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Introduction to Religion

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The Necessity of Gender Equality in the Catholic Church

Women have made important scientific discoveries, created amazing inventions, been elected to Congress and other legislative bodies around the world, been the Presidents and CEO's of Fortune 500 companies, written best-selling novels, produced award-winning albums, movies, and plays, and have even been elected the Prime Minister or President of multiple countries, but no woman has ever been a Priest or Pope in the Catholic Church. Though Catholicism has been practiced for almost two thousand years, women and men still have not been able to find equality in the Catholic church, as women are currently not allowed to become ordained Priests, and are shunned from other important leadership roles.

"Women have been excluded from ordained ministry in the Christian tradition for most of its two-thousand-year history" (Radford Ruether 63). Before the church became a public affair, women were considered the heads of their household and held power in their local churches. As soon as the church became public and more popular and accepted within the community, women had their roles taken away from them, and were silenced in church. They were eventually given the roles of Deaconess and Widow, though Deaconess is not the female equivalent of a Deacon. While a Deacon generally takes care of the physical and logistical needs of the church so that the people above him can focus on the more important topics, a deaconess generally prayed for those who were sick, prepared females for their upcoming

baptisms, and visited sick women and children. The title of a widow was given to older women after their husband died, as God needs to look after women who no longer have male spouses to look after them. Giving the role of Deaconess to women was more of a way to appease women than to actually get them more involved in the church.

Because Catholicism is dominated by male leadership, one would think that males would dominate church attendance and pray by themselves more often than women. Studies have shown that “women are more religious than men in Christian or post-Christian contexts” (Penny, Francis, and Robbins 498). Women even “recorded higher frequency of church attendance, higher frequency of personal prayer, and higher scores on attitude towards Christianity than men” (Penny, Francis, and Robbins 498). This study shows that women are technically better Catholics than men; therefore, they should be allowed to serve as Priests in the Catholic Church, and should have a chance to become a Bishop and the Pope one day. Furthermore, fifty-nine percent of all Catholics support the ordination of women (Pew Research Center), so an ordained woman is something that would be supported by the majority of Catholic followers. Also, “the Catholic Church is 54 percent women” (Pew Research Center) so how can a majority of the Catholic church been seen as unable to lead the church?

Currently, women “do not have full ecclesiastical voting rights and are not eligible for ordination (Oxtoby, Roy, Hussain, and Segal 203). Theologians argue against women being ordained because Christ was a male. Others say that because Jesus selected twelve apostles and none of them were female, this is reason enough to not allow women to be ordained. Other religions have made the move to bring equality into their church. The first female Rabbi was ordained on December 25, 1935 (Hein). The Methodist church elected its first woman

bishop in 1980 and the Episcopalians in 1988 (Radford Ruether 66). The first female bishop in Anglican Communion was Barbara Harris, was elected in 1989 (Oxtoby et al. 204). The Church of England ordained their first female bishop, Libby Lane, in January of 2015 (BBC). So what is stopping the Catholic Church for ordaining the first woman Priest? How long will it be before a Catholic women Priest exists?

To become a Catholic priest, one must be fully committed to the Catholic faith and have at least a Bachelor's degree in religious studies and be pursuing a graduate degree from the Catholic seminary. Most denominations also require a Priest to be unmarried, and forbid them from marrying once they are in the Priesthood. Priests are required to dedicate their lives to God and their faith, which includes performing ceremonies in the church, leading mass, and advising members of their parish when needed. Women can easily fulfill all of these requirements. Currently, "women make up the majority of bachelor's degree recipients" (Flashman 547). As mentioned earlier, women attend church more regularly than men, therefore it would actually be easier for them to dedicate their lives to the faith as they are technically more faithful. The Catholic church's favoring of men makes no sense when women have proven that they are capable of being powerful leaders and devoted to their faith.

Pope Francis has rejected the idea of women becoming priests "not because women do not have the capacity" (McElwee) but because "Pope St. John Paul II said it clearly" (McElwee) that it cannot be done. But why is this? Pope Francis has defied the former Pope before, and he can defy the former Pope if he strongly believed in gender equality in the Catholic Church. In the Bible, God states that women and men are equal before his eyes, so why are women and men not allotted equality in church leadership positions? While Priesthood is considered a male

idea because priests are icons of Christ and Christ was a man, women can also serve as icons to Christ. Women are just as able as men to pray for those in need and lead a church in prayer. Women are just as able as men to offer guidance to the members of the church who need it. It has been thousands of years since the creation of this religion, and there has been no movement to make males and females equal in the church when women make up over half of the parish in the Catholic church.

In modern times, women are fighting for equality in the world. After finally gaining the right to vote around a hundred years ago, women are now trying to close the gender wage gap that pays women “just 79 percent of what men were paid” (American Association of University Women 3). In the last hundred years, women have begun to join the workforce, no longer staying home to take care of the house and the children. Women have begun to infiltrate the male dominated majors such as engineering and mathematics. While the fight for gender equality is far from over, the modern world has recognized that gender inequality exists and has made steps to begin to fix it, and the Catholic church needs to follow suit. There seems to be a “the belief that women cannot bear authority and therefore cannot engage in authoritative relationships” (McDowell 373), but women have proven that they can make important decisions and be a leader, controlled countries, ran multi-million dollar businesses, and have held powerful positions in countless organizations and businesses. The only thing stopping Catholic women from becoming Priests is not their inability to be authoritative, it is the Catholic church.

Women have been trying to draw attention to the inequality they have been facing in the Catholic church. Countless papers have been written in an attempt to draw attention to this

controversial topic. A group has formed the Roman Catholic Women Priests, which is a group made up of female priests who are pushing Catholic churches to give women a chance to become priests. Though they call themselves priests, they are obviously not seen as priests in the eyes of the Catholic church. All the “Women Priests” have been excommunicated from the Catholic church because they have been ordained by the Roman Catholic Women Priests, so they can no longer return to their old church. When Pope Francis visited Washington D.C. in September of 2015, protestors were waiting outside of St. Matthew’s cathedral for him, protesting his views of women’s inability to be ordained and accused him of being sexist (Siddiqui and Gambino). Fifty-eight percent of Catholics say that the Catholic church should allow women to become priests (Pew Research Center). The Women’s Ordination Conference is held annually, featuring supporters from around the world who are joining together to fight for gender equality in the Catholic church.

Women should be able to find equality in the Catholic church that they attend. It is incomprehensible that women are seen as lesser beings by their male counterparts, and that the Catholic church is excluding over half their membership from a leadership position simply because of their gender as it is the twenty first century. Qualified women should be able to become ordained Priests and Bishops and eventually, women should be able to become Pope. Women make up the majority of Catholics, but are not allowed to participate in many of the leadership roles. Women are more religious than men, and they attend church more regularly. The Bible states that men and women are equal in God’s eyes, and they should be equal in the churches they worship in as well.

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