



# Council 50

Towards a Church-Inspired by the Gospel-for the world  
Rumbo hacia una Iglesia-inspirada en el Evangelio-para el mundo  
Vers une Eglise-inspirée par l'Évangile-pour le monde  
Verso una Chiesa ispirata dal Vangelo per il mondo

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## **Catholic reform in the USA**

Remarks by Jamie L. Manson, columnist and the book review editor at  
the National Catholic Reporter."

It is fair to say it has been a very full year for the Catholic reform movement in the United States, which is very likely why there are so few of us here! It may be fair to say that US reformers are exhausted.

Just to give you a sense of some of the major church reform events that took place in the US on the national level in 2015:

The first national gathering of Intentional Eucharistic Communities<sup>1</sup> met in June to support one another and share ideas about how to be new models of non-hierarchical, intimate church communities and how to model new forms of priesthood and sacramental leadership.

In July, Dignity USA<sup>2</sup>, the national organization of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics met for their biennial conference to further explore the idea of achieving full sacramental rights for all Catholics. The meet took place just one week after marriage equality became the law of the land in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://intentionaleucharistic.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dignityusa.org/>

Also in July, in a joint effort by Catholics for Choice<sup>3</sup> and Call to Action<sup>4</sup>, there was Forum on Women, which gathered lay people, scholars, theologians and activists to consider what it is that Pope Francis needs to know about women.

The theme of women in the church was on even stronger display in September at the Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) meeting<sup>5</sup>, which took place in Philadelphia just one week before the World Meeting of Families<sup>6</sup> was hosted in the same city and before Pope Francis himself visited the city.

At WOW, 500 attendees from 19 countries, and 25 speakers from 12 countries, gathered to discuss the crucial importance of women's ordination not only in the church, but the importance of the issue vis a vis the global struggle for women's justice and equality. I'll say a bit more about that in a moment.

The Papal Visit to Washington, DC, New York City and Philadelphia was quite consuming for Catholic reform groups, as you might imagine. At the World Meeting of Families, pilgrims from the Catholic LGBTQ community attended the meeting to remind delegates of our presence in the church. Most of the LGBTQ pilgrims reported hearing presentations at that meeting that were spiritually harmful. Many reported being treated in a discriminatory way. No LGBTQ organizations were permitted to participate in the exhibits of the world meeting of families. Also during that week, in Philadelphia, New Ways Ministries<sup>7</sup>, the group co-founded by Sister Jeannine Gramick, was banned from hosting an educational event about LGBTQ people in a local Catholic parish-- they were forced to move to a Protestant church.

During the papal visit to Washington DC, members of the women's ordination conference<sup>8</sup> and women's ordination worldwide staged a protest in the streets as Pope Francis' motorcade drove by. Miriam Duignam and Kate McElwee were a part of that protest and, I'm sure, would be happy to tell you more about that.

Finally, the year concluded, less than two weeks ago, with the annual meeting of Call to Action which, as it happens, Paul Hwang and Soccoro Martinez spoke at. More than 1,000 people gathered for keynote addresses and workshops on issues as diverse as clergy sex abuse, peace and nonviolence, base communities, immigration, racism, gender justice, women priests, and LGBTQ inclusion.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://cta-usa.org/#>

<sup>5</sup> <http://womensordinationworldwide.org/wow-2015-conference/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.worldmeeting2015.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.newwaysministry.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.womensordination.org/>

**So, amid all of these accomplishments the question remains, what is the state of the reform movement in the United States?**

One crucial question that is persisting in the movement is, what to make of Pope Francis. For perhaps the first time in the forty-year history of the Catholic reform movement, there is some division regarding the pope.

Some of us in the reform movement have taken to calling the pope our “Holy Conundrum” or our holy puzzle.

Why? Because for all of his passionate advocacy on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, the sick, the imprisoned and the oppressed, he remains strongly opposed to the true equality of women and the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the church. In fact, the otherwise gentle pope has used some of his harshest language on these issues. He has referred multiple times to gender theory as a nuclear weapons, and has been strongly critical of same-sex marriage and same-sex parenting.

What many of us in the reform movement continue to argue is that the church’s teachings on sexuality have a profound impact on issues directly related to violence, poverty, oppression and marginalization.

For example, many of us ask, to what extent can the pope advocate for the poor, while overlooking the clear link between poverty and the unequal treatment of women globally.

Many will continue to characterize the question of women's ordination as little more than another culture war issue. But the truth is that this struggle runs much deeper than a battle between conservative and liberal values. As became clear at this year’s WOW conference, women's ordination is about so much more than simply making women Catholic priests. At its heart, it is a movement to convince the Roman Catholic Church, one of the largest and most influential organizations in the world, to lift up women globally as truly equal to men.

Why? Because the agonies of discrimination, war, poverty, lack of education and disease fall disproportionately on women. The statistics are grim.

*Women, who form half of the world's population, work three-fourths of the world's working hours; receive one-tenth of the world's salary; own one percent of the world's land; form two-thirds of illiterate adults; and together with their dependent children form three-fourths of the world's starving people.*

*To make a bleak picture worse, women are subject to domestic violence at home and are raped, prostituted, trafficked into sexual slavery and murdered by men to a degree that is*

*nowhere near equal to men. Regarding education, employment and other social goods, men have advantages simply by being born male. ...*

*To point this out is not to make women into a class of victims but to underscore statistics that make clear the struggles women face in society because of their gender. In no country on earth are women and men yet treated in an equal manner befitting their human dignity.<sup>9</sup>*

While in most cases the Roman Catholic church did not create these afflictions, its doctrine on women serves to reinforce women's inequality and suffering.

How can women ever achieve true empowerment when their religious leaders declare that it is God's plan that women are not entitled to equal religious or spiritual authority? How will women ever see true equality when the hierarchy teaches that even *God* believes that a woman's body is inadequate and invalid when it comes to possessing certain forms of power?

If the Roman Catholic hierarchy declared that women were entitled to equal authority and power in the church, imagine the influence it could have in societies where religious and cultural beliefs have sanctioned the secondary status of women.

The very same argument can be made about the church's teaching on gays and lesbians, as well as the fact that as of yet there is no official teaching on transgender people or intersexuals, other than the ugly words about "gender theory as nuclear weapons." In what ways do these teachings reinforce the arrest, beatings, imprisonments and legal killing of LGBTQI people in some countries around the world, or in the corrective rape of lesbians in South Africa, as Nontando mentioned earlier?

**In what ways does the church's teaching that LGBTQ people are not worthy of marriage support into these violent and discriminatory practices?**

These are the challenging questions that are stirring in our reform movement.

Because for all of the joy that Pope Francis has generated, the church continues to be a troubled place. Sadly, it is still more of a visible sign of exclusion, rather than a reflection of God's justice. As long as exclusionary doctrines are still codified, then parish communities working within the institutional church really cannot be true reflections of justice. You cannot say, this church is a place of justice, but women have no sacramental

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<sup>9</sup> Italicized text based on Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus and Women: You Are Set Free," *Global Sisters Report*, April 22, 2014. <http://globalsistersreport.org/column/speaking-god/spirituality/jesus-and-women-you-are-set-free-1186>

power. You cannot say this church is a place of equality, but same-sex couples cannot marry here.

Changes in tone do not necessarily lead to doctrinal changes. And only changes in teaching can help us achieve a just church.

Our church will not be truly inclusive, our church will not be a whole church, until our communities are true reflections of justice.

That brings me, finally, to Vatican II. One of the Council's greatest legacies is the universal call to holiness—an idea that affirmed the adulthood of the community of faith. Vatican II spoke to us as a People of God come of age.

**And the first response of a people come of age must be to take ownership our church.**

In the United States reform movement, one of the unfortunate repercussions of having a popular pope has been a decrease in conversation and movement around the role of the laity in the church. But regardless of what Pope Francis does, whether he revolutionizes the church, or makes more stylistic than substantive changes we must continue to heed Vatican II's call to take ownership of the church. We must continue to honor our universal call to holiness and recognize that the sacramental life, the very life of God, flows through all of us.

We must continue to break out of the trappings of our tradition: the passivity, the clericalism, the adulation of the papacy. We must continue to embrace the idea that God has infused all of God's people with deep sacramental power.

We cannot let our hope for Pope Francis allow us to lose the momentum behind these ideas. Vatican II reminds us that we are called to be a people of God come of age. We must take adult ownership of our church so that we can continue to do the work of reform that will make our church a true and visible sign of God's justice and equality.