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Forms of male chauvinism hostile to the church

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

The Vatican's preparatory document for the October 2014 Synod of Bishops on the family gets to women after 300 words. Among matters of deep concern are "forms of feminism hostile to the Church." Male chauvinism is not mentioned.

The synod playbook for the most part comes from men's pens. The planned Rome meeting, formally called the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, will bring together Catholic bishops to discuss "The Pastoral Challenges for the Family in the Context of Evangelization."

The world's bishops have nine major topics to consider by the end of this year. Their answers to questions about catechesis, marriage, the family, divorce, same-sex unions, children, contraception, familial relationships and "other challenges and proposals" will frame the synod's conversation.

Exactly how bishops and bishops' conferences gather input is a topic of some discussion. Diocesan bishops in the United States received the materials from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops with no indication that anyone else should contribute responses. Meanwhile, the bishops of England and Wales immediately put the entire questionnaire out in the Internet to gather answers from the folks who slog right-foot, left-foot through real life.

The questionnaire comes from Vatican offices, where the overwhelming majority of professional workers are clerics. Therefore, the document itself views the church through a masculine lens. But didn't Francis express concern about male chauvinism in that long summer interview? Didn't Francis say everything he heard about women is colored by *machismo*?

OK, not all men are chauvinists bound up by *machismo*, but you have to admit the controlling factor in this or any church event is male. Too often, the simplest suggestions about women's roles cause

immediate slap downs.

For example, the chatter about women as cardinals, first in the huge Spanish daily *El Pais*, then spread on Facebook and reported elsewhere, resulted in derisive denial by papal spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi. Why? You have to ask whether the pope is already caught in the curial molasses he so bravely challenges.

When Lombardi says, emphatically, "This is just nonsense ... It is simply not a realistic possibility that Pope Francis will name women cardinals for the February consistory," he insults half the human race -- not just the Catholic women who would love to see even the tiniest nod to their intelligence, their dedication, their outright love for the church and all about it.

The same with the synod on the family. Family includes men and women, but men will gather in Rome to discuss it. Yes, there will be interventions by laypeople, male and female. But they will be speaking to a group of unmarried men.

And all this comes amidst continued discussion about Francis' search for a "theology of the woman." A large part of me wants to say, "Oh, OK, you want to include women into the church's theological anthropology and say what's true for men is true for women." But another part of me says, "Give me a break. You've started a new round of the '*Querelle des femmes*' debate begun in the 13th century, which at times discussed whether women are a different species from men."

If Francis' concept of a "theology of the woman" is rooted in inclusion, it denies the *Querelle's* 900-year history of criticizing women who find themselves equal to men. If his concept is not rooted in inclusion, the church is in trouble.

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Which is it? Does Francis recognize the intelligence, experience and innate dignity of women? I think yes but wonder if the Curia marches to his drum. Is there too much pushback against the pope's recognition of human dignity?

The preparatory synod document's mention of "forms of feminism hostile to the Church" sounds loudly against the world's growing respect for women's equality and dignity. You have to think that when a preparatory synod document turns up to investigate the "temptation of male chauvinism" and the "ideology of *machismo*," the church might be on the road again.

But will it? Will the Vatican change its lens and, therefore, its view of the world?

Lombardi said "suggesting the pope will name women cardinals for the next consistory is not remotely realistic." There are more than a half-billion women out there who suggest it become realistic, and fast.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her newest book is *Mysticism and the Spiritual Quest: A Crosscultural Anthology*, and her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press). She will speak March 13 at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo.]

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