News



Top: Kerry Robinson (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz); Cecilia González-Andrieu (Flickr/LMU Library). Bottom: Joan Rosenhauer (JRS); Arlene Montevecchio (St. Mary's College).



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Women's inroads as leaders in the church and society is to be celebrated, but there is still much work to do so that churches, businesses and governments can benefit from the gifts and talents of half the human race.

So say speakers tapped to share their wisdom on the topic of women's leadership at the second Women of the Church conference, scheduled for Oct. 18-20 at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana.

"The entire future of the global Catholic Church depends on women," said Kerry Robinson, founding executive director and global ambassador for the Washington, D.C.-based Leadership Roundtable, which promotes best practices and accountability in Catholic Church management and finances.

Women are "an underutilized resource," Robinson told NCR. "Promoting talented, faith-filled, exemplary leaders is a matter of managerial and moral urgency."

Robinson, who will speak on "Women, Leadership, Decision-Making, and the Church" at the conference, said tying leadership to ordination hinders the church from making the best decisions and carrying out its mission.

"We need more women in decision-making," she said, noting that diverse leadership leads to better decision-making.

Leadership also was the focus of the first conference, hosted in 2016 by the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana, in partnership with St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. It was organized as a response to Pope Francis' call for a "more incisive female presence" in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel").

The upcoming conference is meant to respond to the signs of the times, said organizer Arlene Montevecchio, director of the Center for Spirituality at St. Mary's College.

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"Women's voices are rising all over the world," Montevecchio said. "We want to look at women's leadership as a source of strength in the Catholic Church and in society as well."

Despite the contributions of individual women, including women religious, "looking at the bigger picture, the leadership of women has been eclipsed by the leadership of men," said Joan Rosenhauer, executive director of Jesuit Refugee Service/USA in Washington, D.C.

And clericalism has led to a "warped" understanding of leadership, she said. "The idea of servant leadership, which is so clearly at the heart of being a disciple of Christ, got lost," Rosenhauer told NCR.

Instead, some clergy see ordination as a path to serving their own advancement, desires and comfort — protecting themselves, or the church, at the expense of the most vulnerable, she said.

The current focus on fighting clericalism, in response to sexual abuse and cover-up in the church, has put attention on lay leadership, including that of women, said Rosenhauer, who will speak on "Challenges and Opportunities: The Role of Women Leaders in the Church and Beyond."

Yet advocating for women's leadership is not about the institution or preserving it, but rather about how to organize to best do the work of the church, said Cecilia González-Andrieu, associate professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

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>
> —Cecilia González-Andrieu
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"The church needs to be organized for the work, not the other way around," González-Andrieu told NCR. "It's not about how we divvy up power, but rather looking at how do we take care of the vulnerable."

Her talk, "#MineToo: Why Robust Women's Voices Are Indispensable to the Church," will draw on liberation, pastoral and feminist theologies as well as Ignatian spirituality.

"It is our church, too," she said. "We are not interlopers. We are not latecomers. We are not peripheral. And if we are the church, we need to do the work of the church."

That involves working not only for "human flourishing," but "planet flourishing" by focusing on the most vulnerable. "That is always Jesus' priority," she said.

The work of the church "isn't about teaching doctrine or wearing lace or having liturgies and speaking Latin," she said. "It's about who is hurting, and how does God's love reach them."

And the Holy Spirit does not figure out who has an X chromosome or a Y chromosome when calling people to building the reign of God, she said.

"There is work to be done," González-Andrieu said. "And we are here to do it."

For more information or to register for the conference, visit www.womenofthechurch.org.

[Heidi Schlumpf, NCR national correspondent, will be a panelist at the Women of the Church event. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]