

Martha Zechmeister, **Open Letter to Pope Leo**

Dear Brother Pope Leo,

Your election brings me great joy. I am moved that a man of the missionary Church, a man of true interculturality, a “shepherd with the smell of sheep,” has been elected Pope. And I am grateful that your election promises continuity with the ministry of Pope Francis. He brought back to the center of the Church what truly belongs there: unconditional commitment to the vulnerable, the marginalized, the “discarded.” That reflects the way of Jesus, and we must mobilize all our strength to that end. Your election and the name Leo, which you have chosen for yourself, fill me with hope that you will continue to lead the Church along this path.

I am a religious and a teacher of theology. Together with my students – all young religious men – I watched last Thursday, May 8, 2025, in a small classroom in El Salvador, glued to our phones and laptops, as the white smoke rose. We were carried away by the excitement of the cheering crowd in St. Peter’s Square. We heard your first “Peace be with you” – and we were overjoyed by these powerful words, spoken into a world tormented by wars! And when you addressed us in Spanish and expressed your deep respect for the faith of Latin Americans, the joy knew no bounds.

Brother Leo, I feel deeply connected to you in your commitment to a poor Church, a Church of the poor. We are about the same age and share similar biographies: the call to religious life, theological formation in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, leaving behind our own cultural identities – from the Global North, from privileged societies – to find a new home in Latin America, where we are directly confronted with the consequences of the imperialist policies of the “developed countries.”

I share with you the joy of being received as a sister, as a brother among people in a place where the Gospel is of immediate relevance, in a Church where the meaning of faith doesn’t have to be artificially constructed – because for many, faith is the daily bread for survival.

Brother Pope, fifty years ago, I began my conscious journey in the Church with the natural, perhaps naive confidence that it would only take a few years for us to find true siblinghood in the Church – a Church without hierarchies based on gender. I placed my trust in a Church shaped by Jesus and his practice, on the way he encountered women and men alike, a Church that would, without hesitation, put into practice the simple truth: “Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven” (Mt 23:9), and where all of us are truly brothers and sisters.

Leo, you are a wise and sensitive man. When I heard your simple and clear address, I was deeply grateful, because your sobriety and rationality were a refreshing contrast to the populist and irrational bluster of the macho men who currently dominate the world. And you are a canon lawyer. You know how much of the Catholic Church’s apparatus is not rooted in “divine law” but has evolved historically, shaped by context and culture –

and thus how much of it can also be changed. The only thing that truly must be the “canon”, the unwavering measure of how we organize the Church, is the way Jesus formed community, and how his disciples gathered after their encounter with the Risen One and the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost. Everything else is human-made, historically developed – and can therefore be changed.

Dear Brother Pope, like you, I am shaped by the charism of my order. I walk in the footsteps of Mary Ward, who more than 400 years ago broke through the canonical limits of her time. She broke out of the walls of cloistered life and thereby contributed significantly to opening the way for women’s active apostolic ministry in the Church. I believe it is again time to break down walls and make space for the living Spirit of God.

Leo, you are described as a man who listens. That is why I dare to speak to you with biblical *parrhesia*, with boldness, without fear or evasion: The time has come for women to be included without restriction in all offices and levels of the Church. Not as a gesture, not as an exception, not as a symbolic sign – but in full equality. This is not about power. It is about dignity. It is about truth. It is about the Gospel.

Just to be clear: I do not want **this** ministry. I never did – and at almost 70 years old, it would be ridiculous. But I want to help transform the Church’s ministry from the ground up. To reimagine it from the roots – more Christlike, more fraternal. Not an exclusive privilege of one gender, but a shared service of men and women. This ministry will have to change – in its symbols, in its staging, in everything.

I often hear the argument: “Now is not the right time, and such a step would provoke a schism.” It may seem inappropriate to trouble you with such concerns just days after your election. But the right time never seems to come, and this issue can no longer be postponed. Because the schism is already happening. It is the slow, relentless exodus of women (and men) who are not readily acknowledged in a Church that remains symbolically and structurally male. At best, this departure happens in protest – but most often silently, unnoticed, in frustration. The real scandal is not a bit of pink smoke over St. Peter’s – the real scandal is that the representation of Jesus is still staged as a male privilege.

The Catholic Church is a master of staging. And when this power of staging is used wisely – as prophetic symbolic action – it is a great asset: Pope Francis’ first trip to Lampedusa, his kiss on the feet of a female Muslim asylum seeker. I understand that you may have wanted to send a signal to some of your brother cardinals when you wore the red mozzetta and the gold-embroidered stole for your first appearance – garments Pope Francis had laid aside 13 years ago – and when you allowed them to kiss your ring.

But precisely because you are sensitive to such signals, I hope you understand the terrible symbolism when, at every Eucharistic celebration – the central expression and heart of the Christian community – women are allowed various roles: we “may” read the readings, “may” sing in the choir, we are no longer banned from the sanctuary as “unclean” and “may” even serve as altar servers. Yet the one who presides, who has the

authority to proclaim the Gospel and to interpret the Word of God in the homily, who invokes the presence of Christ over bread and wine – is always, inevitably, a man. This is not a minor matter that women should just accept – no, it is a wound at the heart of the Church.

I was certainly not born to be a feminist, nor am I in danger of blindly following passing trends or uncritically submitting to the norms of a secularized world. I was raised as a conservative religious. But we “good”, obedient women of the Church – those of us who have repeatedly kept quiet “for the sake of the greater good” – we become complicit in distorting the face of Jesus in the Church.

We cannot go on this way. The Gospel calls us to rise from our prostration. To look men in the eye – upright and clear – and no longer allow their closed networks of male power to go unchallenged. Not so that we women might wield more power. No. Rather so that our shared service to the world, together in equality, may become more credible.

Being a woman is not a moral virtue, just as being a man is not a moral virtue. We are all sinners – women and men – yet we are all called to make Christ present in this world that so desperately cries out for redemption. We women must no longer be divided – into the bad, aggressive feminists and the good, compliant ones who keep the system running. And certainly not into the “privileged women of the North with their indulgent problems” and the Catholic women of the South, who supposedly learn from their struggle for survival what really matters. It is about women coming together in true solidarity as sisters – across all cultural divides – and standing together for a more just and humane world, helping the Church to show a truer face of Jesus.

Many of my friends and companions — women with whom I have shared the road for many years —, have left the Church. Some have become Protestant, where they can exercise ministry equally. Others have entered politics, where they can make more of a difference. I understand both. Still others are stranded in disappointment – and that truly saddens me.

None of these paths are open to me. I am, to the marrow of my bones, incurably and passionately Catholic. I cannot help but remain in this Church. And precisely for that reason, I hopefully and stubbornly expect from it the seemingly impossible: that it truly, genuinely, and deeply opens itself to the transforming Spirit of Pentecost.

To many clerics I want to cry out: Don’t be so afraid! Why do you cling so stubbornly in outdated practices to an exclusively male priesthood? Dare to let go. Stop talking so much about evangelization – rather let yourselves be evangelized! You will lose nothing – except your rigidity and fear – and you will find yourselves again in a richer, fuller humanity, capable of selfless service to others, to this wounded world thirsting for healing.

Dear Brother Pope, we still have to get to know you. But I believe you are a courageous man – a man who can take away his brothers’ fear, and who also has the courage to change what seems carved in stone. I am deeply grateful if you continue what you

began with your papal ministry: peace. Speak with courage and authority against the authoritarian macho men of this world and their deadly strategies. Raise your voice against the barriers the Global North has built to keep migrants out. And have the courage, too, to dismantle the walls that repeatedly exclude and wound your sisters in faith – those who largely sustain this Church. We women are just as capable of leadership and responsibility as men. In some ways, perhaps even more so – just as the reverse is surely true for men in other ways.

I do not want this Church to remain as an archaic relic, a reflection of a social order that can no longer be sustained. I want us – women and men – to stand shoulder to shoulder in transforming this world. And that means we must begin now with the full inclusion of women at every level of ecclesial ministry and responsibility. Not someday – but now.

With determination, love for the Church, and burning hope,

Your sister,
Martha