27 August 2020, The Tablet

**Women in the Church - so tired of waiting**

by [Joanna Moorhead](https://www.thetablet.co.uk/author/70/joanna-moorhead)



Clockwise, from top left: Kate McElwee, Zuzanna Flisowska, Gudrun Sailer and Sr Bernadette Reis

**Since his election, the Pope has made noises about wanting to see a greater role for women in the Church. But for many of those hoping for change, this papacy has so far proved a bitter disappointment, with Francis talking the talk but failing to walk the walk**

The year is 2025, or perhaps it’s 2030. Francis is gone; we have a new pope and, like all leaders, he must decide on the priorities that will dominate his time in office. Across hundreds of years and hundreds of popes, there have been many priorities. But one agenda has never been top of the pile for any pontiff. Sadly, it is an agenda that could perhaps have changed the terrible trajectory of the Church’s path in recent years, stemmed the avalanche of decline in its credibility, and circumvented the increasing perception of it as an obsolete curiosity rather than a radical voice in a fast-moving world. That agenda is women. If a pope had made it a priority, things might now look very different.

The Catholic Church is a masterclass in patriarchy. Power is concentrated overwhelmingly in the hands of male clerics. In a touch of sheer genius, women were given status – the semblance of reverence on the pedestal of Mary – but almost completely barred from decision-making or authority. Through ­history, of course, countless women have found a way round Rome’s rules – think the seventeenth-century Mexican nun Juana Inés de la Cruz, who championed education for women and was ostracised by the bishops; or the English reformer Mary Ward, whose same idea a few years earlier had met with the same sort of reception. Mary Ward was declared Venerable in 2009; the Church has a track record in posthumously “sanitising” its radical women, or reframing them in a way that suits its own narrative: Mary Magdalene was far too powerful as Christ’s wealthy patron and right-hand woman (the true story) but as a reformed sex worker ­forever regretting her “sins” (the rewrite) she fitted the bill perfectly.

In Rome, where I was just before its lockdown, the women who work for something better seemed weary, some of them almost dejected. One day, like Mary Ward, these women will be seen as warriors of much-needed reform; but for now they are sidelined and their cause is belittled. “It’s very lonely doing this work, in this place, at this time. There certainly aren’t a lot of supporters for us in Rome,” says Kate McElwee, executive director of Women’s Ordination. A photo on its website of its inaugural conference shows a large room packed with women, nuns included, and men, priests included, who believed the time for change was nigh. The year was 1975 and the scent of revolution was in the air. Forty-five years later, hopes have been raised and dashed one too many times.

McElwee and I meet for lunch in a bustling eaterie near the Piazza del Popolo in the week after Pope Francis has released Querida Amazonia. Hopes had been high that, at long last, this could be the start of a process that would see women ordained as deacons (and married men as priests): the Synod of the Amazon’s final document had called for both. But just as with the report of a working group Francis had set up to look at the question of women deacons, the debate was stalled. As so often with Francis, the language was vague and open-ended; it was a field day for Vatican-watchers, but a depressing downer for women like McElwee. It “feels like a breaking point”, she told me sadly.

Francis, she said, had been “stirring the pot” – apparently open to the idea of women’s ordination to the diaconate. But for all his emphasis on the importance of listening, at the point where leadership matters – ­decision time, the crunch point – he had once again edged back from taking a leap of faith. “All this lip service after several years is difficult to reconcile with your faith,” said McElwee, as we chatted over pizza. “We know women who are being called to be priests – the Church has lost two generations of educated women.” Others might argue it has lost hundreds of generations.

Look on the websites of the Church’s feminist organisations (Women’s Ordination Worldwide, Voices of Faith, Catholic Women’s Council, Roman Catholic Womenpriests – and there are many more) and there they all are in the photographs, the women who could today be among the Church’s leaders, and instead are its marginalised campaigners. Adding to their frustration is the Church’s constant narrative of a “vocations crisis”. “Some of these women have been waiting for decades – they are great witnesses to faith,” says McElwee. “There’s a huge influx of women doing theology degrees – but what career paths are open for them?”

Another day, another disillusioned campaigner. I am in the Tiber-bankside office of Voices of Faith, meeting with its general manager Zuzanna Flisowska. “Either the Pope doesn’t see it, or he just doesn’t have the energy for the earthquake we need where women are concerned,” she tells me. “What he says [in Querida Amazonia] about ecology and migrants is wonderful – but in the paragraphs about women he just repeats things he’s said already. Women here in Rome are tired; ­nothing is changing. I know theologians who are saying, We’ve waited 40 years – it’s all exactly the same.”

Flisowska does give Francis credit for opening up discussion about equality for women, after it was shut down by John Paul. “He did open up the dialogue,” she says. “He did encourage us.” Indeed, time and again, women pressing for change would tell me how buoyed up they had been by Francis, before being infuriated by his failure to act. There’s a sense among many that he’s playing with it as a topic, and annoyance that he’s using it as a fob. At the beginning of this year, he said women “should be fully involved in decision-making processes” in the Church. They should have more than merely a “functional” role, he said last November; as early as 2015, he was making noises about wanting to see a “greater role” for women in the Church, and calling the gender pay gap a “pure scandal”.

“We want Francis to put his money where his mouth is,” says Sr Bernadette Reis, who works in Vatican communications. “I believe women need to be present at the decision-making level in the Church as Francis is suggesting they should.” Like the other women I’ve spoken to, she’s grateful to him for allowing the debate. “At least the Pope is raising the questions – that’s a big step forward. The question for me is: among the successors of Peter, where are the successors of Mary?”

Sr Bernadette is not a radical; nor is Gudrun Sailer, editor of the German service of Vatican Radio. We have a coffee together on the sunny balcony at the station’s headquarters overlooking the Castel Sant’Angelo. “Francis said he was unhappy at the way women were treated, that he wanted to see change,” she says. But he has failed to deliver: and it’s not only the campaigners he’s disappointed, it’s mainstream Catholic women who are acutely aware of the growing gulf between the lack of opportunities for women as leaders in the Church and the growing opportunities for them in every other area of their lives.

Over another coffee, I meet a woman who’s employed at the Vatican – more than one in five Vatican employees are female, most of them in lower-rung jobs. She wants to remain anonymous: the Pope, after all, is her boss, and she feels he’s doing nothing like enough on the woman front.

“It’s men who have his ear the whole time – working here, you really notice that,” she tells me. “In many ways, Francis seems to have gone backwards on women. You feel he’s looking for ways to appear to be doing something for the women’s cause, while not really engaging with it at all. So yes, there have been a few high-level appointments of women – Barbara Jatta has become the head of the Vatican Museums, and Francesca Di Giovanni is undersecretary of the Vatican’s secretariat of state – but really, they’re anomalies. You have to look at the culture here, and you have to look at the figures overall. Women are not in powerful positions in sizeable numbers – and for the Church, in 2020, that really matters.”

Francis has just appointed six women to the Vatican’s Council for the Economy: it has 15 members, and previously they were all male. In April, he set up a second commission to study the question of whether women could be ordained as deacons. The women I met in Rome point out that he has made appointments before; what is needed is systemic change rather than the promotion of a handful of highly visible women. For many campaigners, Francis is good at talking the talk, but fails when it comes to walking the walk –at a time when action has never been more crucial.

But there’s a glimmer of hope from a dark corner. According to Zuzanna Flisowska, the abuse crisis has fundamentally changed the way Catholics think about power and the hierarchy. “There’s a sense of, ‘enough!’” she tells me. But as with all the work around abuse, reform only happens when those pressing for change are seen as allies rather than irritants by insiders – and when it comes to feminists and the Vatican, that’s still a work in progress.

Some believe, too, that the pandemic could bring positive change. “It’s changed Catholic practice, and made space for more creativity,” says Kate McElwee. “There’s been a growth in women-led liturgies online, and in many ways the women who are part of our movement were in a very good place to adapt to the new ways of worship. It’s an affirmation for what we’ve always been about, which is the Church beyond its walls.”

Against the odds, McElwee remains optimistic. “I think it’s all going to feel as though it’s impossible, and then overnight it will just happen,” she says. “Catholic women are so strong. We will find a way.”