

"Women and the RC Church Misogyny, or Gynophobia? Take your Pick"

Jerry Krase (June 12, 2012)



A small collection of conservative Roman Catholic Bishops are making it difficult for nuns and other Catholic women to do the work they have been called to do. The disarray in the Vatican is another example of how things go wrong when women are left out of the picture, not to mention the hierarchy.



In "[Conservative bishops court the disdain of Catholic women](#) [2]" from his Top of the Ticket: Political Commentary perch at the LA Times, David Horsey wrote:

"America's conservative Catholic bishops are so worried that some woman in their employ will get access to birth control that they have filed 12 lawsuits against the federal government. What they are failing to see is a much bigger challenge that should have them truly worried: the independence of Catholic women." The case in point was the support by religious and non-unreligious Catholic women for President Obama's insistence that church-run institutions receiving federal funds provide coverage for contraceptives, and other useful things, in employee healthcare packages. The Church condemns birth control and equates some contraceptive methods with abortion.

Unlike Galileo, and equally enlightened nuns, my own encounters with the RC hierarchy have been limited but instructive. The RC churchmen I know are decent, sometimes even humble, folks who unfortunately tend to forget why they became priests as they float toward the top. My first encounter of this kind was with Silvano Tomasi who headed the Scalabrini Fathers who minister to migrants globally. Before being elevated to Archbishop, Nuncio, and the Vatican's Permanent Observer to the United Nations, Silvano did a great imitation of Father [Guido Sarducci](#) [3] who understood Vatican operations: "To be made a saint in-a the catholic church, you have to have-a four miracles. That's-a the rules, you know. It's-a always been that-a. Four miracles, and-a to prove it. Well, this-a Mother Seton-now they could only prove-a three miracles. But the Pope-he just waved the fourth one. He just waved it! And do you know why? It's-a because she was American. It's all-a politics. We got-a some Italian-a people, they got-a forty, fifty, sixty miracles to their name. They can't-a get in just cause they say there's already too many Italian saints, and this woman comes along with-a three lousy miracles. I understand that-a two of them was-a card tricks."

Recently the [Guardian](#) [4] reported on a less funny routine: "The Vatican has lashed out at criticism over its handling of its paedophilia crisis by saying the Catholic church was 'busy cleaning its own house' and that the problems with clerical sex abuse in other churches were as big, if not bigger. In a defiant and provocative statement, issued following a meeting of the UN human rights council in Geneva, the Holy See said the majority of Catholic clergy who committed such acts were not paedophiles but homosexuals attracted to sex with adolescent males. The statement, read out by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican's permanent observer to the UN, defended its record by claiming that 'available research' showed that only 1.5%-5% of Catholic clergy were involved in child sex abuse."

Another old friend, Anthony Bevilacqua, who worked for the benefit of underprivileged Brooklynites, rose even further in the old boy's network to become a Cardinal. The American Italian Coalition of Organizations Board celebrated his elevation to Bishop with a dinner. While sitting next to me he turned and asked if I had ever seen the "tongue of Saint Anthony," and then stuck it out at me. Less miraculously, David Zucchino reported in the [Los Angeles Times](#) [5]: "In a blistering 2005 grand jury report, Philadelphia prosecutors said Bevilacqua and other church officials covered up evidence of rampant child sexual abuse by clergy for decades. Bevilacqua died Jan. 31 at age 88, but his videotaped deposition could be played at the trial."

In the 1970s I heard many complaints by Italian American clergy of discrimination against them in the German-Irish dominated American Catholic hierarchy. Somewhat "liberal" Brooklyn Bishop Francis J. Mugavero's name was Irishly pronounced as "McGovero" and even my civil rights activist friend Monsignor Gino Baroni recounted that he was always "Geno" to the big boys. To get ahead you had to learn how to play the game and ethnic self-deprecation was a small part of the process. Nowadays ethnic and racial discrimination in the hierarchy has lessened but nothing seems to have



changed regarding women (as well as unauthorized sexual orientations).

Looking at the good done by the Church over the centuries, it seems that women, and especially nuns, have done much of it. So where does this holy bias come from? I think the answer lies somewhere in the strange logic of the "No women priests" rule that mimics the old "no women in the men's locker room" excuse for trying to block female sports commentators.

It is based on the strangest of logics. Roman Catholics believe that a woman, Mary, was the mother of God (aka Jesus) whom she bore without the help of a real man. Yet women, it is argued, are not suitable (either not good enough or too good) to be priests. So if there is a choice between misogyny (hatred of women) or gynophobia (fear of women) to describe the attitude I would lean toward the phobic. No need for a glass ceiling when there are no women in the building.

The latest, and allegedly final, version of the ban hinges on a letter written by a Polish cardinal Karol Josef Wojtyla who in 1978 became the 1st non-Italian pope in 400 years. John Paul II, nearing sainthood, was an advocate for human rights and opposed capital punishment. Although he supported the progressive reforms of Vatican II and improved relations with other religions, when it came to issues of sex and gender he was distinctly traditional.

After writing patronizingly about how really great women were in his [APOSTOLIC LETTER](#) [6] ORDINATIO SACERDOTALIS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON RESERVING PRIESTLY ORDINATION TO MEN ALONE, he concluded:

4. Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church's judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force.

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.

Invoking an abundance of divine assistance upon you, venerable brothers, and upon all the faithful, I impart my apostolic blessing. From the Vatican, on May 22, the Solemnity of Pentecost, in the year 1994, the sixteenth of my Pontificate.

It boils down to the alleged fact that Jesus did not "authorize" it.

We now have another non-Italian, German, pope who, as Joseph Ratzinger, also lived through the horrors of World War II and witnessed the RC Concordats in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. I can't imagine that Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote "Christianity is the Religion of the Logos," could reason that the structure of the Church is more important than its mission. How much of what the Church does today is also not authorized by Christ, and if something is not authorized by him does it mean it can't be done? It seems to me that the "no females" ideology is a variant of Robert Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy" in that the inevitability of hierarchy transforms the organization into one that sees the male-only status quo as sacred and immutable.



The current "[the Butler did it](#) [7]" scandal in Rome is a prefect example of what happens when a small group of men are hermetically sealed inside the walls of an opulent palace. It seems that someone on the inside leaked documents about dissent over such things as the all-male priest sex abuse cover-ups and (probably also all-male) [Vatican Bank](#) [8] shenanigans that occasionally leave people hanging from bridges. Jesus would have some job cleansing St. Peter's today.

We can thank God that at least the nuns are fighting back against sanctimonious male chauvinism. As reported by [Laurie Goodstein](#) [9]: "In a spirited retort to the Vatican, a group of Roman Catholic nuns is planning a bus trip across nine states this month, stopping at homeless shelters, food pantries, schools and health care facilities run by nuns to highlight their work with the nation's poor and disenfranchised. The bus tour is a response to a blistering critique of American nuns released in April by the Vatican's doctrinal office, which included the accusation that the nuns are outspoken on issues of social justice, but silent on other issues the church considers crucial: abortion and gay marriage." The Bishops' critique focused on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The bus tour is also protesting federal program cuts for the poor and working families passed by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. They were proposed by Wisconsin Republican Congressman Paul D. Ryan, who said his Catholic faith justified the cuts. Evidently adhering to a different version of Catholicism, Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of [Network](#) [10], said "We're doing this because these are life issues," "And by lifting up the work of Catholic sisters, we will demonstrate the very programs and services that will be decimated by the House budget."

FYI: The **Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)** is an association of the leaders of congregations of Catholic women religious in the United States. The conference has more than 1500 members, who represent more than 80 percent of the 57,000 women religious in the United States. Founded in 1956, the conference assists its members to collaboratively carry out their service of leadership to further the mission of the Gospel in today's world.

PS: As is obvious, at best I am a "Cafeteria Catholic" picking and choosing those things that make sense to me, and I assume Jesus as well. A lot of people who might read this are not Christian or Catholic, and many others are atheists and/or agnostics, but if there was a God, and if God had a son by the name of Jesus, my sense is, that if Jesus were around today, he probably would authorize this blog post and maybe even tweet it and like it.

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- [8] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/22/world/europe/22vatican.html>



[9] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/us/us-nuns-bus-tour-to-spotlight-social-issues.html>

[10] <http://www.networklobby.org/>