

# International Women's Day address by Mary McAleese

- March 8th, 2018



*Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland, gave the following address today at the Voices of Faith International Women's Day Conference, on the theme 'Why women matter' - held at the Jesuit Curia in Rome.*

"Historical oppression of women has deprived the human race of untold resources, true progress for women cannot fail to liberate enormous reserves of intelligence and energy, sorely needed in a world that is groaning for peace and justice". *(extract from presentation by Professor Maryann Glendon, member of Holy See Delegation to the UN Conference on Women, Beijing 1995)*

The Israelites under Joshua's command circled Jericho's walls for seven days, blew trumpets and shouted to make the walls fall down. (cf. Joshua 6:1-20). We don't have trumpets but we have voices, voices of faith and we are here to shout, to bring down our Church's walls of misogyny. We have been circling these walls for 55 years since John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* first pointed to the advancement of women as one of the most important "signs of the times".

"they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons" .... The longstanding inferiority complex of certain classes because of their economic and social status, sex, or position in the State, and the corresponding superiority complex of other classes, is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

At the Second Vatican Council Archbishop Paul Hallinan of Atlanta, warned the bishops to stop perpetuating "the secondary place accorded to women in the Church of the 20th century" and to avoid the Church being a "late-comer in their social, political and economic development". The Council's decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* said it was important that women "participate more widely ... in the various sectors of the Church's apostolate". The Council's pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* said

the elimination of discrimination based on gender was a priority. Paul VI even commissioned a study on women in Church and Society. Surely we thought then, the post-Conciliar Church was on the way to full equality for its 600 million female members. And yes-it is true that since the Council new roles and jobs, have opened up to the laity including women but these have simply marginally increased the visibility of women in subordinate roles, including in the Curia, but they have added nothing to their decision-making power or their voice.

Remarkably since the Council, roles which were specifically designated as suitable for the laity have been deliberately closed to women. The stable roles of acolyte and lector and the permanent diaconate have been opened only to lay men. Why? Both laymen and women can be temporary altar servers but bishops are allowed to ban females and where they permit them in their dioceses individual pastors can ban them in their parishes. Why?

Back in 1976 we were told that the Church does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination. This has locked women out of any significant role in the Church's leadership, doctrinal development and authority structure since these have historically been reserved to or filtered through ordained men.

Yet in divine justice the very fact of the permanent exclusion of women from priesthood and all its consequential exclusions, should have provoked the Church hierarchy to find innovative and transparent ways of including women's voices as of right and not in trickles of tokenism by tapping, in the divinely instituted College of Bishops and in the man made entities such as the College of Cardinals, the Synod of Bishops and episcopal conferences, in all the places where the faith is shaped by decision and dogma and doctrine.

Just imagine this normative scenario - Pope Francis calls a Synod on the role of Women in the Church and 350 male celibates advise the Pope on what women really want! That is how ludicrous our Church has become. How long can the hierarchy sustain the credibility of a God who wants things this way, who wants a Church where women are invisible and voiceless in Church leadership, legal and doctrinal discernment and decision-making?

It was here in this very hall in 1995 that Irish Jesuit theologian, Fr. Gerry O'Hanlon put his finger on the underpinning systemic problem when he steered Decree 14 through the Jesuits 34th General Congregation. It is a forgotten document but today we will dust it down and use it to challenge a Jesuit Pope, a reforming Pope, to real, practical action on behalf of women in the Catholic Church.

Decree 14 says:

We have been part of a civil and ecclesial tradition that has offended against women. And, like many men, we have a tendency to convince ourselves that there is no problem. However unwittingly, we have often contributed to a form of clericalism which has reinforced male domination with an ostensibly divine sanction. By making this declaration we wish to react personally and collectively, and do what we can to change this regrettable situation.

"The regrettable situation" arises because the Catholic Church has long since been a primary global carrier of the virus of misogyny.. It has never sought a cure though a cure is freely available. Its name is "equality"

Down the 2000 year highway of Christian history came the ethereal divine beauty of the Nativity, the cruel sacrifice of the Crucifixion, the Hallelujah of the Resurrection and the rallying cry of the great commandment to love one another. But down that same highway came man-made toxins such as misogyny and homophobia to say nothing of anti-semitism with their legacy of damaged and wasted lives and deeply embedded institutional dysfunction..

The laws and cultures of many nations and faith systems were also historically deeply patriarchal and excluding of women; some still are, but today the Catholic Church lags noticeably behind the world's advanced nations in the elimination of discrimination against women. Worse still, because it is the "pulpit of the world" to quote Ban Ki Moon its overt clerical patriarchalism acts as a powerful brake on dismantling the architecture of misogyny wherever it is found. There is an irony here, for education has been crucial to the advancement of women and for many of us, the education which liberated us was provided by the Church's frontline workers clerical and lay, who have done so much to lift men and women out of poverty and powerlessness and give them access to opportunity.

Yet paradoxically it is the questioning voices of educated Catholic women and the courageous men who support them, which the Church hierarchy simply cannot cope with and scorns rather than engaging in dialogue. The Church which regularly criticizes the secular world for its failure to deliver on human rights has almost no culture of critiquing itself. It has a hostility to internal criticism which fosters blinkered servility and which borders on institutional idolatry.

Today we challenge Pope Francis to develop a credible strategy for the inclusion of women as equals throughout the Church's root and branch infrastructure, including its decision-making. A strategy with targets, pathways and outcomes regularly and independently audited Failure to include women as equals has deprived the Church of fresh and innovative discernment; it has consigned it to recycled thinking among a hermetically sealed cosy male clerical elite flattered and rarely challenged by those tapped for jobs in secret and closed processes. It has kept Christ out and bigotry in. It has left the Church flapping about awkwardly on one wing when God gave it two. We are entitled to hold our Church leaders to account for this and other egregious abuses of institutional power and we will insist on our right to do so no matter how many official doors are closed to us.

At the start of his papacy Pope Francis said "We need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church" words a Church scholar described as evidence of Francis' "magnanimity". Let us be clear, women's right to equality in the Church arises organically from divine justice. It should not depend on ad hoc papal benevolence.

Pope Francis described female theologians as the "strawberries on the cake". He was wrong. Women are the leaven in the cake. They are the primary handers on of the faith to their children. In the Western world the Church's cake is not rising, the baton of faith is dropping.. Women are walking away from the Catholic Church in droves, for those who are expected to be key influencers in their children's faith formation have no opportunity to be key influencers in the formation of the Catholic

faith. That is no longer acceptable. Just four months ago the Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin felt compelled to remark that "the low standing of women in the Catholic Church is the most significant reason for the feeling of alienation towards it in Ireland today".

Yet Pope Francis has said that "women are more important than men because the Church is a woman". Holy Father, why not ask women if they feel more important than men? I suspect many will answer that they experience the Church as a male bastion of patronizing platitudes to which Pope Francis has added his quota.

John Paul II has written of the 'mystery of women'. Talk to us as equals and we will not be a mystery! Francis has said a "deeper theology of women" is needed. God knows it would be hard to find a more shallow theology of women than the misogyny dressed up as theology which the magisterium currently hides behind.

And all the time a deeper theology is staring us in the face. It does not require much digging to find it. Just look to Christ. John Paul II pointed out that: 'we are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women..... Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness....As we look to Christ.... it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard and acted upon?'

Women are best qualified to answer that question but we are left to talk among ourselves. No Church leader bothers to turn up not just because we do not matter to them but because their priestly formation prepares them to resist treating us as true equals.

Back in this hall in 1995 the Jesuit Congregation asked God for the grace of conversion from a patriarchal Church to a Church of equals; a Church where women truly matter not on terms designed by men for a patriarchal Church but on terms which make Christ matter. Only such a Church of equals is worthy of Christ. Only such a Church can credibly make Christ matter. The time for that Church is now, Pope Francis. The time for change is now.