

# Rising

*Learning from Women's Leadership  
in Catholic Ministries*

CAROLYN Y. WOO, PhD

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## Introduction

---

### A Long Time Coming

Years before I committed thoughts to paper on the topic of women's leadership in the Catholic Church, I had been writing this book in my head. The issue follows me like a shadow. At almost every talk, even when women leading was not the featured topic, the interest was there. In over five hundred speeches in a span of twenty years, women leading in the church was the featured headline on no more than ten occasions. Yet there was always an undercurrent of curiosity of how a woman became the dean of the Business School at the University of Notre Dame and then chief executive officer of Catholic Relief Services, the official international humanitarian agency of the US Catholic Church.

That curiosity is on two fronts. First is the personal story of how a Chinese immigrant from Hong Kong navigated the journeys to these positions. The second point of interest pivots on the experience of a woman in leadership within the Catholic hierarchies governed by ordained clergy. How does this happen? What is it like? Is this path accessible to others? The first is a story I have told in an earlier book, *Working for a Better World*. The second is the motivation for this current book.

Lodged in my mind is the evening of a public conversation titled "Women Taking the Lead: Acting on Pope Francis'

Message.”<sup>1</sup> A conversation ensued after the program, one that I have been trying to finish ever since that evening. Surrounding me at the foot of the stage was a group of young women who were students from a local Catholic high school. Minutes into the conversation one asked, “Dr. Woo, do you think women’s leadership in the church is really possible beyond exceptions because it seems that women are not welcomed by the church and there are no doors that we can even knock on?”

I winced as I took in the students’ faces. Their countenances reflected light and infinite potential. The student’s question was nothing but earnestness, though its tone vibrated with dejection. Without hesitation, I blurted: “No, no, no: there are many opportunities for women. You must not be discouraged. You must. . . .” The conversation ended abruptly as my attention was hijacked by someone seeking a selfie and the students needed to board their bus.

Over the years I have continued to ponder what answer these young women and many like them, the future of our church, deserve. A jangle of contrasting thoughts fights for articulation.

Without doubt, the case of women leading in Catholic Church ministries is regarded as a rarity. Foreclosure of priestly ordination to women has generated an unshakable and widely held conclusion that the Catholic Church does not value women, appreciate what they have to contribute, or trust and empower them to help shape church doctrines, policies, and ministries.

Women’s leadership in the Catholic Church is a fraught topic that has spawned panels, dialogs, and conferences. The conversation at Georgetown that evening featured three women leaders: Sr. Carol Keehan (chief executive officer of Catholic Health Association), Sr. Donna Markham (executive director of Catholic

---

<sup>1</sup> “Women Taking the Lead: Acting on Pope Francis’ Message,” sponsored by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University, October 22, 2015.

Charities USA), and myself (chief executive officer and president of Catholic Relief Services).

The assembly of the three leaders on the dais was described as historical for the unprecedented coincidence that three of the largest ministries of the US Catholic Church were simultaneously helmed by women. Surely, this would not be considered historical if three men were on the stage. This assembly of three women leaders was of sufficient interest to pack the assembly hall and drew many Catholic women's groups, including the girls' Catholic high school for an evening outing on a school night.

While this student's question and many other similar expressions troubled me, I am grateful for them. They are disconcerting and vexing, but at least they are being raised. What I fear more than these discordant notes is silence: the silence that follows when women finally give up asking, pursuing, challenging, advocating, or voicing their expectations. Of great concern to me is the resignation that settles in when young women no longer knock because the interest no longer registers and they walk past the doors, open or padlocked.

A Pew report found that the percentage of Catholics in the United States has dropped from 24 percent in 2007 to 21 percent in 2014. Of the US adult population, 13 percent are former Catholics.<sup>2</sup> A 2018 survey of 1508 women self-identified as Catholic by *America* finds that 18 percent of the respondents have thought of leaving or actually left for a period of time. Of these individuals, about half cite the treatment of women as "somewhat" or "very much" a concern.<sup>3</sup>

When asked whether or not they have experienced sexism in the church, 10 percent said yes. Of note is that those who

---

<sup>2</sup> David Masci and Gregory A. Smith, "7 Facts about American Catholics," Pew Research Center, October 10, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Mark M. Gray and Mary L. Gautier, "Catholic Women in the United States: Practices, Experiences, and Attitudes," Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, commissioned by *America/Media* (2018), 13.

attended a Catholic college or university (25 percent), those who considered becoming a religious sister or nun (23 percent), those who attended a Catholic high school (16 percent), and those who have served in a parish ministry role (15 percent) were more likely to respond yes to the question.<sup>4</sup>

Tough medicine. As feedback is often a gift, it would be advisable to approach these more critical groups with humility, attention, and optimism. These individuals speak from deep attachment to the church. They are invested in learning about the church and seeking an active role. They have not thrown up their hands, shrugged their shoulders, or turned their backs. These women care and love enough to endure their disappointments, to continue to call for and believe in what is possible. These women assume the emotional burden of expecting more. Invite them: that should be our response.

In a study commissioned by FADICA (Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities),<sup>5</sup> the engagement of women, both lay and religious sisters, is proposed as one of four critical social innovations to have the most impact on the vitality of parishes going forward. Recommendations identified three other areas of priorities: youth engagement, engagement of Hispanics, and a more welcoming church.

The report speaks with utmost urgency on the topic of women. Three factors contribute to this conclusion: (1) nearly 80 percent of the staff in parish ministries are women, (2) these women are getting older with the average age of parish staff at fifty-five years, and (3) the flow of applicants would be more aptly described as a talent trickle than a talent pool.

It has been noted that the exclusion of women is akin to walking on one leg, seeing with one eye, breathing with one lung, operating with one side of the brain. Chittister gives us

---

<sup>4</sup> Gray and Gautier, 15–16.

<sup>5</sup> Marti R. Jewel and Mark Mogilka, “Open Wide the Doors to Christ: A Study of Catholic Social Innovation for Parish Vitality,” FADICA (2020), 17–18.

pause as she asks, “Can the Church possibly be whole without women?”<sup>6</sup>

Pope Francis answers, “A Church without women can’t be understood.”<sup>7</sup>

While the dismissal of women is the dominant narrative, I do not hold the view that women’s leadership in the Catholic Church is as rare, unusual, and out of reach as the perceptions held by many people inside and outside of the church. In over twenty years of leading two Catholic institutions and serving on boards of about fifteen more, I have interacted with many women who play such roles. One can draw up a list of such individuals to populate a monthly program of women leaders over multiple years. These include leaders, founders, and board members in all sectors of Catholic ministries such as K-12 education, higher education, social services, health ministries, pastoral ministries, diocesan administration, clergy formation, communications, and advocacy.

While leadership appointments for women can be significantly expanded, and misogyny still dishonors women and brushes aside their gifts, it is important to acknowledge the inroads that have been made and opportunities that are accessible to women. Perceptions and general criticisms have not kept pace with emerging reality, which points to a notable number of women leading with impact and influence.

Perceptions harden into judgments that can lead to unfortunate choices. A college-age daughter of a good friend and devout Catholic challenges her mother, “Why would I give my life to a church that does not welcome me, value my gift, give me a chance?” Logical conclusion, but from a wrong premise. Though not universal and far from sufficient in attitude and action, there

---

<sup>6</sup> Joan Chittister, OSB, *Women Strength: Modern Church, Modern Women* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, “Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day,” press conference during the return flight, July 28, 2013.

is evidence that women are not locked out wholesale from positions of authority in Catholic ministries.

We must not lose this young woman from the church because of misinformation. We need her gifts, her voice, and her passion to be part of a community that witnesses to the presence of God here and now. We need her to act from the love she receives from the body of Christ and direct this to those who hunger for it. We want her to know that she is made by God to do things that only she can do. We should not make it easy for her to turn away, without a monumental struggle, from her baptismal call and responsibility as prophet, priest, and sovereign. To the women who are discouraged: I hope this book motivates you to reassess and commit.

In setting the record straight, I hope to convey a note of thanks, long overdue, to the many women leaders whose service has sustained the vitality and viability of many Catholic ministries. No, they did not do it on their own, but in the company of the Holy Spirit. We thank them for welcoming the Holy Spirit when they stood alone.

### **Focus of the Book**

The focus of this book on formal leaders by no means dismisses all the women who have served the church as parishioners, volunteers for different ministries, and the staff who make the programs run. It is important to clarify that leadership can occur at every level of organizations and in every function. Titles are not necessary for the exercise of leadership. Indeed, the Catholic Church has run on the labor, passion, and commitments of such individuals, many nameless, to do its work of evangelization, formation, service, and community building.

I intend our attention on women leaders to be an acknowledgment of all women who serve the church. Leadership appointments suggest that women are not valued simply for their

labor and support, but also for their voice and talents that sometimes result in positions of influence and impact. Increasingly, what women have to offer is coming into view, their desire to be engaged as full members of the body of Christ is being heeded, and their rightful place at the family table is being set.

This book pivots on formal leaders because their appointments reflect explicit power-sharing arrangements between the institutional church and women. This step is categorically different from welcoming hardworking volunteers and junior staff who remain “guests” or “outsiders,” not people who shape the future of the organization.

Formal leaders enjoy the legitimacy to weigh in and participate as an integral part of the decision-making process on critical issues. Their inclusion is an acknowledgment that women, as well as men, have the capacity and talent to lead. Being offered the mantle of leadership derives from respect and trust. It represents an investment, a conferral of power, beyond mere intent, words, or pats on the back.

I should clarify that power should never be the motivator for ministry. But formal power is one kind of currency to bring about change, call for improvement, gain the floor, and mobilize resources. To the extent that this currency is given to men, it should also be made available to women for similar purposes.

The many leadership positions that women now occupy would not be possible without active sponsorship by the priests and bishops who opened up the space. To be fair, we have not acknowledged the hospitality, invitations, and investments that raised women to chancellors, chief operating and financial officers, canon lawyers, superintendents, and so on. We do not know what battles were waged for the appointment of women to assignments traditionally held by men or positions that supervise clergy.

We underestimate what goes on behind the scenes to change cultures so that women can flourish in these contexts. There is no question that more is needed. But it should not obscure the



efforts made by some clergy through their vision, goodwill, and action. I hope this book on women's leadership in the church will show what has worked, what more is needed, what opportunities can be placed within reach of women, and how co-responsibility can be cultivated.

This book is my attempt to circle back to the unfinished conversation with the student at the Georgetown seminar. I want her to know why she should not dismiss a place for her service in the church, why it is not a fool's errand to pursue her work life within the church, and how her contributions and commitments can help bring about the peaceable kingdom that Jesus started. And yes, she can find respect, appreciation, partnership, and fulfillment in this choice.

### **Organization of the Book**

The next five chapters compose Part One of the book: "Women's Leadership in Catholic Ministries." Chapter 1 lists four misperceptions that get in the way of women seriously considering professional work in the church: (1) few leadership opportunities are available to women in Catholic ministries; (2) church leaders do not advocate for women's leadership; (3) lay ministry is subordinated to ordained ministry; and (4) women are not well suited for leadership roles in Catholic ministries.

Chapter 2 highlights the common attributes of sixteen women leaders I have recruited to enlarge my own views. The synthesis produced five attributes: (1) they are compelled to serve those in need; (2) they are committed to their staffs; (3) they take ownership of problems; (4) they seek to bridge and heal differences; and (5) their work is rooted in faith.

Chapter 3 delves into the challenges that women and lay people face in church ministries. The first two challenges relate to the struggles women face under these sections: (1) co-responsibility: early in the journey, and (2) woman: the outsider.

The last two sections describe challenges faced by church ministries in general: (3) negotiating differences with church hierarchy; and (4) navigating cultural hotspots.

Chapter 4 provides a reflection on the concept of feminine genius proposed by a number of recent popes. Though well intentioned, this categorization can be problematic and can work against women. The chapter presents the reasons for caution. I also offer a few words on the concepts of power and control as these seem to create great discomfort and dissonance for women.

The last chapter (Chapter 5) in this section issues a call for action noting the changes needed and resources available for welcoming women into ministries and supporting their success. The chapter is divided into (1) what church ministries can do; (2) resources for women's development; and (3) planting the seeds early in girls and female young adults for eventual participation in church ministries.

Part Two, "Requisite Capacities for Leadership," discusses what I see as necessary qualities to leadership for all people, regardless of gender and type of organization. These draw on my four decades of teaching, research, and practice of strategic leadership. They emanate from lessons of both successes and deficiencies. These include (1) capacity for the other; (2) capacity for self-awareness and growth; and (3) capacity for alignment. These are located in Chapters 6 to 8, respectively. Chapter 9 presents a capacity that is unique to faith-based ministries: the capacity for Christian witness. Faith-based ministries do not just perform good works—these emanate from the love of Christ and point to his presence amid us. As both Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have cautioned, the essence of our ministries is not just charitable impulse.

In Part Three, "Journeys of Leadership in Catholic Ministries," I incorporate the voices of sixteen other women leaders in various Catholic ministries. Each leader contributes a personal essay that describes the unique ways she heard and followed the vocational summons into ministry. These reflections compose

a broad portfolio of paths, backgrounds, choices, and styles by which leadership unfolds and evolves. Each woman, however, reached beyond the “known” to find herself in the company of the Holy Spirit. Chapters 10 to 26 depict love stories written through the intersection of faith and work.

In recruiting women leaders for this book, I wanted to make sure we draw from diverse ministries, roles, races, and ages. Some ministries are part of diocesan structures; one is governed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB); some are apostolates of religious orders; and a number are start-ups. Including myself, the group comprises three religious sisters and fourteen lay people. The roles they hold span principal, executive director, president, executive vice president, editor, and board member. Of these women leaders, three are Asian Americans and one is Hispanic. Unfortunately, two leaders, one Hispanic and one African American, had to step out of the project due to personal reasons.

I also invited these leaders to be my thought partners on the chapter themes presented in Part One. I presented a set of questions to which they offered written responses. These will not be published except for some quotations excerpted from their essays. There are two exceptions. The responses by Jennifer Fiduccia and Sr. Donna Markham are especially moving, and I have included them in full in Part Four.

The message to readers is that there is not just one path, one mold, one set of qualifications and skills, or one common approach. These narratives showcase differences and uniqueness, highlighting how we can be true to ourselves, utilize our different gifts, and build from our own life experiences to navigate how we respond to God’s call in our own way.