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The Latin American Male Person of the Year

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Francis. Folks can't get enough of him. He's on the cover of *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and even *The Advocate*. But he's still a 77-year-old Latin American male. Will he do anything for the women of the church and of the world?

He's been photographed with girls and with old women, yet he can't seem to get his picture taken with female adults, except those whose husbands have earned two tickets to his presence.

Why?

Francis quite obviously sees the image of Christ in every person. He has complained that everything he hears about women is tainted by an "ideology of *machismo*." He even said there should be a more incisive female presence in the church.

Yet he seems hamstrung by the *machismo* he complains about. What's going on?

I'm not so sure it's all his fault. First off, no matter what Francis says or does, the Vatican is not a female-friendly place. In an era of images, the photos tell the story. When the pope celebrates Mass in Santa Marta, a barrier reef of clerics stands between him and any woman. When he sends minions to invite the poor to his birthday breakfast, they bring back four homeless men. There are precious few photos of Francis with adult women.

Weeks ago, the pope's Jesuit spokesman said the idea of women cardinals was "nonsense." Now the pope has agreed, calling women cardinals "*una battuta*" -- a joke.

Is he skating on thin Italian ice?

Francis is unquestionably the world's pastor. Christians of every stripe are agog at his embodiment of the Gospel message. But he lives and works in an all-male society with all-male managers of the billion-person enterprise of the Catholic church. That he is of Italian descent and from Argentina may not help.

Or might it? American feminism, where it takes a sharp left turn, often becomes harsh and anti-male -- almost masculine -- the kind of "*machismo* in skirts" the pope complained about. But as liberal philosopher Camille Paglia points out, in many other countries, in "France, Italy, Spain, Latin America and Brazil ... professional women seem to have found a formula for asserting power and authority in the workplace while still projecting sexual allure and even glamour."

Which might be the problem. I think Francis can accept professional women. But can the celibate male organization he heads deal on an equal basis with women who assert power and authority in the workplace, not to mention sexual allure and glamour?

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Think not? Then that might be how the concept of women cardinals became "a joke." Science tells us women in red are very sexy, and in Italy, a woman in red is often considered vulgar. Has the idea of a woman cardinal been overrun by low-level humor, developed to forestall real reform of the Curia and of the church?

Francis dismissed women cardinals, saying women should be valued and not "clericalized." I'm not so sure he was complaining about women cardinals so much as he was complaining about clericalism. The next day, clericalism turned up in his daily homily. He said a lack of prophecy in the church creates an emptiness filled by clericalism.

The lace and the cappa magna may be on the way out, but clericalism may still be on the trail of prophecy. In his August interview and in his apostolic exhortation, Francis said women must have a "more incisive presence in the church." But take a look at the English translation of the August interview on the Vatican website. The crucial sentence is missing. It seems the Vatican posted the original *America* magazine translation, which dropped Francis' call for women's "more incisive presence in the church" and which now in book form uses the milder "stronger presence" for women in the church.

There are two very important points here: 1) The Vatican has posted an incomplete translation, and 2) nobody seems to notice or care.

Or maybe they have noticed and maybe they do care. I still think Francis is the good guy in this scenario. But he cannot control everything, and image management can be a blood sport.

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