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We are at a crossroads for women in the church

Joan Chittister | Dec. 11, 2013 From Where I Stand

The American Academy of Religion and its companion association, the Society of Biblical Literature, is known for gathering forward-thinking theologians across denominations for the sake of cross-pollinating the best of religious research and thinking. So it's not surprising that at this year's Nov. 22-24 conference in Baltimore that part of the conference agenda was a panel of speakers[1] whose own interests might give us all a snapshot view of Pope Francis and the challenges he faces in dealing with various current questions.

The sweeping composition of the panel -- both lay and religious, Catholic and not, male and female -- highlighted specific issues facing the church and the early responses of this present pope to areas of ecumenism, liberation theology, tradition, spiritual formation and, in my own case, women's issues and religious life.

In today's column, in the interest of broadening the conversation, I'll share the remarks I made as part of that panel.

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The 20th-century Jesuit philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote: "The only task worthy of our efforts is to construct the future." My concern today is how to construct a new future for women around the world through the global outreach of the church.

The 6th-century philosopher Boethius reminds us that every age that is dying is simply a new age coming to life. A second insight that gets my attention comes from Woody Allen 15 centuries later: "I'm not afraid of dying; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Both messages are clear: First, continuity can go too far. Second, to fail to face the moment we're in can fail the future that's coming with or without us and whether we like it or not.

Point: This is a crossover moment in history.

This is the moment when history discovered women.

In fact, intelligent men as well as intelligent women realize now that feminism is not about femaleness. It's not about female chauvinism either, or *feminismo machismo.* And it's definitely not about women wanting to act like men.

Feminism is about allowing every member of the human race to become a fully functioning human adult, to make choices at every level of society, to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives, to be financially independent, to be safe on the streets, secure in their homes, to have a voice in the courts and constitutional bodies of the world -- to enjoy, in other words, full and equal civil rights.

It is about bringing to public visibility and public agency the agendas, the insights, and the wisdom of the other half of the human race.

It is about taking their ideas and plans seriously. No! Correction: It is about taking the theology of creation seriously.

It is, in other words, about this century's "emancipation proclamation" of women.

And since it is 2,000 years after Jesus himself modeled it, it can hardly be argued that we're rushing things.

Pope Francis, clearly sensitive to the issue, has himself brought up the notion of launching a study of women, the very thought of which coming out of Rome is at least as earth-shaking as seriously expecting Rome to do something serious about it.

Three issues in particular will measure the authenticity -- the morality -- of the church's response to the women's issue. The issues of maternity, human agency and poverty are key to the way we'll be seen on this issue for years to come.

First, the question of the role of women in church and society is not one of the 39 areas of concern listed in the questionnaire [2] the Vatican sent to the world's bishops in October seeking wide Catholic response to questions about family life. So how really important are the roles and rights of woman-as-woman seen in shaping even the family? Really.

Second, the pope's recent statement on women to a meeting of the Women's Section of the Pontifical Council for the Laity [3] in Rome concentrated almost entirely on women's maternity, which occupies -- at best -- about 20 years of a woman's life. Most modern women, demographic data indicates, live at least another 35 to 40 years after the youngest child leaves home. And after that? What is her role then? Is maternity her only value, her perpetual definition? What does she do now with her personal talents, her insights, her gifts that, they tell us, are given for the sake of the world?

And how does the world make up for the loss of such experience, intelligence and wisdom of the other half of the human race if women are not expected, not welcomed to its shaping?

But without the input of women, humanity sees with only one eye, hears with one ear and thinks with only one half of the human mind.

And -- read the newspapers -- it shows.

Or, more, why is a woman defined by maternity whether she is a mother or not when a man is rarely, if ever, defined by his paternity rather than by his job, his genius, his leadership, his heroism?

Pope Francis says in his now-famous interview with the Jesuit magazine *Civilta Catholica*, which was shared worldwide in September, "We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. Only by making this step will it be possible to better reflect on their function within the church."

Right. But the question there is who will do this study? The same clerical, patriarchal types who have been doing it for the last 2,000 years when church fathers first said that women "have the malice of both dragons and asps," among other things.

Or when Thomas Aquinas called women "misbegotten males." Not the gold standard of the human race, apparently.

And medieval theologians declared that women were by nature subservient, secondary in the order of creation, more emotional than rational.

And today, here and now, a Vatican document can say [2], "Forms of feminism hostile to the church are among matters of deep concern" but never even mention male chauvinism or the very structures of patriarchy itself as any kind of concern at all.

And yet, the church never treats women as fully independent adults, let alone as fully baptized disciples of Jesus. And this despite centuries of deaconesses, a chorus of women saints and hundreds of years of women religious administrators who built the larger part of the social service systems of the church.

Most important of all, on what anthropology and theology and science from what century will they ground their ideas about women this time? What feminist writers, feminist researchers, feminist philosophers, what scientists, theologians and canonists, both women and men, will shape this theology in this era?

Will it simply be another round of "men do this" and "women do that," a dual anthropology that sees women as caregivers alone and men as world builders exclusively, an anthropology that denies our common humanity, our joint human nature basically and entirely? Despite the work of our own Dorothy Days and Raissa Maritains, our Mother Joneses and Rosemary Haughtons as national leaders and bona fide theologians?

And if so, what can possibly be done to save the world such division has made?

The fact is that religion -- all religions -- has been used to justify the oppression, the servitude, the invisibility of women for century after century. Indeed, religion after Jesus has a historic lot to repent where women are concerned, Catholicism and Christianity among them.

As a result of such poor study in the past -- "religious," as it may have called itself, sincere as it possibly was -- everywhere on the planet women are still, today, at this hour, as the United Nations Development Fund for Women reports, two-thirds of the illiterate of the world. Women are still two-thirds of the hungry of the world. Women are yet two-thirds of the poorest of the poor everywhere in the world. Even here; even now.

That can't be an accident. That is a policy. Someone somewhere has decided that women need less, deserve less, and are worthy of less than men.

And all in the name of God.

By the time those apologists get done, God is the only sexist left in the room.

Pope Francis has won the heart of the world by being humble, simple and pastoral -- the warm and caring face of the church, a man like Jesus who is a man of the poor.

But clearly, no one can say they are for the poor as Jesus was and do nothing, nothing, nothing for the equality of women. To address classism does not begin to resolve the problems that come with sexism.

Yet when the membership of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious commit themselves again -- as they have so often in the past -- to do for women what must be done for the sake of the Gospel, and the good of the church, it's called "radical feminism" and they are investigated for heresy.

The full humanity of women, human anthropology, and our efforts to eradicate poverty are indeed among the issues that will measure both this papacy and this church as it moves again from an age that is dying to a new age that is coming to life.

Otherwise, when death comes, we may all be there to see it.

In 1998, Pope John Paul II instructed the bishops of Michigan and Ohio in their *ad limina* visits to Rome: "The genius of women must be evermore a vital strength of the church of the next millennium -- just as it was in the first communities of Christ's disciples."

Which, from where I stand, leads directly to the question women find continually more wearying: If not now -- 15 years later -- when?

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent *NCR* contributor.]

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