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Editorial: It's time for real authority for women in the church

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

In preparing to publish their historic 12,000-word interview with Pope Francis, the editors at *America* magazine cut an important sentence from his answer about the role of women in the church: "It is necessary to broaden the opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the church."

America editor in chief Jesuit Fr. Matt Malone explained that the sentence had been "inadvertently deleted" in a "production error." He immediately issued a statement apologizing for the omission, and the pope's sentence was added to the online version of the story. Malone also said a correction would run in the next print edition of the magazine.

NCR accepts Malone's explanation and believes that the error was simply that, an "oops" moment, a mistake made without any calculated intent.

So, what's all the fuss about? Why is that particular sentence any more significant than the rest of Francis' response to a question about women in the church?

First, as *NCR* columnist Phyllis Zagano points out, the pope is playing off an Italian expression, *non c'è spazio qui*, which essentially means "there is no room." He's saying yes, there is room in this church for women. Come, join us.

But what does he mean by that? In July, speaking to reporters on his flight back to Rome from World Youth Day in Brazil, Francis made it clear that the "door is closed" on the question of whether women should be ordained. "The church has spoken, and she said no," he said.

Instead, then and in his more recent interview with the Jesuits, he talked vaguely about the "theology of women" and the necessity of women in the church.

"I think we must go further in making the role and charism of women more explicit," he told the reporters on the plane.

"The challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church," he told the Jesuits.

If the door is closed on women's ordination, then what does he have in mind when he speaks of places of authority? Some have mused that he was hinting at appointing women as cardinals -- an idea discussed by New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan last year. Others suggest he may ordain women as deacons -- a possibility that opened up with a change in canon law in 2009 and which Chicago Cardinal Francis George has said is an open question. Surely, Francis *must* be talking about something beyond the very important, but also very limited, roles women now play in the church -- that of teacher, caregiver, social worker, music director, secretary, funeral meal planner and church housekeeper.

In the secular world, women run multimillion-dollar corporations, lead governments, go to war. Yes, glass ceilings still exist in most industries, and any study on pay will tell you women do not have across-the-board equality. But more and more, women are getting a shot at positions of authority. Women are presidents and CEOs of Catholic hospitals, charities and universities, and women religious are superiors of multinational congregations with thousands of members. Opportunities, though, in the institutional church are slim for women, and they are tired of waiting and have little patience for promises. Too often, they've heard the words but have not seen the follow-through.

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Women across the globe held great hope in this man from Argentina, this Jesuit who adopted simplicity as a fashion statement and who speaks so generously of needing to focus on the poor and marginalized. Without a specific plan, Francis risks losing many of the women he says are so essential to the future of the church.

He already has a problem with those who want ordination or nothing. But, putting that aside for the moment (which *NCR* does not do lightly), there are plenty of other stained-glass ceilings in this church that women could break if only he'd let them, starting with the diaconate. While some dismiss this as a consolation prize, others -- especially married women or those for whom a commitment to priesthood would not work -- would embrace the opportunity to minister as a deacon.

There are other changes Francis could make in the governance of the church. For example, Greg Burke, the communications adviser to the Vatican's Secretary of State, speaking Sept. 25 at the annual conference for the Religion Newswriters Association, wondered why a celibate cardinal heads the Pontifical Council for the Family. A layperson, including a laywoman, could hold that position, he said. There are other jobs in the Curia in which women could excel given a chance.

But when the pope speaks in generalizations, and when male journalists (and yes, we know there are women on America's staff) are not keenly aware they must report anything and everything he says about women, then it's hard for women to not shake their heads and say, "They still don't get it." Francis may be getting the message. His parting words to Eugenio Scalfari were a hint that the atheist newspaper editor

would be invited back for another talk, and Francis says: "We will also discuss the role of women in the church," a topic the male editor didn't raise. Francis told him, "Remember that the church [la chiesa] is feminine."

If there's room for women at Francis' table, now is the time for him to offer a real chair, with real authority.

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