

Alina Raffaella Hübner: No Room for Me!

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Catholicism. She'll never be a priest, certainly not a bishop or a pope; there's a chance she could be a deacon someday. Why should a woman study theology if she, as a Christian, is constantly treated as nothing more than a second-class member? An exercise in soul-searching. By Alina Raffaella Hübner

I often don't publicize the fact that I study Catholic theology. I don't always want to have defend my Church for relegating me, as a woman, to the second tier. I find it annoying to always have to answer the same question. You can hardly imagine anymore what makes this field so beautiful, so inspiring. The search for truth and the good life is no longer interesting. Instead, the discussions always revolve around the gay lobby, misogyny and contempt for the body, the antiquated totalitarian-patriarchal papacy, or paedophilia. How can one –as a woman! – remain loyal to this club, even study its teachings or, even worse, want to work for it and to do that without any prospects of promotion!? To be constantly under the control of a pyramid of men, whose spiritual leader is still enthroned in the papal palace with symbols of power from past centuries. You would have to have surrendered your ability to think at the “We live in the time before 1968” gate.

I often hear something like this. And I swallow because the objections are not completely wrong. I often feel like a second-class person in the Catholic Church. Raised in Württemberg's Allgäu, near Catholic Hochberg Oberschwaben, I loved the Catholic high holidays, the beautiful local baroque church where you do not know where to look first. The figure of St. Sebastian pierced through with arrows frightened me as much as the beautiful Marian altar fascinated me. It was a magical world full of mystery, and I set off very early on a tour of discovery.

But the whole holy world showed cracks when it was time for me to take First Communion. I remember Whitsunday, the day of my First Communion, very well. We girls giggled about the boys in their white, floor-length robes who displayed great difficulty trying to navigate the church steps. We all had the same outfits and the same preparation. But only the boys were asked if they wanted to become altar boys. We girls weren't. For the first time, my sex stood between me and my beloved Church. For the first time, I had the feeling that it was a disadvantage to be a woman in the Catholic Church – indeed, anywhere! What was worse was that nobody could explain it properly. And even now as well, studying theology, I have not found any great, important arguments that convince me that women should have a more subdued role in the Church than men. At the time, at Communion, in lieu of the chance to be altar boys, the priest offered to let us girls lay a carpet of flowers at Corpus Christi or harvest festival (!). I can only laugh about that now.

My fellow female students are also concerned with this issue. Already in the first introductory seminar at the university in liberal Tübingen, one female student asked: “Why can't women be ordained as priests?” The instructor gave the official answer and wrote on the blackboard that Jesus only invited men to the last supper – the decisive act of instituting the priesthood. I was sceptical.

But it was not surprising that this question arises at the beginning of reflecting on the position of women in the Catholic Church. For that is indeed the heart of the matter: the consecration. Only the consecrated man can arise completely to the top in the Church. Only the ordained priest decides whether women of his parish can enter the sanctuary to do more than decoration work. For me, it was completely clear at the beginning of my study that women should also be ordained. I was convinced that would be the right thing to do. And then that feeling at Mass of being second rate would be gone.

That is how many of my involved fellow students certainly feel. But hardly anyone says out loud that they want women to be ordained. The professors do do that. In 2011, more than 300 teachers in Germany signed the controversial “Kirche 2011: Ein notwendiger Aufbruch” (Church 2011: A Necessary Start), which also promoted the ordination of women. These professors are also the same ones who complain in advanced seminars that the Catholic Church is “so terrible” – not exclusively but above all – for women. Many began their professorships in the much-invoked spirit of Vatican II, but they are now burned out and deeply disillusioned. The great dreams of reform, of the end of celibacy, and a new form of the Church filled out like sails steadily before them, but what they wanted has not been achieved.

And precisely in connection with the topic of the sacrament of holy orders, nothing is changing, even though Pope Francis inspired those who were frustrated to dream once again. But John Paul II closed the door to that in 1994 with his encyclical *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*. Ultimately, that document states, the position that the Church has no authority to ordain women should be maintained. And Pope Francis left no doubt about that: “This door is closed,” he said to journalists on the return flight from Rio de Janeiro to Rome.

Many, including the Central Committee of German Catholics, think they detect a small opening in the office of deacon. The implementation of this notion is at the top of the agenda in many discussions. What a curious hope this is! I cannot be a priest, but if I wanted to, that could not be answered by the office of deacon. That is all the more so since Catholic teaching says that the office of deacon and priest are connected with each other. I believe that they belong to the unity of orders and are thus also connected in a mystical way with the office of bishop. Walter Cardinal Kasper’s attempt to revitalize the early Christian office of deacon by speaking of the ordination as “light” is, from this perspective, unsatisfactory as well.

If we want to understand why the churchmen in Rome struggle with the issue of office, it will be helpful to look at the Church’s arguments. For me, that meant a few long evenings in the university library with Joseph Ratzinger, Gerhard Ludwig Müller, and the Bible. The Pope [Benedict XVI] and his successor at the Congregation of the Faith are required reading on this topic at the university. Finally, I had to flip a switch internally and give up my political study, for church offices are not understood politically but “sacramentally.” The term “sacrament” was found in so many places, and I did not understand it. It was clear that sacrament refers to a symbolic act, such as baptism. We have seven, and Protestants have two. That much I remembered from school.

But I discovered anew that sacraments are not subject to the disposal of the Church and are part of an invisible reality. A sacrament is something created by God that is discovered in its unchangeable form – everything else is “institutional manoeuvring,” as Ratzinger writes. This is an idea that still preoccupies my mind. Is the motivation behind adhering to the male priesthood thus primarily obedience to the will of Christ and not the patriarchal retention of power? But can we know what Jesus wanted? Even if we women were ordained, would something happen sacramentally at all with them in a hidden way? Could they then change bread and wine into the Eucharistic gifts?

These are questions that are also intensely disputed at the university. One such discussion takes place in an advanced dogmatics seminar on a Tuesday afternoon. Around 30 students sit in a large seminar room in the historic Tübinger Theologicums. These students are looking at the question of the ordination of women. The tables are placed in a U-form, with a lectern in front. This is a debate seminar with assigned roles. Theology students need to learn to discuss, which is not a bad idea. One female student argues: “Jesus of Nazareth lived in a specific cultural, social context in which women were underprivileged, which explains why he chose only men. But that was not what he wanted.”

“How do we know that? Did he not, against all the dictates of his time, accept women in other contexts?

Why did he not make Mary a priest? Is your reading not a hermeneutic of suspicion?” I ask in return. The position assigned to me is directed against the ordination of women. And I find that extremely easy. The nights I spent with Ratzinger and the others helped. The churchmen have formulated a counterargument for almost every argument, all the instruments are ready for a defence against the spirit of the times. But some students can hardly bear it when I defend the Church’s teaching. They slide back and forth on their chairs, sigh or laugh out loud to give their emotions some outlet. When they are allowed to speak, they become emotional when presenting objections.

“Maybe we shouldn’t speak about sex at all now? Why does something still depend on that? Have we not gone beyond the idea by now that purely biological sex should no longer be a criterium for distinction?” another speaker exclaims indignantly. The political science student in me is now awake, however, for now it is suddenly a question of gender theory – and that confuses me. It is well known that gender theory distinguishes between biological sex and the acquired gender traits.

The decisive point is this: in that view our biological sex does not play all that great a role. But I simply cannot believe that there are no innate differences other than the physical sexual characteristics. This alleged “fact” is constantly and everywhere recited in mantra-like form both in the university and in politics. Here, however, the Church is a ship in the gender mainstreaming sea! It never denied that biological sex also plays a role beyond physical characteristics. It would be difficult to reconcile anything else with a Christian concept of humanity – body and soul have always been conceived as a unit.

And thus, being a woman is also viewed as being different. Walter Kasper speaks, for example, of a special “female charism” that also benefitted the Church. And that ignited a new debate in the seminar room. “What would this be then – this female charism?” one student asks. And no one in the room knows precisely what it is. There is no one answer. You get the feeling that the reason for saying something like this is that dignitaries always think they have to say something appreciative whenever they speak for women. Unfortunately, a gentle, caressive gesture is meaningless. As such times, I miss a clear “theology of the woman,” as Pope Francis announced and declared it to be a worthy cause.

But there have of course been feminist efforts in theology for a long time. But they were not primarily concerned with the question of office in the first instance. In contrast, For years, they were engaged in presenting in detail androcentrism and all its consequences in theology or in discovering feminine characteristics of God in the Bible. But I can’t do very much with that. Praying an “Our Mother” does not change anything regarding the Church offices and does not answer my question as to what my tasks in the Church could be – and how the Church sees me as woman at all! If I understand many biblical passages literally, then I am the opposite of, the companion of the man and should best be silent in the Church service, my sex was, in the end, more vulnerable to sin in Paradise. Reading elsewhere in the Bible, I am amazed by Jesus’ uncomplicated, revolutionary treatment of women and the prominent position of his mother Mary.

Pope Francis took up this issue himself as well, even if he holds that the door to the ordination of women is closed for him. “Women are differently structured than men,” he said in a famous interview with the Jesuit magazine *Stimmen zur Zeit*. He did not avoid controversial topics in that interview and spoke about homosexuals, divorced people who remarried, and even the role of women. He allowed himself to be brought so as to utter a sentence that could have been spoken by a feminist: “The language that I often hear about the role of women in the Church is often inspired by an ideology of masculinity.” But it’s still not

clear to me what he meant by this – the Church’s conception of the woman as mother and companion of the man that he talks about?

The catchwords take me back to the university library for another night with Ratzinger, Müller – and a woman, the instructor in canon law in Regensburg, Sabine Demel. She writes of the symbolism of the different sexes: Just as the woman can only be mother and the man only father, so the Church as bride can be the whole body of Christ only if it has a male bridegroom, thus a priest. Is that what Gal 3:26-28 means when it states that all are “one” in Christ? Or does it mean that sex/gender plays no role for God? I also came across the argument that only a man can assume the Petrine office, can take on the responsibilities of leadership. In contrast, women should take the Marian office seriously and bring life into the world and be maternal. Nevertheless, women today no longer have “only” the real life of being mothers as an option. The socially emancipated role they have newly acquired does not fit the Church’s conception of submission.

On that the seminar participants in Tübingen are agreed: “The discussion on the ordination of women is nevertheless coming to an end. Rather, we should be looking for places in the Church where women can make their voice heard more than in the past,” one argument concludes. There is more than enough female potential: of the total of 22,281 students in 2013, 15,146 were women. Most of them wanted to become teachers; there is still no place for those women wanting a career in the Church. Nevertheless, even if the Church makes it different for women to find a role, it has remained a home for many. That is also true for me.

Although I cannot rise very high in the church, this does not change anything about my faith. The Catholic Church may have its problems, but its founder Jesus Christ and the message it conveys make it impossible for me to leave. Perhaps that permits a milder view of the institution that keeps me from becoming militant.

The fact is, I cannot do without it – the times of prayer, the time in which I can let go and trust. And precisely when I am praying that I am not thinking of any institution. But I need the church – it is that there that my prayer occurs, and I believe it has been instituted by Christ. It has preserved, deepened, differentiated, and explained the faith for centuries. It offers something that I do not want to miss. The feeling of sitting in a beautiful church, enjoying the silence, while the sunlight shines through the beautiful stained-glass windows, and the eternal light in front of the tabernacle all convey: You are not alone. Then I do not think of myself as a woman.

But that I cannot find a place for myself in the institution of church is nevertheless a testimony to poverty. It is simply painful that women who would like to be active in the Church can hardly move up to higher levels. And this is so also because it is often a(n ordained) man standing in the way who makes the decision over their heads. Change needs a tug was needed from above to change something – it needs a man. Francis has not been in office very long, but his announcements give me courage, and he has also already followed up on them with deeds. For example, he appointed Francesca Chaouqui, a PR expert, as a papal commissioner. Nonetheless, the changes do not yet go so far as to open the offices to women without grappling who they are and what they can do. I hope that there will be no quick recourse to platitudes like “beneficial female charism.”

Hildegund Keul: Become a Cardinal!

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Reply. Hildegund Keul of the German Bishops' Conference argues that women like Alina Hübner have all kinds of opportunities. There are interesting positions available if the men who make the decisions want to give them the chance.

"Love it, change it, or leave it" – so runs the recommendation by the management of an institution to an employee who offers sound criticism. In the course of my work as a female theologian, I have often seen why competent women have decided to become teachers. They abandon the church, turn their backs on theology, and follow another path. I learn a great deal from these women who move so nimbly in other worlds. Nevertheless, their abandoning the Church leaves a painful void behind.

I think of these women while reading Alina Rafaela Hübner's contribution. What changes does the Catholic Church need so that young women who are interested in a career in the Church can find a place in it? That they can find a place in which they are appreciated, in which they are recognized for their competences in their main profession and voluntary activities?

What can the Path of the Church look like in these questions? This question is discussed in a lively way in universities, in dioceses, and at the Bishops' Conference. My assessment of the fact that no change can be detected in the question of the ordination of women as priests is precisely like Hübner's. But I do not believe that women should therefore be active only in the back rows of the Church, where, in the end, they have nothing to say. Rather, the decisive question is: For which leadership positions is the sacrament of ordination as a priest necessary? After all, the Second Vatican Council assured laypeople, both men and women equally, that the fact of their baptism and confirmation makes them participants in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, thus in the ministry of sanctification, teaching, and leadership. What this means concretely and especially for women in pastoral work is not discussed enough at universities.

In 2002, a female head of pastoral care was appointed for the first time in Germany, in the diocese of Osnabrück. At that time, this appointment was highly controversial, for people found it difficult to imagine that this office could be filled by someone who had not been ordained as a priest. Today, it is a matter of course. The pastoral departments in five dioceses are headed by women, who are significantly affecting the shape of pastoral care in the future. A good example sets a precedent.

In February 2013 the German Bishops' Conference in its declaration on "Das Zusammenwirken von Frauen und Männern im Dienst und Leben der Kirche" (The Collaboration of Women and Men in the Ministry and Life of the Church) stated very clearly: "We expect positive results for the life and ministry of the Church when leadership positions and leadership responsibilities are increasingly filled and carried out by women.... We will therefore search more intensely for possibilities in which the number of women in leadership positions can be raised even higher."

I am often sceptically asked if this is more than lip service. Yes, I think so. First, the discussions that led to the declaration were serious, intense, and ongoing. Second, the bishops undertook to re-examine the developments in this area in five years. When I look at what the dioceses – and Caritas with its major project "Gleichgestellt in Führung geben" (Equally Taking the Lead) – are currently undertaking, I am looking forward with excitement to the results in 2018.

There is still another nut to crack that is mentioned in the statement: the intense involvement of women in Church and society should become more visible in the Church's public relations. The keyword here is: gender-sensitive. This has to do with perceiving the specific perspectives of women and men, bringing them into conversation with each other, and deriving concrete options for action from this.

But can women who are not ordained as priests enter the first rows if not the top? This is already happening in the dioceses selectively with legal advisors, leaders of Catholic offices, the ordinariate council, Caritas directors, and, in a completely classical way, with abbesses and the leaders of female orders.

Also interesting in this context is the proposal made by some theologians to Pope Francis in the fall of 2013 with the request "to appoint a suitable number of women as cardinals." Pope Francis responded negatively to this proposal, but it is only recent canon law that the appointment of women as cardinals would go against. Until the 19th century, laymen were occasionally appointed as cardinals in accordance with canon law. Because this honorary title goes back no further than the 4th century, there neither a saying by Jesus nor an announcement by Paul on this. Nor does the Church have any dogmatic position on this. Such a decision would change the reality and public perception of the Catholic Church.

There would nothing to lose here – but a great deal to gain. The reproach of the male fraternity would be invalidated. Women would participate at the highest levels in counselling the pope; they would be included in the joint responsibility on the level of the world church, present in the conclave and in electing a pope. They could bring in their Christian faith and their Easter hope in Rome. The Church would stand out in a positive sense from DAX companies who resist women on their boards.

That women enter high leadership positions is a significant point from two perspectives that are intrinsically connected. The first issue is cogently articulated by Alina Rafaela Hübner: equal opportunity. Much has changed in this area in recent decades. At the same time, women's potential influence has not been exhausted by a long shot; many opportunities are still waiting to be realized. I know very well the difficulties often associated with this. That women are in the meantime building good networks in which they find support and inspiration is helpful and also a good sign.

The second perspective has to do with the Church and its mandate to articulate the Gospel in our society. As the director of the Office for Pastoral Care for Women, I am, on behalf of the Bishops' Conference, giving continuing education for the third time to women who have leadership positions in the Catholic Church. These women – from pastoral and training work, schools and Caritas, orders and the episcopal curia – contribute actively to the processes of change that are currently taking place in Church and society. In addition, the revitalized option for the poor that Pope Francis has advocated has met with a great response. Women take up leadership positions not because they are women but because they, as women, also have something to say about the harm poverty and exclusion can bring. Many companies in Germany could be jealous of this creative potential of the Church.

The situation for women and for the Church is promising, as a whole. Both belong together. This is not a zero-sum game in which one's party's gain is the other's loss. Such a game would be disastrous and cannot be advocated by theologians. The Church is not an all-male club but the people of God, a community consisting of women, men, and children, of priests and laypeople, of old and young. What this means is to be discovered everyday anew, and to be discussed and fought for often.

Times of upheaval are times of conflict. That can be seen in the current reorganization of the dioceses just as in the changes in gender roles. I see a great danger here in that tunnel vision of internal debates arises

from the zeal for dispute. Instead of tunnel vision, however, we need a broad perspective in the midst of society and in international interests. If the younger generation does not expect much anymore from the Church in their “search for the good life,” as Alina Rafaela Hübner implies, this then constitutes an invitation to work on its own authority in questions of faith. Authority, after all, means that one has something educative to say in questions that are actually posed. What perspectives can the Gospel open up for young people – perspectives that they really could need in their joy and fear, grief and hope?

This question requires a sharper eye for the signs of the time, to which the upheaval of gender roles also belongs. It is precisely young people who – entirely with gender-specific differences – find themselves in situations that challenge, that often strain, and are faced with decisions whose scope can scarcely be predicted. Here we need to bring the Christian faith in the resurrection as an art of living into play: in the midst of the difficult decisions regarding the reconcilability of career, family, and volunteer work; in the midst of that vulnerability that characterizes love relationships in a particular way; in the midst of the commitment of the young generation to social justice, ecological sustainability, and peace in Europe. Here faith grasps at the resurrection because the latter opens up the art of aiming at an open future to love and to entrust life itself on the shaky paths to hope.

In the Bible, there is, in the first place, Mary Magdalene, who represents the faith in the resurrection as an art of living (John 20:1-5). A woman who, powerless, doubting, and without any hope, stands at the grace of a beloved human being, is changed when she sees Christ into the first witness of the resurrection: she becomes resistant, energetic, and spirited. The young church needed Mary Magdalene to become the artist of living out of the spiritual power of the resurrection. Just as the contemporary Church needs women to lead it ecclesiastically and societally to that art of living – with resourcefulness and strong leadership, with Easter hope and the strength of the Spirit of Pentecost.

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