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Pope Francis, women and 'chauvinism with skirts'

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

In the six weeks since Pope Francis' election, those who have followed him in the media have been treated to a series of tantalizing headlines about his promising views on women.

The wave of excitement began during Holy Week, when Francis washed the feet of two women (and 10 men) and followed this tradition-breaking act a week later with a sermon that stressed the "special role" of women in the church.

And earlier this week, the Francis-induced spiritual high continued to soar with the rumor that Francis would be handing women a record number of positions in the Holy See.

But there has been sobering news, too. Last week, we learned that the new pope will move forward with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's mandate on Leadership Conference of Women Religious. As many will remember, last year, the doctrinal congregation accused LCWR of "a prevalence of certain radical feminist themes" and doing little to further the hierarchy's teachings against contraception, marriage equality and abortion.

So where does Francis really stand on women? Last week's publication of the English translation of *On Heaven and Earth* offers some illuminating clues. Originally published in 2010, *On Heaven and Earth* is essentially a series of conversations between then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio and Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka on issues both contemporary (like globalization and same-sex marriage) and eternal (like the devil and death).

Each topic is given its own chapter. Chapter 13 is titled simply, "On Women."

Since Francis' comments on women in this chapter run just shy of 400 words, I have included the full text

below in block quotes. (In the interest of space and focus, I am not including Rabbi Skoroka's ideas.) Although I have broken up his statement to offer commentary on specific ideas, Francis' words are presented in the same order in which they appear in the book.

In Catholicism, for example, many women lead the liturgy of the word, but do not exercise the priesthood, because in Christianity the High Priest is Jesus, a male. In the theologically grounded tradition the priesthood passes through man.

Women can't be priests, Francis argues, because their anatomies do not match that of Jesus. In this quote and throughout his comments on women, Francis echoes an ancient idea that was thoroughly developed and articulated by Pope John Paul II in his 1988 apostolic letter* "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).

John Paul II believed that while women were of equal worth and dignity to men, the differences in the physical makeup of male and female bodies were reflections of the different roles, purposes, strengths and weaknesses God intended for us. Men and women were designed to complement each other, which is why their genders must dictate their distinct roles in both church and society. Ultimately, to paraphrase Sigmund Freud, John Paul II believed anatomy is destiny. And Francis seems to agree.

The woman has another function in Christianity, reflected in the figure of Mary. It is the figure that embraces society, the figure that contains it, the mother of the community. The woman has the gift of maternity, of tenderness; if all these riches are not integrated, a religious community not only transforms into a chauvinist society, but also into one that is austere, hard and hardly sacred. The fact that a woman cannot exercise the priesthood does not make her less than the male.

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Here Francis is evoking John Paul II's notion of the "feminine genius," which argues that women have a natural, unique capacity to offer tenderness and nurture to the community. This is the reason Francis, in his highly touted post-Holy Week sermon, spoke about women's "special role" in the church. But special is not equal, which is why women cannot be priests.

It seems outside the imaginations of Francis and John Paul II that a male could offer nurture or tenderness or women could bring strength and leadership to the church. Our anatomies decide the nature of the gifts we can and cannot provide to the community.

Moreover, in our understanding, the Virgin Mary is greater than the apostles. According to a monk from the second century, there are three feminine dimensions among Christians: Mary as Mother of the Lord, the Church and the Soul. The feminine presence in the Church has not been emphasized much, because the temptation of chauvinism has not allowed for the place that belongs to the women of the community to be made very visible.

For a second and third time, Francis invokes Mary, the mother of Jesus, who according to Catholic doctrine remained a virgin until her death. Again we see the influence of John Paul II, who believed there are two dimensions to a woman's vocation: physical and spiritual motherhood and virginity for the sake of the kingdom.

It is somewhat telling that Francis reaches back to the ideas of a second-century monk to explain the three feminine dimensions of Christianity rather than lifting up the rich images of the sacred feminine that have

emerged in Catholic scholarship and spirituality in more recent centuries. He does recognize that chauvinistic tendencies have obscured women's rightful place in the church. Of course, women's rightful place in the church seems limited to some variation of mother or perpetual virgin.

Catholics, when we speak of the Church, we do so in feminine terms. Christ is betrothed to the Church, a woman. The place where it receives the most attacks, where it receives the most punches, is always the most important. The enemy of human nature -- Satan -- hits hardest where there is more salvation, more transmission of life, and the woman -- as an existential place -- has proven to be the most attacked in history. She has been the object of use, of profit, of slavery, and was relegated to the background; but in the Scriptures we have cases of heroic women that have transmitted to us what God thinks about them, like Ruth, Judith ...

Here, Francis seems to be exploring the deeper meanings behind the traditional practice of symbolically identifying the church as a woman. Women and the church have endured similar experiences of power and victimhood throughout history, Francis argues: Both are great givers of life, and both have been violated and misused.

I wonder if Francis understands the negative effects the limits placed on women's roles in the church have had on the dignity of women both inside and outside the walls of the church? Although the magisterium insists women have a "special role," the sad truth is that they still have no decision-making authority in the institutional church and no power to lead the community in sacramental celebrations. Women didn't even have a voice in the creation of notion of "feminine genius" that John Paul II and his two successors have promulgated.

Women may be valued for their maternal instincts, but ultimately it is the male hierarchy who defines and controls their role in the church. Like his predecessors, Francis doesn't seem to understand how the strict limits the hierarchy has placed on women's power inside the church has helped reinforce the powerlessness that women suffer in society.

What I would like to add is that feminism, as a unique philosophy, does not do any favors to those that it claims to represent, for it puts women on the level of a vindictive battle, and a woman is much more than that. The feminist campaign of the '20s achieved what they wanted and it is over, but a constant feminist philosophy does not give women the dignity that they deserve. As a caricature, I would say that it runs the risk of becoming chauvinism with skirts.

Francis, like John Paul II and countless critics of feminism from the past century, employs the same old misrepresentation of feminism as a belligerent imitation of male domination. ("Chauvinism" is the translation of Francis' word *machismo*.) Apparently Francis believes feminists should have been satisfied when they achieved the right to vote in the 1920s. (Is he aware of the irony that women, by virtue of their anatomies, still have yet to achieve any approximation of voting rights in the Roman Catholic church?)

In a world where women account for 70 percent of the global poor, half of all pregnant women lack adequate prenatal care, and two-thirds of the world's illiterate population is made up of women, Pope Francis wants to insist that any further fight for equal treatment under the law and equal standing in society should be understood as women trying -- like vindictive macho men in female drag -- to insist on their superiority over men.

If feminism is such a failure, what will, at long last, defeat all of the injustices that ail women in our world? Given all he has said in this interview, I'm sure Pope Francis would agree with John Paul II, who wrote, "the true genius of women," that innate, unending female drive toward care-giving and mothering, will "overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."

And, after all, who are chauvinists in skirts to challenge the opinions of men in long, flowing robes?

**An earlier version of this column misidentified the type of document.*

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