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Divisions over pope's effect in focus at religion academics' meeting

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If Pope Francis wants to speak genuinely about his concern for the world's poor, he must also address stark issues of inequality faced by women globally, Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister told a crowd of religion scholars, teachers and clergy here Saturday.

Citing figures that indicate women represent approximately two-thirds of the world's illiterate population and two-thirds of those suffering from hunger, Chittister said, "Someone, somewhere has decided that women need less, women deserve less and women are worthy of less than men."

"Pope Francis has won the heart of the world by being humble, simple and pastoral -- a warm and caring face of this church, a man like Jesus who is a man of the poor," she said. "But no one can say that they are for the poor as Jesus was and do nothing, nothing, nothing for the equality of women."

Chittister, a well-known author, *NCR* columnist and former leader of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, spoke Saturday at a session at the annual meetings of The American Academy of Religion and The Society of Biblical Literature.

Held Nov. 22-26 at sites across downtown Baltimore, the meetings saw approximately 15,000 teachers, scholars, clergy and others gather for some 1,000 events over the five-day period.

Chittister spoke at one of several events during the meetings focused on what effect Pope Francis has had globally on Catholicism, religion and society worldwide since his election to replace Pope Benedict XVI in March.

At question at several of those sessions was whether the new pontiff can be seen as standing in line with his predecessor, who did not share Francis' more friendly public persona and was seen by some as more doctrinally conservative.

Evincing a sharp contrast among other analysts Saturday was George Weigel, the well-known biographer of Pope John Paul II who spoke with Chittister as part of a five-person panel dedicated to "Pope Francis and the State of Global Catholicism."

Saying that the first months of Francis' papacy have been "a kind of Rorschach test," Weigel said Catholics have seen in the new pope "their dreams or their fears with a clarity and conviction that frankly has little to do" with the pope's actions.

Giving 10 points about Francis' style and preferences -- calling him, among other things, someone who is a "radically converted Christian disciple," a person respectful of popular expressions of piety, and a "man of the arts" -- Weigel said the pope stands in "essential continuity" with his predecessors, John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Francis, Weigel said, will be the pope who completes a "dramatic historic transition" in the church from a focus on the 15th-century Council of Trent to the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

Outlining an arc of history leading to Pope Francis, Weigel said that transition was a "process of dynamic development" begun by Pope Leo XII in the 19th century and "accelerated by Vatican II and its authoritative interpretation by John Paul II and Benedict XVI, whose pontificates set the stage for Pope Francis and with whom his pontificate will be in essential continuity."

Richard Gaillardetz, a leading academic who heads the nation's largest membership society for Catholic theologians, took issue with Weigel's description of Francis' continuity with his predecessors at another panel discussion focused on the pope later Saturday.

Gaillardetz, who is the Joseph Professor of Catholic Systematic Theology at Boston College and serves as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, spoke at a panel hosted by the College Theology Society -- another membership society for theologians -- and said he had rewritten his remarks after hearing Weigel's description of the new pope.

Gaillardetz said Francis' approach to the papacy represents a significant change in trajectory.

Since the end of the 19th century, Gaillardetz said, popes have frequently focused on being the "chief doctrinal czar" of the Catholic church, responsible for issuing authoritative statements on what Catholics should and should not do.

Beginning in the 1960s with Pope John XXIII, that role of the papacy has shifted to where the pope found himself needing to be someone who can persuade people about the teaching of the church rather than just handing down doctrine, Gaillardetz said.

"This is why it seems to me we can't simply speak of Pope Francis' continuing seamlessly what his predecessors have begun," Gaillardetz said. "Because I think Francis now marks in many ways the end of that trajectory where we think of papal teaching primarily as normative pronouncements of the teaching of the church."

Referencing a wide-ranging interview the pope had with an Italian Jesuit priest earlier this year, printed in 16 publications [1] the order run around the world, Gaillardetz said such interviews are a "new form of papal teaching."

"We can certainly see real continuity with his predecessors," he said. "But I think we have to see also a genuine new development in the papacy -- I think the latest stage in what I hope will be a continued trajectory towards a papacy that can serve the unity of faith and communion in the church by recognizing in the modern world juridical degrees are going to need to be the exception rather than the rule."

Chittister too mentioned the pope's Jesuit interview, drawing specific notice to the pope's call in it for the church to "work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman."

"Who will do this reflecting?" Chittister asked. "The same clerical patriarchal types who have been doing it for the past 2,000 years?"

"The church has never defined women as fully independent beings, let alone adults," Chittister said. "Will there be simply another round of men do this and women do that: a dual anthropology that sees women as caregivers alone and men as world builders exclusively?"

The sessions about Francis were just a few of dozens at the religion meetings that touched on Catholic issues.

Earlier Saturday, the religion academy's group dedicated to those studying the Second Vatican Council dedicated two and a half hours to seven separate papers on the impact on the council's reforms of the Catholic liturgy.

One of the presenters there was Jonathan Tan, a senior lecturer at the Australian Catholic University, who focused on struggles communities in places like the Philippines and India have had in addressing concerns that the Catholic Mass does not do enough to incorporate local customs.

Some Catholics in those places, he said, feel an "an alienation with the church's liturgy which does not align with their hopes and needs."

Other sessions focused on the nature of authority in the global church since the council, experiences of African-American Catholics, and the future of Roman Catholic studies at public educational institutions.

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