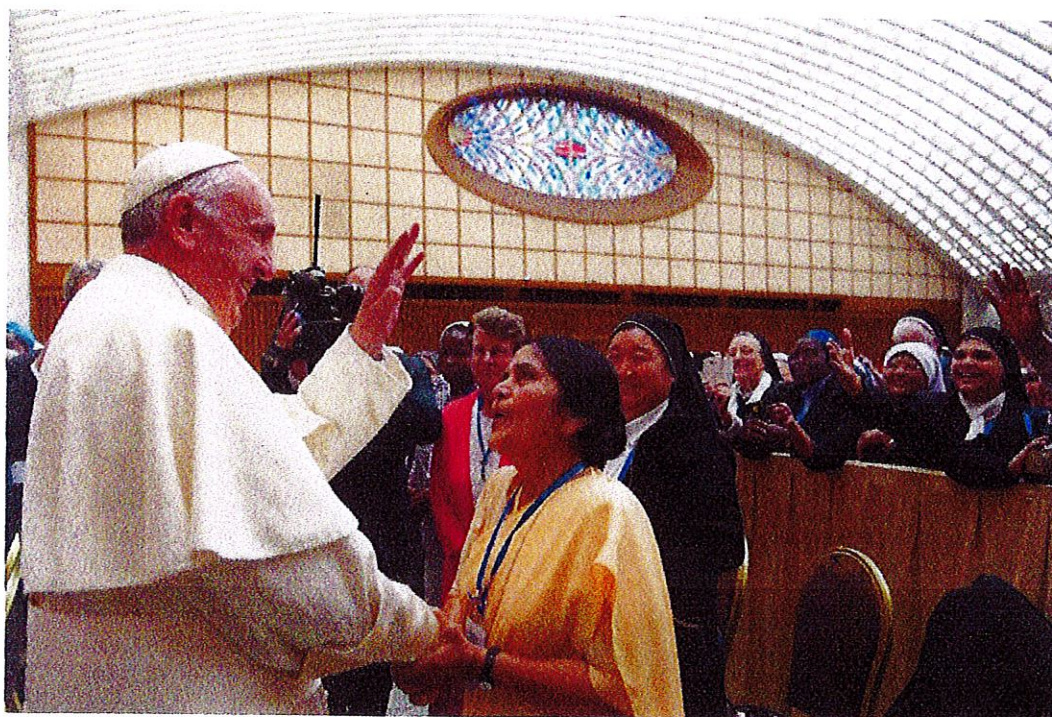


# Francis's Words about Women: What does He Really Think?

By Rita Ferone

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The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers some sage advice on how to take someone else's words. In article 2478, it says:

To avoid rash judgment, everyone ought to be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbors' thoughts, words, and deeds, in a favorable way.

To explain this, it offers a quote from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus:

Every good Christian ought to be more ready to give a favorable interpretation to another's statement than to condemn it. But if he cannot do so, let him ask how the other understands it. And if the latter understands it badly, let the former correct him with love. If that does not suffice, let the Christian try all suitable ways to bring the other to a correct interpretation so that he may be saved.

I thought about this advice when considering some of Pope Francis's words about women. As many have noted, despite his stated intention of including and promoting women, the Pope has caused no little consternation by some of his remarks concerning them.

David Gibson, writing at Religion News Service in 2014, catalogued some of these troubling comments and observed: "When he speaks about women, Francis can sound a lot like the (almost) 78-year-old Argentine churchman that he is, using analogies that sound alternately condescending and impolitic, even if well-intentioned."

Here are a few examples. After a round of new appointments to the International Theological Commission, it turned out that five of its thirty members are women. Pope Francis expressed pleasure at this increased number, but said it's not enough. We need more women theologians. *"They are the strawberries on the cake, but there is need for more."*

In an address to women in the consecrated life he said, of their commitment, "Let it be a fruitful chastity that generates sons and daughters in the church. . . . *The consecrated woman must be a mother and not an old maid (spinster).*"

When Francis helpfully said "It is necessary to broaden the opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the church," he also added *"I am wary of a solution that can be reduced to a kind of 'female machismo'"* (in Italian, "machismo in gonnella" that is, "masculinity in a skirt").

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Francis has been known to sidestep uncomfortable questions with humor at the expense of women, which has made matters worse. For example, when asked if there was a bit of misogyny in the background of his references to women mainly as wives and mothers, he joked that “woman was taken from a rib.” When asked if he would make historic decisions, such as naming a woman head of a Vatican department, he deflected the question with a “funny” stereotype: “Well, pastors often wind up under the authority of their housekeepers.” Clearly, this evasion was not funny.

In more serious utterances too, the Pope often enough seems not to notice that certain images he uses can give offense. In his speech to the European Parliament, for example, he diagnosed “a general impression of weariness and aging.” But he didn’t speak of poor old granddad. Rather, he used the image of “a ‘grandmother’ no longer fertile and vibrant.” This image of a pathetic, worn out old woman “no longer fertile” evoked a firestorm of criticism in defense of, well, grandmothers. Grandmothers do most of the work of the church, some have indignantly pointed out, and besides, infertility does not mean a woman is not vibrant.

There are two general, underlying problems which cause women (and men) to bristle at such remarks. They are not particular to Pope Francis by any means, but when he says certain things, these problems rear their heads and questions about Francis’s intentions arise. What did he mean by that? Is this what he really thinks?

The first problem is the persistence of a narrow vision of women dominated by thoughts about their ability to bear children. Joanna Moorehead, commenting on the “no-longer-fertile grandmother” remark, wrote in the *Guardian*: “The value that has been put on women through the centuries of Catholic history, from the Virgin Mary onwards, has been one tied up with their ability to bear children; de-linking them from this one-dimensional view of what it means to be female is a move that is desperately needed in the Vatican.”

Melinda Henneberger at the *Washington Post* was similarly dismayed at the thought of nuns being advised not to become “old maids.” She wrote, “I am at a loss to see how this could be other than insulting to women who’ve already given up having families of their own to serve God.”

A too narrow focus on women’s child-bearing capacity as her source of identity and value is a problem that runs deep and is anchored by papal writings in modern times. It appears in the writings of Pius XII, and more recently in the writings of Pope Saint John Paul II. The discussion of women, from Pius on, has circled around the notion of *maternity*, even when the topic is not related to bearing children, but rather on how women bear themselves in the world. When the idea of a “feminine genius” comes up in Francis’s remarks, it generally means he is borrowing from the thought of John Paul II.

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Francis, to his credit, says again and again that a “deeper theology of women” is needed. I take this to mean that at some level he knows that he *doesn’t* know what this “feminine genius” is—and nor does anybody else. Having a certain humility and realism—that is, a reflexive preference for evidence-based claims rather than deductions from a priori principles—Francis does not presume to have it all taped. He evidently *feels* deeply that women are important and he *knows* they are undervalued in the church. But when it comes to the point of saying *why* women are important and *what* is valuable about women, there is less clarity.

The second underlying problem implicit here is that women are not easily “defined” and perhaps should not be. Pope Francis is attempting to helpfully talk about “the role of women” or “the need for women” or “the place of women” in the church. Why do these efforts meet with such limited success? The reason, as I see it, is that a questionable assumption underlies the whole discussion: namely, women are somehow a mystery, a problem, an “issue.” Men, on the other hand, are merely people. We never talk about “the role of people in the church.” We never say “We need *people* in the church.” That would be ridiculous. Women, on the other hand, are treated essentially as a sub-species that needs to be accounted for somehow. Whether we do that by glowing reference to their “feminine genius” or cudgel our brains concerning why God created them, or struggle with the classic question of why God made man subject to woman (another mystery of gestation!) or why woman must be subject to man (St. Paul!)—woman remains a puzzle. She cannot just “be.” Her being itself is a problem. Most vexing of all, the attendant assumption is that we must look for solutions to the challenges she faces *not* by reference to her humanity, but by reference to a different standard: her womanhood.

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Some of Pope Francis’s statements seem like a direct expression of these deep problems. But are his thoughts concerning women held entirely captive to them? I do not think so. Other statements he has made show that his thinking goes beyond them. Francis has made significant statements about women that are deeply encouraging. Here are a few.

All talk of strawberries aside, we should not forget that Francis has said “We need more women theologians.” He has said it plainly: five out of thirty on the International Theological Commission is not enough. They remain a token few. It would be unfortunate to lose sight of the core of his statement because of negative reactions to the unfortunate metaphor he employed in making it. Francis is interested in the thinking of women, not only in their reproductive capacity.

Pope Francis has also said that “We need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 103). The word “incisive” is quite strong. Now, admittedly, I don’t see bishops rushing forth to make this imperative a reality. But his call for development in this area is definite and unmistakable.



Here is another Francis quote worth pondering: “Why is it taken for granted that women must earn less than men? No! They have the same rights. The discrepancy is a pure scandal.” He has also said that Catholics must “decisively support the right to equal pay for equal work.” This is a challenge to the whole church, especially the laity. Pope Francis’s words give support to positive action on this front.

Pope Francis never quotes St. Paul on how the husband is the head of the wife. Instead, he has said that the Christian faith tradition espouses “radical equality” between spouses. He has also connected marriage and family to economic justice. In order for families to thrive, he has said, we “must become more demanding” about achieving equality for women in the workplace.

Finally, Pope Francis has vigorously defended the emancipation of women, saying it is “not true” and an “insult” to suggest that women’s rights movements should take the blame for declining marriage rates. Doing so “is a form of chauvinism that always wants to control the woman.”

On the plane returning from World Youth Day in Rio, Francis made some comments about women that are suggestive of an unfinished agenda. He has since repeated some similar assertions in other settings. They are worth looking at in detail.

“The role of women in the church must not be limited to being mothers, workers, a limited role... No! It is something else,” Francis said. He struggled to express his thought. He praised the women of Paraguay who rebuilt their country after a devastating war that killed 90% of the population, as a secular example of the courage of women. Then he said, “All we say is: they can do this, they can do that, now they are altar servers, now they do the readings, they are in charge of *Caritas*. But there is more! .... profoundly more, even mystically more....” Finally, he ended with this statement: “Women, in the Church, are more important than bishops and priests; *how*, this is something we have to try to explain better, because I believe that we lack a theological explanation of this.”

How might we read this quote from Pope Francis? Is the assertion that women “are more important than bishops and priests” just another attempt to put women on a pedestal without saying anything specific? Let’s read him with St. Ignatius’s injunction in mind.

The first thing to notice is that Francis is *insisting* on something. He is pushing against something he thinks is wrong. He is calling attention to the fact that women are not given their due, not given their rightful priority in the life of the church, whereas clergy are over-valued. Furthermore, Francis is saying it is not enough to “concede” minor positions to women that previously belonged exclusively to men; women must be valued in their own right. And, finally, when they are valued in their own right, and at their true worth, their value in the life of the church surpasses that of the male hierarchy.

I think Francis is expressing an intuition here, rather than a well-articulated position. His respect for women, like his reverence for Mary and the honor he accords to the church, is something which outruns his power to express it in words but it is nonetheless real and important. It is not something he has deduced from principles. Rather, for him it seems to be a truth apprehended in life and only later reflected upon. He is saying he honors women for their courage and worth. He is also asserting unapologetically—though surprisingly—that he holds them in higher esteem than he does bishops and priests.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis works out this idea further, although he still does not really crystalize the thought he struggled to express in the plane on the way home from Rio. He first acknowledges women as indispensable and says that men and women are equal in dignity, and women’s legitimate rights must be respected. He then distinguishes between dignity—which is something more fundamental and more important than things we do—and roles. “Our great dignity arises from baptism,” he says (EG 104). That dignity belongs to men and women alike.

On the other hand, he says, “When we speak of sacramental power, ‘we are in the realm of function, not that of dignity or holiness.’” (EG 104) The key to the ministerial priesthood, he asserts, is not the power of domination, but the power to administer the Eucharist. He ends by challenging pastors and theologians to recognize the implications of this statement, and to see “what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.” The presumption he makes here is very clear: women can exercise decision-making authority despite the fact that they cannot administer Eucharist.

When ordination is rightly understood, according to Pope Francis, women’s gifts for leadership can be shared within the church. Women can engage in decision-making for the church. He seems to be saying that ordination is simply less important than baptism in the grand scheme of things. And in any clerically-dominated church, that is saying a mouthful—for women and for men.

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