Opinion
News



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Perhaps you heard about the Baptist preacher in Missouri who used his Sunday sermon to remind wives of the need to lose weight and "not let themselves go."

"Now, look, I'm not saying every woman can be the epic, the epic trophy wife of all time, like Melania Trump — I'm not saying that at all," the not-underweight pastor preached last month. "But you don't need to look like a butch, either!"

He has since taken a leave of absence and is seeking professional counseling, according to the church's website.

At least Catholic women don't have to put up with such blatant sexism from men in our church, right?

Wrong.

Just a couple weeks after the Baptist minister gave his unsolicited makeover suggestions, two Catholic authors and radio hosts took to the airwaves to complain about how men have been emasculated by feminist women and liberal culture.

"Catholic men, in particular, are brainwashed to think that Jesus Christ was a nice guy and that your job is to imitate him," said Patrick Coffin, formerly of Catholic Answers, an organization dedicated to apologetics.

Instead, men should not be afraid to "ruffle feathers" and assert their authority, especially in the hierarchy of the family, in which the man—the "household priest" or "the bishop of the home"—is at the top of the pyramid, Coffin and Timothy Gordon counseled the more than 11,000 viewers on YouTube. Sometimes physical violence may be necessary, they hinted, while ruminating on Jesus' use of a whip while cleansing the temple.

Among the evidence of the problem of "effeminacy," according to these two, are: the expression "We're pregnant"; girls' sports; the belief that men and women can be friends; NFL players wearing pink to bring attention to cancer research; men who wear condoms; men who wear masks to prevent coronavirus spread; and man caves, because they limit men's expansiveness in the whole home.

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"Men need to be the leader, and the culture needs to come from the men. You're setting the big goals, as the leader," said Gordon, adding later: "Women are meant to be docile. They're created to follow the household order of their husband."

Quipped Coffin: "Men and women are not equal. That doesn't even make sense."

Coffin even criticized St. Pope John Paul II, who "muddied the waters" by emphasizing mutual submission among husband and wives.

Only slightly more obvious than their insecurity and homophobia was the fear of women that permeated the hour-and-a-half conversation. It would be laughable, except that it reveals a whole subculture in our church of folks who truly believe this stuff. Among the questions in the comment section: whether a certain conservative Catholic journalist should be staying home with her kids (She "is single and can work," Gordon responds), and "When do we band together as a militia over this COVID nonsense?"

I was grateful to be asked by the church reform group FutureChurch to speak about the issue of women and Catholic media for their "Women Erased" series this week. Perhaps because I am only the second female top editor in NCR's history — and because building my team has been such an important part of my first year as editor — I decided to focus on whether Catholic media include diverse voices on their editorial staffs. Spoiler alert: most don't, especially at the top, and we're even worse on racial/ethnic diversity.

Progress has been made, of course (and props go to U.S. Catholic magazine for having the largest percentage of women on their staff), but as I noted in the talk, having women on the editorial staff is not the only way to center women, women's voices and women's issues in our publications. How we cover things is just as important as who covers them, although an organization with few women in the room when those decisions are made is likely to do a poorer job of covering women and women's issues.

I also referenced a similar talk I had given 16 years ago, in which I noted that fear was the biggest deterrent to a prophetic Catholic press. Then, editors were fearful of repercussions, especially if they wrote anything that suggested support for women's ordination or rights for LGBT people. This was under the pontificates of John Paul II

and Benedict XVI.

Of course, an independent publication like NCR has always had the freedom to cover all the news, but today the media landscape has changed. Now, in addition to diocesan publications and mainstream Catholic publications that are connected to religious orders or other parts of the institutional church, there are myriad media empires that are answerable only to their donors — usually right-wing donors. And thanks to the internet, pretty much anyone can hang out a shingle and call themselves a "radio host" — like Coffin and Gordon.

The blatant sexism and homophobia is no longer couched in officiousness or clericalism: It's right out there, asserting that women are merely sex objects, as the Baptist preacher was proud to say while being videotaped, or that we are subordinate baby-making machines, as Coffin and Gordon suggest.

Lord, have mercy. There is still so much work to do.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 2-15, 2021** print issue under the headline: Sexism: It's still a thing, unfortunately.