Opinion
Vatican



Pope Francis meets with 850 superiors general May 10, 2019, at the Vatican, who were in Rome for the plenary assembly of the International Union of Superiors General. The organization represents more than 450,000 sisters in more than 100 countries. (CNS/Vatican Media via Reuters)



by Jamie Manson

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There was a new episode last week in a saga that has been brewing for the past year between the "two popes" and their supposed ideological differences.

In this latest installment, retired Pope Benedict XVI apparently co-authored a book defending the Catholic Church's teaching on mandatory celibacy. It was an action that some interpreted as an expression of dissent against Pope Francis, who may be considering opening ordination to some married men in regions of the Amazon where clergy are scarce.

This latest contrarian move comes after Benedict penned a letter, in April 2019, blaming clergy sex abuse on the social and political upheaval of the 1960s. He released the missive less than two months after Francis held an unprecedented global summit on the crisis in February 2019.

The whole kerfuffle erupted into a farce of he said, he said, with high-ranking men in cassocks lying and lobbing all kinds of accusations at one another. Benedict's co-author, the super traditional Cardinal Robert Sarah, claimed that the pope emeritus agreed multiple times to joint authorship, even as recently as late November. Benedict's longtime secretary, Archbishop Georg Gänswein, insisted he didn't and, in fact, the pope emeritus is too infirm to have participated in any of this.

A host of other contradictory statements was unleashed from the book's publisher, and even the wily Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, a prelate who has made sowing seeds of division an artform, weaseled his way into this theater of the absurd, insisting that Gänswein was manipulating the retired pope.

I'm not going to lie, I did find some delight in watching these very powerful men get pitted against one another, both in the media and in the hotbed of gossip that is the Vatican City State.

Typically, it's women who get pitted against one another. Whether it's in Hollywood, business, the academy, the arts and even motherhood, feuds and drama between women are fomented to give the false impression that women are dysfunctional, can't work together, and are constantly in conflict with everyone around them.

This method of dividing and conquering women is particularly insidious in the Catholic Church, where a small, elect group of men devise absolute norms about who women are, what they are capable of, and what they can and cannot do. But their simplistic understanding of women holds a lot of sway, and those ideas inevitably pit women in the church against each other.

For example, there is this sense that the good and obedient woman loves her church and wouldn't dream of making life uncomfortable for the men in charge, while the angry, malcontented woman only wants domination, glory and honors.

One can see it in the question about women deacons. Women who want to be deacons simply want to serve, the narrative goes, while women who want the priesthood have a lust for power.

These divisions, which are the result of theologies created by and for men's benefit, make it hard for women to have a united front, even in a church where they have no voice, no influence over doctrine and no decision-making authority.

But rather than clutching my pearls at this fiasco of dueling popes — or perhaps it's more accurate to say dueling papal factions — the whole situation has me dreaming dreams.

The church is in a remarkable position, one that it hasn't been in for centuries. We have a scenario that is akin to the rise of an anti-pope.

As most of us remember from high school history class, during the Western Schism, which began in 1378, there was a pope in Rome and an anti-pope in Avignon, France. But there was also a second anti-pope who took up residence in Pisa, Italy. The first Pisan anti-pope was Alexander V. He died early in his reign and was succeeded by another anti-pope, who, believe it or not, took the name John XXIII.

There have been more than 30 antipopes in the Catholic Church's history, and they typically had factions behind them who questioned the validity of the election of the pope in Rome.

Regardless of how cognizant Benedict is of what is going on around him, he has a vocal, well-oiled faction of radically traditionalist Catholics who do not accept the authority of the current supreme pontiff.

This widening fissure in the church is, of course, what comes with vesting one man with absolute, unchecked, quasi-divine power.

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So perhaps it's time for a new kind of second anti-pope. But this time, not one single man, but a union of all of the women of the church.

A Chinese proverb says, "Women hold up half the sky." It's fair to say, women hold up a lot more than half of the Catholic Church. Think about it, women make up 52% of the more than 1 billion people in the church, and in the United States alone, 85% of church positions are held by women. So, we've got the numbers. If women walked away from the church for one day, the whole enterprise would be thrown into chaos.

What if we used that leverage, stormed the Vatican (peacefully, of course), and initiated the friendliest of hostile takeovers of this fine mess that men have gotten us into?

At the Amazon synod, we heard many accounts of how women are singlehandedly keeping the church alive, going to the remotest places of the Amazon to evangelize, despite constant threats of violence and exploitation of their work. Clearly, they have the strength and wherewithal to step in and take over the ship.

What if the 1,350 sisters in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious went into the Vatican and initiated their own kind of apostolic visitation? In the same way the bishops stepped in, in 2012, to monitor and control LCWR, perhaps it's time for the sisters around the globe to step in and regulate this papal situation gone awry.

Centuries ago, when women religious arrived in what is now the United States, they had showdowns with pirates, ascended mountains and crossed prairies to seek out this country's neediest and build countless schools and hospitals. To this day, nuns around the world intrepidly go places few dare to go, facing war, disease, deprivation and other unspeakable horrors.

With this kind of legacy, can these women renew and remake all things in this almighty mess that is the Vatican? They may be the only ones up to the task.

I mean, think about it. If we continue to let men have all the power, what is it going to get us? Married male priests? We'll still have to answer to men. Some kind of diluted deaconess role that gives women more work and a modicum of authority? We'll be shamed into being grateful for that miniscule change and not push for more.

Last week, Pope Francis received worldwide acclaim for making a woman an undersecretary at the Vatican Secretariat of State — an office she had labored in for 27 years. If this is the course we are on, it's going to be a slow boat to equality. We all know the church can't wait that long for justice.

Really, think about it. These men are no match for us women. We prove that truth every day in parishes and campus ministries, outreach programs and charities, hospitals and clinics, schools and universities, and, yes, even in the Catholic media.

So why does my dream sound so absurd?

Because centuries of sexist doctrine — which not one woman had a voice in creating — has worked so deeply in us that it is unimaginable that we could step in and take the reins.

And that is what needs to change if we are really ever going to change the church.

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