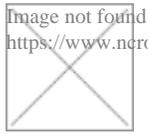


'Don't even think about it' just isn't working anymore

Joan Chittister | Oct. 25, 2010



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Women's ordination advocates call on Pope Benedict XVI to ordain women, in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican June 8. (AFP/Alberto Pizzoli)

COLUMN

Change always happens one way or another. If it happens through the system, we call it evolution. If it happens despite the system, we call it revolution. The problem is that the spirit of revolution -- that unguided burst of change so often triggered by frustration or despair -- is in the air now, politically, economically and spiritually.

Almost half a century after the opening of the first session of the Second Vatican Council in October 1962, there is a new spirit in the church.

But the spirit that is rising in this church no longer pulses with the promise and energy of Vatican II. There is little sense of new possibilities now. The council's mandate to welcome the fresh air of the Spirit has gone stale.

But not completely.

The echo of council documents still rings in those who have a living memory or an intuitive fear of what it was like to live in the shadow of the 16th-century Council of Trent. These are the people who experienced the clerical domination that shaped its definition, the medieval caste system that marked its identity, the authoritarianism that shaped its culture. These are the people who took Vatican II seriously. Its call to the laity to make their needs known to their bishops began to overflow into church renewal groups.

New life erupted everywhere.

For a while it looked as if things were really changing.

Laypeople took the kind of responsibility for the church that was reminiscent of early Christian communities: They became eucharistic ministers to the sick and elderly in the parish; they became hospital chaplains; they took responsibility for parish marriage courses and RCIA programs; they accepted positions on parish and diocesan boards; they became credentialed church ministers in what had once been exclusively clerical preserves.

An electrifying spirit bubbled up and overflowed in the wake of Vatican II. Renewal groups since then have been intent on making the council documents real. It seems that the list will never end: The Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church seeks to make the priest-lay relationship plain. Call to Action seeks to bring

laity, religious and clerics together to continue the discussion of renewal of the church. Corpus, an association of laicized priests, brings their willingness to minister to bear on the question of married priests. FutureChurch, Women-Church Convergence and the Women's Ordination Conference began to call for the expansion of the role of women in the church. New Ways Ministry and Dignity seek to bring the attention of the church to the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Catholics; Voice of the Faithful emerged to enlarge the model of authority in the church; and Priests for Equality and Elephants in the Living Room call for the enlargement of roles for both women and men in the church.

And that's not the whole list of them.

Of special importance to the history of these groups is that all of them set out to function within the rubrics of the church.

But the church, it seems, chose not to take any of them as seriously as the groups themselves took renewal.

They simply closed discussion. Correction: They couldn't close it. They simply refused to be part of it.

The problem with that approach is that the longer an organization -- any organization -- ignores major internal questions, the more the pressure builds up within it. Like too much water against a dam for too long a time, the cement begins to crack. First, it's only little cracks, hardly noticeable. Then, if nothing happens, the cracks get larger. Finally, there are more cracks in the dam than the dam can withstand.

For years now, small intentional communities have begun to develop around pressing questions to form their own opinions on them. And brave individuals rose up across the years, plagued by conscience and committed to the Gospel, to speak the unspeakable, louder and more clearly every time. For instance:

- Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois, founder of School of the Americas Watch, which is one of the most effective groups in the country in the monitoring of the U.S. military's teaching of torture tactics, spoke out in favor of the ordination of women. The church that took years to expel pedophile priests put Bourgeois out of the priesthood in four months.
- Fr. Michael Tegeder, pastor of St. Edward Parish in Bloomington, Minn., spoke out against the recent Minneapolis-St. Paul archdiocesan DVD campaign against committed same-sex relationships. As a result, Communion was denied to a group of students wearing buttons and sashes to protest that campaign at Archbishop John Nienstedt's Mass at St. John's Abbey.
- Sr. Louvenagh Heffernan, an Irish Sister of Loreto, in the light of failing Mass attendance in Ireland and a shortage of priests there, spoke out in favor of the ordination of women.
- Jennifer Sleeman, a grandmother from Cork, Ireland, called "faithful women" to a one-day boycott of

Sunday Mass to demonstrate to the church the importance of women while it denies the Eucharist to many because of the lack of male vocations to a celibate clergy.

And all the while, the waters of frustration and despair bubble and stir:

- Charity Sr. Louise Lears was placed under interdict and refused sacraments for attending the ordination of two Roman Catholic Womenpriests in November 2007.
- Charity Sr. Louise Akers of Cincinnati was prevented from teaching or making any presentations in the archdiocese when she refused to publicly disassociate herself from the issue of women's ordination.

Women have begun to open their own seminaries and ordain their own priests.

Priests for Equality published a non-sexist edition of the scriptures in the face of the Vatican's refusal to admit that God is speaking to all of us, not simply to men.

Even bishops from various parts of the world, and as a group in Asia, have called for the church to explore such questions in their own synods.

From where I stand, it looks as if "Don't even think about it" just isn't working anymore. It looks as if the dam is threatening to break. It looks as if Jesus is walking the road to Galilee again, raising women from the dead, curing the sick on the Sabbath, contesting with the scribes and Pharisees, calling for change so that the churchmen of that time would finally be true to the scriptures they teach.

It looks as if the church may have to choose whether it will foster evolution or risk revolution one more painfully unnecessary time.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*. Her Web column, *From Where I Stand*, is found on the *NCR* Web site: NCRonline.org/blogs/from-where-i-stand [1].]

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