



# The Fight for Women's Rights in the Church: Historical Urgency or Race to the Bottom?

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In 2017, shortly after the *#MeToo* Movement began denouncing violence against women in the secular world, the feminist movement became a prophetic voice also within the Church. Several ecclesiastical initiatives have been responding to the wound and the suffering produced by structural discrimination against women. By March 2020 there were already public demonstrations in the streets in support of the dignity and equality of women in the Church.

Without pastoral intelligence, it is impossible to grasp the regenerative potential of these movements. Just as working for peace or for integral ecological conversion are areas in which the Church's social teaching has much to say, so also the feminist perspective can help us to rethink from top to bottom how we organize and how we celebrate our faith more fraternally.

Today, after more than five years of experience, including a pandemic, the Catholic Women Council (CWC) has consolidated into a global network. It has named and criticized the abuse and inequality that women experience within the Church. It has called for a halt to the cover-up, the misogyny, and the unjust subordination. The organization's steady work has given its members vision and experience. In this process, women have forged a strong network of mutual support based on an attentive and prayerful attitude. The feminism of believers expresses a model of Church that experiences faith in the depths of the world, not in a risk-free laboratory. From what other place can we Christians build the Kingdom of God?

Little by little, the feminists in the Church have achieved recognition outside the institution, so that secular femi-

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nists also count on them in their struggle. Moving back and forth between these two realities has placed these women on an uncomfortable path, but they have not abandoned it and they have made themselves heard. They have asked significant questions in the public square: What is the meaning of the gender distinction when assigning functions and roles? Beyond the patriarchal tradition, what determines that women are better at caring occupations and that men are better equipped to lead the community?

A major challenge arises from the recognition that women and men are basically equal. There is much work to be done in reconceiving the self-image of women within the Church. Much training and awareness is needed to avoid perpetuating inequalities. Feminism is synonymous with mobilization, but it also involves serene reflection and scientific study. It is not easy to promote a cultural change and a change of mentality. We must unlearn clericalism and return to the essence of the Gospel. We need an anthropology that overcomes the received teachings about male-female complementarity and that stresses the dignity and the rights of all as equals.

One of the principal merits of these movements is that they have understood that vindicating the rights of women in the Church is a long-distance race. In this way it is like the unending defense of human rights: it is always urgent and always unfinished. These processes require time and not just one-day demonstrations. Nevertheless, going out into the streets helps to make the conflict visible, and it inspires hope that we can win the struggle as a community of believers.

It is not always easy to maintain confrontation and resolve a latent conflict.

The exhaustion and frustration experienced within the Church have turned it black and blue. The feminists have dedicated themselves to listening to the victims of sexual abuse and also to the victims of the abuse of power and conscience. They have taken responsibility for amplifying all those silenced voices. They have been able to engage in conversations that create discomfort. Their own difficult situation has helped them to remember the dignity and intrinsic freedom of all beings created in the image of God.

Constructive criticism is an element that makes them more genuine. They are women within the Church, and they support the Church in its various functions and community services. Their commitment, generosity, and solidarity make them a voice that is authoritative and credible. They set an example by their words and their actions. They are dedicated to dialogue, encounter, and debate. They want a Church that communicates well and that is transparent in all that it does.

And they have lived and worked the same way. The feminist church movements join together in networks, establishing a beautiful mutual complicity. We have seen this, for example, in the "Women Believers Raise Their Voices" movement in Catalonia, which maintains close links with the "Women's Revolt in the Church" movement in Spain and with the Catholic Women's Council around the world. Feminists are open to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, always ready to listen to believing women of other confessions. They understand that there is a fundamental cultural battle in which they are all involved. This has given them oxygen that keeps them open

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and helps them to avoid the danger of being self-referential. Their networking has also given them the strength they need to meet greater and more complex challenges and to persevere on the long path of social transformation. Sorority encourages them to continue fighting, and it reminds them that the effort is worth it.

The tone with which they respond to the call is quite praiseworthy. They do not defend themselves as embittered victims. They propose vital and dynamic actions. They engage in a loving struggle that seeks to build relationships based on trust and not control. Their message may be difficult to understand for those who equate authority with hierarchical superiority.

They have successfully forged their own agenda, which has found a place in the universal ecclesiastical agenda. Recent years have seen many conferences and debate forums discussing feminism in the Church. Well-argued books and articles have been published on the presence of women in governance, and there have even been plays starring the women who are closest to the transformative experience of Jesus' passion. In their protests, they have exercised their memory, and they have known how to interpret history. They have valued solidarity between generations, and they have recognized the positive ecclesial influence exercised by so many Catholic women, deaconesses, abbesses, and mystics over the centuries.

All these witnesses and studies improve the ecclesiastical narrative, which is often conformist and monochrome. They provide valuable examples of credibility for an institution whose credibility has been greatly eroded in the public sphere. They are clearly a committed,

self-critical collective, eager to grow and to help the Church grow. They want participative bodies to be more than consultative: they ask for a voice and a vote in all decisions that affect them as a believing community. They want leadership to be shared in a spirit of co-responsibility, and they work for renewal of obsolete structures. Their demands inevitably involve access to all ordained ministries without distinction of gender.

To help achieve this, they ask that there be a thorough review and interpretation of texts with a feminist perspective, and they hope to see more women in ecclesial training, both in seminaries and theological faculties. Another demand of theirs, and not a minor one, is for greater transparency and ethics in the economic management of parishes. They want to know who holds the key to the cashbox. Gradually, they have been laying the foundations for a new form of governance.

It must be admitted that their mission coincides with a favorable ecclesial context. Pope Francis has promoted the practice of synodality, which calls for charting paths together. Synodality brings us back again to the importance of fraternity that is always inclusive and welcoming. Today the voices of women are recognized, and women's protagonism has been central in the Synod debates. This has been happening in local churches around the world, from Korea to Australia, from the United States to Mexico and Brazil, from Ireland to Switzerland and the Czech Republic.

That is why the feminist appeal to the Church should not be understood as just another struggle for power in a specific sector. Rather, it requires soul-searching reflection on the very notion of power.

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Through shared reciprocity and service, we can recognize all our talents and put them into play. We can overcome the misogyny and machismo that claim that only men can represent Christ in the priesthood. A new perspective is required, one that is based on the essential dignity that baptism grants to all the baptized, but also on the respect and equality practiced by Jesus in his dealings with all men and women.

How can a sense of “historical urgency” be communicated when it comes to gaining equality between men and women in the Church? We know that the secular world must also heal many wounds and continue to advance in this area. The Church as institution has the authority to get involved in social action and to care for the most vulnerable persons. Why can it not also be an example of ecofeminist transformation by being converted to equality and applying a more radical solidarity?

If we want to revitalize the Church, we must promote this cultural change. We have the opportunity to become a more proactive community with a greater capacity for listening and for dialogue that will minimize the departure of so many people who feel excluded. The photograph will be more complete if we are all there. How is it possible that there are still some people who do not miss a significant part of the community?

This kind of co-protagonism becomes tangible when more voices are included

in the main ecclesial forums. For the first time, the Synod on synodality has had the active participation of 84 women, 54 of whom are able to vote. Although they are a minority and serve as a symbol, it is a step forward. Another step forward was the methodology and format of the round tables where the conversations took place.

Ecclesial feminism involves duties. It is evident that resources must be allocated for better training if women are to prepare the ground for shared leadership. Space needs to be opened up for pastoral governance, preaching, and celebration by those women who are already prepared and feel this call. At the same time, it would be advisable to carry out an in-depth study to analyze how the discourse about this movement is evolving in the public sphere, both in general and in Church publications. This would be a good way to confirm that women in the Church are an authorized and recognized voice, both inside and outside the home. They are capable of generating content, opinion, and thought in all the groups, workshops, and conferences where topics of common interest are discussed. Continually growing in awareness is the responsibility not only of the feminist movements, but of the entire community of believers to whom they appeal.

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