

Editorial

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Historical and sociological literature has shown how women in various spheres of life are often confronted with a ‘glass ceiling’.¹ The religious field is no different, and within Christianity a ‘stained-glass ceiling’ has often prevented them from accessing certain responsibilities and ranks. In recent decades, a noticeable process of ‘feminization’ has occurred.² Particularly within Protestantism, many denominations have now adopted diverse forms of women’s involvement at various levels, including ministries – ordained ministries as well, if ecclesiologicaly mandated.³ However, within Catholicism women have remained excluded from several hierarchical positions and other functions not only by subtle mechanisms of disqualification but also by explicit criteria. The symbolic barrier that prevents Catholic women from reaching the highest positions within the ecclesiastical hierarchy remains today a magisterial fact: John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, published in June 1994, which marked the irrevocable refusal to ordain women as priests (and consequently as bishops as well).⁴

1 Cf. for example, Portier, “Introduction”.

2 Scaraffia, Pelaja, *Due in una carne*. Valerio, *Donne e Chiesa*.

3 As an example, Da Rold, C. “Measuring Social Media Marketing Strategies of Christian Female Religious Leaders”.

4 John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*.

1 Of Popes and Women

This document, though, was not born out of a canonical, political or cultural vacuum, but out of a well-established Catholic tradition. In particular, it fits into the debates over the Catholic Church and modernity, between Catholic thought and feminist movements. The pontiffs of the twentieth century were the first to address the issue of women and their role in society and the Church with increasing interest. Magisterial interventions gradually intensified behind the impetus of the so-called ‘woman question’,⁵ which arose in the late nineteenth century and was advocated by feminist movements. Despite the fact that, in principle, the Catholic magisterium from the very beginning emphasized the equal dignity of women with men on the basis of a centuries-old theological tradition, practical applications only slowly adapted over time to the demands coming from an emancipating society, gradually moving away from an ecclesiastical tradition that could be defined as anthropologically misogynistic.⁶

Leo XIII (1878-1903) was the first pope to include women in a broader project of social and religious reform. He did not recognize feminism and the emancipationist movements as legitimate forms of thought; however, in what would later be called the ‘social doctrine of the Church’, which found its cornerstone in the encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891),⁷ the recruitment of women could take place with a view to re-Christianization. It was reiterated, however, that their best place was within the home, raising children and praising husbands.

His successor Pius X (1903-14), although without any explicit documents on women, made the first conditional openings toward women’s social apostolate, especially with a anti-socialist/anti-communist function. The political engagement of women was not allowed, but a religious-assistance activity was considered as an extension of that vocation and function considered to be exclusively feminine, i.e., the service to the others. During his pontificate, both the feminist battles but also the disagreements between the magisterium and Catholic forms of feminism became more acute. Suffice it to think of the

⁵ ‘Woman question’ is the expression used by Catholic historiography and the ecclesiastical magisterium to refer to issues related to the role of women within the *ecclesia*.

⁶ Cf. Piola, *Donna e sacerdozio*, 61-92; Dau Novelli, *Note sulla questione femminile nel Magistero della Chiesa*. Camp, *From Passive Subordination to Complementary Partnership*. Cf. Baronchelli, Sauro, *Il problema femminile*. It should also be kept in mind that women were excluded for a long time from the reasoning the church was elaborating on their nature and role, lacking sufficient education, especially of the official language of papal documents, Latin. Thus, the debate on the ‘woman question’ did not arise until later in a dialogical form.

⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*.

numerous feminist newspapers that – with different orientations and degree of autonomy from the ecclesiastical hierarchy – began to be published and read by Catholic women (*L’Azione Muliebre* by Elena da Persico,⁸ *Pensiero e Azione* by Adelaide Coari,⁹ Antonietta Giacomelli in *Ora presente*)¹⁰ and the creation of several women’s groups (the Unione femminile nazionale in 1900, la Lega cattolica femminile in 1901, la Federazione femminile milanese in 1905).¹¹

During World War I and the post-war period there were profound changes in the condition of women, who had been forced precisely by the wartime event to assume roles previously reserved only for men. A clear indication of support for the active role of women in society is concretely expressed by Pius XI (1922-39) in several speeches.¹² Noted indeed is the pontiff’s support for Catholic Action – the lay association disciplined by the ecclesiastical hierarchy and considered a suitable instrument for both sexes for the Christian restoration. However, the traditional submission of the wife to her husband remained the traditional Catholic view, as well expressed in the encyclical on marriage *Casti connubii* (1930).¹³ The progressive opening of the social field to women, therefore, did not proceed hand in hand with a real acquisition of autonomous public spaces, and there was no rethinking of feminine roles within the ecclesiastical structure. The emphasis on the woman as ‘angel of the hearth,’ which was also encouraged in that period by Fascism in Italy, determined within the pontifical tradition a sort of double level of interpretation of the woman question: on the one hand there was awareness of the factual reality – the emancipation of women – which was more or less tolerated, while on the other hand there was a parallel idealization of women that instead opposed their emancipation.¹⁴

The papal magisterium’s reflection on women continued during Pius XII (1939-58), particularly concerning the woman’s role outside

8 Gazzetta, *Innovazione nella conservazione*.

9 Gazzola, “Adelaide Coari”.

10 Scattigno, “Antonietta Giacomelli”.

11 The Federazione femminile milanese was directed by Adelaide Coari, one of the most open-minded and progressive exponents of Catholic feminism at the time, and it was dissolved with the endorsement of Pius X himself, who rather favored, although only after overcoming some significant delays, the birth of the Unione fra le donne cattoliche d’Italia (1909), which was more aligned with the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Cf. Dau Novelli, “Sorelle d’Italia”. About the feminist Italian Catholic movement, cf. Gaiotti De Biase, *Le origini del movimento cattolico femminile*. About Elena da Persico cf. Gazzetta, *Elena da Persico*.

12 Cfr. Pius XI, “All’Unione Femminile Cattolica Italiana”, 54-8; Pius XI, “Alla Gioventù femminile di Azione Cattolica”, 800-6. For the general context see Della Sudda, “Les défis du pontificat de Pie XI”; Della Sudda, “L’Azione cattolica femminile in Francia”.

13 Pius XI, *Casti connubii*.

14 Cf. Dau Novelli, *Note sulla questione femminile nel Magistero della Chiesa*, 78-9.

of the family. The *Allocutio ad mulieres a Societatibus Christianis Italiae delegatas* of October 1945 summarized Pacellian thought very well: he stressed the equality of man and woman - "it is the imperishable glory of the Church to have put this truth back into light and honor and to have freed woman from a degrading slavery contrary to nature" -, however it reaffirmed the traditional feminine inclination in marriage, motherhood or voluntary celibacy.¹⁵ Women's mobilization, especially in the second post-war period, took on a clear anti-communist political significance, just think of the encouragement for women also to exercise their right to vote - particularly in the Italian context - in defense of the Church.¹⁶

John XXIII (1958-63)'s encyclical *Pacem in Terris* marked an opening in papal thinking on the relationship between Catholic women and social action. Here the changes that have taken place globally are welcomed without fear or hesitation. The entry of women into public life is recognized as a 'sign of the times,' as one of the most important phenomena characterizing modern society along with the social-economic rise of the working classes and the political freedoms acquired by many communities.¹⁷ Women's emancipation was finally read in positive tones, although the Church continued to reserve criticism where the path became radicalized. Although, in what was arguably a striking omission, the Second Vatican Council did not specifically address the woman issue: the topic was touched upon in several passages, especially in reference to the enhancement of the laity, along with women religious the only other ecclesial space granted to women. The priesthood and the diaconate for women, on the other hand, were not mentioned in any official council document, although they were widely discussed within the broader Catholic scenario. For the first time, however, women auditors had been admitted to an ecclesiastical council (13 laywomen and 10 nuns).

From there on, the issue of expanding ecclesiastical spaces for women and access for them to the priesthood conditioned the entire subsequent development of magisterial thought. Paul VI (1963-78) intervened several times, culminating with the well-known statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith approved in October 1976, *Inter Insigniores*.¹⁸ As early as May 3, 1973 he established, in accordance with the requests of the synod of bishops two years earlier, a study commission on women in society and the Church, with the explicit instruction to exclude from discussion the topic of female

¹⁵ Pius XII, "Allocutio ad mulieres a Societatibus Christianis Italiae delegatas", 285-7 (English translation by the author).

¹⁶ Pius XII, "Allocutio ad mulieres a Societatibus Christianis Italiae delegatas", 294.

¹⁷ John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*.

¹⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*.

priestly ordination.¹⁹ The commission continued its work until 1976 and concluded its activity with a request for an in-depth study on the issues of women's access to non-ordained ministries and in the liturgy.²⁰ The Montinian attempt to pursue on a prudent line of balancing tradition and innovation did not prove effective, and the controversy over women's access to the presbyterate in Catholic circles escalated. It was only with John Paul II's above mentioned apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that the Catholic Church attempted to resolve the controversy in a seemingly definitive manner.

A new phase has perhaps opened with the current pontiff Francis, who from the outset has presented a more inclusive and collegial style.²¹ The issue of women's priesthood has been joined, if not replaced, by the issue of women's diaconate, which emerged in a concrete way through the establishment of two study commissions on this topic starting in 2016.²² A concrete step has been taken with the *Letter to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* on January 10, 2021, when Francis authorized that women can be instituted as lectors and acolytes, which also allows them, under specific conditions, the distribution of communion, as this "renders more effective in the Church everyone's participation in the work of evangelization".²³ Although at present no definitive action has been taken to meet the expectations of several Catholic feminist groups, a different path seems now to be walked according to a more ecclesiastically and ecclesialogically inclusive vision of Catholicism.

2 More sophisticated stories

This special issue offers a collection of contributions with the intent to discuss the extent to which Catholic women have managed to 'break through the stained-glass ceiling', or at least acquire positions of influence and responsibility in the Catholic world, from the 1950s to the early 2020s. The transnational dimension of much of what follows adds a level of complexity to much of the existing historiography. Each article adds nuance and richness to the story that has just

¹⁹ Camp, *From Passive Subordination to Complementary Partnership*, 522.

²⁰ Piola, *Donna e sacerdozio*, 81-2.

²¹ On Francis' synodality see Vian, "Sinfonia nella Chiesa". See also the final part of Béraud's article in this special issue.

²² Vatican News, *Istituita una nuova commissione di studio sul diaconato femminile*, 8 April 2020. The 2016 commission, due to discordant opinions, did not reach any conclusion, as Pope Francis said during the press conference on the plane upon his return from Macedonia (May 7, 2019). On April 8, 2020, the new Commission took office.

²³ Francis, *Letter to the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*.

been presented and enriches our understanding of the evolution of the place of women within Catholicism over the past 70 years.

Natalia Núñez Bargeño opens this special issue by questioning the idea that the end of Vatican II marked the beginning of the emancipation of Catholic women. According to her, a generation of lay women asserted themselves after the Second World War, in the context of the Cold War, by engaging not only in the ICOs (International Catholic Organizations), but also in theological debates. The legacy of these pioneers would be victim of a double omission: as Catholics, they would be little valued in secular historiography, which focuses on radical feminist movements; as women, they would be ignored by Catholic historiography, still centered on men. Her connected history approach allows her to uncover transnational networks of Catholic feminists active during the 1950s and to fill a gap concerning the contemporary participation of women in the development of global Catholicism. Her investigation also leads her to reassess the pontificate of Pius XII: she suggests that Pacelli accompanied and encouraged the involvement of women in public life, partly for strategic reasons (the fight against communism). His quoted speech of 21 October 1945 to members of Catholic Women's associations is quite explanatory: "[woman] must compete with man for the good of the *civitas*, in which she is equal in dignity to him... they both have the right and the duty to cooperate for the total good of society and of the nation".

The next contribution, authored by Mariangela Maraviglia, focuses on the Italian theologian Adriana Zarri (1910-2010). It considers the importance of the pre-council period in Catholic women's empowerment. Participation in the Gioventù femminile di Azione Cattolica in the 1930s played a determining role in Zarri's moral, cultural, religious and social education. The skills she acquired in that movement allowed her to enter the Catholic intellectual field, publishing two books in 1941. However, it was not until the early 1960s that she was recognized as a theologian in a context where theological faculties slowly opened their doors to women. The 1970s and 1980s marked for Zarri a gradual emancipation from the positions of the Catholic magisterium, particularly in matters of sexual morality, as well as an exploration of the links between Christianity and ecology.

The following article also leads to reassess the rupture that Vatican II would represent in the promotion of women. Clarisse Tesson returns to the proclamation, in 1970, by Paul VI, of two women doctors of the Church: Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena. She shows that this event, which broke with a thousand-year-old tradition that reserved this title for clerics (and therefore for men), was a consequence of the new ecclesiology of Vatican II, which considered that all the baptized, and not only ordained ministers, were called to be prophets, priests and kings. But Pope Montini never publicly presented his gesture as an encouragement for women to study and teach

theology. Their access to this field, long reserved for priests, was a gradual process that began in the 1950s with the creation of institutes of religious studies and continued into the 1960s.

The recruitment in 1965 of Josephine Massyngberde Ford to the University of Notre Dame as a New Testament and rabbinic scholar was one example of this gradual opening of Catholic theology to women. In his article, John Maiden opens with a discussion of how this pioneering woman participated in the CCR (Catholic Charismatic Renewal), of which Notre Dame was one of the cradles in the late 1960s. Addressing Ford's analysis, Maiden shows that the renewal had ambivalent effects on the women who participated. On the one hand, the spiritual upheaval produced potential new contexts in which women could take new spiritual roles: the assertion that any person could be a repository of the charism given by the Holy Spirit placed women on an equal footing with men. But, on the other hand, a literal reading of the scriptures, including epistles of St. Paul, inspired by particular varieties of Protestant pentecostalism, led to the entrusting of leadership to men. However, contrasting the approach to gender of Catholic charismatics in the United States in the United States, Maiden finds evidence of different approaches to the woman question in Catholic charismatic renewal, and in doing so provides a helpful case study of the movement as 'glocal'.

This same attention to geographical variations within Catholicism can be found in the next contribution, authored by Charles Mercier. His study of the place of women in John Paul II's WYD (World Youth Days) shows that, according to the countries where these great international festivals took place, the place of women had not been identical. It was in the United States, on the occasion of the Denver WYD in 1993, that feminist demands were most strongly expressed. But it was in the Philippines, during the Manila WYD in 1995, that women were given the most responsibility. Despite these nuances, the WYD case shows that in the 1980s and 1990s, the Catholic Church was still a patriarchal institution that entrusted most of the key positions to men. Women's access to power, however, could be achieved through women's congregations, through the patronage of a high prelate, or through the lack of available male personnel.

It is this last factor that Céline Béraud, whose contribution closes this special issue, puts forward. Beyond ideological and spiritual factors, the rise in power of some women also resulted from the decrease in the number of clerics and the new division of religious work. In France, during the 1980s, the shortage of priests led to women taking on functions that previously reserved for men. Women became chaplains in prisons or hospitals, or responsible for the celebration of funerals. But this dynamic partially stopped in the 2000s, in the context of a conservative turn among French Catholics on gender issues. In contrast to Rome's directives, which were becoming

more liberal, some parish priests forbade girls from accessing the altar (and thus from being altar servers), and asked women to stop doing the readings or distributing communion. Gendered devotional practices, reserved for men or women, also appeared, to emphasize the irreducible difference between the sexes, but also to try to bring men back into religious practice. The sexual abuse crisis in the late 2010s changed the balance of power once again. The link between the violence and the patriarchal character of the Church gave French Catholic feminists a new opportunity to make their voices heard. Their discourse, long marginalized in French Catholicism, found new audiences.

3 Convergences

In spite of the differences arising from the variety of times and places (asymmetries which show the need to take into account the contexts in which Catholic women are inserted when one tries to capture their condition), the comparison of these contributions allows the identification of a number of convergences, which seem to characterize the role of women within the Catholic Church since the 1950s.

First of all, most of the contributions shed light on the ambivalent relationship of Catholic women to power. Over the period studied, many Catholic women seemed to accept their subordination to men, and some saw it as God's will. Quoting sociologist Joseph H. Fichter, Maiden recalls that in the 1970s, "most charismatic women want[ed] men to assume the leadership and that [was] only by defaults that they [were] willing to do so themselves". In the early 2000s, Béraud encountered the same type of discourse among French Catholic women in charge of their parishes: even though their position within the Catholic Church was vulnerable and their legitimacy weak, women did "not speak out to demand better conditions to perform their tasks nor would they mobilize collectively". They declared they found "fulfillment" in carrying out their mission and accorded "utmost respect to the figure of the priest".

If this is true for several experiences shown in this special issue, it is noteworthy to mention that alternative visions emerged in other contexts in the same period: as an example, at the beginning of the 1990s the international movement "Wir sind Kirche", which was particularly strong in German-speaking areas, advocated gender equality access to ordained ministries for women and the overcoming of the division between clergy and laity. Although it has not been officially recognized by ecclesiastical authority, it adds more complexity to

the plurality of Catholic voices that should be encompassed when analyzing these phenomena.²⁴

Interestingly, the above-described submissive attitude was sometimes conceived as subversive, insofar as it was likely to subvert the mundane logic of power. The Filipina Henrietta de Villa, interviewed by Mercier, connected her refusal to command priests with the teaching of Jesus (“the last shall be the first”). From her perspective, it was by becoming humble servants that, paradoxically, women’s influence would grow. Women’s ability to disarm male domination was publicly expressed by Celina Pineiro-Pearson in 1952. Núñez Bargeño notes that in an address to the 1200 WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Women’s Organizations) delegates gathered in Rome, she denounced “the incapacity of men, because of their violent nature, to achieve true peace and, thus, the need to include women to accomplish this fundamental task”. The value of the feminine approach to responsibility was theorized by Adriana Zarri in 1964, in her book *Impazienza di Adamo*. As Maravaglia notes, she “expressed a critical view of typically male activism, enhancing instead female qualities such as acceptance, openness and listening”. In the mid-1980s she reworded this intuition, advocating for the integration of “the dominant ‘masculine’ attitudes leaning toward activism and efficiency, with the ‘alternative’ and ‘feminine’ qualities of ‘welcome’ and ‘contemplation’”. In the beginning of the 1990s, Sister Ann Mary Walsh, appointed communication director for the Denver WYD, adopted the “so called male mindset to make the event work” while emphasizing her “maternal side”, which would have led her to “humanize”, better than men, WYD organization by paying attention to people, especially the more vulnerable.

Given these provisions, and although Mercier’s and Béraud’s contributions illustrate the experience of Catholic feminists who demanded equality in access to priestly ordination, the feminism of most of the Catholic women mentioned in this special issue does not appear to be structured by the objective of obtaining the same statuses as men. It is interesting to note in Mercier’s contribution that it was on anti-feminist positions that Mother Angelica, a US nun and founder of the conservative television station EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network), sought to establish her influence on American Catholicism in the mid-1990s. In most of this issue’s *herstories* (to borrow a word used by Núñez Bargeño) women adhered to a differentialist feminism, which proclaimed the equal dignity of men and women, while postulating a complementarity between the two genders. The Catholic institution itself encouraged this feminism, at the risk of essentializing cultural constructs and implicitly maintaining

²⁴ Wegan, “Wir sind Kirche”, 645-65.

women in their traditional roles as mothers and wives. This is particularly evident in Tesson's analysis of Cardinal Garonne's interpretation of the proclamation of Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena as Doctors of the Church. His valuing of the feminine way of teaching went hand in hand with a belief in women's unfitnes for theorizing, which is evident in these words quoted by Tesson: "They would not be at ease in a doctrinal presentation where one must make abstraction of one's self, of others, of life, to order ideas logically". The same devaluation of women's intellectual skills, hidden by a discourse of the superiority of their maternal function, can be found in the conservative Catholic press of the time. Cardinal Garonne and a part of Catholic opinion seemed blind to the historical reasons for the intellectual marginalization of women within the Catholic Church.

The special issue shows, however, that since the 1950s, the Catholic Church has promoted women in certain areas. Both in Núñez Bargeño's contribution, focused on the pontificate of Pius XII, and in Mercier's, focused on the pontificate of John Paul II, the Catholic hierarchy put forward women in the field of international relations and public relations. In this, these papers complete an observation that had already been made in the field of national politics concerning the Interwar period.²⁵ This partial promotion as a precise Vatican strategy was probably based on the representation of women as having a vocation to be mediators, like the Virgin Mary. But this choice can also be explained by other tactical considerations - taking into account the strength that Catholic women represent on a global scale - or by communication strategies inspired by logics of tokenism.

This dynamic led to feminine empowerment, as shown in the path taken by Celina Pineiro-Pearson, an Argentinean social worker who became Vice President of the WUCWO. Like other women leaders of ICOs, she "traveled extensively, collaborating with other women and men across the globe and across different denominations". According to Núñez Bargeño, "Catholic women in positions of leadership in ICOs became humanitarian and apostleship experts". The same can be said of Filipina Henrietta de Villa who climbed the ladder of responsibility from president of an association of Catholic women who washed liturgical dishes and linens to Philippine ambassador to the Holy See.

Several of the collected contributions show that the promotion of women within the Catholic Church was linked to the fact that, when they found themselves, sometimes by accident, in leadership positions, they appeared competent in the eyes of the Catholic hierarchy. Núñez Bargeño notes that the record of ICOs' female leaders changed the view of part of the hierarchy and the Roman Curia. In

²⁵ Della Sudda, "The Women's League of Catholic Action".

the French Catholic parishes of the 1980s studied by Béraud, female leadership was often the result of a lack of available men. But once in place, bishops recognized the abilities of these women, sometimes valuing them more than priests. One of the women interviewed by Béraud reported her what her bishop said: “Now that I’ve seen how you work, I would not dismiss my pool of laywomen because the feedback I get is that you work at least as properly as a priest!”. However, this woman was not convinced that she would not return to the fold if there was an influx of presbyteral vocations.

We wish that the various contributions gathered here, which paint a nuanced picture of the evolution of the place of women in Catholicism since the 1950s, will allow us to better grasp the historicity of gender discourses and practices within the Catholic Church. We hope that this special issue, which testifies to the numerous transnational connections that are being established among researchers working on the history of contemporary Catholicism, will help to further highlight the changes but also the continuities in Catholic women’s experiences as well as the extent to which they have influenced Catholicism as a whole.

Lastly, we would like to thank Daiana Menti for her editorial work on this issue.

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