Block that metaphor

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Pope Francis hurled an annoying — even insulting — metaphor at half the planet when, in a speech before the European Parliament, he likened Europe to a "haggard" grandmother "no longer fertile and vibrant." Not sure how many grandmothers he knows, but it's pretty clear he hasn't been to the gym lately. He might meet a few vibrant grandmothers there.

OK, stand by, before we all get run over by the Francis Fan Club. He's terrific. He really is. He regularly says and does the right thing at the right time. Yet, he seems to have a blind spot when it comes to women.

It might not be entirely his fault.

Francis does not seem to have a single person coordinating his message. There is no way a professional editor in the 21st century would allow the chief executive of any corporation to use demeaning metaphors about women. Yet this "selfie" shows Francis with his foot in his mouth.

As too many people have noticed, even though Francis talks a good game, he has done nothing for the women of the church. In fact, there are still too many situations in which human beings are treated as objects — and who can then be discarded when no longer useful, due to weakness, illness or old age?

That would be from Francis' European Parliament "grandmother" speech. That would be a direct description of the way the official church seems to view women: as baby-making machines, useless when "no longer fertile and vibrant." Don't believe that? Think about all the Catholic jokes about large families. Think about all the anti-Catholic comments about state-funded contraception and abortion.
I am not complaining about Catholic doctrine here. I am merely pointing out the fact that the Vatican is about a century behind in knowing how to spread the central message of the Gospel. If Francis wants to change the world so that all persons are respected for their human dignity, so that all persons are seen as the image and likeness of God, he needs to include Catholic female human beings in the mix.

It does not look as if it will happen anytime soon. Even collapsing a few minor Vatican offices into some bureau for the laity with a woman at its head will not erase the general perception that Catholic women are not even at the low end of the totem pole. They’re simply not on it.

Men know this. Women know this. Substitute the word ?women? for ?Europe? in the pope?s speech and ponder how every woman is: ?feeling less and less a protagonist in a world which frequently regards [her] with aloofness, mistrust and even, at times, suspicion.? Every woman has suffered the bruising aloofness and mistrust and suspicion of men ? especially clerics ? well-taught that women are dangerous to their lives and livelihoods. Good Catholic women are virgins or mothers, period. And huge cadres of men see women not easily put into those boxes as temptresses and troublemakers.

The cavernous gap between what the church says and the way it appears to regard women is where the empty rhetoric falls into oblivion. Even the American member of Francis? Council of Cardinals fumbled on about how men cannot be mothers when the U.S. television program ?60 Minutes? asked about women in the church.

Francis said: ?the promotion of human rights is central ? to advance the dignity of the person.? How about promoting the human rights the church does not want to talk about? How about promoting the human rights of women, of all women, in ways both real and symbolic? Go ahead, use the ?O? word ? that would be ordination. Speak coherently about sacramental symbolism. Proclaim that women can indeed image Christ.

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The pope said a while back: ?the feminine presence in the church has not fully emerged, because the temptation of machismo has not left space to make visible the role women are entitled to within the community.? Where is that space? As Francis said about Europe, in the church great ideas seem to have lost their attraction, ?only to be replaced by the bureaucratic technicalities of its institutions.?

That is quite true. The church, unable to block its metaphors, has blindsided itself and is stalling for time with its own technical fouls. But the clock is running out.

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