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Abuse cases show need for greater women's role

by John Thavis by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- A greater presence of women in decision-making roles in the church might have helped remove the "veil of masculine secrecy" that covered priestly sex abuse cases, a front-page commentary in the Vatican newspaper said.

The article said that despite calls by popes and others for welcoming women into equal, though diverse, roles in the church, women have generally been kept out of positions of responsibility.

As a result, the church has failed to take advantage of the many talents and contributions that could have been provided by women, it said.

The article, published March 10 by *L'Osservatore Romano*, was written by Lucetta Scaraffia, an Italian journalist and history professor who has been a frequent contributor to the Vatican paper in recent years.

As an example of what the church has lost by not taking advantage of women's contributions, Scaraffia pointed to the "painful and shameful situations" of sexual abuse by priests against the young people entrusted to their pastoral care.

"We can hypothesize that a greater female presence, not at an inferior level, would have been able to rip the veil of masculine secrecy that in the past often covered the denunciation of these misdeeds with silence," the article said.

"Women, in fact, both religious and lay, by nature would have been more likely to defend young people in cases of sexual abuse, allowing the church to avoid the grave damage brought by these sinful acts," it said.

Scaraffia used the Italian word "omerta," a term that refers to the Mafia's code of silence, to describe the

secrecy surrounding the sex abuse cases.

The article cited statements by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI in support of a greater presence of women in the church, not in the ordained priesthood but in roles that are important.

The problem is that these theoretical statements have not been put into practice, it said. In reality, women continue to be generally excluded from decision-making roles in the church, it said.

The article said religious orders have long understood better than other church institutions the importance of reciprocal cooperation between men and women, as seen in the fact that most orders have male and female branches.

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