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Men, women and going for the gold

Phyllis Zagano | Feb. 29, 2012 Just Catholic

They gave out the gold the other day. Everybody who was anybody was there. They all seemed to have a great time.

I'm talking about the papal consistory. You thought maybe I meant the Oscars?

OK, so they're not that different, except in the Academy Awards there are categories for "Best Actress" and "Best Supporting Actress." The pope has only men for his chief advisers. He doesn't really have to, but he does. And only men elect the pope. Same deal.

There are now 17 U.S. cardinals, all but four still young enough to join the conclave to elect the next pope. That could be soon, just after Benedict turns 85 in April and, if rumors are to be believed, retires.

Maybe not this spring. But sooner or later, about 120 cardinals will board trains and planes and cars and head to the Sistine Chapel, where popes have been elected since 1492. There, one will replace his own gold ring -- engraved with the arms of the pope who put him in red -- with the fisherman's ring.

There are more than 2 billion Christians in the world, more than half of them Catholics. Someone surely can do the math, but the percentage of Catholics who are cardinals is pretty small. They wrote it into canon law in 1917 that you had to be a priest to get the title, effectively cutting out women. But, even at half the odds, it's still pretty hard to grab that gold ring.

So can someone tell me why the Empire State Building has a beef with Cardinal Timothy Dolan? I mean, why not light it red for his homecoming? When New York's Cardinal John O'Connor was heading to Rome in 1985, the folks at the Empire State Building called the archdiocese to ask what color to light the building. This is a true fact, folks. I answered the phone.

Fast-forward to today, when the Empire State Building, which the New York *Daily News* complained lit up in red for China, refused to honor Dolan. I do not get that. In February, it lit up in memory of Mets baseball player Gary Carter. A while ago, it cheered the royal wedding partners, Will and Kate. Why not Dolan? It says it does not honor "religious figures" -- I guess forgetting William, Duke of Cambridge, is the future head of the Church of England.

No matter Dolan was cut from that shorter kaleidoscope. One World Trade Center, approaching 1,776 feet and soon to be Manhattan's tallest building, went full-dress for him, lighting red from top to bottom.

And Dolan, an impressive off-the-cuff preacher, is going full-dress and lighting up New York. He's everywhere -- visiting, hugging, laughing, eating, smiling. Folks who like him call him a big bear of a guy. Others say he's a heart attack waiting to happen. Still others grit their teeth and say the plaid shirts and drinking beer out of a bottle just have to go.

That's inside the circle. Outside the circle, I think folks wonder why the Roman ceremonies only honored men, why only men sit next to the pope making suggestions about how to run the church, about how to serve the people of God. Why is the papal lens so terribly constricted it only lets in light from male eyes?

Nothing against Dolan or the other New Yorker to get that ring, Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien. They work quite hard. They do their best. They are good guys at heart.

But they are guys. Maybe it is time to see how other folks select the best and brightest. Maybe the Academy Awards can shed some light on what our culture, and by extension the world's culture, looks toward as exemplary in both fact and fiction.

You recall the Hollywood winners, I am sure. The top film was in black and white, with lots of music and barely a word or two (in French): "The Artist." Its tap-dancing star, Jean Dujardin, won Best Actor. Best Supporting Actor was 82-year-old Christopher Plummer, the oldest Oscar winner ever.

Nice, but it is the female winners who can say something to the church and to the world about what it takes to make a difference. Octavia Spencer was a sassy maid in "The Help," and Meryl Streep played Margaret Thatcher in "The Iron Lady."

Wouldn't you like to see women like them -- or at least somewhat like their characters -- on the line to get that other gold, the cardinal's ring? The church has circled and circled around itself enough. It needs to open up somehow. Forget the politics for a moment and just imagine women with spines of steel, with piercing eyes, with humility transformed into action, sitting next to the man in white suggesting how to heal the world.

Just imagine one of them in the running in the Sistine Chapel, next time around.

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