Opinion
Guest Voices



A crane lifts the upper section of a statue of Pope Leo XIV in "El Niño" park in Callao, Peru, Nov. 6, 2026, ahead of his planned trip. (RNS/AP/Guadalupe Pardo)



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Pope Leo had some interesting things to say in South America recently, including a few comments about machismo, that have circled the globe.

He laid it on the line:

> Recognition of human dignity also requires that we effectively promote the presence, respect and participation of women. Their contribution to every sphere of society and the Church is indispensable. It is sad to see that machismo persists, manifested in the absence of fathers from family life, in abuse and violence against women. This mentality disregards the newness of Christianity, which recognizes and proclaims that men and women possess equal dignity and responsibility.

This from the pope who made no comment when, in December 2025, the head of Pope Francis' second commission on women deacons sent Leo a letter stating that women could not represent Christ. Fully half of the commission disagreed, but the so-called "Petrocchi report" (named for the commission chair) includes the following:

> The masculinity of Christ, and therefore the masculinity of those who receive Holy Orders, is not accidental, but an integral part of sacramental identity, preserving the divine order of salvation in Christ. To alter this reality would not be a mere adjustment of ministry but a rupture of the

nuptial meaning of salvation.

The letter's argument ultimately rests on "the nuptial meaning of salvation," a concept Catholic and Orthodox theologians use in relation to the priesthood, not the diaconate. Pope Benedict XVI changed canon law in 2009 to match the basic truth published in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: The diaconate and the priesthood are separate and distinct orders.

Benedict was an elegant theologian well capable of writing a document barring women from the diaconate. He did not.

The Petrocchi letter weakly attempts to link the priesthood, barred to women, with the diaconate, to which women were ordained for at least a thousand years. Rather than seriously consider years of published research and the submissions to the synod on synodality, the short and lightly footnoted letter is an exercise in patronizing mansplaining with more than a whiff of misogynistic machismo.

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Leo had already said in October 2025, in response to the leader of the European Synod Team, that the problem with women in church management and ministry was cultural. For sure, the culture of clericalism cannot be denied. Despite some prominent bishops, even cardinals, agreeing that women can be ordained as deacons, the well-recognized infection of clericalism has spread to every corner of the church's decision-making.

How long before the clerics whispering "schism" understand that as long as the church says — in one way or another — that women are second-class citizens, machismo and worse will run rampant through every culture in the world? How long will published church documents continue to demean women?

Leo says good things:

"I would like to renew an ardent appeal, not only to my brothers and sisters in the faith but to every man and woman of good will: Let us value women! Let us protect and respect girls!”"

The people may be listening. But what about the clergy?