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Breaking the Stained-Glass Ceiling

Women in the Catholic Church often feel pushed aside and ignored by those with leadership roles like priests, deacons and those working in the Vatican. Over the years, women have acquired new roles in the church such as eucharistic ministers, catechists and lectors, but still have not been given equal opportunity to be more than a layperson or a nun (Coblentz). Women find it hard to resonate with and relate to men in higher positions and to men in the Bible, yet the church continues to deny women jobs and to negatively portray the women in the Bible. Women turn to the church for love and acceptance but are instead greeted with misogyny from the congregation, the clergy and the Vatican.

Over half of the Catholic Church is made up of women, yet they are not able to vote in council meetings like the Synod of Bishops. The Synod of Bishops is a group of ordained bishops that advise the pope and vote on matters that concern the church. That was the case until 2018 when two brothers joined the synod and were able to participate in voting (Kuruvilla). Some women questioned why sisters were not permitted in the synod; some might say it is because they are not ordained but neither are brothers (Kuruvilla). Brothers and nuns are almost the same except the only difference between them are their genders. The only way women have been able to attend the Synod of Bishops is if they attend as auditors and speakers (Kuruvilla). This is not to say canon law, the laws and guidelines enforced by the papacy and the Catholic Church, prohibits them from voting. In fact, canon law is not currently keeping women from attending and voting at the synod, the church is (Kuruvilla).

As well as being denied roles in the Synod of Bishops due to gender, women are also not able to be in the Secretariat for Communications or participate in the Vatican council meetings. Women cannot join the Secretariat for Communications because “it is made up of exclusively men, despite the fact that this is not mandatory” (Pongratz-Lippitt). Although women cannot vote in the Vatican council, they are still able to attend, but as explained by Carmel McEnroy, women feel like “guests in their own home” (Coblentz). Catholic women are as active in the Catholic Church as their male counterparts but are still treated as secondhand members of the congregation. They can have and speak their opinions about the church’s teachings and canon law, but their voices will not be able to be properly heard and will not be able to influence the church’s decisions unless they are able to vote in councils of the Catholic Church like the Synod of Bishops or the Vatican Council.

Some members of the Catholic Church are attempting to sway the Vatican into allowing women to become deacons and priests. After hearing about this, the Vatican “reaffirmed its refusal to permit the ordination of women as deacons” (Donnovan, “Vatican Reaffirms”). They did this because of the increasing amounts of female deacons and priests claiming to be ordained in the Catholic Church (Donnovan, “Vatican Excommunicates”). Even after the Vatican addressed the subject on the ordination of women, women continue to push for change and even get ordained by catholic bishops. After finding out about one instance of ordained women, the Vatican gave the women “twelve days to renounce their ordination and seek forgiveness of the Catholic Church” or they would be excommunicated (Donnovan, “Vatican Excommunicates”). The Vatican further announced that both the woman who is ordained a deacon or priest and the priest who is ordaining the woman would be excommunicated from the church (Coday).

The reactions to situations like these differ dramatically from complete approval to total opposition. Since “the church considers ordination as a deacon to be primarily a step on the way to priesthood”, most Catholics believe women should not be able to become deacons because they cannot become priests (Donnovan, “Vatican Reaffirms”). This was true until the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican stated that ordination as a deacon is no longer only a stepping stone to priesthood, but it is now a permanent role in the church (Donnovan, “Vatican Reaffirms”). This should give women the opportunity to take on larger roles in the church as deacons, but the Vatican will not budge on the subject even if it results in a multitude of excommunicated women from the Catholic Church.

In addition to some people believing the diaconate is a step towards priesthood, those who oppose the ordination of women in the Catholic Church would argue that there has never been a female deacon or priest because Jesus’ apostles were all men (Kuruvilla). While both of these points are true, there has been a documented deaconess in the Bible which was Phoebe (Batchelor). I do agree that women should not be able to become priests because St. Peter was the first pope and is an example of what the papacy and priesthood should look like. I agree that the papacy and priesthood are meant to mirror and resemble the apostles, but I do not believe deacons are meant to as well. Although there is no actual direct documentation of female priests, there is evidence of women holding ministerial roles like prophets, deacons and priests found in inscriptions, images on tombstones, frescoes and mosaics (Pogiolli).

A female minister named Tara Beth describes the moment she knew she was called to minister. She was in Mexico on a trip and the group leader says that someone in the group is being called to ministry and then she heard a voice in her head saying it was her. People have acted negatively towards her because she is a female minister, and she has been borderline harassed because of this. One day after she preached, a man approached her and handed her a piece of paper that listed reasons why women do not belong in ministry (McKnight). Instances like these are common occurrences for women in the church. Although Tara Beth is not catholic, this example demonstrates how misogyny can be found in all denominations of Christianity.

There have also been multiple women with leadership roles found in the Bible, such as Phoebe. Phoebe is an example of how women can become deacons and why it should be permitted. Huldah and Ana were both prophetesses which is a role women can pursue without being ordained (Batchelor). They were able to teach and give sermons as a deacon or priest would without being given the additional responsibilities a deacon or priest would have. Deborah was the judge of Israel and Priscilla was active in evangelism (Batchelor). This demonstrates how women have been able to take on other roles in the church as well. Leadership does not have to mean inclusion in the diaconate and priesthood, but it can simply mean inclusion in the church.

Currently, women only participate in the church as eucharistic ministers, catechists or lectors. This is not due to them being uninterested in pursuing other roles and being granted more responsibilities, rather the church only offers women the jobs men are not interested in pursuing. Women want to share their faith and offer a different perspective to the church than what has already been provided. Youth ministers do exactly that, except youth ministers are mostly men. The title does not require ordination, yet women still do not follow this career path. Gender does not formally keep women from becoming youth ministers, but gender plays a role in why they are not offered the job. This is because the hiring is done by those in higher positions, and those in higher positions are male.

Many might disagree on the grounds that Saint Paul believes the church should “let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness” (Batchelor). He also argued that women should not be able “to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet” (Batchelor). In first Timothy 2:11-20, Paul suggests that women should not contribute their own opinions and should not be allowed to teach what they have learned. He implies that men are academically superior and that a woman learns best when she contributes nothing to the conversation. This is merely an opinion of Paul; therefore he does not speak for the church as a whole (Batchelor). In Acts 18:26, women would teach and explain to other women and children the gospel (Batchelor). Currently, many women hold positions as catechists where they teach children and adults the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Women want to be included in the decisions of the church, whether it means being able to vote in councils, becoming deacons or priests, or even just taking on more responsibilities in their respective parishes. When Pope Francis was ordained as pope, he instilled faith in many catholic women because of his focus on the poor and marginalized (Poggioli). Women had hope that they would be given more opportunities, be treated equally to men and be treated less like a burden to the church. Whether women are in higher positions or they see other women in higher positions in the Catholic Church, women feel more validated (Pogiolli).

Women can also resonate more with other women than with men. Allowing women to take on more roles in the Catholic Church will give young girls and teenagers someone to look up to. Giving them a role model in the church could help them stay active in their faith and one day take on more roles in the church as well. I personally have many role models in the Catholic Church who I look up to like my confirmation sponsor, my church’s religious education teacher, my friend’s mother and my campus minister at Longwood. These women have all taught me what it means to be a catholic woman and how to make my voice heard as one. Each of them hold positions in their parishes and strive to teach and share with everyone around them the teachings of the Catholic Church. They do so much, but they still get little recognition for their contributions.

Allowing women to have the opportunity to hold higher positions in the Catholic Church is important to me because it means my friends, my family and I will have the chance to make a difference. Right now, my friends and I feel as though we do not have much say in the church, but by allowing us to, we would become more confident and active in our faith while providing new perspectives on the church and their teachings. The Catholic Church often dances around the inclusivity of women by claiming they are already given many opportunities, but even so, it should not stop women from fulfilling their vocation (Harris). A vocation is “what God calls women to do in the Church” (Harris). If a woman’s vocation is leadership in the Catholic Church, wouldn’t the voice of God be the ultimate permission for women to lead?

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