Vatican



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Mary McAleese, the former president of Ireland, has called on Pope Francis to develop a "credible strategy" to include women at every level in the Catholic Church's global structure, saying their exclusion from decision-making roles "has left the church flapping about awkwardly on one wing."

McAleese, speaking at the annual Voices of Faith event March 8, said the church "has long since been a primary global carrier of the virus of misogyny."

"Today, we challenge Pope Francis to develop a credible strategy for the inclusion of women as equals throughout the church's root and branch infrastructure, including its decision-making," she told a packed crowd in a small hall at the Jesuit order's Rome headquarters outside the Vatican's walls but on the city-state's territory.

McAleese, who led Ireland from 1997 to 2011 and is pursuing a doctorate in canon law at the Pontifical Gregorian University, said she wanted "a strategy with targets, pathways and outcomes, regularly and independently audited."

"Failure to include women as equals has deprived the church of fresh and innovative discernment," she said. "It has consigned it to recycled thinking among a hermetically sealed, cozy male clerical elite."

Voices of Faith is an annual women's storytelling event in its fifth year. This year's event attracted more attention than usual after McAleese and the group's organizers criticized the Vatican for reportedly withholding permission for three of its speakers, including McAleese.

Organizers said the decision about the speakers was made by Irish-American Cardinal Kevin Farrell, head of the new Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life.

At a book launch event earlier in the month, Farrell said events held within the Vatican are "presumed to be sponsored by the pope" and people assume "the pope is in agreement with everything that is said."

He said after being told "what the event was about, it was not appropriate for me to continue to sponsor such an event." But Farrell said while he could not sponsor the event, the church is "always open to listening and we are always open to dialogue."

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McAleese began her talk by acknowledging that the reforms of the Second Vatican Council have opened up new roles to laity in the church.

She said many of those roles "have simply marginally increased the visibility of women in subordinate roles ... but have added nothing to their decision-making power or their voice."

McAleese said the church's ban on the ordination of women, articulated by Pope John Paul II's 1994 apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, "has locked women out of any significant role in the church's leadership, doctrinal development and authority structure since these have historically been reserved to or filtered through ordained men."

"How long can the hierarchy sustain the credibility of a God who wants things this way, who wants a church where women are invisible and voiceless in church leadership, legal and doctrinal discernment and decision-making?" she asked.

McAleese's speech seemed to represent a shift in strategy for Voices of Faith, which in past years has taken a notably careful tack. While the event has occasionally touched on issues of exclusion inside the church, words like "ordination" and "sexism" have largely been avoided.

One of the organizers for the event said at a press conference March 7 they had decided to allow the Vatican to exert a certain amount of control over speakers in its first four years as a way of establishing themselves and attracting interest around the world.

Lesley-Anne Knight, former secretary general of Caritas Internationalis and a consultant to Voices of Faith, said the group feels like it is better-known now and can strike out on its own.

"Initially, enabling women's voices simply to be heard in the Vatican from a very wide diversity was probably key," Knight said. "In those initial years, there was also a control, and we knew that. We knew that was part of it."

"I think the moment has come where we felt there was sufficient support to Voices of Faith from a huge diversity of women for us to say, 'This is the moment where we will no longer be silenced,' " she said.

"It doesn't mean that there wasn't a protest at the time," she said. "But I think we felt establishing Voices of Faith was important enough for us to toe the line to a certain extent to this moment."

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Several of the other speakers at the press conference expressed hope that the Catholic Church will ordain women in the future.

British theologian Tina Beattie said the church "has gone down a catastrophic cul-de-sac in trying to provide coherent theological arguments against the ordination of women."

"Because I have great faith in the Catholic tradition, I don't think the church remains stuck in cul-de-sacs, and I have no doubt that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the better arguments will prevail, and women will be ordained in the church," said Beattie, a professor of Catholic studies at the University of Roehampton in London.

Nivedita Lobo Gajiwala, an Indian woman raised by a Hindu father and a Catholic mother, said her parents had not baptized her as a child because they wanted her to make her own decision about her faith. She said she decided not to be baptized, even though she had gone to Catholic school and appreciated the religion.

"I just didn't see myself in the ordained leaders, and I didn't see myself in the rules and rituals," Lobo Gajiwala said. "It felt very different from the reality that I'm chasing as a young woman."

"I was chasing agency and autonomy and empowerment, and it felt like these celibate men were making my decisions for me, decisions about family planning and domestic violence and sexual abuse ... when they didn't have my experience as a young woman in the world," she said.

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