Opinion
Vatican
Guest Voices



In this 2017 file photo, Pope Francis speaks during his annual pre-Christmas meeting with top officials of the Roman Curia and members of the College of Cardinals in Clementine Hall at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Claudio Peri)



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July 28, 2020

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Last week, La Croix and The Tablet both reported on an interview with the president of the French bishops' conference, Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort. During the interview, he envisioned that "the Holy See will one day be led by the Pope surrounded by a college of cardinals in which there would be women."

The Rheims archbishop's musings reminded me of many years ago when I was much younger, and older Catholics were first daring to discuss the ordination of women.

Invariably the debates about the probability of ordained women surrendered to the question of whether such ordination was possible. Here arguments against the possibility were raised by invoking pervasive misogyny, local cultures, theology, canon law, the Bible and even the intentionality of Jesus at the last supper!

After exhausting a host of objections to the possible, invariably a senior in the room would suggest, "Why not make women cardinals?" This often prompted quizzical stares from mostly everyone, but the clever proponent would remind them that until recently there were, indeed, lay cardinals. "They didn't have to be ordained," the proponent would expertly conclude.

It was only a hundred years ago that the "new" Code of Canon Law (1917) decreed that cardinals had to be ordained. Before that they were either from the laity or the ordained, though clearly the majority were the latter.

Ordination was introduced, in part, to correct abuse in the appointment of cardinals. For instance, in 1735, Pope Clement XII made Luis Antonio de Borbón, son of King Felipe V of Spain, a cardinal, he was 8 years old. Ordination would give some surety that the person was an adult and theologically educated.

In 1983, the code required that cardinals be bishops.

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We should not think, however, that these laws negated the possibility of popes making lay cardinals. While we can rarely know what a pope intends to do, until he

discloses it, there have been fairly consistent reports that Pope Paul VI wanted to or actually offered to make the French philosopher Jacques Maritain one, and later that Pope John Paul II offered the appointment to Mother Teresa. Both persons reportedly declined the offer.

Moreover, in 2013 on these pages Jesuit Fr. Frederico Lombardi, director of the Holy See's press office, commented that women cardinals were "theologically and theoretically … possible." Like my seniors 50 years ago, he added, "Being a cardinal is one of those roles in the church for which, theoretically, you do not have to be ordained." He said this, however, to quell speculation that a woman would be among those named for the next consistory.

Why should women cardinals matter?

Like the discussions 50 years ago, the Rheims archbishop's comments remind us of a variety of ways that the laity in general and women in particular can and should exercise authority and leadership in the church. He entertained the question of women deacons, but he was much more interested in the diversity of leadership roles in the church that were not being filled by the laity nor especially by women whether religious or lay. Thus he noted that he was "completely flabbergasted" that non-ordained religious brothers could vote at the Synod of Bishops' meetings, but women could not.

Reminding us that the ordained "are in principle neither more learned nor closer to God than the laity," he added, "The voice of all the baptized laity, from the moment they try to embrace Christianity, should be able to count as much as that of the clergy."

Then he turned to the question of competency: "Nothing prevents them from holding many more important functions in the workings of the institution, with everything being a matter of competence."

Ah, competency! The question of leadership in the church too often defaults to the question of ordination, a dumbfounding mistake inasmuch as ordination simply does not bestow such competency for leadership, though it does recognize and confirm the capacity to preside at certain sacraments. Pope Francis' insistence on a servant priesthood is a helpful addendum: Orders is fundamentally a sacrament for a vocation of service.

When it comes to competency for leadership, the sacrament does not give to those what they do not have. By the sacrament of orders, a priest or a bishop does not become more able to lead an office, a parish, a department at an episcopal conference, a state or national conference, a confraternity, a Catholic non-governmental organization, a dicastery or a congregation. Clergy do not gain such competency by orders.

The appeal to having women cardinals, then, is a case in point. The pope shortly after his election created a cabinet of eight cardinals whose judgment he wanted to regularly summon. If he is looking for competent judgment, could there not be women in that group? If women could be cardinals, should not they be in his inner circle of confidants and advisors?

I always find the topic of women cardinals energizing. As it did 50 years ago and as recently Moulins-Beaufort illustrated, the topic provokes us to untether the question of competency from orders and allows us to see as Paul told us the variety of gifts within the church.

That untethering is long overdue.

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