

Women in the teachings and lives of John Paul and Benedict

Thomas C. Fox | Feb. 15, 2013 NCR Today
Benedict Resigns

"We need a pontiff who feels totally comfortable among women, one who respects rather than fears female intelligence. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, led by their limited, distorted, one-dimensional view of women and femininity, separated the lives of the hierarchy from the lives of the people," writes Catholic theologian, A. Regina Schulte. "From both popes have come some benign, non-specific testaments to feminine qualities such as a woman's 'genius' and 'superiority' (think Mother's Day cards).

It is a widely held belief that, aware of the indefatigable character of women, the pope and hierarchy continue to stifle feminine power because they fear it," she writes in an essay set to appear in *Corpus Reports* [1], the bi-monthly journal of [CORPUS](#) [2]. "A just and equitable rearranging of the deck chairs, starting an entirely new way or seeing and working with women, as respected equals, sharing the same basic baptismal rites, is long overdue."

Full Schulte text follows

As many Catholics offer their suggestions regarding the qualities needed in the next pope allow me to place one more on the table. We need a pontiff who feels totally comfortable among women, one who respects rather than fears female intelligence. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, led by their limited, distorted, one-dimensional view of women and femininity, separated the lives of the hierarchy from the lives of the people.

From both popes have come some benign, non-specific testaments to feminine qualities such as a woman's 'genius' and 'superiority' (think Mother's Day cards). However, John Paul made two very significant judgments concerning women. First, he introduced the term 'complementarity' to describe the essence of women's vocation. Women, by their very nature, he wrote, are called to complement men (think ladies' auxiliary). By this logic, 'women's work' as intended by God, is distinct from that of men, and not just biologically. More specifically, women's role, he wrote, is 'to be for others.'

Second, he declared it to be definitive teaching of the Church that women can never be ordained as priests. Going even further, he forbade Catholics the right even to discuss that possibility. For all 'orthodox' purposes, this forever denies women equality in the institutional Church.

Yet another potential path for at least some small participation in church leadership has been blocked. Because of mandated celibacy for priests, women may not slip into the gated community on the arms of their husband-priests. Thus, dual barricades protect the clerical enclave from female infiltration.

Benedict has not only strictly maintained the force of these restrictions, but he has upped the ante with the orchestrated coup and 'regime change' for the LCWR. Hierarchical males will now rule over the majority of U.S. religious women as censors of their activities. Such is a clear example of both duplicity and outright discrimination against women. A mere few years earlier Benedict publicly stated that 'we' should open specific leadership roles for women; but in the meantime, 'women can find their own way.' For fifty years, religious

women have been doing precisely that by their faithful response to the teaching of the Council. Apparently, in the eyes of the hierarchy, they have been too successful.

In the growing cultural enlightenment of the last two to three centuries, women have been gaining human rights in society and functioning in leadership roles alongside men. Yet, in the attitudes and actions of our recent popes we see regression to the point of embarrassment. Claims that the Church, as instituted, gives authority only to celibate men have been disproved; yet, the popes continue to repeat this mantra. Why?

It is a widely held belief that, aware of the indefatigable character of women, the pope and hierarchy continue to stifle feminine power because they fear it. In fact, they appear willing to do whatever it takes to keep the entire body of the faithful in their vise. To broaden the ranks of leadership by admitting women and married men would necessitate relinquishing some of their self-created powers?and job security.

Although misogyny in the Church is certainly not a new reality, a dearth of quality experience with women could have exerted undue influence in the teachings of these two popes. Consider Karol Wojtyla. His mother having died when he was only eight years old, an infant sister dead before he was born, and his one (older) brother having died just three years after his mother, it appears that Karol Wojtyla was reared by his father largely as an only child. In sum, he had no mother, no sister, no sisters-in-law, and no nieces. And, because he became a priest, he had no wife, no daughters, and no granddaughters. There was no feminine presence in most of his formative years and adult life. The women who would cross his path in the seminary and in priests' residences would have been those engaged in domestic chores behind the scenes. Furthermore, it was somewhat endemic in seminaries to portray women negatively in order to keep celibacy secure. It seems fair, then, to opine that Karol Wojtyla would have carried these images of women with him into the papacy, where they surely influenced his opinions.

However strange it may seem, as a young priest he served for a time as a marriage counselor and, in that position, would have interacted personally with women. Unless this included pre-marital counseling, he would likely have experienced them only when they were emotionally troubled and most vulnerable.

Appointed to the committee formed by Pope Paul VI to study the birth control issue that concluded with the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, it is said that John Paul didn't attend a single meeting. Had he participated in the dialogues of the committee, he would surely have become more acquainted with the realities faced by wives and mothers. But, he dismissed that opportunity.

As pope, he was surrounded by hierarchs and men who managed the details of his travels and public appearances. One little episode on a visit to the U.S. stands out as very telling: the obvious disdain he displayed in silence to the request for women's ordination put to him in public by Sister of Mercy Theresa Kane. It was certainly more than rude. One statement should suffice for John Paul's twenty-seven years in the papal palace. From the time he was consecrated bishop of Krakow (1958) until he died (2005), he was served by five nuns (women vowed to celibacy?hence no wives or mothers). He brought them with him to the Vatican. Hence, during the last forty-seven years of his life, he had five women as personal domestic servants. To this writer's knowledge none of these women was ever seen with him in public, as are men who surround him. It should also be noted that in the eastern European culture women, in general, lag behind their western counterparts.

Benedict has lived a life even more sheltered from women than that of John Paul. There is no evidence of close contact with women other than what he had with his mother until, at a very young age, he entered the seminary. His one sister never married, dedicating herself instead to his service as housekeeper and secretary. His only other sibling was a brother who also became a priest and is now a monsignor. It doesn't seem to be an undue stretch of Catholic imagination to believe that their mother doted on both of her sons, sharing their priestly glow in the highest rank afforded a married woman in the Church.

Like Wojtyla, Ratzinger had no sisters-in-law, no nieces; and, as a priest, no wife, no daughters, no granddaughters?no opportunities to interact with modern women within a family circle. When he was asked by biographers if, in his youth, he had ever fancied a girl friend, he replied that he had had no time for that. There seems no evidence that he ever had an experience that could pass even as merely friendship with any woman other than his sister, who was in his service. In fact, he has been a life-long loner.

As soon as he was old enough, young Josef entered the ?no girls allowed? club of boys preparing for priesthood. It might go without saying that in the seminary and in his residences after ordination, women would have been merely the domestic servants, as they were for all of the clergy. Even at the seminary where Ratzinger took August vacations, nuns cooked the meals and kept house. As pope, he maintains four nuns in servant roles.

And so, neither pope, John Paul II nor Benedict XVI, in their roles as leaders of the Roman Catholic Church worldwide, seems to have had any significant personal experiences preparing them to relate appropriately to women in the modern world. Their limited understanding of female gender would have come only from women subordinate to them. These may be the only models with which either man was familiar. It seems no wonder, then, that John Paul saw the very essence of femaleness as ?being for others??men evidently exempted. Joined at the hip, Benedict not only endorses John Paul?s teachings, but also, at least in the case of his attack on the LCWR, apparently holds that ?others? are the hierarchy.

The current problems of our institutional Church are organically interrelated. A just and equitable rearranging of the deck chairs, starting an entirely new way or seeing and working with women, as respected equals, sharing the same basic baptismal rites, is long overdue.

Schulte is a theologian and the wife of the late James Schulte, co-author of Human Sexuality.

Source URL (retrieved on 02/01/2015 - 19:45): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/women-teachings-and-lives-john-paul-and-benedict>

Links:

[1] http://www.corpus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=category.display&category_id=17

[2] <http://www.corpus.org/index.cfm>