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The red and the black

Phyllis Zagano | Mar. 13, 2013 Just Catholic

The Catholic roulette wheel keeps spinning after the white smoke, the white cassock and the white pallium appear. Even though the new pope is at the center, cardinals in red and black still surround him. Insider horse trading and old-school thinking remain. You may think the new pope will be a surprise reformer, but you can't win big putting chips on double zero. Only American-style roulette has that bet.

While American-style journalism has been driving the news coming from Rome, they'll all be home soon enough, carrying their openness and their accents with them. While it might straighten out things, American-style management and transparency will be a hard sell in the new papacy. Curial machinery did, after all, stop the U.S. cardinals' news conferences. No matter the qualifications of the latest man to climb into Peter's chair, the Vatican bank and overall curial messes will surely take up enough time and energy to halt any reforms, even reforms requested by both sides of the marbled aisle.

Of course, the elephant in the Sistine Chapel is female, and she's not leaving. The general consensus from the sidelines is that women in authority would have cleaned up the mess of the sex abuse scandals more quickly and cleanly than the bumbling hierarchs.

So now the men in red and black say they want to ameliorate women, but will they? Can they? It is entirely possible -- even probable -- they've figured out who keeps the family checkbook. Women are, to put it mildly, hopping mad at what has been going on, and they are keeping those checkbooks at home. So the latest wisdom from on hierarch is that women should have more power in the church.

Of course there is that little question of ordination. No orders, no office. No office, no authority. It is as simple (and as complicated) as that. You have to be a cleric to hold any real authority in the church, and you have to be ordained in order to become a cleric. And I did not hear any of the contenders, noncontenders, or bona fide hangers-on trumping women's ordination. Nor did I hear too many straight answers.

Don't hold your breath waiting for women priests. It's not going to happen.

But there are two ways around the problem, each recently reported in *The Tablet*. One, promoted by German Cardinal Walter Kasper, a Curia member for more than 10 years, would be to bless a fourth nonordained order of "deaconesses." Kasper would probably support a legal change allowing "deaconesses" to be clerics. The other answer comes from German Cardinal Karl Lehmann, a diocesan bishop for 30 years and a longtime supporter of women as deacons. Lehmann said the question of ordaining women to the diaconate has been around too long and it is time for "a binding and good decision."

Lehmann understands the problem. Kasper misses the elephant.

The fact is, they can't say "no," and they don't want to say "yes."

There is nothing new about ordaining women as deacons. Reportedly responding to Pope Paul VI's question in

1974, International Theological Commission member Cipriano Vagaggini wrote that what the church has done, the church can do again. His treatise -- not yet translated from Italian -- parses the ordination rituals of the early church and comes down clearly on the side of returning women to the one order of deacon. That is, scholarship argues not for some second-class "deaconess" status, but rather for women in the ordained diaconate.

But the International Theological Commission found a way to ignore Vagaggini's (and others') recommendations, publishing an inconclusive document in 2002. The question seems to rest in Rome: "It pertains to the ministry of discernment which the Lord established in his Church to pronounce authoritatively on this question."

But who does the discerning? Does the Curia stop the spinning wheel, or do the 1.2 billion Catholics have any say in the matter? Are the men in red and black the representatives of the church, or do they represent the inside of that spinning wheel? Will the new pope be able to get past the markers to an old answer for a new age that includes governance and ministry by women?

The top line inside bet pays out the best on every roulette wheel. It is obvious what the church needs. But will the red and the black and the new white take the chance?

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