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**Pope Francis and His Critics on Gender Issues**

A friendly critic suggested that when Pope Francis discusses gender issues he sounds like an 80-year-old Latin American male. This quip reminds us that we should examine the pope’s positions on gender in various contexts, including the history of his Catholic heritage.

The Bible, which is normative for Christians, was written entirely by men in patriarchal cultures and often betrays a sexual bias. The book of Genesis, for instance, records the story of Abraham, the great patriarch, palming his wife Sarah off as his sister to King Abimelech in order to save himself but exposing Sarah to sexual exploitation (20: 1-17). In the Letter to the Ephesians, the sexist bias is more explicit: “Wives should be submissive to their husbands as if to the Lord because the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of his body the church, as well as its savior” (5:22-23).

It is important to note that Pope Francis is very aware of scriptural passages that subvert the general patriarchal thrust of the Bible. The book of Genesis, for example, suggests a fundamental equality between men and women since God created them in his own image and likeness, “male and female he created them” (1: 27-28). The Apostle Paul grounded gender equality in our fundamental relationship to Christ: “There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3: 28).

Mary of Magdala serves as a great example of rising above biblical cultural norms. Cured of a serious illness by Jesus, this Galilean woman accompanied him on his journey to Jerusalem and was present at his crucifixion, while the male disciples fled. According to John, the risen Christ first appeared to Mary and sent her to the disciples to report the good news, which has earned her the title “Apostle to the Apostles,” and made her a prominent figure in discussions of the role of women in the church.

The writings of the Church Fathers, both East and West, contain strong misogynistic statements: for example, Origen (d 254), the great representative of Eastern Orthodox theology, insisted that women not speak in public assemblies, even if they had valuable things to contribute, precisely because they are women, who are always a threat to lure men into sin. In the West, Augustine (d 430) wrote: “What is the difference whether it is in a wife or a mother, it is still Eve the temptress that we must beware of in any woman…. I fail to see what use women can be to men, if one excludes the function of having children.” There are exceptions to this sexist bias. St. Gregory Nazianzus (d 390), for instance, defended women’s rights by insisting that both men and women possess an equal dignity because both are made in the image and likeness of God.

During the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas (d 1274) accepted Aristotle’s notion that females are misbegotten males, lacking the fullness of humanity, meaning that women are essentially inferior to men and should therefore be subject to them. He used this same questionable analysis to explain why women could not be ordained priests. In the late middle ages, Martin Luther (d 1546), who made a happy marriage with Katie von Bora, repeated Augustine’s charge that women lead men into sin: It is you women “with your tricks and artifices that lead men into error.”

An important exception to medieval patriarchy is the talented, creative mystic Hildegard of Bingen (d 1179), who developed a sophisticated analysis of four types of male and female behavior and how they interact. Based on erroneous biology but insightful psychology, she distinguished male and female types, in part, according to the intensity of the sexual drive and the ability to form chaste friendships. Furthermore, she accepted the existence of distinctive sexual characteristic: for instance, men show courage and strength while women demonstrate mercy and grace. Anticipating an emphasis in modern psychology, she encouraged each sex to develop the other sex’s main characteristics: men showing more compassion and women more fortitude. What distinguishes Hildegard’s analysis, however, is her insistence that the distinctive characteristics are of equal value. As made in the image of God, men and women are inherently equal. Their sexual differences are not polarizing but are complementary. Hildegard of Bingen stands as a reminder that we Christians today are not trapped in the world of traditional patriarchy but are free to find new ways for men and women to relate on the basis of respect and equality.

In the twentieth century, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) proposed his own version of gender complementarity, which makes the ordination of women metaphysically impossible. For Balthasar, the gender differences between males and females, evident in human reproduction, are normative for all interactions between men and women. In sexual intercourse men are the active agent and women are, as Balthasar puts it “active recipients.” Although he often insists on the fundamental equality of the sexes, the Swiss theologian tends to give the primacy to the male role and to limit the role of females. Gender is an important category in all of his theology. The human family is feminine (actively receptive) in relation to the God active in history. The church is feminine, the bride, in relation to Christ, the bridegroom, who actively sustains the community of faith. In this regard, he proposed the so-called ”iconic argument” that only males could be priests since they represent the active male Christ in relation to the church. Women cannot be priests because they are by nature active recipients and cannot be conformed to Christ, the head of the body. Furthermore, Balthasar insisted that the church must be a bulwark against a feminism that denies all sexual differences. In response, feminist theologians insist that his iconic argument unfairly identifies women with their reproductive role and limits their participation in the public life of the church and society.

Between 1979 and 1984, Pope John Paul II gave a series of 129 lectures on human sexuality which were published as *The Joy of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (1997). The pope presents a positive understanding of sexuality which sees the human body as a sacrament of divine revelation. He challenges the cultural assumption that sex is an autonomous possession to be used for personal self-gratification. His theory of gender complementarity echoes themes found in von Balthasar, without any explicit attribution. Anatomical differences and reproductive sex make women fundamentally receptive of male activity. Marital intercourse, which involves total self-giving, serves as a metaphor for the divine human relationship in which God is the active agent and we humans are recipients of divine love. John Paul often stresses the fundamental equality of men and women, but in their interactions women are the receptive partner. The pope consistently praises women for their distinctive contributions as mothers, which tends to identify them with their domestic role while downplaying their participation in public life. He opposes forms of feminism that seek to make women “like men.”

John Paul II uses a form of the iconic argument to insist that women cannot be ordained priests. In presiding at the Eucharist, the priest takes the place of Christ and acts in his person. Sacraments require a natural resemblance between the sign and the one signified. Therefore, only males can properly preside at Mass because only they can adequately symbolize Christ, who is the active agent in sanctifying the feminine receptive church. In his 1994 Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio* *Sacerdotalis*, John Paul praised women and their contributions to church and society, but then explicitly declared: “the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women,” thus attempting to eliminate further debate.

The pope’s Apostolic Letter did not halt discussion of women’s ordination among all segments of the Catholic community and raised further questions about the binding character of his prohibition. In November of 1995, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), headed by Cardinal Ratzinger, issued a statement declaring that the teaching of John Paul does belong to the deposit of faith and requires definitive assent because it is “founded on the written word of God” and “has been set forth infallibly by the ordinary and universal magisterium.” This statement by the CDF, meant to silence dissent on this volatile topic, has not won total acceptance since some theologians continue to debate it and a majority of U.S. Catholics still favor women’s ordination.

In examining the historical context for discussing the gender questions, including women’s ordination, it is helpful to recall the response of the German Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, (1904 -1984) to a 1976 declaration of the CDF forbidding women’s ordination, which employed the same general line of argument as their 1994 declaration. Rahner, who was very sensitive to discrimination against women in the church and society, challenged the argument that the practice of Jesus and the Apostles, which did not include women in official leadership roles, is normative for all succeeding historical periods. He argued that the fundamental principle of male and female equality, implicit in the teaching of Jesus, did not immediately challenge the entrenched patriarchal structures of his society. The position of women in Jewish culture of the day made it virtually impossible for them to be among the Twelve, the official witnesses for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This in itself is an adequate explanation for the practice of Jesus and the Apostolic Church, which excluded women from official leadership positions both in Jewish and Greco-Roman communities. According to Rahner, this means that the exclusionary practice of the early church is not necessarily normative for later historical periods like our own. He thinks it is significant that The Fathers of the Church and the medieval theologians argued against women’s ordination on the basis of women’s inferiority and not on Gospel teaching. Rahner claims the same dynamics have been at work on the question of slavery. The fundamental Christian principle that all humans have equal dignity and worth did not immediately challenge the institution of slavery, but only achieved its societal application in the last few centuries with the abolition of slavery in the developed world. Rahner contends that with the modern progress on women’s rights, the burden of proof is now on the Vatican to explain why women should be excluded from the priesthood. Despite the more recent statements by the CDF, theologians, men and women, have continued to use Rahner type arguments in favor of women’s ordination in the Catholic Church.

This background helps us understand the position of Pope Francis, the first Jesuit Bishop of Rome. On a flight from Sweden to Rome in November 2016, Francis, responding to a journalist’s question, said: “On the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, the last word is clear,“ referring to the absolute prohibition stated by John Paul in his 1994 Apostolic Letter. Pressed whether this prohibition was forever, Francis replied, “It goes in that direction.”

He went on to speak positively about the role of women in the church, insisting that “women can do many other things better than men.” For him, the Marian or “feminine dimension” of the church is more important in the theology and spirituality of the church than the Petrine apostolic dimension led by the bishops. This last comment, which reflects the ecclesiology of von Balthasar, raises the question of the position of Francis on gender complementarity. He has expressed his opposition to the gender theory taught in schools that denies or downplays sexual differences. In that regard, he has said: “I am in support of women, yes! But feminism, no.” Furthermore, “We must not fall into the trap of feminism, because this would reduce the importance of women.” More positively, the pope insists: “The way of viewing a problem, of seeing things, is different in a woman compared to a man. They must be complimentary, and in consultation, it is important that there are women.” Again reflecting von Balthasar, Francis says: ”The consecrated woman is an icon of the Church, an icon of Mary,” while the priest is an icon of the apostles, who were sent to preach. Women can preach in many settings, according to Francis, but not at the Eucharistic liturgy where the priest presides in the person of Christ. Using the nuptial imagery favored by Pope John Paul, Francis speaks of the church as the Bride of Christ, married to the Lord, her bridegroom, adding that women, with their “feminine genius” symbolize this relationship, while men do not.

The fundamental problem, identified by many critics, with the gender complementarity espoused by von Balthasar, John Paul and Francis is that it tends to identify women with their reproductive role and domestic responsibilities while limiting their public role in the church and society. It rules out women’s ordination and limits their power in the church. While praising the “feminine genius,” it makes women essentially dependent, recipients of male activity.

Feminist scholars have collected quotes from Francis that suggest his tendency to identify women with childbearing and his insensitivity to real concerns of contemporary women. Noting the need for more women theologians, Francis describes them as “the strawberries on the cake, but there is a need for more.” Addressing a group of vowed religious: “The consecrated woman must be a mother and not an old maid.” While advocating for a greater role for women in the church, he added: “I am wary of a solution that can be reduced to a kind of female machismo.” Addressing the European Parliament, he compared a culturally weary Europe to a grandmother who is “no longer fertile or vibrant.” Feminist theologians point out that Francis, along with many other men generally sympathetic to the cause of women, does not really understand how his language offends women and limits their public role by identifying them with childbearing.

In addition to these critics who are disappointed in Pope Francis for not moving forward on women’s ordination and for accepting a flawed version of gender complementarity, members of the LGBT community have criticized the pope for not explicitly repudiating the teaching of Pope Benedict, found also in the Catechism, that same-sex inclinations are “objectively disordered.” They also claim Francis has not been strong enough in his defense of gay persons, especially in his exhortation *Joy of Love,* which they see as weaker than the Synod report that it reflects.

Pope Francis, who remains very popular among U.S. Catholics, has important defenders on gender issues. Some women theologians have said the pope is so good on so many other issues that they are willing to give him a pass on this one. Other Catholic scholars have argued that his position on gender complementarity is less rigid than his papal predecessors. Francis has a strong sense of the Holy Spirit, who is the source of unity, harmony and fundamental equality in human relationships. He understands that male-female relationships are influenced by diverse societal norms and cultural patterns, which are a mix of grace and patriarchal sexism. His pastoral practice of walking with those struggling to live the Christian life makes him attentive to the cause of women who seek a greater role in church and society. It seems the position of Francis on gender complementarity is at least open to developments that would be more congenial to the concerns of his critics.

It is interesting that some secular commentators have come to the defense of Francis. Their point is that his ecclesial critics are so focused on the ordination issue that they fail to appreciate the great things he has done for women worldwide. His recognition that we are facing a unified ecological crisis that threatens the earth and the poor is crucial for the well-being of women who are among the least prepared to defend themselves and their children from this threat. The pope’s personal integrity and authenticity implicitly challenges misogyny and sexism. Finally, some of the secular commentators have praised Francis for halting the questionable investigation of U. S. women religious, which has opened the door to greater roles for women in the church.

Just as critics of Francis have assembled a series of unfavorable quotes on women, so it is possible to find more favorable statements. “We need more women theologians.” “We need to create still broader opportunities for a more inclusive feminine presence in the Church.” “Why is it taken for granted that women must earn less than men? No! They have the same rights. The discrepancy is a pure scandal.” There is “a radical equality between spouses.” “The role of women in the church must not be limited to being mothers, workers, a limited role….No! It is something more.” “Women, in the Church, are more important than bishops and priests: how, this is something we have to try to explain better, because I believe that we lack a theological explanation of this.” All of these quotes would need the context to grasp their full impact, but just standing alone they suggest that Francis wants to champion the rights of women and to expand their role in society and church, even if critics detect his limited perspective on the problem in these statements.

In August of 2016, Pope Francis appointed six men and six women to study the issue of women deacons and their ministry, especially in the early Church. Back in 2002, the International Theological Commission issued a report which recognized the existence of female deacons in the early church but indicated their role could not be simply equated with male deacons. The U.S. theologian, Phyllis Zagano, one of the twelve appointed by Francis, has argued for a more positive reading of history that suggests the possibility of ordaining women deacons today. According to Zagano, women were ordained deacons in the Church from the earliest days into the Middle Ages, and the ordination ritual was the same as for men. In Romans, Paul refers to Phoebe as a deacon (16: 1). The Council of Chalceden (451), echoing Nicea (325), speaks of bishops “laying hands on her,” a reference to ordaining women deacons. The Eastern Church has a long history of women deacons and has recently considered reinstating the practice. The German bishops have asked Vatican permission to ordain women deacons several times since 1975. Finally, Zagano points out that most Catholics are open to women deacons, who would enrich the ministry of the Church. By appointing a study commission, Francis has opened up the possibility of a significant advance in the role of women in the Church, trusting that the process will be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Although some critics have faulted Francis for his limited support of the LGBT community, others have praised him for his explicit comments defending gay persons. He has clearly stated that homosexuals “should not be discriminated against” and deserve respect and pastoral care. He has also said: “I think that the Church not only should apologize to a gay person whom it offended” but also “must ask for forgiveness, not just say sorry.” For the pope, “people should not be defined by their sexual tendencies; let us not forget that God loves all his creatures.” Commenting on his now famous question “Who am I to judge?” Francis said he was paraphrasing the Catechism, which insists that homosexual persons “should be treated with dignity and not be marginalized.” His positive public interactions with LGBT persons, for example, embracing a gay couple during his visit to Washington, reinforce his consistent support of persons with diverse sexual orientations.

Pope Francis is indeed an older Latin American male who sometimes speaks in a way that betrays the patriarchal bias of his culture. He is also a loyal son of the church who is faithful to previous teachings. At the same time, he is a compassionate pastor who tries to walk with persons who are hurting and feel alienated from the Church. He also recognizes that the Church must always be reforming itself and that there is a proper development of church teaching and practice. It will be interesting to see how the church develops on gender issues under the leadership of Pope Francis. There are clues. He has given no realistic hope to his critics who are passionate about ordaining women to the priesthood. He has initiated a process which could lead to the ordination of women deacons and has taken concrete steps to expand the role of women in the church. His theory of gender complementarity is at least open to development and does not necessarily curtail the participation of women in public affairs. In general, the LGBT community enjoys the support of Francis and can hope that he will soften the harsh language found in the catechism. As to further developments, we do well to stay open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, as Pope Francis reminds us.