

Vatican religious prefect: Gender inequality exists in church

Joshua J. McElwee | Biagio Mazza | Aug. 12, 2013

Rome

Gender inequality exists in the Catholic church because men and women forget they cannot be "fully human" without one another, a key Vatican cardinal said in May.

"Man without woman is not fully human," Cardinal João Braz de Aviz said. "And woman without man is not fully human either. Each without the other is a piece of humanity, incomplete."

"Throughout history, we have had many difficulties in this area," Braz de Aviz said. "History became a primarily masculine enterprise. For many reasons -- political, anthropological -- this mode also dominated religion."

Braz de Aviz, the prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Religious, made his comments in May in Rome during a talk at the triennial meeting of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), a membership group for approximately 2,000 leaders of Catholic sisters around the world.

While the cardinal's remarks to the sisters, [first reported by NCR](#) [1], garnered wide attention at the time, the full text of Braz de Aviz's talk was never made public. *NCR* will publish the cardinal's full 80-minute talk in three parts on [Thursday](#) [2], [Friday](#) [3] and Monday.

The church, Braz de Aviz said in the third part, is at a moment "when we need to re-vision many things."

"Obedience and authority need to be re-visioned," Braz de Aviz said. "An authority that commands kills. An authority that serves generates life. An obedience that merely copies what the other says infantilizes, makes us less human."

Among other points addressed by the cardinal in the third part:

- How congregations of sisters who are of diocesan rite, who are not international but under the control of a local bishop, can deal with tensions with their bishops.
- His congregation is meant to be supportive, not investigatory: "The congregation does not want to come across as an organization of surveillance only, to catch you in some error or fault. This is not our mission."
- Catholic priests and sisters must be able to show weakness: "We need normal persons that sin, that are weak, that can seek forgiveness, that have a heart that is alive."
- Theologians who explore Catholic feminism should continue their work: "If it is a biblical and theological reflection, it should be of great value. We need to proceed ahead. Have no fear. We need to converse even more about this."
- Sisters' communities should care for their elderly members: "They are precious women. They are true treasures that remain alive and connected when there is true community."

Braz de Aviz has been at the congregation, officially known as the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated

Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, since 2011. He oversees the work of an estimated 1.5 million sisters, brothers and priests around the world in religious orders.

The cardinal took questions May 5 during a meeting with some 800 UISG members, each leaders of sisters' communities around the world, who had gathered in Rome from May 3-7 to focus on the theme of servant leadership.

Speaking in the afternoon after celebrating Mass with the sisters earlier in the day, Braz de Aviz frequently paused during his answers to laugh and to accept several sustained bouts of applause.

Following is the second part of Braz de Aviz's May talk to women religious in Rome, with minor edits for context. Braz de Aviz, a native Brazilian, spoke in Italian. Biagio Mazza, a native Italian who serves as a pastoral associate at a Kansas City, Mo.-area parish, provided translation for *NCR*.

A UISG representative asked Braz de Aviz questions on behalf of the sisters, who created the questions in group discussions the day before. She asked several questions at once and let the cardinal respond at length.

***UISG questioner:* What can be done when bishops do not permit our different congregations of diocesan rite that have enough time and foundation to make the request to be of pontifical rite?**

At some tables, there was discussion of bishops who interfere in making this decision and in the use of goods. In the African context especially, the sisters and their goods are exploited at times by bishops and priests. It seemed to us that in the local church, the sisters do not have voice or rights, and our goods belong to the church even though the hard work falls on us.

Others were speaking of how to maintain financial support for diocesan orders that have formation but don't have money to support it. How can these congregations report to the dicastery when the bishops interfere in an inadequate manner?

Braz de Aviz: For an institute to become a pontifical institute, there are requirements: a charism, a certain number of consecrated members -- around 40 -- perpetual vows, that there be a consensus of the surrounding bishops that things are well, etc., and also the desire or will of the institute itself.

There are cases in which the number, the testimony of others and the charisms are not a problem but they have never requested this from our congregation. We cannot know the desire. Once the situation is known to us, we attempt to set up a dialogue.

Even in the cases where there are difficulties in the report, it is necessary to see if they are objective reports or if there is difficulty with the reports themselves. They need to be analyzed. I also think that it depends a lot on your report along with ours.

The congregation does not want to come across as an organization of surveillance only, to catch you in some error or fault. This is not our mission. Our mission is to be of great help and support to this work that the Spirit activates in the church through the various charisms.

Often, various congregations go through great difficulties and we have no idea or report on the matter. When we come to know of the situation, it is at that point that we have to intervene. At times, the situations are very painful.

Before this happens, let us know what is happening because when we know about it, we can be in contact. There are these problems with bishops, superiors, with other members within particular regions where there are

difficult situations that can't be resolved on their own. We can help.

In our congregation, there are canon lawyers and administrative people with plenty of experience. We work together on these issues. Every document that comes to us from a congregation is examined by at least five people: the prefect, the secretary, two under-secretaries (one of them a woman), and the official of that particular office.

We take great care to arrive at a good solution, but we must know what the problem is. We ask that you let us know the problems and difficulties that exist. We will do all that we can to help.

We know that there are many diocesan institutes that want to remain so. There is no problem here. But when they want to go global and have rights in other places, especially when they begin to spread to other countries, they are outside the jurisdiction of their local bishop.

This is when we can be of great assistance in helping you walk well in what you are trying to do. But we must help one another. We are at your disposal.

Have a little patience with us because each day we receive 50 to 100 cases. This means that every month, we attempt to expedite 700 to 800 cases. And this is just our congregation alone. It is a great volume of work.

Within two to three months, we should be able to respond to your requests. The more difficult cases will take longer. Also, it does not depend solely on us. It might depend on another Vatican congregation, and we have to wait. Am I being clear?

But have faith. If you see serious problems with us, tell us. Then we would be able to explain better what we did and why. If we are to blame, we ask your pardon and forgiveness.

I was successful in addressing a situation with the religious of France because I asked for pardon for a mistake that I made. For me, this is a sign. Someone said that a cardinal cannot ask for forgiveness. But I said that if Jesus asked for pardon, I can ask for it also.

Why is it so difficult, many were asking, to have gender equality in the church? What can we do so that a woman can assume her place in the church? How do you perceive the leadership of women in the church today? What is the resonance in the Vatican for theological reflection of women? And do you think that with the present pope, we might be able to have some steps taken on this subject?

How can we improve communications and mutual understanding between the Vatican and women religious? This goes beyond the dicastery, but with the whole Vatican. And going back to the dicastery, is it possible to have more women working there? And many of the English-speaking congregations are mentioning that there [could] be somebody who is a woman canonist, such as [Loretto Sr.] Mary Wright [an Australian canon lawyer who previously worked in the dicastery] was.

Mary Wright -- we liked her very much. This has caused great difficulty for us because we did not want her to leave. We wished her to stay. But such is the situation. We did a great deal to keep her here. We have many documents to prove this, but it is what it is.

Why is it difficult to experience gender equality in the church? First, I want to return to our fundamental doctrine: God created man and woman. God created them in his own image and likeness. There are three things here:

1. Man and woman are not God. They are creatures.

2. Man without woman is not fully human, and woman without man is not fully human, either. Each without the other is a piece of humanity, incomplete.
3. Third and that which saves us all: We are the very image and likeness of God.

Throughout history, we have had many difficulties in this area. History became a primarily masculine enterprise. For many reasons -- political, anthropological -- this mode also dominated religion.

The problem of walking together as man and woman is something that I think needs to be delved into and explored more and in a deeper fashion, even among male and female religious.

Up to now, we have seen two ways of operating, which are both imperfect.

First, consecrated women have separated themselves from consecrated men in the name of self-protection. Consecrated men have separated themselves from consecrated women because they were seen as sources of temptation. The result: We men no longer understand you women, and you women do not understand us as well. This is the result.

Second: We put religious men and women together and children were the result. And this does not work well, because whoever has a child has to take care of it and must leave religious life to do so, be it priest, monk, sister. This is a problem.

What are we to do? Return to the biblical insights.

We must clearly ask: What does it mean to be images and likeness of God? It means men and women together, for they do not image God by themselves but only when they are together.

Up to now, we have seen that to be in the image and likeness of God, to be like God, it is necessary to cultivate reason, memory and ... as St. Augustine said, the will.

Why did St. Augustine take this route? He intuited the journey of love, but he was afraid. He spoke of the Trinitarian God: the One loved, the Lover and the Love; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But he said that this was too much for him to comprehend and therefore, he could not enter there.

So he abandoned that and looked inside humans to see how they imaged God. He took this path, and we have continued to look at things this way. Because of this, it has become difficult for us to deal with unity and diversity.

In God, unity and diversity, that is one God in three persons, is a perfect equilibrium where no tension exists. We have not been able to operate this way; that is, to create equilibrium or unity in the midst of human diversity, inclusive of both man and woman.

Man without the presence of woman is less a man. Woman without the presence of man is less a woman. This is a difficult problem that we must correct. It is necessary to discover what love is and live it intensely according to our vocation.

Consecrated life is a very precious gift in the church where mature communities come into being, where virgins come into being. What does it mean to be mature? When one finds a woman that through her formation no longer has her womanly qualities, one is repulsed by her. This is not a woman. It is someone beyond a woman. I do not know what she is.

The same for a man. We need normal persons that sin, that are weak, that can seek forgiveness, that have a heart that is alive. Instead, some become hard, heavy persons, individualistic, and live life within this mode.

Love should take us on another road. In God, unity and diversity have never been a problem. For us, this has been a big problem throughout our history. We need to retrieve this aspect of our lives. I believe that our task is to recover a sense of the person.

The essence of being a person involves individualization. I am different from the other, but I cannot fully be without the other. Instead, what we have said, even within philosophical studies, is that relationship with the other is secondary, not essential. But how can this be?

If to be born, there is need for relationship. If to grow, there is need for relationship. How can this not be true in the spiritual life? There is a need to reconstruct our relationships. Our relationships are sick, profoundly so.

If I have authority, I relate to others in a different manner than if I did not have any. Why? Why? The other and I are still the same person. Therefore, how do we rebuild this kind of love in our relationships? We need to return to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word and the Paschal Mystery.

They are the two mysteries that show us what love truly is. We need to recover in all our institutions, even among us bishops, the second chapter of Paul's Letter to the Philippians, chapter 2:5-11. Begin with the fifth verse and not the sixth:

"Have in you the same thoughts that were in Christ Jesus, who though in the form of God, did not hold on to divinity as something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself."

This is the Incarnation. The Mighty One became small so as to be understood by humanity, who is small. There are no human persons unless we are small before God. This is relatively easy for us, for it is at the heart of our spiritualities. But to be small before others!

But you say, "You must be joking. The other is a limited human being." And thus we do not seek to relate with the other because we do not drink from the font of love which is God. If I want to find and relate to the other, I have to become small. Whom do you serve?

The pope has said that our power cannot be one of domination, but one of service. We have seen this year how the popes have given us this rich example. Again, to connect with the other, it is necessary to be small.

Up to what point, you may ask? Up to the point of giving one's life for the other. Herein is the Paschal Mystery. Before we can speak of what is true, we must be ready to give of our lives for the other, to offer our lives for others.

This is a discipline that needs to be practiced every day because it is difficult to carry out. When we do live this out, then we are reborn because it is the very life, the fecundity of the mystery of God and not something that is within our capacity to accomplish. This is most important.

To stress this point, I would like to reveal to you how I discovered this path as a gift in my own life by reflecting on Jesus' cry from the cross. First, that cry has no words. Jesus just makes a noise and secondly says, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

What is going on here? Having loved us to the end, Jesus had humanly lost the presence of his father. The presence of his father was key to Jesus' existence. For us, he risked everything -- even the loss of God.

However, in the end, he says, "Into your hands I commend my spirit." But Jesus dies without a response from God. He did not get a response from his father. His father did not respond to him. The response came only with the resurrection.

This fidelity to humanity, exercised by Jesus, is the fidelity of love that we all must have. This is difficult for us. When we live this out, we reintroduce into the world the love according to God. And then, life starts to germinate here and there. We know not when or how, but life begins to germinate.

We are at a moment when we need to revision many things. Obedience and authority need to be re-visioned. An authority that commands kills. An authority that serves generates life. An obedience that merely copies what the other says infantilizes, makes us less human.

An obedience that dialogues, expresses what God says within me and leaves it to the superior the responsibility to make the decision, whose word I have to obey -- this brings growth and maturity.

How many religious congregations today are headed by superiors that are commanding! We have mother superiors who are in charge for 30 or more years but are not the founding mothers.

Why is this so? Is it possible that your congregation is incapable of generating and thus choosing another mother superior? Must it only be you? Are you that focused on your own power?

Right now, there is a congregation seeking to remove a superior from a certain region of the congregation and this woman, after 25 years, refuses to leave office: "I'm staying. I'm the only one who can do this."

I say, "But who told you that you are the only one who can do this?" And once one leaves, one must not build roads or maneuver to regain authority. We see this every day. A mother superior quits being superior general, but in reality, she still thinks that she is in charge because she is the mother.

We need to follow Pope Benedict's example in all of this. I say this because I have counteracted the same tendencies within me. This results in a new way of operating.

Maybe I have answered practically all of the questions. Women leadership needs to grow more in the church, at least 50 percent. Paul VI, during the [Second Vatican Council], said "Where are the other 50 percent of humanity that is not here?"

Regarding the resonance of theological reflections on women in the church: It must go on. Why not? If it is a biblical and theological reflection, it should be of great value. We need to proceed ahead. Have no fear. We need to converse even more about this. I think that we are on this road together.

With Pope Francis, remember that the conclave only lasted a day and a half. We cardinals did not fight much. There are many things that can be done in this field, definitely. We are a church together -- the maternal together with the other.

We will be even more harmonious, more human. We should not fear this. With the pope, the journey we are undertaking should prove to be very interesting. We are only at the beginning.

Improve the understanding between the Vatican and women religious? I believe that the diocesan synods, vicars for religious and your representatives from regional councils are set up to engage in dialogue and to reflect

together on the Word of God and then discuss together without domination. For the path of domination is not the way of the Gospel.

Slowly, we will arrive at this, I think. We must speak of our experiences and recount them to one another, and in this manner, we will walk together and advance ahead.

Is it possible for more women to work in the Vatican dicastery? I think that currently, it is almost equal. We even have here a woman who is a layperson, a canon lawyer with a doctorate who is the head of our No. 1 office. One of our under-secretaries is a woman. We have many sisters and laypeople who work with us.

This will continue to grow. We are even looking into the expanding our English-language people because in truth, we have that need because the world is very big and needs to be understood. We also have [Oblate] Father [Hank] Limonicelli [a staff member at the congregation], who understands both sides of the issues, the male and female side. A good man. I already spoke about Mary Wright. I can't say much more because we think alike on this matter.

In telling our stories, both personal and church stories, what is needed every now and then is the courage to remove the skeletons that are within us and bury them.

I repeat that what is needed in both our personal and church lives, what is needed is the courage to remove the skeletons that are within us and bury them in cemeteries so that they will be at peace there.

Many times, that which is a skeleton for me, something that is not good for me, no longer exists in my life. I have seen this even within my own life. I combat a reality that no longer exists. I had been afflicted by certain problems and hurts. We must purify this within us, internally. And if that skeleton remains there, it does us much harm.

Regarding the new communities, I want to make only one point: If the new communities are from God, there should be no conflict among them. One must understand what is different and what is good and complement one another because a kingdom set against itself will be undone.

Regarding the issue of the elderly sisters: Keep them with you for as long as you can. Do not send them to die alone. There they die in their hearts before they die in their bodies. Keep them with you.

They are precious women. They are true treasures that remain alive and connected when there is true community. Otherwise, they shut themselves off and no longer contribute their wisdom. Let us keep our elderly with us as long as we can.

But you say, "It is too expensive, too much of a burden." Keep them with you. They will die in peace in our midst, and they will help us get to heaven.

Thank you. I just want to say without any pressure or inducement from anyone something about the beauty of our vocation. You are most precious to the church. Do not leave. As the pope has recently said, when the time of testing and tribulation comes, it is good that we remain where we are lest we leave and the Lord returns to console us but does not find us.

Thank you.

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