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Stop shaming women for seeking equal power in the church

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins
Women deacons

In late June, on a flight back from Armenia, Pope Francis told a team of reporters that he was angry.

What made Francis angry wasn't the continued deaths of countless refugees, or the latest instance of environmental degradation or some grim statistics about rates of human trafficking. No, what angered him was the suggestion, by some in the media, that he had "opened the door to deaconesses," after his May 12 dialogue with the International Union of Superiors General (UISG).

"Really?" Francis said incredulously to the reporters aboard the plane, "I was a bit angry with the media because this is not saying the truth of the thing to the people." He explained that, after the UISG meeting, he asked the prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Gerhard Müller) to compile a list of possible members of a commission to study the role of women deacons in the early church.

"When you want something not to be resolved, make a commission," Francis joked to the journalists, quoting line from a former president of Argentina.

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And, yet, on August 2, just weeks after this press conference, the pope appointed six men and six women to the "Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate."

But the pope's anger over the notion that admitting women to some form of the diaconate was already a *fait accompli* suggests the depth of angst conjured by even the suggestion of offering women a semblance of authority in the church.

We don't know what, if anything, will be resolved by this commission. We do not know how long they will meet, we do not know what they will recommend, and we do not know how Pope Francis will respond to their recommendations.

We do know that this commission will not resolve the neuralgic issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood. The reasons have been laid out. First, there is clear historical precedent for women deacons, where there isn't clear precedent for women priests. Second, women deacons are a matter of ecclesiastical law that can be changed, whereas women priests have been banned by church doctrine.

But the deeper reason that women will be denied the priesthood lies in the Catholic church's radical opposition to allowing women and men equal power in the realms of ecclesiastical and sacramental authority.

According to the pope and the hierarchy, women cannot have equal power in the church because it would go against nature. That's because they believe that God created men to be leaders, authorities and decision-makers, while women were made to be servants, helpers and nurturers.

This is why the pope has repeatedly said that women are entitled to equal dignity, but he has not said that they are entitled to equal power. He wants women's voices to be heard in discussions, but he doesn't necessarily want to entrust them to make decisions.

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It's a safe bet, therefore, that the only form of the diaconate for women that can gain approval from the pope is one that honors the model of male-female complementarity that Francis regularly extols when discussing any issue related to gender and sexuality.

I can appreciate those who see the creation of this commission as a small, important step towards integrating women into the decision-making positions in the church. But as we celebrate this incremental step, I think it is wise to bear in mind a sobering reality. We are dealing with a hierarchy that has an enshrined belief that God has

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ordered the cosmos and human relations in a way that de facto denies women power in the church that is equal to men.

The struggle for women's equal participation in the church will, therefore, continue to arouse a variety of emotions -- and Pope Francis is not the only one whose anger will get piqued by the topic.

But we shouldn't concern ourselves too much with the anger or outrage of the church leaders or conservative Catholics. Much more alarming is the discomfort that is being stirred among Catholics who claim that they want equality for women in the church.

For example, more than once in the conversation about women deacons, I have heard the argument that women who want to be deacons "do not want power," they simply want to serve, or to be servant leaders.

I realize that such rhetoric is intended to avoid scaring off the men who will ultimately decide if women will be deacons. But playing down women's right to ecclesial power and playing up women's desire to serve could result in the creation of a diminished form of the diaconate for women -- one that is different from the male diaconate and one in which female deacons would get trapped in rut of service, loaded down with lots of new responsibilities, but endowed with very little actual authority.

The hierarchy already believe that women were born to play the role of the servant, and have convinced themselves that it is service alone that women find uniquely fulfilling.

So a new form of the diaconate that is heavy on support of the priest and light on sacramental faculties could in fact set the struggle for women's equality in the church back by years, if not centuries, rather than creating an incremental step towards progress.

But an even darker threat looms over the struggle for women's equality in the church, and I hear it in some of the criticisms leveled against those who campaign for women in the priesthood. Some progressive Catholics have expressed resentment towards the women's ordination movement for impeding or derailing any possibility of progress for women in the church, as if expecting to be recognized as equal is asking too much.

I've also heard more than one person suggest (taking a cue from Pope Francis' own warning that women will be "clericalized" by ordination) that women who want the priesthood are power-hungry careerists who seek honors, and titles and status.

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I find this argument particularly troubling, since we rarely hear anyone accuse a young man seeking the priesthood of such nefarious motivations. We tend to give male seminarians the benefit of the doubt, but it seems such good intentions aren't assumed of Catholic women who feel qualified to seek the priesthood.

There is a demonization, sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, of women who want the same power afforded to men in the institutional church. That sort of shaming and blaming must stop. The only purpose it serves is to divide and conquer Catholics who want to see women treated with genuine justice and equality in the church.

We must insist that there is no shame in a woman's desire for equal power in her church. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "power" means "the ability or capacity to do something or act in a particular way," or "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events." Where is the sin in a woman's wanting to function in this way within her church?

Those who have had the blessing of encountering good priests and good bishops, and those who exalt Pope Francis for using his ecclesial power to do good, have seen that not all church power is corrupting. Why, then, can't women be trusted to do the same good in any and all clerical roles? Why is it that when a woman wants sacramental or decision-making power, her image gets sullied as controlling, domineering, or ambitious?

As we move forward in our discussion about women deacons, we must stop disparaging and devaluing women who want equal rites in our church. There is no more shame in a woman's wanting to use sacramental or spiritual power than there is shame in Pope Francis' own use of it. Like the beloved pope, women are simply trying to claim the power that God has already given them.

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