

Article

Women and Gender in Contemporary European Catholic Discourse: Voices of Faith

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Abstract: Catholic women’s movements, networks and initiatives have a long history of advocating for an equal role in the Church—especially in the North American world. In recent years, their presence and visibility has been increasing in Europe too, also in relation to a series of initiatives and events, such as the Mary 2.0 campaign in Germany, which led to the launch of the Catholic Women’s Council (CWC) in 2019. This article focuses on the emerging discourse on women and gender promoted by the developing network of initiatives related to the role of women in the Catholic Church in different European countries. After reconstructing the map and history of this network, the contribution explores its emerging discourse, drawing on a triangulation of data: key-witnesses’ interviews; the magazine *Voices*; social network pages and profiles.

Keywords: women; Catholicism; religious feminism; gender; Catholic Church; feminist theology

1. Introduction

In recent years, the presence and visibility of Catholic women’s movements, networks and initiatives have been increasing in Europe: the Mary 2.0 campaign in Germany, the candidacy of a woman as bishop in Lyon, the resignation of the all-female editorial board of *Donne Chiesa Mondo* [*Women Church World*], the monthly magazine of the Vatican daily newspaper *Osservatore Romano*, gained in fact wide media coverage in the countries in which they took place.

Even though Catholic women’s movements have a long history, the current initiatives benefit from their resonance with the wave of women’s movements all around the world, which increases their public strength and visibility. Moreover, the contemporary Catholic Church structure is partially decentralized: even though the Pope and the Vatican maintain a crucial role, central authority is slowly eroded by the autonomy of ecclesial movements and initiatives, and the relevance of National Bishop Conferences (Dobbelaere and Pérez-Agote 2015; Marzano 2013; Turina 2013), and it is challenged by marginal voices (Campbell 2007, 2010; Cheong 2012). Scholars argue that the appointment of a Pope coming from the “periphery” is an attempt to address the structure crumbling and stem the peripheral discontent (Ferrara 2015). Therefore, contemporary initiatives of Catholic women may be effective in their claims.

In 2019, the Catholic Women’s Council (CWC) was launched with the aim of organizing a network of groups and initiatives related to the role of women in the Catholic Church in different European countries. In this paper we aim to understand the discourse of this network: by adopting classical frame analysis developed in social movement studies (Benford and Snow 2000), we explore what the issue of women in the Catholic Church is (diagnostic frame), what the prospected solutions are (prognostic frame) and what the reasons why the Catholic Church should change (motivational frame). In addition, we analyze the portraits of Catholic women emerging in the discourse.

Data stem from content and discourse analysis of the magazine *Voices*, and key-witnesses' interviews with the Italian group affiliated to the CWC, *Donne per la Chiesa* (Women for the Church). The analysis that we present here is part of a larger project dedicated to the analysis of women's activism in the Catholic Church.

The article is structured as follows: the next section provides an overview of women's activism in the Catholic Church, proposing a typology of initiatives, movements and campaigns. The third section introduces the CWC and its organization, while section four describes what emerged in frame analysis. The last section discusses the results.

2. Women's Activism in the Catholic Church

The relationship between women and the Catholic Church is particularly relevant, and the object of increasing literature (for a reconstruction, [Giorgi 2016, 2019a](#); [Korte 2011](#); [Woodhead 2001](#)). First, women appear to be the large majority of the faithful, as shown by the analyses of Catholic Church attendance disaggregated per sex: even though it is declining, women's participation in the Catholic Church activities is higher than men's ([Voas et al. 2013](#); [Pew Research Center 2016](#)). Different reasons have been put forward to explain the gender gap in Catholic Church attendance, including cultural, such as socialization, and structural factors, such as gender differences in employment rates (for a detailed reconstruction, see [Palmisano and Todesco 2019](#)). In addition, the decline in women's religious participation is a more recent phenomenon than male declining rates ([Brown 2001](#); [Palmisano and Todesco 2019](#)), which led scholars to point out the gendered understanding of the concept of 'secularization' ([Aune et al. 2008](#)). In addition, many studies documented women's role in the intergenerational transmission of the faith: the decline in women's religiosity may heavily affect the future of Catholicism ([Bengtson 2013](#); [Bengtson et al. 2009](#)). Hence, women play a relevant role in Catholicism: yet, they have a limited role in the Catholic Church.

Catholic women's movements, networks and initiatives have a long history of advocating for an equal role in the Church¹—especially in the North American world. There is a wide literature on women in Christian Churches advocating for women's rights, voice, and role. While some of these women then left their churches, others remained, trying to reform their institutions. In this section we propose a typology of women's activism, in order to situate the case-study of CWC.

For analytical purposes, we can identify three types of internal activism—which of course, in reality, intersect. (1) The first type of activism focuses on theology: although internally diversified, feminist theology, *thealogy* ([Goldenberg 1979](#)), and queer theology ([Athaus-Reid 2003](#)) reconsider gender normativity of religious traditions, practices and scriptures. Feminist theology, in particular, deconstructs the gender paradigms in the theological realm, thus creating room for redefining women's role. Also, scholars in feminist theology seek to give voice to women theologians who have been forgotten, such as Hildegard of Bingen. According to [Radford Ruether \(2002\)](#), Catholic feminist theology has developed especially since the late 1960s in North America in relation to three main factors. First, the civil rights and women's movements provided a cultural context of activism and awareness also for women in the Catholic Church. Second, the gradual access of women to theological education and ministry, particularly in liberal Protestantism, and later on, the access to ordination, contributed to Catholic women's rethinking of their role in the Catholic Church. Also, due to a renewed ecumenism between Catholics and Protestants in North America, the chance was offered to Catholic women to access critical theological education in Protestant-led prominent Universities. Third, Vatican Council II was enthusiastically received among sections of North American Catholics and this created a climate of activism and expectation for change. Progressive American nuns adopted a feminist critique, and female Catholic theologians raised to prominence: "Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who begin their feminist theological work in the late 1960s to mid-1970s,

¹ We do not consider, here, outward activism, addressing the entire society (see, for example [Zwissler 2018](#)).

to be followed by a number of others, such as Margaret Farley, Mary Jo Weaver, Elizabeth Johnson, and Susan Ross" (Radford Ruether 2002, p. 7). In time, feminist theology diversified, and Womanist (crossing black feminism), and Mujerista (with specific Latino voice) theologies have been established. All around the world, Christian—and Catholic—feminist theologians coordinate in networks and local groups that organize publications, meetings and conferences. Relevant voices have developed in Europe too, especially in Germany and the UK, such as those of Elisabeth Gössmann, Kari Børresen, and Ursula King. A UK-based scholarly journal, *Feminist Theology*, collects their voices. While in North America Catholic feminist theology is an institutionalized voice, in Europe feminist theologians had fewer opportunities: Catholic feminist voices emerged especially in an ecumenical and academic context and are marginalized by the Catholic Church.

(2) A second type of activism, directly related to feminist theology, is expressed by the movements that aim at redefining the organizational structure of the Catholic Church, particularly with regard to women's role. One example is the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement, which started in 1975 with The Women's Ordination Conference in Detroit (Michigan), then expanded to other countries (the firsts in 1985, were Canada and Germany) and which is organized nowadays in a worldwide network Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW). The movement was actually able to find Catholic bishops willing to ordain women: the first Consecration took place on a ship on the Danube in 2002, when seven women were ordained to priesthood, the 'Danube Seven'—and then others followed in every continent (Daigler 2012; Murphy 2014). The validity of their ordination is of course in debate, as the Vatican does not acknowledge women's possibility of administering liturgy and the Danube seven were excommunicated: in their declaration, the seven women interpret their gesture as a prophetic sign of protest against women's discrimination. As explored by Barbara Velik-Frank in her analysis of the 'Danube seven' motivations and understandings of their action, women are already *in* the Church—yet, they are not fully visible. In the Danube action, these women took a step back from the blurred visibility they might achieve in the Church, to become fully visible as heterotopia, on a moving boat that constructed a symbolic counter-visibility, a counter-perspective from which to look at and be looked from the Catholic Church (Velik-Frank 2016).

Within the same frame, starting in the early 1980s in North America and then expanding worldwide, groups of Christian women also began to shape the 'Women-Church movement'—autonomous feminist liturgical communities (Hunt 2009; Kautzer 2012).

(3) The Catholic Women Council could be interpreted as a third type of activism, which does not aim at subverting theology or the organizational structure: it includes contemporary campaign and initiatives that locate themselves within the Catholic Church and it primarily aims at influencing the culture of the Catholic community—which in turn would push for reshaping the Catholic Church organization and practice. This activism claims for the voice of women in the Church to be heard, and claims for equality and recognition: also, it has developed in relation to the conservative and traditionalist turn of some Catholic groups (especially Catholic women's groups). Its visibility is also related to the women's movements all around the world: the #metoo campaign, and the *Ni Una Menos* (initiatives against violence against women) in particular (Giorgi 2020). On the one side, this renewed broad women's activism opened a window of opportunity in the public discourse and in the Catholic discursive sphere for speaking about the violence, patriarchy and abuse in Catholicism. Hashtags like #inchurchtoo, or #nunstoo contributed to open a discussion among Catholic women. On the other side, it worked as a source of inspiration and legitimation for women's activism in different fields, including Catholic associations and the Catholic Church. In this light, the Catholic Women's Council is an umbrella network that gathers all the groups working for the full recognition of the dignity and equality of women in the Church, relaunching Catholic women's internal activism.

3. The Catholic Women's Council Organization and Network

In this section, we introduce the Catholic Women's Council, describing its organization and demands. The CWC was created in Stuttgart in 2019, stemming from the "Mary 2.0" initiative: during

the May devotion to Virgin Mary, women abstained from going to the Church and from all the voluntary work (it was called ‘women’s strike’), and gathered outside the religious buildings in many German cities, celebrating and protesting. The campaign was related to the global protests against violence against women and was meant to raise awareness of abuse and sexism within the Catholic Church too. Its demands included allowing women’s ministry and the end of priests’ celibacy (Kötter 2020). Mary 2.0 was a success, and it was supported by many local groups and organizations, including the project Voices of Faith (VoF)—originally created to fund Jesuits’ missions, the project shifted its focus on the promotion of women’s dignity and equality in the Catholic Church². Outside of Germany, groups from Austria, Liechtenstein and Switzerland joined the movement and in November gathered under the umbrella network Catholic Women’s Council. Broadly speaking, the general relaunch and visibility of Catholic women’s activism is deeply related to the vitality of Catholic women’s organization in German-speaking contexts. In January 2020, CWC organized a conference in Rome, inviting groups and associations from all over the world to join the network, which then became global.

Founding members include 25 groups—among which there are groups that promote women’s presence and voice in the church, also opening space for dialogue and debate and cooperation, such as the large women’s associations *KDFB Bundesverband* and *kdf—Katholische Frauengemeinschaft Deutschlands*, or the network *Andante* or *Catholic Women Speak*, or *Donne per la Chiesa*, in Italy; groups advocating for the possibility for lay people to share the sacramental ministry with priests and bishops (*#JuniaInitiative*); groups advocating for opening permanent diaconate and priesthood to women (such as the small group *Aktion Lila Stola*—purple stole—part of *We Are Church* in Germany); there are also study groups, associations of solidarity, and monasteries; there is also one radio, based in South Africa (but many groups are in Germany); and *We Are Church Ireland* (which, for example, want to promote a positive attitude towards sexuality and the removal of the obligation of clerical celibacy).

Even though it is not a mass movement, the groups included in this network are able to mobilize interest from Catholic groups and grassroots movements and, in some cases, from the clergy. One of the interesting aspects of the CWC action is the public character of the initiatives: while the Catholic Church is the primary target, society at large is also part of the larger audience, as the network is particularly interested in public and media visibility.

The groups demands are partially diverse from one another, but they all share the sense of being and the commitment to promote women’s dignity and equality in the Catholic Church. Broadly speaking, these groups gather Catholic women protesting against what they consider to be ‘Churchsplaining’, Heyder (2020) puts it—the patronizing explanation of Church matters by the male clergy only. The criticism against the ‘clerical power’, which manifests itself in the exclusion of women from the clergy and, more broadly, the exclusion of the faithful from the Catholic Church decision-making is, in fact, the object or the theological and spiritual reflections of contemporary Catholic women engaged with these groups (Eckholt 2020). The main form of action of the CWC is the current pilgrimage to Rome, which started in 2020, on the International Women’s Day, and it was scheduled to end in November 2021—now postponed to March 2022, due to the Coronavirus outbreak—when the network will meet in Rome and will bring its reflections to the Vatican. This pilgrimage is virtual and multi-sited: the underlying idea is that each group organize meetings, prayers, and discussions around the topics related to women’s equality in the Church and articulates its demands, using the materials provided by the CWC alongside theirs. Due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, however, many meetings took place online and reconfigured as international conversations and dialogues around six themes: sacramental life; power and participation; theology, language and representation; structures, accountability and communication; vulnerability, resistance and hope; and women in the post-Covid Church.

² Information provided during the first interview with a representative of the Italian group *Donne per la Chiesa*, affiliated to the CWC (10 July 2020).

4. The Discourse of the Catholic Women’s Council—Voices of Faith

This section introduces the data selection strategy and the analytical approach, offering a preliminary overview of the results. The CWC network, as well as its members, praise the plurality of voices: apart from the demand for women’s equality in the Catholic Church, all the groups share the commitment to dialogue and the acknowledgment of internal diversity and pluralism. We decided to focus on Voices of Faith (VoF)—and, in particular, on its yearly magazine *Voices*, because not only is it one of the founding members of CWC, but it also hosts its website and digital network. Hence, we posit that VoF positions are representatives of those of the other groups in the network. In addition, VoF is a Germany-based institution: this appears to be relevant in relation to the fact that the CWC was launched in Germany and that contemporary women’s activism in the Catholic Church is particularly developed in German-speaking countries.

On its website, Voices of Faith describes itself as inclusive, honest and open, respectful, unapologetic, innovative and bold, and faithful. These adjectives are quite interesting as they challenge the gender stereotypes connected to womanhood. Also, the Voices of Faith defines itself as:

*... an initiative that creates events, media outreach and international network groups to empower Catholic women into decision making roles at local and global levels of the Catholic Church. But we don’t only focus on the current and extremely patriarchal structures of this Church. We also imagine and create completely new and innovative ways women can and must be included right now—without asking for permission.*³

Started in 2015, the magazine *Voices* collects the voices of women in occasion of events organized by Voices of Faith and, particularly, the yearly conference on the international women’s day, with the aim of enhancing women’s participation and leadership through storytelling. The stories and voices are mainly those of women who are in the frontline in the Church and the broader society, from all over the world: women who can be role models for action *in* and *for* the Catholic Church. Many of the women whose stories are reported, for example, are in leadership positions in the Catholic Church structure, or work in charity projects all around the world, taking action against exclusion, discrimination, human trafficking or violence against women, to make only some example, and promoting women’s and children’s education or local economy.

For the analysis, we collected the magazine issues: first, we generated the documents’ word cloud, in order to understand their main focus. Second, we coded the texts in the document according to who was speaking, her (or, more rarely, his) country of origin, and the main topic of discussion, for a preliminary analysis of the type of stories and voices populating the magazine. Third, we coded the text and performed a traditional qualitative frame analysis to understand how the role of women in the Catholic Church is problematized (diagnostic frame), what are the possible solutions (prognostic frame) and what are the arguments proposed in support of the action (motivational frame) (Benford and Snow 2000). Lastly, we coded and analyzed the discourse on women and womanhood emerging from the multiple voices of faith collected and shared by the magazine.

Considering the *Voices* dictionary, the main focus is on women in the Church and their multiple roles and is shown in Figure 1. The words emerging in the picture are “woman”, “Church”, “she”, and, to a lesser extent, “our”, signaling the overarching theme of the initiative.

³ <https://voicesoffaith.org/about/>.

The majority of women whose stories are showcased, or who intervene in the debates are either part of the Catholic Church—nuns, or lay women working in Church-related organizations—or leading charities and associations in different parts of the world. These stories report experiences of activism, challenges, and success of Church women working in deprived areas or even war zones, fighting poverty, human trafficking, natural disasters and, more broadly, crisis. The other stories come from key-witnesses, usually women who have been supported by Church-related initiatives and missions, who felt inspired by the actions of role-models, or businesswomen who are also involved in charities. These are stories of overcoming challenges to success, which also praise the value of education and culture, while celebrating the differences. In 2018 and 2019, two issues were devoted to the stories of survivors to gender-based violence and sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Consistently, the topics touched upon are mostly related to three themes: women’s role in the Church; poverty, deprivation, human trafficking; abuse and gender-based violence.

In the following sub-sections, we explore the results of the analysis in relation to the diagnostic (4.1), prognostic (4.2) and motivational (4.3) frames, and in relation to the image of Catholic women emerging in the discourse.

4.1. What’s the Issue with Women and the Catholic Church?

The diagnostic frame clarifies the different problematic aspects related to the role of women in the Catholic Church: women are excluded from the decision-making, they cannot vote at the Synod and are excluded from the institutional key roles, in line with the Canon Law. In addition, religious women are treated differently: for example, recently issued instructions for women’s contemplative life, *Cor Orans* (2018), redacted by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, confirmed the old practice of putting female monasteries under spiritual control and economic supervision, while male monasteries are autonomous. Moreover, the contribution of female theologians is downplayed, as well as female examples of sanctity.

In addition to the core issues, which consider the whole of the women’s situation in the Catholic Church, there are also other problematic issues, such as the disturbing fact that the Catholic Church structure did not protect abused women who suffered violence from the clergy—and, there is no possibility to appeal to an independent body within the Catholic Church, if the system fails. Also, women working in Church-related organizations (such as official press agencies) have career limits, occasionally described through the glass ceiling metaphor used for women in nonreligious institutions.

The problematization of women’s role in the Catholic Church touches upon a variety of aspects. First and foremost, the Catholic Church attitude and structure are described as contradictory, in terms of discourse, pragmatically, and in relation to the reality of Catholic Church everyday life. In terms of discourse, a member of the Lutheran Church, invited to intervene in one of the first debates on the topic, commented:

It seems to me that the Church, which emphasizes so much the differences between women and men and the complementarity of women and men, should be particularly eager to hear what women have to say for themselves and to have a balance of men and women in its governing structures. This situation seems a little bit illogical. (Voices 2015, p. 51)

Both the Pope and the Catholic Church hierarchies constantly recall the importance of women, their crucial role in society, the Catholic community and the Church structure. Particularly in relation to the discourse on family, the complementarity of women and men is a relevant discursive topic (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016; Paternotte et al. 2016; Avanza and Sudda 2017; Rochefort and Sanna 2013). However, key roles are covered by males. Catholic women discussing the topic point out that they are “Church”: yet, they do not have the right to have a say in how the Catholic Church works, and in its

decisions. The term “spiritual abuse”⁴ is also mentioned but without prominence. This framing also includes the laity, whose presence and commitment are crucial in the Church structure and praised by Vatican Council II. In her intervention, one theologian explained:

As lay people we simply don't have a right to have a say in our Church [. . .] Our role can neatly be summed up as follows: Listen, obey and pay. That becomes even more absurd when you consider that ordained men form only a super-tiny proportion of our Church: less than 0.1 percent. (Voices 2019a, p. 10)

This frame resonates with (and echoes) the broader campaigns on reclaiming democracy and reducing inequalities. The Catholic Church is criticized because its “governance” does not seem to represent the majority of the people who animate its activities. Numbers are indeed another version of the framing that focuses on the Church contradictions. If we consider the Catholic community, women are the majority—even though their participation is decreasing (Palmisano and Todesco 2019). According to the women taking part in VoF events, among consecrated people women are roughly 80%. Moreover, women’s numbers in lay ministry are significantly higher than those of men. Religious orders, in particular, are praised as positive examples of Church-related organizations in which women’s (and laity’s) capacity and strength are recognized, as women are often appointed in leadership positions. This is the case, for example, of Caritas Internationalis, Pax Christi, or the Jesuit Refugee Service and its many related initiatives⁵. Therefore, pragmatically, it is contradictory not to acknowledge women’s relevance and leadership.

In addition, considering the Catholic Church everyday life, the situation is framed as already changing, both in the “peripheries” and in the “center” of Catholicism. For example, women from India explain how feminist theology is compulsory in theology studies in many seminaries. One Swiss bishop comments that: “Women in my dioceses are allowed to preach, even during the Eucharist.” (Voices 2019a, p. 37), and likewise in many German parishes. In many contexts, women already have administrative roles, and in female religious orders, things have already changed, as one of the women points out:

Sisters belonging to international congregations are influenced by feminist thinking and are making changes in their attitudes and also in their governance. They are moving away from a patriarchal world view to a feminist one and are making changes accordingly. So we hear of participative leadership, team leadership, consensus in decision-making, dialogue as a way of life, etc. (Voices 2019b, p. 23)

Even though the Catholic Church hierarchy does not acknowledge the change, this is already in place. On the one side, women in leading roles are positive examples for younger women and the broader Catholic community. Also, it can be a stimulus for the Catholic Church to familiarize with women’s presence and acknowledge their relevance and competence, allowing them to access key roles and decision-making arenas. On the other, even though numbers and roles of women are increasing, there is still a long road ahead, particularly considering that, in the end, the power on change is not in women’s hands: to use the words of one of the women intervening in the debates related to this topic, the CEO of an international Catholic agency, there are women in leadership roles, in the Catholic Church, but they are an exception. Women are engaged, but: “Are women engaged as family, are they engaged as guests or are they engaged as guest workers?” Moreover, “are the voices of women taken as a little threatening or as enriching?” (Voices 2016, pp. 46–47).

Also, in some cases, the women who gain leadership roles remain silent on the Catholic Church contradictions, and they neither provide role-models for Catholic women, who learn instead to be silent, nor for women on the outside, who are often unaware of how the Catholic Church is already changing.

⁴ Spiritual abuse refers to the situations in which spiritual or religious beliefs are used to hurt or control, and to the situations in which religious leaders abuse of their authority. Some studies on violence include ‘spiritual abuse’ in the typology of abuse (Aune and Barnes 2018; Giorgi 2019a).

⁵ However, research show that women are a minority even in those leadership positions open to the laity (Qualbrink 2019).

This is a particularly important aspect for another type of framing that, instead of contradictions, focuses on the gap between the Catholic Church and contemporary societies. This frame, mobilized by young women intervening in the debates, highlights the distance between contemporary women's needs and the Catholic Church response—including the role it accords to women. One of the young women, for example, says that “the Church felt very removed from the reality I was chasing as a young woman: autonomy, agency, empowerment. I didn't want my conversations with God to be censored by a group of men who didn't really want to listen to me” (Voices 2018, p. 26). Another young woman, raised by a multi-religious family, discusses her unease with the Catholic Church positions on issues such as gender and LGBT+ rights:

I think ultimately it was a battle between my sense of self, my moral compass and compromising in exchange for a “purer” Catholic identity, and I wasn't ready to do that. Having always been on the outside looking in, I could not in good conscience endorse a system that makes outsiders of people for their gender, sexuality, and life choices. How do reconcile that with the teaching of Jesus, who hung out with “tax collectors and sinners”, basically pious society's outcasts? (Voices 2018, p. 25)

Another intervention is made by a Catholic homosexual woman who lives in a deprived context and runs a charity: she points out her difficulties in participating in a Church that doesn't make her feel safe. Again, it emerges a sense of exclusion and distance from the Catholic Church structure and, at the same time, an implicit request—similarly to what emerges from the analysis of the debates of Christian LGBT+ people, there is not the willingness of leaving the Catholic Church: on the contrary, it emerges the desire to be fully recognized as legitimate Church citizens (Giorgi 2019b). These excerpts also point out the change in how young people live their faith and their understanding of Catholicism, for which the structure and the community are as important as the personal relationship with the divine.

The issue with exclusion from the Catholic Church, however, is not only related to the absence from the decision-making arenas, or the limited access to key roles: it also includes a broader sense of voicelessness, for which women are not heard nor listened to, and their opinions and feelings are not taken into account. As one of the women maintains:

... many of us are bored at listening only to male interpretations of biblical texts, ethics, and ecclesial life. Sunday after Sunday, we are exposed to faith experiences made only by male, or interpreted by an only male priesthood. Not to talk about the exclusive male language in liturgy, prayers, hymns. (Voices 2019a, p. 33)

This excerpt expresses the need for feminist—or, at least, female—theology, underlining that men's and women's experiences of faith, as well as their interpretations of the sacred scriptures, are not the same (cfr. Radford Ruether 2002). Therefore, the role of women in the Church is framed as both a cultural and a structural issue, ideally merging the first two types of activism mentioned in Section 2.

4.2. The Many Ways of Valuing Women's Roles

The prognostic frame is strictly related to the problematic aspects: considering that the problem is both a cultural and a structural issue, the solution implies a change in women's role in the Church at the structural, the theological and the cultural level, although opinions vary in relation to which is the causal relationship and what should come first. Broadly speaking: “there is an urgent need for expanding the roles of women, especially at the highest decision-making levels” (Voices 2015, p. 27).

The structural changes that women deem as needed range from radical Constitutional and law changes to small adjustment of the Church practice. Considering the role of consecrated women, prognostic framing focuses on the need to reaffirm their autonomy with respect to male religious orders and other forms of authority, particularly in relation to monasteries' running.

In broader terms, demands including the possibility of voting at the Synods, and the institution of female diaconate—for which a commission was organized, without reaching any agreement⁶. While some of the women whose voices are reported would pursue female ordination, or at least maintain the ordination as a “dream”, others do not. In between, other solutions are suggested: intervening in a debate on the Catholic Church of the future, for example, the theologian Tina Beattie maintains

We are told that the question of ordination is ruled out. Now, if we are asked to accept that and respect it, we have to see that in every other situation there is full and equal promotion of women’s leadership, that every position that not require ordination is equally filled by men and women. (Voices 2015, p. 29)

More specifically, suggestions include setting up inclusive pastoral, parish and finance councils: this would value the role of women and concretely equate their roles to men’s. In addition, women’s leadership should be relevant and visible. One of the women intervening in the debates point out that some Pontifical Councils—such as the Pontifical Council for the Laity and the Pontifical Council for the Family—could be run by women, instead of the male clergy. Other suggestions mention the possibility for women to give homilies and be in charge of the parish organization.

Occasionally, the revision of women’s role in the Catholic Church is framed in relation to the broader issue of the role of the laity and the youth. Considering that, as it emerged in diagnostic framing, the Church is mainly populated by lay people, their voices should count in the Catholic Church organization (it may be seen as an issue of representation, as we will discuss in the next section). Therefore, the focus here is on the reception side: the voices and opinions of women, young people, and the laity should be listened to and taken into account, in order to make non ordained people fully part of the Church. In this direction, suggestions include setting up spaces for dialogue on the future of the Church and critical issues such as race, class, LGBT+ rights, environment, and, more broadly, contemporary societal debates. For example, considering the role of young people, a woman suggests:

Create spaces for the voices of young people to be heard and listen to them. Get into their skins and their experience of the world. Learn from them and respect their agency to change the world. They are moving ahead at a tremendous speed in a virtual world. They cannot be stopped, but they do need your steadying hand. Be honest and transparent and non-judgmental. Help them to live the gospel message of love, justice and peace. (Voices 2018, p. 28)

In addition to structural change, cultural change is deemed as crucial: in women’s voices, cultural changes include change in the Catholic Church discourse, in training and education. The Catholic Church discourse, women say, should change and proclaim the full equality and dignity of men and women, and should give “the freedom to both women and men to realize their full human potential [. . .] emphasize more the common humanity of women and men and less the differences.” (Voices 2015, p. 30). The Catholic Church discourse should change at different levels—for example, it is suggested to enhance the visibility and dignity of women by revising the lectionary and valuing the forgotten history of women in the Church, as well as their contribution.⁷ During celebrations, in teachings and museums, women’s contributions should be made visible and valued, in order to create a counternarrative able to shed light on women’s presence in the Church.

The cultural change especially works through education, starting with young children studying catechism, who should learn equality from an early age, in order to create the Church of the future. At the same time, it is suggested that men in key roles in the Church structure undergo equal opportunity

⁶ <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/05/07/pope-francis-says-commission-women-deacons-did-not-reach-agreement>.

⁷ Other changes include theology: for the Church to be inclusive and equal, it is said, there should be the space of liberating God from gendered constructs.

trainings, and that women in key roles pay attention to mentoring young women, in order to start changing the Catholic Church culture. Being role-models, and inspiring young women to participate and engage in the Church and in the change is a relevant instrument for action. In addition, the cultural education and training for the priests and bishops of the future should consider the contributions that women made to the Catholic Church history and structure, including theology and doctrine.

Imagine how a young seminarian would come out if during his preparation he studied and understood the role of women, historically. Not just in the Church but the role women have played in leading government, business, non-profits and movements. Imagine if every young seminarian understood that voice. What might be the effect when he goes out [to a parish]? That could be a good step. If seminarians really understood the history and role of women, they would want them more engaged. (Voices 2016, p. 49)

This excerpt also points out the relevance of speaking to and with men, making them allies in the cultural, scriptural and structural change of the Catholic Church. More broadly, partnerships, networks, and solidarity are considered as crucial instruments to advance women's demands and the Catholic Church change.

In practice, change is conceived of as a combination of a bottom-up and top-down approach. On the one side, Church hierarchies should open the space for dialogue with women and appoint women in key roles. On the other, women are required to take action and clearly ask for change. Many use the Scriptural analogy "knocking at the door", to explain the type of action that is required. Others are more intense, as the following quotation illustrates:

So we can't just wait for the Holy Spirit to rescue us. We have to look for where the holy Spirit is sending along the means to do so. Often, when I begin to feel, am I saying too much too loudly, I go back to Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham Jail where he says, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed." (Voices 2018, p. 53)

More broadly, women are requested to adopt creative methods and imagination to find new and effective ways of being listened to and included. Women need to "stir the water" and not accept the status quo.

The prognostic framing also includes visions and dreams about the Church of the future, which is described as "messy, free, faithful, joyful community" (Voices 2015, p. 28), inclusive and welcoming, which values all the voices, open to learning from the world. In terms of organization, some imagine the Catholic Church of tomorrow as a synod-based sisterhood and brotherhood. The dream that many women express is for the Church to accept their gifts and to make women fully-fledged citizens of the Church. To sum up, for many: "women already are in the Church! What is missing is only to integrate them, to accept them and value them. Recognise them" (Voices 2018, p. 33).

4.3. Anger and Reverence—Why Women Should Be Included

The motivational framing expresses the arguments in favor of change. In the case of women's role in the Catholic Church, a variety of arguments is mobilized.

In *Voices* articles, the importance of women's inclusion is often framed as an opportunity to stop women—and their children—leaving the Church. An inclusive Church is able to include and value the visions and desires of its different members. As one of the women points out, commenting on the positive examples of women's inclusion and their potential impact on young women: "They are no longer forced to make a decision between staying in the Church and being silent or leaving. Instead, they are able to see that they can stay in the Church and be who they are and speak their truth" (Voices 2018, p. 44). At the same time, if women stay, children would stay too: reference is made to women's social role as a mother, who is often the primary mediator of her children's encounter with religion. In addition, contemporary young people who perceive the Catholic Church as an outdated

institution might be reintegrated as they see that the Church is able to include the issues that are relevant to them—such as equality. Discussing the future of the Church, one of the women comments:

The younger generation settles for less and asks more questions. In the last 40 years, women have woken up and realized, “I am not just happy with what is at the margin”. They will ask questions and expect answers. (Voices 2016, p. 42)

More broadly, women’s inclusion would give a signal to all the laity that their Church is able to face the challenges and the opportunities of contemporary societies, therefore preventing people from leaving the faith. In addition to not losing participants, women’s inclusion is also framed as an incentive to attract other people to the Church. In a slightly different version, the argument for inclusion would use the language of brain drain, or talent drain, to frame the waste of resources that should be ended as soon as possible, because “The Church is doing itself a disservice.” (Voices 2016, p. 45). Women’s inclusion is framed as an investment, from which the Catholic Church would benefit.

Women’s inclusion is also framed as necessary to improve the Catholic Church credibility in front of its members. An institution that wants to be able to speak the truth and being heard in contemporary society, it is said, should be held accountable for what it says and for its actions. More importantly, a trustworthy institution should also be truly representative—including the voices of all of its members.

The inclusion of women’s voices is framed with the language of either diversity or complementarity. In the diversity version of this framing, women’s inclusion would be an advantage because it would allow for a wider imagination, leading to diversity of thought and making the Catholic Church able to fully grasp the complexities of the contemporary world through multiple lenses. In the complementarity version, women’s inclusion responds to the necessity of fully taking into account the human experience of love, which stems from the union of men and women.

Women’s inclusion is also framed in terms of equality and fairness: women’s participation in the Catholic Church mission, women’s feelings and faith, women’s capacities are equal to those of men. Therefore, they should be included as men are. One of the few men who took part in VoF initiatives commented on the experience he had during his training to become a priest:

What attracts them to ordained ministry is what attracts me: a positive experience of the Church, of priests who I admired when I was younger, priests in my life as a Catholic adult who I was drawn to, who I found inspiration in, who I saw making a difference in people’s lives. This is the reality that draws these women to this ministry. Obviously, it puts them in a very complicated, confusing, painful situation to not have the opportunity to even explore that call. (Voices 2018, p. 55)

Women’s inclusion, then, would acknowledge the equal relevance of men’s and women’s experiences.

As equality is one of the arguments mobilized for women’s inclusion, injustice also comes into focus: women’s absence is unjustifiable and unfair and should be fought against. The first article of the first issue of Voices discusses the role of anger in Catholic life and identity, starting from a reading in the Gospel, and the speaker points out that:

We are called in this Gospel today and every day to never be apathetic, to always be angry when the holy is compromised. We are called to be angry when the dignity of people is compromised. We are called to be angry when there is sexism in the world or in the Church. [. . .] Our invitation today is to claim that anger, and in emulating Christ, to turn that anger into opportunities for action to reverence what God holds dear, what God sees as holy and sacred. (Voices 2015, p. 4)

This excerpt also summarizes the overarching tone of women’s demands and initiatives, which are described as angry and reverent at the same time. As we discuss in the next section, the use of anger contributes to deconstructing the traditional visions of “Catholic women identity”.

Another argument for women’s inclusion considers violence and abuse: women’s exclusion from key-roles contributes to their exclusion from the institutional culture and imagination, as well as to

their subordination to men. The topic of violence in the Catholic Church communities, whomever the perpetrator, has been traditionally neglected, with tangible consequences on women's capacity to recognize an abuse (Aune and Barnes 2018). In recent years it has started to be discussed, for the initiative of local communities and, also, in relation to the broader #metoo campaigns (Giorgi 2020). Introducing the initiative on abuse and violence in the Catholic Church, one of the women clearly affirms: "Yes, I am deeply convinced about that. A hierarchical and sexist Church is the one that makes men violent and allows violence". (Voices 2019b, p. 6).

As a call for action, it is sometimes pointed out that the Catholic Church is the only major institutions that exclude women. To use the words of one of the women intervening in the debates:

The empowerment of women is a sign of the times. It is not about secularization or imitating the world but it is about recognizing that excluding women from the Church does not conform to the Gospel. It is not what the Gospel wants. (Voices 2015, p. 31)

Therefore, women's inclusion would fill the gap between the Gospel and the Catholic Church practice. This frame echoes the arguments put forward by Catholic LGBT+ people to advocate for recognition (see, for example, Giorgi 2019b).

Women's discourse often mentions the successful stories of inclusion and the positive examples both in the Church and in the outer world, pointing out the action and mobilizations are effective and may bring changes: particularly, the success of the Catholic Church structure in the USA, the role of women in European local parishes, or the effective action brought about by female leaders in religious orders and charities all around the world.

However, women's requests also face criticisms, from some sections of the Catholic Church, and silence, from the hierarchy: therefore, especially in the last issues, the voices collected also manifest some uncertainty about the real chance to trigger an effective change. Consecrated women are accused of defying their vows of obedience, while lay women are accused of wanting a revolution, and to follow the wind of the secular world. Nonetheless, VoF, the CWC and many other initiatives continue to promote campaigns for inclusion and for change.

4.4. Portraits of Women

The voices of those who intervened at the various initiatives of VoF also invite to rethinking stereotypical images of women, in general, and Catholic women in particular.

I have lost count of the number of times I have heard women addressed collectively as tender, patient, sensitive, motherly, empathic, gentle, etc. (Voices 2015, p. 27)

This frame of femininity is also related to the "feminine genius" mentioned by John Paul II in the Letter to Women issued in 1995 and criticized by many women during the initiatives of VoF. The feminine genius points to the nurturing aspect of women, their role as caregivers. Also, the expression normalizes and naturalizes attitudes, such as sensitivity, and behaviors, such as tending to others, turning them into innate elements of femininity. The role of women as good wives and mothers, empathetic and accommodating, obedient members of the community, is seen as limited and far from everyday reality. As one of the women comments, "women are individual persons with different characteristics, different professions, different theologies, different political views" (Voices 2015, p. 28). These tensions between female stereotypes and women's diversity echoes the traditional debates and claims of women's movements. Moreover, the world is changing, and women in the Church are changing too, in their desire to speak up and to find their calling. One of the women intervening in the meetings says that:

... there are more missions in the Church than just to get married, become a nun or be celibate. In reality, with my testimony and my story I have understood that many other women feel the call to do more, but do not know how to answer. Do not know how to contradict society. (Voices 2018, p. 31)

The lack of role-models makes it difficult to re-imagine a significant role for women in the Church, which is different from the traditional ones. During education, as well as in families, gendered roles are experienced and learned, and it requires a conscious effort of deconstruction and imagination to re-inventing different paths to femininity. The president of VoF, Chantal Götz, comments:

I am often asked, “Chantal are you angry? Are you angry with the world, with the church, with our religious leaders?” It seems that women are not allowed to be angry. I am sometimes even told by my colleagues that an angry tone is not particularly good for a woman. Not good for Voices of Faith and its mission and goals. (Voices 2017, p. 6)

As the excerpt points out, challenging the stereotypes also leads to criticism and misunderstandings. More broadly, it underlines the strict control over gendered relationships that characterizes many contexts—including, of course, the Catholic Church. Yet, women are of course diverse: one of the members of the CWC network, Catholic Women Speak⁸, clearly states on the homepage of its websites that the organization consciously chose to use “women”, instead of “woman”, to point out and value diversity and pluralism of women’s voices (see also Heyder 2020).

What about women as social critics or social activists, like Dorothy Day? What about women who are scandalous, like Dorothy Day and Mary Magdalene and the woman at the well? What about women who are entrepreneurial, hard-headed, persistent and sometimes even defiant? Like many of the women religious who founded and sustained their congregations, and the women who followed them and went into these territories to establish works? What about those women? What about women who really take the spiritual works of mercy seriously, like Catherine of Siena, who wrote words urging the pope and the political leaders to change their ways? What about those women? (Voices 2016, p. 48)

Women at the VoF initiatives point out the tensions around their Catholic identity and the figures of women they admire, who are scandalous, critics of the status quo and definitely noncompliant (these are “warrior women”, as one of the other interventions described them).

In naming potential role-models, they also contribute to construct an alternative image of Catholic women: persistent, defiant and courageous. What emerges from the voices and the texts is an idea of femininity characterized by three interrelated aspects. First, Catholic female identity is not submissive nor shaped by the “otherness” of men: regardless of the “complementarity” issue, what characterizes a woman is not the opposite of what characterizes a man. Therefore, women can be as courageous as men, as hard-headed as men, as leading as men. Second, the relevance of women’s role in the Church is not legitimized or given by men: regardless of the structure technicalities, women are as part of the Church as men. Equality is a right, not a concession. Third, women’s voice and dignity do not derive from women’s social role as nurturing mothers or empathetic caregivers: it derives from the common humanity they share with men. In other words, the image of the good Catholic woman is not shaped by her femininity. Rather, it is shaped by her militant faith.

5. Conclusions: Women, Equality, and the Catholic Church

The article focused on the current wave of women’s mobilization within the Catholic Church gathered under the umbrella of Catholic Women’s Council, exploring the discursive space created by contemporary Catholic women, captured in-between ‘impotence’ and ‘emancipation’ (see Eckholt 2020). The analyses explored the discursive frames of the mobilization, pointing out the problematic aspects of women’s role in the Catholic Church, the suggested or dreamed solutions, and the underlying arguments for structural and cultural change. Broadly speaking, the case study findings point out women’s ambivalent perception of their role in the Catholic Church: on the one side, they consider themselves a lively part of the Church, and contribute to its mission in many ways. On the other,

⁸ <https://catholicwomenspeak.com/>.

they feel excluded by the Church structure, which seems to not have space for their 'gift'. Women point out the absence of female figures in the Catholic Church structure and narrative. At the same time, in the interventions reported in the magazine, Catholic women also provide a range of possible solutions, ranging from partial inclusion in local decision-making to open the possibility of Consecration to women. The reasons for which the role of women in the Catholic Church should change are diverse: it is a matter of equality, it is an acknowledgment of the changes in the wider world, it is the rediscovery of the original roots and teaching of the Catholic Church. In this direction, the analysis showed the criticism of 'Churchsplaining' that women moved to the Catholic Church institution (Heyder 2020). Also, the analysis touched upon the efforts in countering the stereotypes surrounding the Catholic women, showing what aspects of femininity and womanhood are praised instead. The voices of women reported in the magazine refuse the vision of the 'feminist genius', for which women would be 'naturally' inclined to care and be sensitive. On the contrary, those women reclaim diversity, and the legitimacy of feelings and behavior traditionally attributed to men, such as anger (Giorgi 2019b). The initiative Voices of Faith is heavily influenced by the German context: however, the women's voices reported by the magazine *Voices* came from all over the world, as the magazine reports the interventions made in Rome during the yearly conference organized by Voices of Faith with other partners. These voices testify, in fact, for a diffuse interest and sensitivity towards the issue of the role of women in the Catholic Church. In this sense, the results are relevant to the broader analysis of contemporary Catholic women's activism. Overall, the analysis contributes to the literature on women's activism and feminism within the Catholic Church (e.g., Giorgi 2020; Daigler 2012; Eckholt 2020; Hunt 2009; Qualbrink 2019), and to the studies on current women's mobilizations in different fields.

The mobilization explored in this article is significant, in spite of the small number of women involved, for at least two elements. First of all, the Catholic Women's Council is not a fringe mobilization organized by marginal actors: on the contrary, it channels a feeling of unease felt by women who are already active in their parishes, their communities and Catholic organizations and charities. What is described here is an internal activism, which seeks to bring about institutional and cultural change. These women do not want to leave the Catholic Church, and their activism is not an example of detachment from the institutional authority or religion—quite the opposite, in fact: traditional religious authority emerges as particularly relevant to the women who intervene in the Voices of Faith initiatives. The desire emerges to be recognized and included, which may be challenging for the traditional Church culture and structure, but it is not meant as a challenge to the Church authority. Women's requests do not go in the direction of praising different religious authority or communities—on the contrary, traditional authority is constantly reaffirmed. There is a request for "more" institution, for "more" adherence to the Gospel, and for more inclusion. Following the analysis of Velik-Frank (2016) of the first women's ordination in terms of 'heterotopia', we could advance the hypothesis that, slowly but steadily, CWC groups are working toward transforming that 'heterotopia' into the reality of the Catholic Church.

The second relevant element we would like to point out, which goes beyond data analysis and refers instead to the social background of the case-study, is that in contemporary European societies there is a favorable opportunity structure for women's requests of increasing their role in the Catholic Church. Contemporary women's movements, which have developed all around the world managed to gain sympathetic attention, which create a favorable climate for religious women's mobilization. In addition, contemporary women's movements are mostly attentive to intersectionality and women's diversity, which make them attuned to connect with different actors and unlikely allies, such as religious women—even though the intersections of religion and feminism have a long history (Giorgi 2020), mainstream secular feminism in Western European countries is often suspicious toward religious feminism or religious feminists (Van den Brandt 2014). Moreover, the digital arena offers an important platform for networking and for voice and public visibility. Even though religious women's demands are nothing new, their visibility is indeed increasing, as it is the sympathetic audience.

Finally, we want to underline another aspect, related to the post-Covid context, to push the discussion forward: having no possibility of going to Church, and yet wanting to celebrate, in many homes a “domestic” church emerged, and some women also used this time to reconnect to the Church. As the theologian Tina Beattie pointed out, “homes become a sacred place in which women have assumed priestly duties, transforming family meals into eucharistic celebrations or finding their own ways of actively participating in or creating livestreamed liturgies. [...] During the last few months, women have become priests of the household [...] When this is over, Catholic women are not going to be pushed back”⁹. Therefore, it will be interesting to explore whether the post-Covid Church will have room for these women and how they will creatively find their path within the Catholic Church.

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⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/WACIreland/photos/a.290827707604577/3190182997669019/?type=3&theater>.

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