Pique says that every morning, the Pope asks St. Therese of Lisieux, doctor of the church, to enlighten him. Perhaps you want to enlighten the Pope that St. Terese of Lisieux is the patron saint of ...women’s ordination!
- I also suggest the development of an agenda on women and the church that demands an end to the church’s misogyny and discrimination on every level—in theology, Biblical interpretation, church teachings, ordination, ministry, church governance, everything. Ask people to sign on – parishioners, priests, your bishop—and make it as widely available as possible.
- Analyze the Synod report on the family for what it says and fails to say about women, and bring your analysis, your concerns, and your recommendations to your priests and your bishop in preparation for next year’s Synod.
- On the subject of dialogue: dialogue is good. But don’t let dialogue become an end in itself, an easy appeasement, a delaying, diversionary tactic. It has to lead to something, to recognition, respect, action, and change.
- Push to have your meetings where they should be: in Catholic churches. If Pope Francis can be open to what everyone thinks, in and out of the church, atheists and theists alike, then surely the Bridgeport diocese can open the church doors to the faithful, devoted, respectful, church loving people of VOTF.
- Consider dramatic action. I don’t know what that is, that’s for you to decide. But I remember sitting across from one of the early founders of VOTF in Boston years ago. Mother’s day was coming up. Some women in her chapter wanted women to stand on the church steps with their mouths taped shut, holding signs that said: “Women have no voice in this church.” I loved it. It was very 60s, but it would have conveyed a message that is clearly not getting through. If nothing else, it’s right in line with Joan Chittister’s ministry of irritation.
- Promote feminist theology. We have an incredible body of work by incredible women... Elizabeth Johnson, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sister Sandra Schneiders, Christine Gudorf, Mary Hunt, Ivone Gebarra, Margaret Farley, and on and on and on. Bring their voices into every room where there is a conversation about the place of women in the church. Their work, to my mind, holds the key to the future of this church.

- Some will say that the thinking of these feminist theologians is too radical, that incorporating their thinking into Catholic theology and teachings will mean too much change. But I don't agree. I think that religion writer Peter Steinfels said it best. In his book *A People Adrift*, he wrote:

“Over the long run, nothing in Catholic Christianity, like nothing in other forms of Christianity—or in Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and even Hinduism... will remain untouched by the passage from a patriarchal era to one of female equality.... No one should be confident about predicting which elements in the great religions will be radically revised, which will be reconfigured, which will remain relatively intact.”

I also agree with what Pope Francis said in his closing remarks at the Synod. He said: “God is not afraid of new things.”

- Finally, I would say, make the Catholic Church a church that Jesus would recognize, where women would never ever be left out in the cold.

I salute all of you for your voices, your courage, your commitment to changing the church.

At this crucial moment, with a new Pope who has opened the door to different ideas, I hope all of you will use your voices and everything at your disposal to demand change now, before it's too late, before the churches are empty of anyone who wants the church you want: One that is fully open to the other half of the human race, no longer a man's church or a woman's church, but a church for us all.

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