

## Postcolonial Catholicism

### A U.S. Feminist Perspective

The most important new thing in the world of Catholicism is not the election of Pope Francis. The most important new thing is that lay (and a few clerical) Catholics around the globe are quickly waking up to the stark reality of a church run amok and taking the lead to reverse course. A Latin American pope is no guarantee of a postcolonial church, but empowered people who change behavior are. By postcolonial church I mean one that despite its deep roots in a kyriarchal system with all of the sexism, class, race oppression, heterosexism, and the like that comprise it, is structured for full participation and committed to the common good. Progressive U.S. Catholics seek this model based on a theology that has very porous edges.

I realize that this is not the media-sensation that the election of the Argentine Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio created on March 13, 2013 when he became pope. Nor is it the stuff of glitzy headlines that have followed his election when he has articulated seemingly progressive positions in interviews, chosen to live simply, and leave aside the red shoes. He stands in stark contrast to his two immediate predecessors. But the real story, in my view, is of the many people who have voted with their feet, leaving the colonialist institutional church (if not always the Catholic community) in droves. Former Catholics are now the second largest denomination, after current Catholics, in the United States. The story gets fascinating when one examines the commitment of many other Catholics to bring about the deep structural changes needed to construct a postcolonial church.

I read this situation from a U.S. perspective. I am subject to the vagaries of the U.S. press as well as to my own assumptions about church and state that emerge from a late modern, feminist, queer perspective. Admittedly, I am not objective in these matters. Moreover, I read the unfolding of things Catholic as a Catholic, a dynamic and ever evolving term. While some might question my Catholic *bona fides*, I claim my rightful place among the baptized and my duty to shape the faith tradition of which I am a part according to my best insights.

Three substantive issues in Catholic life — marriage equality, feminist ministry, and reproductive justice — reveal why I am ambivalent at best about the papacy of Francis contributing to a postcolonial church. Some may argue that Jesus, salvation, and the Eucharist are more definitive of the faith tradition. But most people do not feel any impact of their adherence or lack of it to Catholic teaching on those score, but they do experience real consequences related to the ones I focus on. In each case, the kyriarchal model of authority and decision-making results in the continued oppression of large groups of people. The Roman Catholic hierarchal church, as distinct from the church itself that I take to be the larger community of faith, acts as a political force to hinder

change both within its circles and where possible beyond in the social/political order. Catholic bishops try to be major players on the political scene without much success.

With fourteen states and the District of Columbia already in the plus column, and the Internal Revenue Service leading the way on federal tax rights for all married people, a rapidly growing consensus in the U.S. is developing on marriage equality. This dynamic is repeated in many countries around the world, including the Pope's native Argentina where he strongly opposed it. When it was clear equal marriage would pass there he jesuitically proposed civil unions so as to get some compromise. No such luck. Nonetheless, the U.S. Catholic bishops continue their efforts to roll back the tide by working in conjunction with the National Organization for Marriage, the group with whom they worked successfully to nix same-sex marriage in California that was later restored by a decision of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Ideology is one thing; individual bishops are free to express their opinions like any other citizen. But the expenditure of tens of millions of dollars of church money on lobbying efforts about which rank and file Catholics have no input is quite another. This is the power issue related to ordination since only those ordained can make decisions. We want a horizontal, democratic church in which many people would participate.

The bishops' cautionary tales about the end of marriage as we know it are put to rest as more and more people are acquainted with married same-sex couples and the sun comes up the next day. But the continued use of church money to turn back the tide is simply unacceptable both on the issue and as a practice. Governance by a few is outmoded. Moreover, the rampant priest pedophilia cases and their cover-up by bishops who long moved offending priests to new assignments rather than seeing to their prosecution has weakened the hierarchy's authority. It has resulted in more than 3 billion dollars in legal, counseling, and other fees and a loss of credibility.

In this case, any claim to have moved beyond a colonial model at the highest levels of church is simply bogus. But the hierarchs' views and efforts do not seem to matter as momentum for equal marriage grows. So the whole church evolves despite its leadership squandering money that could be better used to feed the hungry and change policies that cause hunger in the first place. Nonetheless, the structural problem that permits the unfettered decisionmaking of funds gathered from the laity remains to be solved.

It will be increasingly difficult for local bishops to stonewall, as it were, on queer issues given perhaps the most famous papal pronouncement thus far. In an airplane interview en route home from the 2013 World Youth Day gathering in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (July 29, 2013), Pope Francis surprised the world by saying, "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" But whether he actually meant that he agrees with the growing social consensus that is consigning heterosexism to the dust bin of history with racism, slavery, sexism and other forms of oppression is less important than the fact that the process is well underway without him. The media stir created by his welcome question was prepared for by decades of Catholic pro-sex activism by groups including DignityUSA, New Ways Ministry, Fortunate Families, Catholics for Marriage Equality, and others. This is what I mean by a postcolonial church — not waiting for the hierarchs to move but being church ourselves.

Feminist ministry is a second cluster of issues on which no real change seems likely. Pope Francis rejected the ordination of women to the diaconate or priesthood in the same press conference. His charm offensive with reporters on the flight from Rio on

same-sex love simply did not extend to anything having to do with women. Note that while the use of the term “gay” was considered novel, there was no mention of lesbians, bi, or trans women in his famous line about judgment. Women do not seem to be on his radar screen in any meaningful way.

While for Francis other issues seemed more fluid, open to conversation, he insisted, “With regards to the ordination of women, the church has spoken and says no. Pope John Paul [III] said so with a formula that was definitive. That door is closed.” Obviously it is not closed as more and more women engage in ministries that are priestly by any measure, and fewer and fewer men gravitate to the priesthood. So change is afoot in Catholic ministry. The question is whether it will be a continuation of the same inadequate, colonial model of priesthood in which only those ordained, women and men, have decision-making power on expenditures of money, celebration of sacraments, use of church buildings. Or will it be something more democratic and effective with base communities and other expressions of subsidiarity called for in Vatican II?

One possible scenario is that the institution in its seeming largess, which in this case is really its desperation, will “allow” women to enter a clerical, celibate, hierarchical priestly ministry. There is some suggestion that women may be allowed to be deacons soon. That would be a very smart move on the part of the hierarchy in that it would co-opt women into service and, in my view, a very foolish women on the part of women to accept because it would effectively keep the monarchical model of church in place. Another, in my view more palatable, possibility is that Catholics may come to recognize the many ways in which women are already attending to the pastoral, sacramental, educational, and administrative needs of the community. The communities will recognize their own right to make decisions about property, resources, Eucharist, leadership, and the rest. Ordained ministry will simply die out as competent, well-trained women and men opt for a postcolonial, empowering style of ministry. It is anyone’s guess as to how long this will take to materialize but the diminishing number of priests makes it look inevitable.

The crux of the matter is who decides such things. Many people look to Pope Francis to see what he will do about women priests. That gaze, in my view, is misdirected. The issue is how communities will organize themselves despite the last gasps of the hierarchal church to impose its clerical model. What is so seductive about the current situation is that even if Francis et al. were to “allow” women to be priests, a remote possibility but ironically in the kyriarchs’ best interest if they want to conserve the status quo, they would still maintain the very structures of authority and decision-making that prevent women at present from being recognized and paid for their work. The net gain would be more priests, more enthusiasm for the priesthood as such because it would be open to both men and women, and heroic standing for the dear gentlemen who “permit” this seemingly major change to occur. That is a recipe for religious colonialism that may well be used. The Roman Catholic kyriarchal institution has existed for two thousand years for a reason: they win if they say yes and they win if they say no.

One real change would involve women cardinals who would be decision-makers. Since cardinals were not always ordained (Canon Law in 1917 changed the custom but it can change back) so there is no reason why women cannot be named to the body whose fundamental task is electing a successor to the pope. While this would not shake the foundations of a top-down system, it would signal that women’s participation is needed for wisdom and discernment not only for liturgical or ministerial legwork that the

shrinking clergy pool can no longer accomplish. It would be a small step in the right direction.

Meanwhile, the work of the Women's Ordination Conference continues along with the Roman Catholic Women Priests to prepare the community for women's leadership and equip women to minister. WOC does lobbying and organizing. RCWP does training and ordaining of women priests in valid but illicit ceremonies according to their claims. Some women are also ordained in the Old Catholic and American Catholic Churches. The Women-Church Convergence persists as the coalition of feminist groups rooted in the Catholic tradition creating new space and new models of church. Those base communities celebrate Eucharist and engage in justice work. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the many active women's religious orders live out contemporary modes of vowed religious life. Taken together with other feminist efforts to lobby, teach, and organize, there is ample evidence of women's ability to be church despite the hierarchy in new, refreshing, ecumenical and interreligious ways.

I would be remiss not to mention the authoritarianism manifest in the control exerted over women religious. In the United States in 2009, the Vatican ordered an Apostolic Visitation to ascertain more about the lives and commitments of women in 400 active canonical communities whom authorities assume are not living in strict compliance with kyriarchal rules. This process, akin to a grand jury investigation, presumes a problem and goes about trying to find and resolve it. Results of the investigation have not emerged; among the ground rules was that the communities being investigated would not have access to their information gleaned about them. But the process was so invasive and disruptive, even if some of the actual meetings were cordial and informative, that it looms large as evidence of authoritarianism.

The sisters were not consulted. The investigation was simply foisted on them. They were able to make only minor changes in the process, for example, successfully rejecting the requests for extensive financial reporting. But in the main, even if the results are never revealed, the process itself served to remind the nuns that they are beholden to an authoritarian government. It also functioned as a way to divide and conquer women since it was carried out by women religious from conservative communities that are now held up as exemplars of the future of religious life. But it also had the happy result of bonding some women more closely with one another both within and among communities in the face of a common threat. It also brought so-called religious and secular women closer together in solidarity. These are common results of authoritarianism wherein the oppressed find one another and their allies.

A similar doctrinal investigation of the U.S. Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the organization that gathers leaders of women's religious congregations for education and networking, took place around the same time. The dynamics are the same — Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith officials, uninvited and unwelcome, looked into the group's positions on issues including same-sex love, the ordination of women, and *Dominus Iesus*, the teaching that salvation comes only through Jesus. One more time the heavy-handed long arm of canon law is exerted to control women. LCWR leaders had no say in the matter of launching such a probe and are likely to have less say in the outcome. Authoritarian regimes ask no one's permission and few people's pardon.

The unhappy result of that intrusion was that the LCWR was found guilty as charged by the bishops and is now in the process of being "reformed." That means that

the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has assigned Archbishop Peter Sartain and two other bishops to "oversee" the organization, essentially in business terms putting it in receivership. Since it was chartered by the Vatican there seems to be no legal — moral is another question — recourse. So the women's organization is now expected to submit speakers, programs, publications, and agenda to the men for approval. This will last over a five year period at which point it is presumable the Vatican will decide if LCWR can continue on its own or not.

There is a conservative rival group of women religious already in existence, the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (CMSWR) founded in 1992 by some women who felt the LCWR was too progressive. It is allegedly made up of women whose median age is 35 (LCWR represents groups whose median age is more in the 70+ bracket), who wear habits, live in convents, and reportedly are growing in numbers. A good guess is that they will replace LCWR as the preferred group. But these aggressions against American nuns portend dire consequences for women religious in other countries.

This concern about Roman authoritarianism is what motivates my own caution about an uncritical embracing of women's ordination as a solution to Roman Catholicism's woes. While there is every reason to acknowledge and encourage feminist ministers who work in parishes, prisons, hospitals, and universities, the structural problems that accrue from having a few people, even including a few women, set aside in positions of power give me pause. Of course if there are to be some who make decisions for the whole community women ought to have the right to be among them. But I fear from historical example that including women only expands the pool of those who can "lord" it over others while in no way undermining the kyriarchal structure. What is a feasible alternative?

Given the vehemence with which the Vatican responds to challenges to its presumed authority, there is no easy route to change. Its well-known allergy to democracy shows no signs of abating. However, as the world watches successive dictators of the Mubarak and Qaddafi ilk being challenged by their contemporaries, there is every reason to think that the Vatican's grip on social, ecclesial, and economic power can be loosened and will ultimately be broken by active resistance. The question is really how to mobilize women and laymen to resist clerically driven authoritarianism.

Reproductive justice is a third area in which the stark contrast between a colonial approach and a postcolonial one is vivid. In a subsequent interview, published in sixteen Jesuit magazines worldwide (September 30, 2013), Pope Francis said, "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods." Rather he tried to broaden the institutional church's agenda and make it more attractive to people who have many choices in the spiritual arena: "The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow." It sounded great.

However, a day after the Jesuit interview appeared, the same pope spoke to Catholic doctors reiterating the inflammatory analysis that his predecessors employed on abortion: “Every unborn child, condemned unjustly to being aborted, has the face of the Lord, who before being born, and then when he was just born, experienced the rejection of the world. And every elderly person, even if he/she is sick or at the end of his/her days, bears in him/herself the face of Christ. They cannot be discarded!” It was familiar rhetoric that surprised no one except that Pope Francis had so recently said that emphasis on a few of what theologian Daniel C. Maguire called “pelvic zone” issues needed to be changed. Well, which way is it, Francis? Obviously he has to please a large constituency. The Catholic right wing is quite unhappy in the first year of a more progressive papacy. But that women once again bear the burden of theo-political jousting is patently unfair.

There is no hint of women’s moral agency in the pope’s remarks. He has simply parroted the same sentiments of his predecessors when it comes to women: “the fact remains that it is the woman who conceives, carries in her womb and gives birth to the children of men. And this is not simply a biological matter, but carries a wealth of implications for the woman herself, for her way of being, for her relationships, for the way in which we lend respect to human life and to life in general. Calling a woman to maternity, God entrusted the human being to her in an altogether special manner.”<sup>1</sup> It is language vexed by outmoded anthropological assumptions, as if men did not have responsibility for children, and fraught with a biologicistic determinism long rejected by postmodern women. Pope Francis does not seem to understand which is why Catholic women have to speak out.

There is no acknowledgement of the complex circumstances in which good people make hard decisions to abort pregnancies. There are the seeds of judgment and condemnation that motivate some churches to erect tombstones near their entrances to remind people of their position on this difficult matter. So any hope for real movement by the institutional church on reproductive justice would seem to be misplaced. Local bishops’ conferences can take heart from such papal statements and continue their interventions in the political order, which they do with decreasing effectiveness.

The faithful witness of groups like Catholics for Choice and their international partner groups tell the changing story of reproductive justice. The Brazilian *Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir* published a challenging letter on the occasion of the pope’s visit there outlining their hopes for a new church. They express as well as anyone the vision of a postcolonial church:

Catholic women as we are, we want to live a faith that brings freedom and not condemnation, threat or fear. We respect and admire your gestures in the simplicity of welcoming people. Thus, we had hoped that as Pope you would bring fresh air to the Church, as did John XXIII. That as Pope you would bless all families, both hetero and homosexual; that you would understand that a positive experience of motherhood or fatherhood does not result from the biological possibility of generating life, but from the capacity to love, respect and educate a child. That is why we read with sadness your first letter to the Catholic people reaffirming the heterosexual form of union as the only expression of true love. When will the Church be open to the real diversity of ways of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Fox, “Francis: ‘Women called to service, not servitude’”, *The Catholic Reporter*, October 13, 2013. Website: <http://ncronline.org/blogs/francis-chronicles/francis-women-called-service-not-servitude>.

loving and expressing human sexuality? When will it understand that there is a huge universe of possibilities of fulfillment for a human being?

We want a new Church. A Church in which women are acknowledged for their own merit, for their autonomy in leading their lives freely; Acknowledged as community leaders, with full access to priesthood and fully part of the decision making process; A Church which esteems the religious communities of women who evangelically work for the poorest sectors of our country. We wish them to be respected and admired for their audacity and generosity. We want a Church in which celibacy is not mandatory and the running of communities is a decision made by all the faithful, both male and female.

We want a new morality for human sexuality and reproduction that acknowledges the moral value of the decision by Catholic women to discontinue a pregnancy. Research data indicate that the majority of women who undergo an abortion in Brazil are Catholic. May they do it not despite their faith but supported by their faith, with the certainty that God understands them, as one of them put it after an abortion. Keeping abortion illegal has led thousands of women to death. Our lives have been misused politically as a bargaining chip for the purpose of ensuring electoral victory. The Church must struggle against this type of situation. This is the fight for life that the Church must embrace.

Yes, we want a new Church, one that abandons the ambition for power and wealth and becomes bold in its commitment towards its internal renewal and towards social justice and peace.<sup>2</sup>

This letter lays out the agenda at hand from the perspective of women who struggle in a country whose laws and politics have been deeply influenced by hierarchal Catholic power. Their vision of a postcolonial church is authentic and feasible. They make clear that issues related directly to women seem to be the most challenging when it comes to the church change, an important clue about why it continues to be so important to focus a feminist lens on this community.

In advance of the 2014 Synod on “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization,” the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, issued a rather extraordinary invitation on October 30, 2013 to the whole church: “The synodal reality is manifested with the most effective participation of the world episcopate under the governance of the Holy Father, who wishes to strengthen it for a better exercise of collegiality.” The Catholic Bishops’ Conference for England and Wales (CBCEW) immediately launched a survey to find out from their dwindling community what people think about family-related issues. Other dioceses would be well to follow their lead.

Initial excitement in the U.S. church that a similar survey might be forthcoming was high. Might this really mean a change in method, a move toward true collegiality among members? Hopes were dashed quickly. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops immediately countered with the notion that “usual procedures” would be followed, that is, that they would report as they wished without necessarily consulting anyone, and certainly without the widespread polling that an online survey would generate.

Progressive lay groups developed their own survey instruments so the Vatican will get data from the U.S. church despite the bishops’ recalcitrance. But what astonished many

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<sup>2</sup> “We want a new Church! Open Letter from Catholic Women to Pope Francis,” *Católicas pelo Direito de Decidir*, July 18, 2013. Website: <http://www.catolicas.org.br/artigos/conteudo.asp?cod=3976>.

people was that the bishops would so brazenly co-opt a process that could be a step in a decolonializing direction. It raises the specter that perhaps such consultation had been sought in the past but was simply not mentioned to the larger communion. One happy consequence of increased communications is that such actions as the bishops' do not pass unnoticed. In addition, the Vatican will receive data from progressive Catholics who will collect it by simply bypassing the bishops rendering the bishops unnecessary to the good order of the community.

In addition to the lack of any discernable changes on the three issues I cited, another dynamic, namely the substitution of personal for structural change, stands in the way of progress. Pope Francis is admittedly a breath of fresh air after John Paul II and especially Benedict XVI who were hardliners on doctrine and simply not as personable. Of course "John Paul II, We love you" was a popular chat during his papacy, but the Polish pontiff was positively stiff compared with the naturalness of Bergoglio's Latin American baby kissing, mate drinking, and ease with people with physical and mental illnesses/disabilities. Francis, from choice of name to place of residence, from plain shoes to folksy phone calls is a much more appealing public figure and a much more convincing religious one.

However, none of this amounts to more than a cosmetic difference without the aforementioned structural and doctrinal changes coming about. And worse, the very personal affability that is so attractive on the surface can obscure the fact that nothing significant has changed structurally. The "good Pope Francis" serves only to reinforce and reinscribe the power of the papacy as a central, authoritarian role rather than, at best, a symbolic reminder of the unity of all Catholics. Moreover, those who are critical of the papacy in this iteration run the real risk of being seen as negative on a nice man, a man who refuses to judge except when he does or allows those who are responsible to him to do so. Hence, the task of unmasking the papal power structure becomes far more difficult. But that is what it takes to bring about a postcolonial church.

It is hard to blame Catholics who have endured more than thirty years of hardline, authoritarian leadership when they respond positively to a friendly face, a warm personality, and a person who lives simply. But it is a mistake to confuse these welcome changes with a postcolonial church. History is replete with the stories of beneficent monarchs. But the consistent witness of committed Catholics to bring about marriage equality, feminist ministry, and reproductive justice is the unmistakable proof that something quite other is going on.

Progressive Catholics like myself have welcomed same-sex marriage as a minimum threshold for justice. But we are convinced that friendship is more foundational than marriage for a new world order. Likewise, while we expect women to be ordained if men are, we are far more committed to abolishing the clergy/lay distinctions and creating egalitarian communities in which all baptized adults take responsibility for ministry. Furthermore, while we consider accessible, affordable, legal contraception and abortion to be human rights, we struggle to provide sex education, even more effective contraception, adoption rights, education, health care, and jobs for women to bring about reproductive justice. We do this because of, not in spite of our faith. They are achieved in concert with people around the world who may or may not share any religious beliefs but whose commitments to the common good mirror ours. Then we can claim that we are beginning to bring about a postcolonial church.