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February 16, 2021
“Women Erased” Series

***WOMEN IN THE CHURCH:
VATICAN II AND THE JOURNEY THAT CONTINUES***

INTRODUCTION

Welcome and thank you for participating in this evening’s event. Tonight we want to reflect on the role of women in the church, specifically with regard to Vatican II. We also want to think about the journey of women in the years since the council.

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The council itself must be our starting point. On October 11, 1962, another moment in God’s unfolding drama of salvation was about to occur. More than 2500 bishops from all over the world began their procession into St. Peter’s Basilica.

They were followed by a man who will be remembered in history for many reasons. One of those was about to unfold – the Second Vatican Council.

At the end of that long procession was Pope John XXIII. One can only wonder what was in his mind that day as his council was about to begin.

John’s council was a moment of grace in our church for so many reasons. A few key achievements will suffice for our purposes tonight:

1. Instead of continuing a hostile and suspicious attitude toward the world, Vat. II called us to witness to the Gospel ***IN*** today’s world
2. Instead of regarding itself as spotless and all holy, the church acknowledged its errors, its failings and saw the need to continually reform itself.
3. Instead of viewing the church primarily as a pyramid, with the pope on top, followed by cardinals, bishops, priests, nuns and lastly the laity, the Council

issued a call for universal holiness ~ with no one in the church better than any other simply by virtue of one's vocation.

4. Instead of viewing other Christian churches with hostility and other religions as false and harmful, the council called on us to respect our brothers and sisters and, perhaps, in one of its greatest achievements...acknowledged that salvation is a gift that can be offered to all of humanity, not only Roman Catholics.

Vatican II would never have happened without this spirit-filled John XXIII...along with a group of openminded bishops, prophetic theologians and a sufficient number of laity, including women religious who rose to the challenge.

When the council opened, John said he felt like he was launching a big ship that someone else would have to take out to sea.

He died a year later and his successor, the more cautious Pope Paul VI, continued the voyage until the council's conclusion in 1965.

To his credit ~ beginning with the third session of the council ~ Paul VI accepted the nudging of some high-profile bishops and he admitted women as auditors for the first time in history...a decision that was not well received by a number of his brother bishops.

At the end of the second council session, it was Cardinal Suenens from Belgium who raised the issue regarding the lack of women at Vatican II.

These women had great expectations. They saw their presence and work as an acceptance of women and their gifts as full church members.

And we need to continue to tell the story about these courageous women... as well as the story of Vatican II.

Because if we do not, then we will fail at one of our important tasks – being signs of hope for the church of the new millennium.

Vatican II told us that the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to give future generations reasons for living and hoping.

I do fear about whether this incredibly important moment in ecclesial history is reaching the ears of today's generation.

In the Old Testament, here is a line in the Book of Judges that haunts me. After Moses died, Joshua became his successor. But after his death...the faith of the Israelites began to weaken...prompting the author of the book to write: "And there arose a generation that did not know the Lord."

I pray that church historians, hundreds of years from now, will not look back at our time and be able to make that claim about us.

Today women are struggling to achieve their rightful place in the church. This is just one of the reasons why the "Women Erased" series is so important. It provides hope for the future. There is a song by Leann Womack that I have quoted in some of my talks:

She sings:

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance
And when you get the CHOICE to sit it out or dance...I hope you dance.

This evening as we reflect on the women of Vatican II and those women still on the journey, I invite you to continue the dance begun 56 years ago by John XXIII and those 23 women at Vatican II.

REMEMBERING THE WOMEN OF VATICAN II

At a 2012 conference, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the opening of Vatican II, Donna Orsuto, the founder of the Lay Centre in Rome, spoke about the women at Vatican II.

In one sense, she noted, it is a short story to tell. Not a single woman spoke during any of the four sessions of the council.

And, early on, a female relative of Cardinal Montini (later to become Pope Paul VI) was actually denied entry when she showed up to attend a Mass.

There were no women speakers. The only speech written by a female, economist Barbara Ward, had to be read by a man.

Still, it is clear that the voices of women were heard. Orsuto noted three phases of influence: the run-up to the council, the council itself and the reception of Vatican II afterwards which she described in terms of “planting,” “nourishing,” and “harvesting” the fruits of Vatican II.

In the years before the council, women were active in international lay movements which helped set the stage for the council’s thinking of the role on the laity in the church.

Twenty-three women served as auditors and three were American:

Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, Loretto Sister
Sister Claudia Feddish of the Byzantine Rite
Catherine McCarthy, President of the National Council of Women

Officially, these women had no role in the council’s deliberations but they found creative ways to make themselves heard.

And their ideas found their way into a number of the Council documents...especially *Lumen Gentium*, *The Decree on the Laity*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Perfectae Caritatis*..

Referring to these women as valiant trailblazers, Orsuto said they worked within the structures of the church and out of love for the church.

Apart from the 23 women auditors, other women did play a role in the larger context of the council. They formulated their expectations in petitions sent to Rome, they advised bishops and they networked.

As for the aftermath of the council, Orsuto did note that the wheels are slowly grinding in the direction of an expanded role for women, even in Rome.

There was a time when women needed special permission just to use the libraries of a pontifical university. Today they are valued members of the faculty.

It should be noted that women were not admitted into graduate theology programs until the late 1960s.

SR. MARY LUKE TOBIN

Perhaps the most well-known female auditor at the council, at least here in America, is Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, a member of the Loretto Sisters, who died in 2006.

SML's story and those of the other female auditors are intrinsic to developing an understanding of this council's revolutionary effect on the role of women in the church.

Looking back, we are of course dismayed that there were so few avenues for women ~ but we must remember that it was 1962 and the council was a product of its time in history.

The women's movement itself was barely beginning.

Today, the thought of having an ecumenical council with **no** input from women seems unimaginable, but in 1962, it was hardly noticed.

As already noted, Paul VI does deserve credit for breaking through the opposition against having female auditors. One bishop explained why many other bishops were unhappy with the female presence:

He said: "We were all formed in the straight-jacket mentality of Vatican I (which took place 100 years earlier) and with no previous experience of women's involvement in the church, it never occurred to us that they should be there. However, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a new awakening took place and many of us welcomed new possibilities." (Bishop Lamont of Rhodesia)

Sr. Mary Luke recalled three basic categories in defining bishops' reactions to women at the council:

1. A **minority** of good guys appreciated the women being there.
2. A **majority** reacted indifferently and appeared scared and even shied away from the women.
3. **Some** clearly disapproved and avoided the women completely.

One woman auditor recalled how an elderly bishop covered his eyes when the women walked past him as they went up to receive communion!

SML was a woman of hope. In one interview, she said:

“This door swinging open to admit women from different parts of the Catholic world represented an unexpected sign of hope for women in the church.

It signaled at least a minimal awareness of the questions women were asking and some recognition of their secondary status in the church.

True, 23 women among 2500 bishops was hardly a quota but it was a beginning.”

She frequently referred to a line from G&S, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, which stated:

“With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.”

She understood the significance of this quote, stating:

“It is a powerful statement that you cannot undo. It is a pronouncement by the highest authority of the church ~ an ecumenical council ~ and their statements cannot be gotten around. They are written in cement.”

Women are part of the church, but they’re not recognized as full, participating members. Jesus, on the other hand, recognized that women had a major role to play in carrying out his message.

In St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he tells us that Christians are “neither male nor female, slave nor free, Greek nor Jew, but are all one in Christ.” (3:28)

This biblical verse is critical for the women's movement...

...because it says that in the Christian faith, all persons are equal before God and are to be recognized as such. They are not to be seen as anything less than full persons.

Fully recognized personhood is what the women's movement in the church is based upon.

And this fact can be the mantra for all women in the church and a reason for our hope for further developments.

Still, Mary Luke was a realist and understood that change does not come quickly in the church. She believed in a quote by theologian Karl Rahner, who said: "The church always runs weeping after the cart of history."

As many of you know, there were some female religious communities that were not happy about the changes introduced by Vatican II.

Moving from a submissive role to making personal decisions required an enormous adjustment for many sisters.

Twenty years after Vatican II, SML still had her hope about the progress the council made and the belief that more progress would be made.

"For me Vatican II was an opening, although just a tiny crack in the door, to a recognition of the vast indifference to women and the ignoring of their potential for the whole body of the church."

Years later, when asked if the church should have a Vatican III, she responded:

"We have not yet brought to life the action and spirit of Vatican II; we haven't brought it sufficiently into the life of the people of the church. Until the people begin to truly understand what Vatican II was about, we have not done our work."

GUESTS IN THEIR OWN HOUSE

As I did my research for this presentation, I came across a book that is considered a seminal work on the topic of women in the church.

The title will be familiar to many of you: *Guests in their Own House: The Women of Vatican II*, written by Sr. Carmel McEnroy. It was published in 1996. (and modified in 2019)

In reviewing this book, theologian Gregory Baum wrote:

"This interesting historical investigation of the exclusion and participation of women at the Vatican Council reveals the dynamics of communication within the Church, including its systematic distortions and the forgiving fidelity of dedicated women. I am glad that this book has been written."

It troubled McEnroy that within 20 years after the end of Vatican II, the fact that there were any women present was already becoming a forgotten memory.

She referenced a book that was written in 1986 entitled *Vatican II Revisited By Those Who Were There*. There was not a single article by one of the 23 officially invited women auditors.

I have that book. There are exactly 23 chapters in the book!

During the time of the council, the question about female ordination was being raised and Pope Paul asked the Pontifical Biblical Commission to examine the New Testament to see if anything there prohibited ordaining women.

When the commission returned a negative verdict, Paul did not accept their finding and wrote a document against women's ordination.

Pope John Paul II repeated this position in 1994 and this has been perpetuated since then.

In 1995, Carmel McEnroy was fired from her position as professor of theology at St. Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in Indiana ~ after she signed an open letter to Pope John Paul II and the American bishops asking that the discussion of women's ordination be allowed to continue.

She did not **dissent** from the teaching, she simply joined a number of others who requested that discussion be allowed to continue.

Sadly, time does not permit me to spend any substantive time on three topics related to our main theme this evening:

They are:

-Female ordination

-Female Deacons

-And, Pope Francis' most recent document, *Spiritus Domini*, which has modified canon law to officially open the ministries of lectors and altar servers to all lay persons.

Some commentators read this as the pope opening a deeper reflection on the place of laity and the function of these ministries.

But we have Mary Luke Tobin's thoughts on this matter. During yet another interview, she said: "If you leave women out of any aspect of the church, it is no longer a complete church."

We know that Jesus did not ordain anyone in our sense of formal ordination. It wasn't until much later in the church that priests and bishops were ordained at all.

Not until the 2nd century did the church begin to say that "an institution is necessary to keep the faith all together."

What many people do not realize is that in the very early days after the Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus' followers believed he would return during their lifetimes. The Greek word for this "end-time" or Second Coming, is Parousia.

Because of this thinking, there was no need to put together a well-organized institution like we have today.

But then the apostles began to die, and the Risen Christ did **not** return as anticipated, the followers of Jesus realized the need for some kind of central mechanism that would be able to pass on the faith to future generations.

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH SINCE VATICAN II

(cf. notes from ML Tobin article, Nov. 1, 1986)

When you read the plentitude of literature on the topic of women in the church, one sentiment repeats itself and that is a growing impatience.

But that same literature demonstrates that there has been growth in this area as well. To name just a few:

- Many organizations devoted to the cause of women in the church have sprung up: Voices of Faith,.org; FutureChurch.org; Catholic Women Preach.org; Catholic Women Deacons.org; Reclaim Magdalene.org; the Women Erased Series and others.

- Religious orders of women, since Vatican II, have developed collegial and personalist insights and practices.

- A number of outstanding women have emerged as theologians and biblical scholars. Several have uncovered new data regarding women in history, scripture and the early church community.

- Organizations of women in the church, especially the LCWR (Leadership Council of Women Religious), have grown in strength.

Through the years the LCWR has included ways to develop collegiality and solidarity. And they have promoted Vatican II theology within religious orders.

The growing emphasis on a Gospel spirituality has led female religious and laywomen toward developments in social justice.

However, on the part of some in the hierarchical church, understanding the evolution of women religious has been tragically lacking...

...despite the calls from many female organizations for church authorities to listen and appreciate the motivation of women and their rootedness in Vatican II.

In this regard, the LCWR has described some conditions contributing to the alienation of women from the church. To name a few:

- Women have been excluded and minimalized in liturgical worship. This has been demoralizing for women.
- It has been the experience of some women that many clergy relate poorly to them.
- Women are unable to participate fully in ministry.

But despite these factors, the momentum of the women's movement is not slowing down.

And there are signs of hope. We saw just last week that Pope Francis named Sr. Nathalie Becquart, a Xaverian Sister from France, to the position of undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops.

She is the first woman and non-cleric to hold this position and will be the first woman able to vote in the Synod's assemblies.

When interviewed, Sr. Nathalie praised what she called the "pope's bold and prophetic gesture" in appointing a woman to this position.

The next synod will be held in 2022 and its theme is "synodality," a term which means "walking together."

We can only hope that this will lead to involving more women in the decision making process in the church.

CONCLUSION

Let me offer a few concluding thoughts...

A recurring theme in many of my talks is Michaelangelo's Pieta. What many people may not know is that later in life, he created two unfinished pietas.

We could compare the church to an "unfinished pieta".

The church of the 21st century – whose shape we cannot fully discern at this time – will be new.

It would appear that the Divine Sculptor is still fashioning that shape but it remains hidden in the marble.

Before Vatican II, the church was known for its certitude, things were clearly right or wrong, there were no gray areas.

If we had a question, we had only to look to the pope who was, of course, believed to be infallible in **all** matters. (In reality, the articulation of the First Vatican Council's (1869-70) teaching on infallibility was intended for matters of faith and morals.)

This is one reason why so many people were surprised when John XXIII announced Vatican II. They did not see the need for a council.

Of course, as recipients of what Vatican II brought about, we now know why John was moved to call a council.

In his opening speech at Vatican II, John told us that "the ancient deposit of the faith is one thing...the way it is articulated in every new generation is another."

Our current Pope Francis uttered something similar not too long ago. He said:

Tradition is not the worship of ashes, it is the preservation of the fire."

Dominican theologian Yves Congar once wrote that:

"Genuine reform in the church will be recognized by an openness to adapt the structures of church life to new situations, to refuse to let any stage in the life of the church be considered definitive, claiming that along the journey, ecclesiastical apparatus must never be permitted to obscure God's grace."

Congar refers to "structures of church life." These structures were created by humans...therefore these structures CAN be changed. For Congar, the Holy Spirit is available not just for the defense of the *status quo*; the Holy Spirit also has a role to play in bringing about structural reform.

Rooted firmly in the teaching of Vatican II, I believe that is what women in the church today are seeking...

