Opinion
Guest Voices



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A famous Zen koan asks: What is the sound of one hand clapping? A contemporary spiritual riddle might inquire: What is the sound of a woman leaving? Neither has an answer. There is only silence.

I reentered Catholicism with some trepidation, overpowered by a longing I could not name. Intellectually, I understood that what had exiled me in the 1980s had not changed. Popes come and go but misogyny remains entrenched. I came back anyway, drawn by light through stained glass, by music both beautiful and inspiring, by pews filled with goodhearted people who reflected our city neighborhoods, not just in ethnicity and color but in shades of gender, sexuality, physical abilities and gifts. In the decades of my absence it seemed the church had gotten much right.

But not the whole gender equity thing. On that the hierarchy remains frozen. Intransigent. Unyielding. Unhearing.

I entered in the autumn months, among displays of departed loved ones commemorated through the month of the dead. And I returned amid conversation which harkened some movement on the issue of women's equal dignity and participation. A deacon proposed reviving the dialogue around female deacons. I attended a preliminary meeting but soon became uncomfortable with both the inadequacy and inequity. Why such incremental change? Why not full and immediate recognition of women's equality? Why do we continue to placate, to cater to embedded misogyny within a church to which we look for inspiration, enlightenment?

From that initial meeting sprang a coalition of women who asked these questions aloud. At the time it felt liberating, exhilarating. A flurry of activities and meetings unfolded; plans were proposed and refined. Then COVID-19 hit and we retreated to our screens.

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Over time and distance further shifts occurred. A merger of parishes distinct in outlooks and practices, a new pastor charismatic and unyielding in his opposition to our goals. Our group statements and announcements were censored, no longer welcome in the parish bulletin. We were encouraged not to be "disruptive" to parish unity. And over time our voices muted, demands softened to polite entreaties. The focus became education, not action. We sponsored presentations on the historical role of women in the church. This was more palatable, more easily digested by those uncomfortable with change.

With the overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade*, pro-life announcements crept into our liturgies, enjoying full access to the bulletin. Despite the overwhelming opposition to the Supreme Court ruling by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, despite its tragic and highly publicized impact on women's lives, no one raised objections. In the name of conciliation and non-offense, the women's group softened its rhetoric. Once again we discuss the possibility of female deacons. Someday. Somewhere down the historical road.

In the current synod on synodality, ostensibly convened to consider a "new way of being church," we are asked to imagine this can be accomplished without considering women's equal and full participation. Instead we are encouraged to take heart that the more than 50 invited women "will be allowed to vote for the first time in any such meeting."

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If such incrementalism is not adequately demoralizing, consider the question posed by the Vatican in its guide for synodal discussion, *instrumentum laboris*. Circumventing the question of women's equality and full participation, i.e., ordination, it poses only the possibility of inclusion in the diaconate, asking, "Is it possible to envisage this, and in what way?"

In so framing this discussion, the clerical hierarchy reduces their vision of a "new way of being church" to a familiar two-dimensional landscape with no significant change on the horizon. It is archaic, degrading to half of humanity. And it is a classic stall technique. The men (and the approximately 50 women "allowed") are not there to reconsider the institutionalized subordination of women. Instead they gather to

discern whether equality is even "possible to envisage." In the 21st century.

This is where I entered, and where I exit.

It is a painful departure. Again. I miss the stained glass, the soaring music, the goodhearted people gathered in faith. But I am a mother of two daughters, grandmother to two granddaughters. My conscience cannot reconcile a church that refuses to recognize their full equality in the eyes of a loving and equitable God. This is not a matter for endless discernment. It requires atonement and redress in our lifetimes.

We will never know how many women departed in sorrow and demoralization. We leave no footprints; we slam no doors behind us. What is the cry of the women lost? As evanescent as the sound of one hand clapping.

Related: On eve of synod, women's ordination advocates hold vigil at Rome's Basilica of St. Praxedes

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 27-Nov 9, 2023** print issue under the headline: What is the sound of a woman leaving the church?.