

## **Gender Equality in the Catholic Church: Time for Action?**

### **Introduction:**

Taking action contains an implicit critique of words. Yes, there is a certain distrust of words in my argument. Yes, I say: "Women, let's be wary of words!" Why?

### **1/An Observation: The Appropriation of the Discourse on "Women's Place"**

For some time now, we have witnessed the appropriation of the discourse on women by the clergy (or legitimist laity—I'm not referring to Rome). The goal is to seize control of the discourse itself, in order to control, and therefore neutralize, it. The hope is to remove any potential threat to its implementation. The underlying idea is that if you control the discourse, you also control the actions that would follow from it.

A phrase I have often heard seems to me to perfectly illustrate the undermining work that institutional discourse can do. It goes like this: "It will take time! Let's be patient!" And then they cite historical examples showing that the Church took several generations to adapt to a specific issue. The ultimate trick is to have the women themselves make the remark... They often don't see the trap, since they simply echo the remark.

But this phrase signals the demobilization of any activism. They acquiesce and postpone it indefinitely... The mere words have been enough.

Faced with such a risk of seeing women blinded, and above all manipulated, I roar. "No, this discourse is shameful, women deserve everything, and now!"

But my roar is also a sign that I've fallen into the trap. If I respond to the rhetoric, I join the ranks of the talkers and risk disengaging from the camp of action. It's easy to fall into my trap...

**2/ Therefore, let us be cautious with our words, and if necessary, reserve our actions for when they are taken.** How? By reclaiming the initiative. Yes, the use of words, rather than simply responding, must become the anticipation of action. We must break free from an imposed framework and choose the one that allows us to continually return to the areas from which women are excluded.

Let us constantly bear in mind that we have the right to choose the subject we wish to discuss with the institution.

But this presupposes a clear understanding of what needs to change. What is our vision?

## **Part One: A Radical Affirmation: Complete Equality**

Genesis chapters 1 and 2 form the solid foundation upon which the fundamental equality between the two halves of the original being created by God and "remade" to "be two," in order to deliver it from the peril of solitude, is based. Yes, Genesis 1:27 establishes a dual humanity, but Genesis 2, contrary to what has long been asserted, reminds us (v. 19) that it is humankind that must not be alone, not the male. The male does not have preeminence; the creation of man and woman is simultaneous.

As the Jewish commentator Rashi boldly but accurately stated, God erred in believing that humankind could live alone, and he had to rewrite his work. The procession of animals proved to him that, when exposed to solitude, humankind is in mortal danger. And note that the "rib" is actually a "side," in fact, it's the Hebrew word for each of the two panels of the Ark of the Covenant. A prestigious responsibility indeed! The human couple is compared to the Ark of the Covenant. Consequently, the Creator obtains two perfectly equal halves. Man and woman are fundamentally equal.

No doubt differences exist, but God did not directly decide them. Their content is left to the genius of cultures.

Let us therefore assume that the biblical author did not have God speak on this subject. The clerical discourse on gender attributes between men and women is an opinion; it has no scriptural basis.

Certainly, the book of Leviticus establishes rules relating to the pure and the impure (Lev 11-18), yes, they affect men and women differently, but, on the one hand, they concern both, and, on the other hand, Christianity has rejected them from its origin.

So, when I hear expressions of hope for a diaconal ordination and the fervent enthusiasm it arouses, I still roar with indignation.

That Rome might one day "grant" the diaconate is one thing; but that Catholics should ask for it and swoon with hope if a cardinal suggests that

"perhaps, under certain conditions, but it's not up to me to decide, etc... it would be conceivable," that makes me roar even more.

Am I—and others—so incapable, so unworthy, so lacking in confidence in my abilities as a believer to be content with such a minor role?

Yes, diaconal service is evangelical, yes, it is eminently respectable, but women's capacity must not be limited by institutional constraints. They must be able to do everything in their Church. Thus, women's demand must be very clear: it is complete equality.

Equality, certainly, but in the face of what exclusions?

There are three major areas of exclusion: ordination, preaching, and governance. It is essential that they have a vision encompassing these three domains.

## **Part Two: A Vision**

### **A/ Ordination**

**- This is the favourite objective of the non-Catholic media and a good portion of Catholic opinion.**

Everyone sings the same old refrain: "Let women become priests!" Why? Because that's where the power lies. There's more to it than that, but for those with a more detached perspective, it's the essential one, because the cleric is the only legitimate agent of institutional functioning.

I won't go into the numerous prerogatives of priests; they are well known. I'll simply make a few side observations.

Since the second half of John Paul II's pontificate, this quality has been revealed to be extensive. John Paul II, driven by his vision of a reconquest of souls through a strong clerical power (see *\*The Shadow of the Saint\**, by Christine Pedotti and Antony Favier), indirectly facilitated the assignment of a number of tasks to priests, even those not requiring ordination.

**One example:** the Pope's Wednesday audiences. These involve assistants, particularly translators. Until the arrival of Leo XIV, these audiences were conducted by priests. The current Pope has ended this practice.

**Another example** will illustrate this expansion that occupies people's minds, sometimes in a subtle way.

I am referring to the widespread practice of entrusting altar service exclusively to boys, while "inventing" the category of "servants of the assembly" for girls, which keeps them occupied while simultaneously excluding them from the altar. The motive, sometimes openly stated, sometimes concealed, is to encourage priestly vocations.

But in the name of what sacramental gesture is this choice made? Girls and boys are baptized in the same way, and the young boys who serve at the altar have not taken any vows. No ordination presides over their "election." It is an implicit expansion of the clerical sphere.

A pure theological power grab in the service of clericalism.

Certainly, a Roman instruction reminds us that girls' access to altar service is by no means forbidden (*Redemptionis Sacramentum* no. 47, 2004). But it is linked to the judgment of the diocesan bishop; "in this case, the established norms on this matter must be followed."

For my part, I believe this is not the bishop's responsibility, because the theological file is "empty." It falls outside his area of expertise to express only an opinion. If this opinion is imposed, it is because it allows for a number of unspoken assumptions: that, for example, the girls are impure, or unfit for the sacred. No, the institution cannot venture to openly support such horrors... It is better to say that the bishop bears the responsibility for the decision....

Consequently, in my opinion, this is grounds for a very firm challenge from all those who share this struggle.

Because these practices erode baptismal equality, and they themselves deny it.

**-Fundamentally, should we fight for priestly ordination? My answer is a resounding no! Why?**

**a) Political reasons.**

In a Church as divided and fragile as Pope Leo found it, the question of ordination is taboo. Indeed, since the beginning of the Lefebvrist rebellion, it has been, within the Curia, the marker of the fault line between conservatives and progressives.

Leo XIV, engaged since his election in a process of internal reconciliation, never placed the subject on the agenda.

**b) More structural reasons.**

I believe that placing this question on the agenda is not opportune because the ordained ministry has been going through a profound crisis for at least two generations.

I often say, "The job is in crisis; it's not the time to put women in it." As long as the vocation of the priest remains undefined (is he a man of withdrawal from the world or a man of the community he represents?), as long as his sacred nature is invoked (CDC §1008), and as long as the causes of abuse have not been addressed, it is not right to ordain women priests.

Women are not expendable; they should not have to pay the price for clericalism.

**c) I understand that my position is difficult for those who feel “called” to accept.** I hear them say: Couldn't God call women? How dare the institution decide whom God calls? Is it privy to God's secrets? In any case, it would be very well informed, because in Jesus' time, there were no priests, in the modern sense of the word...

These objections lead me to ask what constitutes a vocation. In the Church today, it is almost exclusively based on the intimate dialogue between God and the candidate. However, this seems to me very fragile, and in any case, quite insufficient for determining a vocation to the priesthood.

The New Testament is clear: charisms, therefore competences, and above all, the call of the community. Yet, in the Church today, this last point is minimal, often merely formal.

In my opinion, it should be revived, because it allows us to move beyond subjectivism and provide objective criteria for a vocation.

In short, with many "ifs":

If the structure of the priesthood were clarified,  
if it were clearly stated that the priest is a member of a human community, charged within it with representing Christ, and not a religious figure adrift in the world,

if the ordained ministry were desacralized by amending canon 1008 (CDC),  
if, by virtue of all these "ifs," married men were admitted to the priesthood,

yes, then, faith communities, parishes, or thematic communities could attempt actions with significant public impact, making it known that they have candidates capable of representing Christ within their community. But today, the conditions are not in place.

## **B/ Preaching**

**- This is a central theme in the New Testament narratives: women preach. They proclaim the Gospel, the Good News. The most striking example is that of Mary Magdalene.**

I remind you that the Gospel of John presents her as the custodian of an essential dialogue with Jesus on the morning of the resurrection:

“But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples that she had seen the Lord and that he had told her this.” (John 20:17-18). Besides the fact that Jesus’ announcement is theologically very powerful, it gives Mary a very clear command: to proclaim the resurrection, the absolute center of the Christian faith. “Go to my brothers”...

**How could this “go to my brothers and tell them” have disappeared in the corridors of Roman palaces,** transforming women into invisible figures who, at the beginning of the Synod on Synodality, weren’t even allowed to speak? A man was supposed to deliver their message!

Yet, until the 15th century, we see women preaching. Little by little, they disappear.

When will the institution be able to address this injustice and, above all, this major transgression against the word of Jesus?

I won’t delve into the Pauline dossier on the presence of women in community leadership. But it is eloquent (see Valérie Duval-Poujol), despite preconceived notions about Paul’s misogyny...

## **What is to be done?**

Here too, it would be helpful to form groups of parishioners within parishes who request that women preach.

Simply because they are baptized and competent.

They don't have to justify themselves based on gender.

**They exist and they are capable.**

So, liturgists object to the "unity of the two tables"—preaching and consecration—to justify why women cannot preach in a liturgical setting.

These are objections constructed for the sake of being objections; I don't even want to hear them.

What seems more interesting to me is to observe that there are already sermons that openly break away from established institutional practices. The retreat from parishes is giving way to freer forms of preaching, sometimes outside of a Eucharistic liturgy, but during a Liturgy of the Word, or in prayer groups, sometimes using new media such as websites, podcasts, Instagram stories, or monthly newsletters, for example. All of them carry meaning. And they find their audience.

Women's voices resonate differently, elsewhere, and they forge their own path. Through these channels, female preachers are already gaining recognition. Catholic, often Protestant, but listened to by Catholics, which is glaring evidence of a need.

When will the institution understand that by remaining inactive, it is only harming itself?

### **C/ Governance**

This is the area that could be the most promising in the short term. It allows us to bypass the contentious issue of ordination and to base the advancement of women on the sacrament of baptism, complemented by charism, or, in modern terms, competence.

I will briefly recall the progress made by Pope Francis. It has two aspects: appointments, either as head or deputy head of a dicastery, and the right to vote at the last synod.

**-The appointments** concern five or six dicasteries, but the major responsibility has been entrusted to Sister Simona Brambilla, who will become Prefect of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life in January 2025. Sister Brambilla is flanked by a cardinal, who one can imagine prevents her from opening controversial cases, such as those concerning abuse of nuns, for example. This is undoubtedly the price of her promotion. And, moreover, these appointments are still rare. They can be counted on the fingers of one hand... At this rate, parity will be for the 22nd century.

**-Women's right to vote is fundamental.** This is the first time Rome has effectively acknowledged that women can decide on the internal affairs of their Church. Until now, their status was that of wives and mothers, and that was supposed to be enough for them. But now, ontologically, they are citizens.

This is a huge change. They vote, which means that the decision-making process is expanding to include them, that their voices are considered important, and that the institution must reckon with them. They become partners, no longer dependent minors.

Can Leo go back? Legally, yes; politically, it would have disastrous consequences, at a time when women are expecting more inclusive decisions. The Pope has also announced that he will continue the progress made at the Synod. He reiterated this in his latest encyclical on artificial intelligence.

**But another measure could change the face of the Church: the presence of women in the conclave.**

I think Francis's gesture is preparing the way for another, of spectacular proportions, and I would like to conclude by extolling its benefits. This would involve opening the next conclave to women. They would then become electors of the Pope, who would become "their Pope."

Because I remind you that the election of Leo XIV was achieved with 50% abstentions... Is that "normal"? Furthermore, no woman was invited, or even listened to, during the general congregations that precede the conclave.

Yet it is there that the urgent needs of the Church are debated, and therefore the outline of the future Pope is formed.

Why weren't they invited?

**The first question I ask all of us this evening is: how would this measure be received? Or, to put it another way, who would be harmed, and who would benefit?**

**a) Would the cardinals feel wronged?**

\*Certainly, they should **open their circle to women**. But their circle is already far from closed: between conclaves, cardinals die or reach the age limit, and new ones are appointed; therefore, no two conclaves are identical.

They might object that the conclave cannot be open to women because of the **sacred nature of the electors, all ordained, and thus exercising a ministry considered sacred (CDC §1008)**.

This argument will linger in people's minds, but it may not be invoked as such because asserting the sacredness of the ordained ministry is a minefield:

Does it exist? In canon law, yes.

But abuses demonstrate its harmfulness.

Is it a male prerogative, based on the masculinity of Jesus? But if this is fundamental, if it grounds salvation, then women cannot be saved. The entire theology of salvation would have to be re-examined. To avoid reaching this absurdity, I think the question of the prerogative of electing the Pope by ordained men would be difficult to defend publicly.

I am therefore inclined to think that the opposition from the clergy, undoubtedly real, will remain underground.

But beyond this feeling, I don't see how the cardinals would be harmed. They would not be harmed in any way.

#### **b) Who would benefit from the measure?**

##### **\*Women, of course, and first and foremost.**

This would be a major sign of recognition. It would directly acknowledge the immense contribution of women to the life of the Church. Without the contribution of women, there is no Church.

I would remind you that the primary purpose of the cardinalate, when it was created in the Middle Ages, was to bring together the principal collaborators of the Bishop of Rome. These are the Pope's faithful workers, and he associates them with his office. It is therefore entirely legitimate for women to be among them.

I believe that such an initiative would have a tremendous impact, for women, but also for the Church.

##### **\*The Church would also be the great beneficiary of this initiative.**

Because currently, women are leaving, especially young women, and these departures are causing it considerable harm. They deprive it of precious strength, they contribute to distancing the Church from the world, they compromise its very essence.

The presence of women at the conclave might perhaps mark the end of the haemorrhage of talent that the institution is suffering.

The Church would also gain in cohesion, strength, and communion.

**\*But the major indirect beneficiary would be the Pope, or rather the papal office.** Leo XIV was elected quickly, therefore "well-elected," but he

was elected only by male representatives, that is, by half of humanity. Today, I meet young women who don't feel involved in a Pope elected without female representatives in whom they see themselves.

Yes, including women would not only make the Pope better elected, but it would also give him considerable new authority.

Today, the Pope is the dominant moral figure in the world. The contribution of women to his election would be an additional gain and would strengthen his authority.

It is therefore, in my opinion, very beneficial for women, for the Church, and for the papal office to allow women to vote in the conclave.

And I would like to reiterate that this in no way affects the ordained ministry. It is a win-win situation.

**-In essence, such a measure would reinforce, on the one hand, the universality of Christianity, and on the other hand, Jesus' fight against exclusion. It would fulfil something major about Christianity.**

#### **a) Universality:**

Women's suffrage would strengthen the universality of Catholicism. Even if the Church's structure is monarchical, its universalism must be able to be expressed.

\*As proof, I offer the fact that **the Bible, in the Old Testament, establishes the Law, given by God, as the primary, almost sole, source of power.** Moses does not take Pharaoh's place; he establishes the Law. And he asks for the consent, not of the priests, but of the entire people. This act is decisive: the people must approve.

One example, at the time of entering the Promised Land:

“You shall gather together the people, the men, the women, the children, and the foreigners whom you have in your towns, so that they may hear and learn, so that they may fear the Lord your God and be careful to observe all the words of this Law” (Deuteronomy 31:1). In this time when neither men nor women vote, approval comes from knowledge: it is tantamount to consent. The consultation process is clearly defined: it is this process that legitimizes the law.

When one remembers that, in the Church, the Pope ultimately embodies the law, both theological and moral, one can appreciate the benefit of having

women also champion the cause of the law. They are lacking... And this lack contradicts the spirit of the Old Testament.

**\*As for the New Testament,**

While he advocates obedience to leaders (Letter to the Romans), he absolutely does not take sides with any structure of a Church that does not yet exist.

I will simply mention briefly the existence of "viri probati" to lead communities (see in particular Titus). These are men from the common people, trustworthy, with proven lives. Here again, acquiescence is tacit, but it is facilitated by the fact that these individuals are commendable.

We are still only talking about men, but the work of contemporary exegetes, particularly women (Valérie Duval-Poujol), shows that women also led communities, either because the communities were female, or, more simply, because these women were competent.

**b) Against Exclusion**

What seems even more important to point out is the attitude of Jesus. Not only did Jesus never show favouritism, a remarkable fact in a patriarchal society, but he also strongly opposed all forms of exclusion, whatever their nature (see the story of the woman with the haemorrhage, the story of the healed leper, etc.).

For Jesus, the rejection of exclusion is central to his ministry, perhaps even more so than the cause of the poor ("You will always have the poor," John 12).

Therefore, the current exclusion of women from positions of responsibility in their Church can only be understood as a vestige of male domination, but absolutely not as an inherent characteristic of Christianity. Integrating women would be a return to greater fidelity to the Gospel.

**-How to proceed?**

Now that I have gathered the arguments in favour of women's participation in the election of the Pope, the question remains: how to implement it?

On this subject, Rome will listen only to itself... But it is important to show that the decision is not difficult to implement.

It seems to me that there is a choice to be made: that of a single college including women. To be admitted, women must therefore become cardinals. In the pre-1983 code, unordained men could become cardinals. This possibility was abolished by John Paul II; it can be reinstated by his successors. The decision belongs to the Pope, and it is quite easy to make. But it would be good if women were already mobilizing for this cause. That is the wish I express this evening, among you.

One delicate, potentially divisive question remains. The conclave is an assembly of electors. Any cardinal who enters it can leave as Pope. Would the female cardinals who are members of the conclave be eligible? Could they become popes, or popesses? Is public opinion ready for this possibility?

It seems to me that it would be reasonable to wait a while before raising this question. For the sake of pragmatic consensus among Catholics, it is better to experience a few mixed conclaves before raising the issue of women's eligibility.

### **In conclusion,**

I observe that women are confronted by an institution reluctant to welcome them, perhaps even more so today than yesterday, but that they refuse to remain silent.

They speak out, as if their own Church had exfiltrated them into the world... Consequently, reforming the Church, in the current context, may not happen from within, but from without. This is the message I bring to you this evening.

Yes, women are speaking out. While remaining within the Church, the great Church of Christ whose boundaries no one can define, women, through their vitality, are already proclaiming the Good News of salvation in countless ways.

And the world desperately needs it. So, let's get to work!