

Overcoming Visible and Not So Visible Barriers to Women's Leadership in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States

Colleen McNicholas, Dean, School of Education, Dominican University

Abstract

In the 21st century, Catholic women and the Roman Catholic Church are finding themselves meeting at a crossroad that is fraught with ambiguity. It is a challenging crossroad full of both potential and frustration. The women gathering at this crossroad are questioning the Church structures into which they were baptized. These questions focus on the fundamental issues of leadership, ordination, decision-making, gender and language. Women view these issues as visible, and not so visible, barriers to their full participation as leaders in the life of their Church. Currently, Catholic women are speaking out, talking back and answering questions that they have not yet been asked because they believe that their voices are missing from the discourse on these and other significant issues which affect them.

This paper will discuss two of the major barriers, both visible and invisible, which are preventing Catholic women from assuming leadership roles within today's Catholic Church. The final section of the paper will focus on new models of ecclesial leadership currently being implemented through the efforts of Catholic women. A quiet revolution is underway within the Church. The revolution is flourishing despite current barriers.

Introduction

As they move through the first decade of the 21st century, numerous Catholic women in the United States are questioning the Church structures into which they were baptized. Their questions focus on the fundamental issues of leadership, ordination, decision-making and gender relationships. These women perceive such issues as a piece of the visible and invisible barriers to their full participation in the life of the Catholic Church. This paper will discuss one major invisible barrier and one visible barrier preventing Catholic women from assuming significant leadership roles within the Church. These two barriers are the traditional anthropological view of women and the understanding of power and authority which flows from that anthropology. In addition, I will cite examples of women who, collaborating with other women and men, are chipping away at these two barriers. In this paper, leadership is defined as the ability to articulate a vision and create an environment in which others may identify themselves with the vision in order to achieve common goals.

Barriers to Women's Leadership in the Church:

Traditional Anthropological Understandings

Forum on Public Policy

The conflict that surrounds women's status in the Church is based on the invisible barrier of an obsolete anthropology that regards women as deficient beings lacking the fullness of human nature. Classical Greek philosophy divided all reality into spirit, the realm of light, and matter, the realm of darkness.¹ Spirit was prized over matter. Greek thought identified men with spirit, women with matter. Thus, for over a thousand years, society advocated the idea that men were to be leaders in the public domain, while women were to nurture and care for children.

This traditional anthropological vision influenced Church theology as far back as Augustine, who while agreeing that women were equal to men in their soul, denied women were created in the image of God.² Thomas Aquinas defined women as "defective male".³ This denial of women's dignity and full equality with men remained a part of the Church tradition from the 4th century until the Second Vatican Council.⁴ A major Council statement calling for a recognition of the equality of all persons appeared in the Council document entitled *Pastoral Constitution in the Modern World*. The document states "Since all persons possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin..... the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition".⁵ Following the Council, many women were hopeful that their status and role within the church would change. However, almost immediately after the close of the Council, Catholic women began to experience the ambivalence of Church officials in regard to changes promoted during the Council.⁶

¹ Elizabeth Johnson, *The Church Women Want* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2002), 49.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴ Kaye Ashe, *The Feminization of the Church?* (Kansas City, MO.: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 94.

⁵ "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World #29," Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966), 227.

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, *With Oil In Their Lamps* (Mahwah, NJ.: Paulist Press, 2000), 55.

Though Church documents continue to declare explicitly that women and men are created equal in God's image, the interpretation of "equality" remains limited.⁷ Catholic women espouse an egalitarian view of partnership in which both women and men participate in the life of the Church through sharing their personal gifts. Church officials hold to a view of complementarity in which women and men, though equal in dignity, have pre-given roles based on gender differences and identity.⁸ Though the viewpoint of complementarity is an advance from previous thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, it continues the principle of separate but equal and presents an invisible barrier to changes in Church policy regarding the status of women and their right to significant ecclesial leadership roles.

Power and Authority

A very visible barrier to Catholic women assuming leadership roles within the Church flows from this anthropological viewpoint. This visible barrier is the hierarchy's vested interest in power and authority. In her book, *The Feminization of the Church?*, Ashe writes, "Leadership is intimately bound up with issues of power and authority, and gender plays a central role in the web that connects all three."⁹

Definitions of power frequently include the ability to influence others or to produce effects on them not always of their own choosing, effects such as domination or exclusion.¹⁰ However, a definition of power more appropriate to our topic of women's leadership is power as the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter.¹¹ Thus, power involves relationship.¹²

⁷ Johnson, *Church*, 53.

⁸ Ashe, *Feminization*, 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Balantine Books, 1988), 18.

¹² Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications, 1994), 39.

We have few contemporary models in the Church or society for the proper understanding and use of power and authority.¹³ Over decades, masculine rule has become so firmly embedded in the thought process of the Church, in our language, symbols and rituals that it has become accepted as social reality. Scripture, however, provides a different example of power and authority. Jesus, in his person and his teaching, reversed the classical understanding of women, power and authority. He preached leadership as service and power as the establishment of right relationships. This association of power and authority with service brings to the forefront the gifts of women. Courageous leaps of imagination are needed to develop new understandings of both women and power in order to overcome a system of masculine rule that has been in place for so long.¹⁴

Leadership

Catholic women have already begun this task by working collaboratively to develop and implement models of leadership which allow them to articulate the Gospel vision through mutuality and inclusion rather than power and control. They have strong role models in the women religious who preceded them. For decades, the life and culture of the Catholic Church in the United States was shaped by these women religious. Historically, they led the establishment of a system of Catholic schools and hospitals, across the nation, which continue to serve the needs of Americans today. Between 1829 and 1995, women religious founded approximately 845 hospitals, over 300 colleges as well as parish elementary schools and large secondary schools.¹⁵ Through these institutions, they passed their own vision of women, Church, social justice and spirituality on to successive generations, creating a corps of women with excellent

¹³Ashe, *Feminization*, 111.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹⁵Schneiders, *With Oil*, 72.

personal and professional preparation who desire to share their leadership gifts within the Church.

Women religious of the past encountered the same barriers to leadership as women are experiencing today. They had difficulties with local bishops who may not have shared their vision and sought to limit their ability to make appropriate decisions. Women religious met these barriers with strength, dignity and perseverance. Their legacy continues today within the Leadership Council of Women Religious which brings together the leaders of 95% of American women religious. This Council provides a forum for mutual sharing, a collaborative focus on justice and leverage with ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁶

Currently, both lay and women religious are working together to chip away at the anthropological and power barriers by creating new models of ecclesial leadership for Catholic women, models which allow them to assume significant leadership roles within parishes, dioceses and seminaries.

Leadership in Parishes

Women have been successful in assuming leadership roles through their participation in the decision-making structure of the parish as members of a parish leadership team. They minister as finance officers, directors of social and educational programs, Parish Council members. As these women bring their own gifts, experience and perspectives to parish pastoral ministry, they are changing the pastor-staff dynamic, not only because of their own background but also because they outnumber the priests on the pastoral team.

In November 2005, the National Pastoral Life Center published a study entitled *Lay Parish Ministers*. This study emphasizes the growth of women in parish leadership roles over the last two decades of the 20th century. The data showed that, of the approximately 30,000 lay

¹⁶Ibid., 76.

Forum on Public Policy

parish ministers, 74% were employed full-time and the majority of this 74% were women who participated in the decision-making structures of the parish as pastoral associates on the parish team.¹⁷

With the encouragement of some local bishops, a new model for women's leadership within a parish has developed quietly in some areas of the United States. In this model, a woman serves as the sole pastoral and administrative leader of a parish. She has the same responsibility as a parish pastor, being accountable for the pastoral service to the parishioners, as well as the administration of the parish. Parishioners in upstate New York, in rural Iowa, Minnesota and Alabama, as well as a limited number of parishes in large cities, have welcomed women as their parish administrators. In addition to handling parish finances, making sure that the parish plant is in good repair and caring for the other numerous administrative tasks, these women minister in significant ways to the people of the parish. They bring the values of community and collaboration as they work with parish members to enhance the spiritual life of the parish. They develop Word services for week-day parish prayer and preach the sermon during such services. Though they are the primary Church ministers to the parish, an ordained priest drives in on Sundays to preside at the liturgy and preach. Despite the fact that these women religious are unable to preside at the liturgy, it is clear that parishioners recognize the "priestly presence" of these women who minister to them. They respect the compassion, listening skills, theological education, personal spirituality and ability to lead public prayer which they experience on a regular basis within the parish. The parishioners do not need official approval to consider these women religious as their parish leader.

Leadership in the Archdiocese or Diocese

¹⁷Karen Sue Smith, "The Francis Next Door, *America*, February 27, 2006, 9-10.

In addition to parish leadership, women have made limited strides in leadership at the diocesan level. Women serve as diocesan directors of education or superintendents of schools. In a few archdioceses or dioceses in Minnesota, Arizona, California, Indiana, Iowa and Illinois, both women religious and lay women minister as directors of social justice programs, members of the marriage tribunal, serve as canon lawyers or diocesan chancellors. In addition, women theologians teach in several seminaries preparing diocesan seminarians for ordination. It is hoped that, through their relationships with women faculty, the seminarians will enter their ordained priesthood as men who view women as their complete equals with shared responsibility in leadership.

Leadership through Organizing

Catholic women are not only providing leadership in parishes and dioceses, they are also collaborating in large organizations to address the gender and power issues which prevent their full participation as Church leaders. In this section of the paper, I will touch on three of those issues and identify a Church organization working to address each respective issue. The three issues are:

- Language
- Preaching
- Ordination

Language

Language has power; it actually may constitute reality and create identity.¹⁸ One's presence actually occurs through the medium of language.¹⁹ Both the introduction of the vernacular in the liturgy and the English translations of Scripture showed women what had not

¹⁸Robert J. Starratt, *The Drama of Leadership* (London: The Falmer Press, 1994), 77.

¹⁹Robert J. Starratt, *Ethical Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 86.

been obvious when the readings were in Latin, namely that women were either ignored or stereotyped.

Armed with this knowledge, Chicago Catholic Women, an organization founded in 1974, focused on the issue of “linguistic invisibility” and began chipping away at the use of only male language within public prayer and liturgical celebrations.²⁰ They worked to construct a new language for prayer which includes both women and men. As the organization grew in size and visibility, women also grew in influence within their parishes. They altered the words in the Scripture to include inclusive language when they were readers during the liturgy. They lobbied their husbands, brothers, sons, even their parish priests, to participate in the language struggle. During the decades of the 1970’s and 1980’s, more than one priest celebrating liturgy in the parish was surprised as he listened to the reading of the Epistle, to hear the words “brothers and sisters” or “he and she” or “humankind” instead of the usual masculine nouns and pronouns.

The language issue continued to struggle for acceptance for some time. However, as use of inclusive language became more common, most parish priests and parishioners accepted the changes.²¹ Today, liturgical readers, both women and men use inclusive language; some priest celebrants have adapted their prayers to include everyone. Vatican officials no longer place sanctions on such pastoral use of inclusive language, but they continue to accept only male nouns and pronouns in the publication of new texts or documents.²²

Preaching

Though women achieved success in the transformation of language during liturgical celebrations, there is only limited success in recognizing women’s call to preach during liturgy. The authority of one’s speech does not come from ecclesial position but from the authenticity of

²⁰Donna Quinn, interview by author, Chicago, June 3, 2006.

²¹Ashe, *Feminization*, 63.

²²Schneiders, *With Oil*, 58.

Forum on Public Policy

the one speaking, the truth of the words spoken and the relationship of trust between the listener and speaker.²³ Currently, Church officials maintain that only the ordained may preach since preaching the Scripture is a ministry within the sacrament of Holy Orders.²⁴

The New Testament handed down a different picture regarding women as preachers. Jesus did not consider men to be the only ones with that gift. In John 4:1-30, he entrusted the revelation of his identity to a Samaritan woman, not a Samaritan man.²⁵ She brought his teaching to her people. In addition, in John 20:11-18, Mary Magdalene was commissioned by Jesus to preach the message of his resurrection to the apostles.²⁶

Many contemporary women are both theologically prepared and desire to participate in the preaching ministry. The changes which resulted from the Second Vatican Council brought the question of women as preachers to the forefront. The Current Code of Canon Law indicates that women may preach under certain circumstances.²⁷ However, there are still very limited opportunities for women to share their gift. Currently, they preach at wake services, in parish churches for a particular cause such as the education of children; they preach during parish missions and spiritual retreats. Women religious may preach the homily during liturgical celebrations on some occasions.

Women view their inability to participate fully in the preaching ministry of the Church as another example of the barrier of power. However, under the leadership of a small group of women religious, the Magdala Project was initiated to chip away at this barrier. The purpose of the Magdala Project is to provide resources to further women's opportunity for liturgical

²³Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Speaking with Authority* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 65.

²⁴Congregation for the Clergy, "The Priest: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community," *Origins* 29/13, September 9, 1999, 202.

²⁵*The New American Bible*, John 4:1-30 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1970).

²⁶*Ibid.*, John 20:11-18.

²⁷Ashe, *Feminization*, 85-86.

preaching. The Project offers a multiyear program to prepare interested women with the education and skills for liturgical preaching. The leaders of the Project encourage priests to welcome women as preachers within their parish liturgies. They are beginning to have success in this endeavor. In addition, the Project leaders are expanding their efforts to discover other Church occasions where women would have the opportunity to share their preaching gifts. Members of the Magdala Project believe that, through appropriate preparation, perseverance and continuing contact with parish priests they will be able to bring the preaching gifts of Catholic women into the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy.

Ordination to the Priesthood

The barriers of traditional anthropology, power and authority are particularly strong in regard to the issue of women's ordination to the priesthood. The documents of the Second Vatican Council opened a new vision of Church and the place of women within Church leadership. Following the Council, some American bishops stated publicly that they were open to a discussion of women's ordination.²⁸ However, resistance from the Vatican grew until Vatican officials, in 1976, decreed that the subject was closed. In 1995, Pope John Paul II reiterated the position that the Church may not ordain women in his apostolic letter "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis."²⁹ Two reasons are cited stating that women should not be ordained:

- Women do not resemble Jesus in their physical appearance; therefore, they cannot stand in his place at the Eucharist.
- Jesus did not call women to be apostles or invite women to participate in the Last Supper when he instituted the Eucharist.³⁰

Both Catholic women and men reject these reasons. Looking with fresh eyes at Scripture, they realize the breadth to which authority and active service to the Christian

²⁸Schneiders, *With Oil*, 55.

²⁹Ibid, 134.

³⁰Johnson, *Church*, 55.

community were shared by women and men in the early Church.³¹ In both the Acts of the Apostles and throughout his first epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul describes the priestly roles which women exercised.³² They founded local church communities, preached to the people, healed and assumed responsibilities in public worship. Women were even commissioned as deaconesses.³³ Though men were more prominent in leadership roles, the early Christian communities welcomed women as their leaders to the extent culturally possible.

This fresh understanding of Scripture, the belief that Eucharist is at the center of the faith life of a Catholic, the expression of Church leadership found in the Council documents, the decrease in the number of seminarians, as well as the social currents of the women's movement in the United States has intensified the dialogue among Catholics regarding women's ecclesial leadership as well as their ordination as permanent deacons or as priests. Encouraged by this dialogue and by their commitment to the issues of women's leadership and ordination, several groups of women are working creatively through institutional networks to change what they consider to be an injustice. Through research, theological reflection and discussion, these groups present evidence that the development of priesthood is not a static reality established by Jesus in the 1st century.³⁴ Rather, they contend that the concept of priesthood and its role within the Church has evolved over time. This paper will offer a short discussion of one group whose mission emphasizes the issue of ordination.

Women Priests is an organization of Catholic theologians who believe that the discussion on women priests should be left open. They accept the authority of the Pope and respect his personal integrity as a spiritual leader. However, they are convinced that Vatican officials, the

³¹Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, In *Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 351.

³²Ashe, *Feminization*, 92.

³³Schneiders, *With Oil*, 55.

³⁴Ashe, *Feminization*, 91.

Forum on Public Policy

Pope included, have made a serious mistake by dismissing the issue of women as priests. They believe that it is always crucial to determine the true mind of Jesus and the genuine meaning of Church tradition through a careful interpretation of the sources.³⁵ They seek to provide evidence contradicting the writings of the Vatican officials in order to bring about a transformation within the priesthood. They have researched thousands of documents which allude to women's role within the Church. These documents are decrees of Church Councils and Synods of Bishops, statements by the early Fathers of the Church and medieval theologians as well as contemporary articles on Scripture. They provide these readings in several languages for discussion among Catholics around the world. In addition, they network with Catholic women who are political leaders asking these women to speak with the members of their hierarchy to keep the discussion open.

Women Priests challenges all Catholics to speak out on the women's ordination issue with prudence and responsibility. They have published a statement disassociating the organization from the recent illegal ordinations of Catholic women that have occurred in both Europe and the United States.³⁶ They emphasize that carefully crafted statements of criticism are necessary rather than actions that will cause a Vatican reaction. Women Priests has extensive outreach on an international scene through their contacts with prominent theologians and Scripture scholars, their extensive use of media, their development of virtual and actual "circles" of women and men who promote their mission and further the discussion of women's ordination to the priesthood. These women realize that, at this time, they have to be satisfied with incremental success but that they must keep pushing against the barriers.

³⁵Women Priests, "The ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church," <http://www.womenpriests.org> (accessed June 7, 2006).

³⁶Ibid.

Forum on Public Policy

I believe that, of the several women's groups working to overcome the barriers to women's ordination to the diaconate and priesthood, the intellectual inclusive approach of the Women Priests group will keep the dialogue alive and, in the future, be successful in achieving their goal of a true equality of women and men. History has shown that when change or revolution at the level of thought and analysis becomes profound, change at the level of structure and institution is inevitable.

Conclusion

As this paper indicates, Catholic women are currently seeking a new place in the Church, a place of full equality where they may share their personal and professional gifts equally with men. In order to accomplish this, they are being proactive in seeking opportunities to exercise ecclesial leadership and overcome the traditional anthropological view of women and the Church's understanding of power and authority. They are bringing their own particular leadership style that values cooperation, inclusion, respect for differences and collaborative decision-making. However, these women realize that their success in bringing inclusive language into parish prayer, their increasing participation in parish and diocesan decisions are essentially cosmetic gains in their struggle for full participation as ecclesial leaders. They also realize that substantive leadership within the Church comes with ordination to the priesthood, which includes the ability to preside at Eucharist and use their preaching gifts within the Eucharistic celebration.

Eucharist is central to the faith life of Catholics. It nourishes individuals and local communities and unites them to the universal church. As fewer and fewer men respond to the call to ordination, the celebration of the Eucharist will become less frequent. Even today, in

Forum on Public Policy

small towns or rural areas, multiple parishes are being served by one priest.³⁷ Catholics in such parishes are able to participate in the Eucharistic liturgy perhaps once or twice a month. Eventually, as the number of priests continues to decline, Eucharist may become unavailable to the majority of Church communities. It will be at that point in the life of the Church that need, not theology, will bring women into full participation in Church leadership as ordained members.

References

- Abbott, Walter, ed. *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York: America Press, 1966.
- Ashe, Kaye. *The Feminization of the Church?*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1997.
- Congregation for the Clergy. "The Priest: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community." *Origins* 29/13, September 9, 1999, 202.
- Fiorenza, Elizabeth S. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *Writing A Woman's Life*. New York: Balantine Books, 1988.
- Hilkert, Mary Catherine. *Speaking With Authority*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. *The Church Women Want*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2002.
- Schneiders, Sandra. *With Oil In Their Lamps*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000.
- Smith, Karen Sue. "The Francis Next Door." *America*, February 27, 2006, 9-10.
- Starratt, Robert J. *Ethical Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.
- Starratt, Robert J. *The Drama of Leadership*. London: The Falmer Press, 1994.
- The New American Bible*, John 4:1-30, 20:11-18. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1970.
- Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publications, 1994.
- Wilkes, Paul. "A Prediction Fulfilled." *America*, February 27, 2006, 12-13.
- Women Priests, "The ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church." <http://www.womenpriests.org>. (accessed June 7, 2006).

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.

³⁷Paul Wilkes, "A Prediction Fulfilled," *America*, February 27, 2006, 12-13.