

OPINION ED, published in De Standaard (national newspaper Belgium) on Holy Saturday 2021 and signed by 30 women working in the Catholic Church as teachers, chaplains, pastoral workers in parishes, inspectors for catholic education, professors at the faculty of theology, staff members in dioceses.

The quiet turnaround for women in the Catholic Church

The Easter story shows the central role of women at the beginning of the Christian tradition. In the Gospel according to John, it is Mary Magdalene who goes to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, finds it empty and meets the living Jesus for the first time. Mary Magdalene was therefore called the apostle among the apostles in the first centuries of Christianity. This central role for women has been pushed into the background again and again throughout the history of the Catholic Church.

Easter 2021. Women are still excluded from offices in the Catholic Church by an exclusively male hierarchy. Outsiders rightly look at the Catholic Church with pity when it comes to not opening up ordinations to women. For many Catholic women, this is an extremely painful denial of their own vocation. To them, the Church's attitude indicates a persistent closedness to renewal, underpinned by arguments of power in a theological cloak. Women wonder when the bishops will stand up for the ordination of women in the Church.

In neighbouring countries, there are some activist groups that want to weigh in on the Catholic Church's policy on the ordination of women. In Germany, the Maria 2.0 movement caused a stir with a widespread strike by women in all church work. In France, there is the "comité de la jupe", a group that arose in response to Cardinal VingtTrois' anti-women statement in 2008. He said that it was difficult to find educated women and that wearing a skirt was not enough to work in the church. The "comité de la jupe" recently encouraged seven women to apply for jobs that are only open to men. In Flanders, public activism about admitting women to all church functions has weakened today. Many have given up bumping into a glass ceiling, have consequently identified less with the Church's teaching or have tacitly left the Church.

But those who have chosen to stay, almost unnoticed by the general public, have caused a quiet change. That quiet change consists of the fact that when people come into contact with the faith community, they will often first meet a woman in a leadership position and have now come to experience this as 'normal'. Are you admitted to a healthcare institution and would you like a conversation about the meaning of what is happening to you or a ritual? The chaplain is more than likely a woman. Is your child receiving confirmation? The catechist is most likely a woman. Are you attending a weekend service in a rather progressive church community? Chances are that one of the pastors is a woman. Women do funerals, preach and bless, and the vast majority of those involved consider this normal. Meanwhile, women are also present in the highest policy-making bodies in the Flemish dioceses.

Flemish Catholic women who feel called are no longer on the public barricades shouting at people who do not want to see or hear. Flemish Catholic women who have a vocation simply carried on and made what they do ordinary. The future of the Catholic Church in the West will depend on the appreciative integration of what is happening at grassroots level. The Catholic Church, like many other institutions in society, still has a long way to go in avoiding exclusion on the basis of gender, origin, sexual orientation and age.

The question is not whether the base will continue to outpace the top, but whether those who currently have decision-making power are willing to go the way of the base.

Following the biblical tradition, we, as women, want to be the first and always continue to witness to the power of life in situations that are not life-giving. A blessed Easter!

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