

## Article

# Observations on the Magisterium's Gender Anthropology and Its Consequences for Women in the Catholic Church

Bernhard Sven Anuth

Faculty of Catholic Theology, University of Tübingen, 72074 Tübingen, Germany;  
bernhard.anuth@uni-tuebingen.de

**Abstract:** The Catholic Church has a gender-hierarchical constitution. The Church's magisterium justifies this structure and the lack of gender equality within the Church with the complementary sexuality of human beings as man and woman, which is considered to be the will of God. In this article, this doctrine is presented in detail, based on relevant documents of the Church's magisterium, and is classified with regard to its consequences for women within the Catholic Church. Even though the Church rejects criticism of its position as a dangerous "(gender) ideology", fewer and fewer women (and men) accept its teaching of a specific "genius of women" and of the assigned gender-specific roles in the Church and in the world associated with it. Moreover, there is now a growing awareness that violence against women is usually related to such hierarchical gender concepts.

**Keywords:** anthropology; catholic church; gender; magisterium; woman; women's ordination



**Citation:** Anuth, Bernhard Sven. 2022. Observations on the Magisterium's Gender Anthropology and Its Consequences for Women in the Catholic Church. *Religions* 13: 305. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040305>

Academic Editors: Ute Leimgruber, Doris Reisinger and Hans Zollner

Received: 15 February 2022

Accepted: 26 March 2022

Published: 31 March 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Since Pope Francis' revision of the Church's criminal law came into force in December 2021, sexual violence against women in the Roman Catholic Church is no longer merely a punishable violation of the obligation of celibacy, but also a crime against human life, dignity and freedom. Moreover, for the first time, sexual assaults committed by someone taking advantage of their ecclesiastical position and the authority associated with it can now also be prosecuted under Church law (cc. 1395 § 3 and 1398 § 2 *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983).

However, this only partially improves the general legal position of women in the Catholic Church; they are still excluded from all offices through which they could shape Church identity by magisterial teaching and/or through ecclesiastical leadership, due to the impossibility of ordaining women as priests, which by the magisterium is considered to be a definitive, i.e., infallible doctrine (cf. *Pope John Paul II* 1994; *Ladaria* 2018). The magisterium justifies this doctrinal and legal situation with the complementary sexuality of human beings as man and woman, as it is considered to be God's will. Against this background, the "reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse [ . . . ], is not a question open to discussion" (*Pope Francis* 2013, No. 104). Since, according to church law, women cannot validly receive the ordination of deacons either (cf. *Anuth* 2020), they are limited to the lay state, but even in this they are not legally equal to men (cf. e.g., *Lüdecke* 2012, pp. 184–91), even though Pope Francis recently amended c. 230 § 1 CIC to allow women to become lectors and acolytes as well (*Pope Francis* 2021, p. 10). What would be discrimination under state law is considered to be a consequence of the magisterial gender anthropology within the Church, which, according to the Church's self-understanding, is not mere opinion or even an "invention" of the Pope and the Bishops, but their interpretation of God's plan for women and men guided by the Holy Spirit. However, the Church has long had a serious mediation problem in this regard and is also currently criticized for promoting misogynistic violence against women through its magisterial gender anthropology and the gender-specific norms of canon law (cf. *Leimgruber* 2021, p. 176f.).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Church's Magisterium and Women

As the pastoral theologian Rainer Bucher noted a good 10 years ago, the Catholic image of women is “even and especially among Catholic women—apart from a small minority—simply rejected, even ridiculed” (Bucher 2009, p. 287). These problems of acceptance are the result of social developments that also find support among convinced Catholics. The Church's authority knows this and has always reacted to it with “doctrinal intensification and inculcation” (Lüdecke 2012, p. 211).

As early as 1981, Pope John Paul II clearly stated the Church's position on the rights and duties of women and on their dignity and social role in his Apostolic Exhortation “Familiaris Consortio” (Pope John Paul II 1981, No. 22–24). Then, on the occasion of the Marian Year in 1988, he set forth in detail the Church's teaching on the dignity and vocation of women in the Apostolic Letter “Mulieris dignitatem” and reaffirmed it in 1995 in a “Letter to Women” (Pope John Paul II 1995). The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith provided a reminder of the Church's doctrine in 2004 in its “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004). The reason for this reminder and inculcation was that the Congregation saw the Church challenged by “certain currents of thought which are often at variance with the authentic advancement of women” (ibid., No. 1). Regarding the contents, the Congregation does not criticize individual publications or theologians, but identifies certain currents and tendencies that it considers to be dangerous (cf. Lüdecke 2004, p. 234). One of these tendencies, according to the Congregation, “strongly” emphasizes “conditions of subordination [of women] in order to give rise to antagonism”. Women react to male abuse of power with their own pursuit of power and thus become “the adversaries of men”. From the Congregation's point of view, this results in a “confusion regarding the human person” that is particularly harmful to the structure of the family (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004, No. 2).

“[I]n the wake of this first tendency” the Congregation sees a second one emerging, which minimizes the bodily difference between man and woman (*sex*) while the category of *gender* as a “purely cultural element [ . . . ] is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary”. From the Church's point of view this conceals “the difference or duality of the sexes” and “has enormous consequences” since it not only calls “into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father,” but also equates homosexuality and heterosexuality and promotes “a new model of polymorphous sexuality” (ibid., No. 2). As the Congregation states, such an anthropology apparently denies the predestination of the person on the basis of his or her “essential constitution” as man or woman and renders “the fact that the Son of God assumed human nature in its male form” unimportant and meaningless (ibid., No. 3). Where the relationship between the sexes is “distorted” in this way, “their access to the face of God is threatened” (ibid., No. 7). For the Church, the relationship between man and woman cannot “be a kind of mistrustful and defensive opposition” (ibid., No. 14).

In the letter, the Church itself is being called an “expert in humanity” with “a perennial interest in whatever concerns men and women” which has “contributed to a deeper understanding of this fundamental question, in particular through the teaching of John Paul II” (ibid., No. 1). Nevertheless, this question remains “highly topical”, as Pope Benedict XVI emphasized on the 20th anniversary of the publication of the Encyclical “Mulieris dignitatem”, and went on to say: “The man-woman relationship in its respective specificity, reciprocity and complementarity certainly constitutes a central point of the ‘anthropological question’, so decisive in contemporary culture and ultimately for every culture” (Pope Benedict XVI 2008, p. 163). In 2009, on the occasion of the International Women's Day, the then Pope stated that the Church wanted to continue being committed “to ensure that every woman always and everywhere may live and express her abilities to the full, obtaining complete respect for her dignity” (Pope Benedict XVI 2009, p. 6). In the meantime, Pope Francis has also expressed himself similarly on various occasions and described the magisterial position, for example, as follows: “For quite some time, at least in

western societies, the model of woman's *social subordination* to man has been surpassed; it is, however, an age-old model that has never completely exhausted its negative effect. We have even overcome a second model, that of pure and simple *parity*, applied mechanically, and of absolute *equality*. And thus a new paradigm has emerged, that of *reciprocity*, in equivalence and difference. The relationship man/woman must therefore recognize that both are necessary inasmuch as yes, they possess an identical nature, but each with its own modality. One is necessary for the other, and vice versa, for they truly complete the fullness of the person" (Pope Francis 2015a). The question is: what does this mean in detail?

### 3. God's Plan for Woman and Man

As soon as 1981, Pope John Paul II had already declared in his Apostolic Exhortation "Christifidelis laici", that by taking part in the "reflection on the anthropological and theological basis of femininity", the Catholic Church "enters the historic process of the various movements for the promotion of woman", and in doing so the Church reaches "the very basic aspect of woman as a personal being" and therefore can provide a "most precious contribution". Above all, however, the Church sees itself committed "to obey God, who created the individual 'in his image', 'male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27) and who intended that they would accept the call of God to come to know reverence and live his plan. It is a plan that 'from the beginning' has been indelibly imprinted in the very being of the human person—men and women—and, therefore, in the make-up, meaning and deepest workings of the individual" (Pope John Paul II 1989, No. 50). This signifies, that the unchangeable basis of all anthropology is, according to the Church's official teaching, "the revealed truth concerning man as 'the image and likeness' of God" (Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 6; cf. [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 5). The cornerstones of this divine plan for man and woman, constituted from and by creation (cf. [Pope John Paul II 1989](#), No. 50; [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 12), "can never be abrogated", although it is and will be "upset and darkened by sin" (ibid., No. 6). Thus, already in the first creation account, the Bible describes humans as sexually differentiated beings, who are created for and dependent on this relationship. As such, human beings are the image of God (ibid., No. 5). From the Church's point of view, the importance of the sexual difference is unequivocally affirmed in the second creation account; Eve is not an "inferior" but a "vital helper" for Adam (No. 6). Man and woman are considered to be related to each other: they are called to be there for each other and to complement each other (cf. [Pope John Paul II 1995](#), No. 7; [Pope John Paul II 1988](#), No. 7; [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 6). This is considered by the Church to be "the heart of God's original plan and the deepest truth about man and woman, as willed and created by him" ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 6). However, the relationship of the sexes was defaced by sin: "In this tragic situation, the equality, respect and love that are required in the relationship of man and woman according to God's original plan, are lost" (ibid., No. 7).

In the eyes of the Church's magisterium, the biblical text clearly indicates that in their common humanity, both sexes are essentially alike: "From the very beginning, both are persons, unlike the other living beings in the world about them. *The woman is another 'I' in a common humanity*" (Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 6). The equal dignity of man and woman as persons, however, does not mean indistinctive equality, but "is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity, giving rise to a harmonious relationship of 'uni-duality'" ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 8). In this sense, the sexual difference characterizes man and woman "not only on the physical level, but also on the psychological and spiritual" level, and this "diversity, linked to the complementarity of the two sexes, allows thorough response to the design of God according to the vocation to which each one is called" ([Holy Congregation for Catholic Education 1983](#), No. 5). According to the Church's conviction, only sin has turned this creationally good relationship of the sexes into a "potentially conflictual" one ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 8).

The basic three-step of the magisterium's gender anthropology therefore consists of the following: "Man and woman are equal as persons", "men and women are different in

their expression of humanity”, “women and men are dependent on mutual partnership” (cf. [Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference 1981](#), pp. 8–18). In external perception, this has long been perceived as a “stereotypical pattern of argumentation” of post-conciliar Church teachings on questions of the position of men and women, because on the one hand, “the equal personal dignity of women is emphasized again and again, on the other hand, the peculiarity of women, their specific, special nature is strongly emphasized, in order to legitimize a different assignment of tasks and roles” ([Raming 1990](#), p. 420). Others state that a theological gender anthropology “at the height of the current state of human scientific research” remains a desideratum as long as the Church’s magisterium holds on to “a pre-modern, essentialist concept of nature”, “by which certain assumptions about the ‘nature’ of women (or the sexes) are directly linked to normative expectations of their social roles” ([Heimbach-Steins 2007](#), p. 34).

The magisterium is nevertheless immune to such criticism, even if it is shared by many of the faithful, because according to their self-understanding, the Pope and the Bishops are not free to change the current Church’s doctrine on the relations between man and woman. Thus, Pope John Paul II emphasized that a deepening of the theological and anthropological foundations of gender difference is, as always, “a question of understanding the reason for and the consequences of the Creator’s decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man. It is only by beginning from these bases, which make it possible to understand the greatness of the dignity and vocation of women, that one is able to speak of their active presence in the Church and in society” ([Pope John Paul II 1988](#), No. 1). God’s plan for the sexes is the crucial factor for the magisterium’s anthropology. The Pope and the Bishops see themselves committed to this divine plan as its binding interpreters (cf. [Second Vatican Council 1966](#), No. 10; c. 747 § 1 [Codex Iuris Canonici 1983](#)) when emphasizing that “man and woman are distinct, and will remain so for all eternity” ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 12).

The knowledge that God created human beings as man and woman in mutual relation to one another should enable Catholics to “appreciate that the presence of *a certain diversity of roles* is in no way prejudicial to women, provided that this diversity is not the result of an arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female” ([Pope John Paul II 1995](#), No. 11). Even if the human body in both sexes “includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love” ([Pope John Paul II 1980](#)), women furthermore have a special and “naturally spousal predisposition” ([Pope John Paul II 1988](#), No. 20) according to Church’s doctrine. This specificity of the female personality makes it understandable from the magisterium’s point of view why man was not created for woman, but vice versa, why woman was created for man, without this implying a subordination of woman to man ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 6).

In this regard, the Church, and with it, most recently Pope Francis, “considers it very important that women be given proper esteem, that they be able to claim in full the place that is theirs, both in the Church and in society”. For this reason, he explicitly calls for girls to be educated, among other things, “to the beauty and greatness of their vocation as women [ . . . ] in a right and discerning relationship between man and woman” ([Pope Francis 2015b](#)).

#### 4. The “Genius of Women”

In order to counteract the tendency of an emancipatory “masculinization” of women, Pope John Paul II already demanded in “*Mulieris dignitatem*” to emphasize the vocation and dignity of women “that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman” ([Pope John Paul II 1988](#), No. 10). According to the former Pope, the following becomes clear in the light of biblical anthropology: “The personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different” (ibid.). Pope John Paul therefore liked to speak of a specifically “feminine ‘genius’ or also



of a 'charisma', a special 'vocation' of women" (Burggraf 1999, p. 327). The question arises: What does this "genius" of women consist of from the magisterium's point of view?

According to Church's doctrine, the personality of all women is essentially shaped by their physical capacity for motherhood (cf. Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 18; [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 13). The fact that the physical constitution of women and their organism contain the natural predisposition to motherhood, conception, pregnancy and birth as a consequence of the conjugal union with a man, is considered by the Church not to be something purely biological, but also to correspond "to the psycho-physical structure of women" (Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 18). According to magisterial doctrine, the capacity for motherhood results in a special "capacity for the other", which is concretized in various specifically feminine values and gifts. Women are therefore said to possess a "deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other" ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 13). Women, therefore, also have a special sense of the meaning of life and a respect for what is concrete and, moreover, the "singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life" ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 13). Although all human beings are called to reach out to each other, "women are more immediately attuned to these values", and for that reason, they "are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values" (ibid., No. 14; cf. ibid., No. 16).

Pope John Paul II teaches in his "Letter to Women", that women, more than men, acknowledge their fellow human beings "because they see persons with their hearts"; it is therefore especially in their everyday service to others, when "they try to go out to them and help them", that women understand and "fulfil their deepest vocation" (Pope John Paul II 1995, No. 12). With regard to the manifold ethical-social service of women in the field of education and health care, in which they realize "a kind of *affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood*" (ibid., No. 9), John Paul II hoped in 1995 that women "will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the '*genius of women*', not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God's plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church" (ibid., No. 10).

As Mary is being understood as "the highest expression of the 'feminine genius'" the former Pope called her "a source of constant inspiration" for a deeper understanding of this special "genius" of women (ibid., No. 10). Even in the early years of his pontificate, he had taught that God had manifested "the dignity of women in the highest form possible, by assuming human flesh from the Virgin Mary, whom the Church honors as the Mother of God, calling her the new Eve and presenting her as the model of redeemed woman" (Pope John Paul II 1981, No. 22). In Mary, in addition to motherhood, virginity (cf. Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 20), which is considered the second specific dimension in the realization of the female personality, also acquires its "full meaning and value" (ibid., No. 17). Although, according to the magisterium's teaching, motherhood is of crucial importance to the female identity, women must not be reduced to their reproductive function (cf. [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 13). Consequently, Christian virginity "is of the greatest importance" against such a narrow perception of women. According to the Church, this vocation "refutes any attempt to enclose women in mere biological destiny. Just as virginity receives from physical motherhood the insight that there is no Christian vocation except in the concrete gift of oneself to the other, so physical motherhood receives from virginity an insight into its fundamentally spiritual dimension: it is in not being content only to give physical life that the other truly comes into existence" (ibid., No. 13).

Pope John Paul II assumed that Mary, who became a mother as a virgin, can help all the faithful, but especially women, to understand "how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other" (Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 17; cf. Pope John Paul II 1987, No. 46). In this context, the motif of the bride is important: "Mary accepted her election as Mother of the Son of God, guided by

spousal love [ . . . ]. By virtue of this love, Mary wished to be always and in all things ‘given to God’, living in virginity” (ibid., No 39). Since, according to the Church’s understanding, a person only becomes truly devoted to others in such a bridal love, consecrated virginity cannot be properly understood without it; while this applies “similarly” to the consecrated chastity of men in priestly celibacy or in religious orders, the woman is understood to be “naturally” disposed to be bridal (cf. [Pope John Paul II 1988](#), No. 20). The love of Christ as the bridegroom is considered ecclesiastically as an example and “the model and pattern of all human love, men’s love in particular” (ibid., No. 25). Bridal love is understood as responding to this love of Christ: the bride is united with the bridegroom “because she lives his life; [ . . . ] united *in such a manner as to respond* with a ‘sincere gift’ of self *to the inexpressible gift of the love of the Bridegroom*” (ibid., No. 27). On the one hand, this is meant to be valid for the Church as the bride of Christ, and therefore for both men and women (cf. ibid., No. 27); on the other hand, it is also meant to confirm “the truth about woman as bride” (ibid., No. 29), who cannot find herself unless she gives her love to others (cf. ibid., No. 30).

In 1988, Pope John Paul II reminded all Catholics that if they want to fully understand God’s plan of salvation for human history, they must not exclude “the mystery of ‘woman’: virgin-mother-spouse” from the perspective of their faith (ibid., No. 22). In the “womanhood” of faithful women, and especially of consecrated women, the Church recognizes “a highly significant ‘iconic character’, which finds its full realization in Mary and which also aptly expresses the very essence of the Church as a community consecrated with the integrity of a ‘*virgin*’ heart to become the ‘*bride*’ of Christ and ‘*mother*’ of believers” ([Pope John Paul II 1995](#), No. 11).

## 5. The Role of Women in the Catholic Church

According to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the knowledge of the special nature of the female personality, of the “genius” of women, enables to understand “the irreplaceable role of women in all aspects of family and social life involving human relationships and caring for others” ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 13). Against the background of the special dignity and vocation of women, the Church also considers it plausible that their exclusion from receiving priestly ordination “does not hamper in any way women’s access to the heart of Christian life” (ibid., No. 16; cf. [Leahy 1996](#), p. 242). From the magisterial point of view, women merely get there by a different route than men.

The Congregation stresses that “women play a role of maximum importance in the Church’s life”. By living the Marian attitudes of listening and welcoming, of humility and faithfulness and of praise and expectation “with particular intensity and naturalness”, and thus recalling them for all the baptized, they contribute “in a unique way to showing the true face of the Church, spouse of Christ and mother of believers” ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004](#), No. 16). Priests, however, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, act “in persona Christi capitis” and therefore, according to the conviction of the Church, must be men. The magisterium concludes that because at its institution Christ entrusted the Eucharist exclusively to the apostles, “he thereby wished to express the relationship between man and woman, between what is ‘feminine’ and what is ‘masculine’” as “a relationship willed by God both in the mystery of creation and in the mystery of Redemption” (MD 26). The resulting differing roles of man and woman in the Church, however, should not be understood from a purely functional point of view, but should be seen in the light of the “sacramental economy”, which means “the economy of ‘signs’ which God freely chooses in order to become present in the midst of humanity” ([Pope John Paul II 1995](#), No. 11; cf. [Pope Francis 2020](#), No. 100f.). In this perspective of an “iconical” mutual complementation, the distinct roles of man and woman, according to the Church’s official self-understanding, represent two essential dimensions of the Church at once. Pope John Paul II, closely following Hans Urs von Balthasar, called these the “Marian” and the

“Petrine” principles (Pope John Paul II 1995, No. 11; Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 27; cf. e.g., von Balthasar 1978, pp. 65–72).

For Pope John Paul, the “Marian profile is also—even perhaps more so—fundamental and characteristic for the Church as is the apostolic and Petrine profile to which it is profoundly united. . . . The Marian dimension of the Church is antecedent to that of the Petrine, without being in any way divided from it or being less complementary. Mary Immaculate precedes all others, including obviously Peter himself and the Apostles. This is so, not only because Peter and the Apostles, being born of the human race under the burden of sin, form part of the Church which is ‘holy from out of sinners’, but also because their triple function has no other purpose except to form the Church in line with the ideal of sanctity already programmed and prefigured in Mary. A contemporary theologian”, namely Hans Urs von Balthasar, the former Pope assesses, “has rightly stated that Mary is ‘Queen of the Apostles without any pretensions to apostolic powers: she has other and greater powers’” (Pope John Paul II 1988, No. 27 Footnote 55 with reference to von Balthasar 1979, p. 144). Pope Francis has explicitly taken up this anthropological and mariological line of his predecessor and stated that, in the light of the nuptial mystery, the Church is the bride of Christ, and “we understand why there are these two dimensions: the Petrine or episcopal dimension and the Marian dimension, including everything involving the motherhood of the Church, in the deepest sense” (Pope Francis 2016, p. 8).

This means, that from the magisterial point of view, the man as representative of the Petrine dimension of the Church has his place in the realm of the official-hierarchical; the woman, on the other hand, as representative of the Marian principle, plays the role of a virgin or mother marked by specifically feminine values and characterized by bridal love (cf. Lüdecke 2012, p. 203). Even though “this charismatic sector is undoubtedly distinguished by the ministerial sector in the strict sense of the term”, it is nevertheless considered to be “a true and deep participation in the government of the Church”, because the support of ordained ministers by faithful women “has always been a crucial factor without which the Church cannot survive” (Pope Benedict XVI 2006, p. 273; cf. Pope John Paul II 1995, No. 11). Accordingly, as recently as 2020, Pope Francis stated that women “make their contribution to the Church in a way that is properly theirs, by making present the tender strength of Mary, the Mother”; acknowledging this means that “we do not limit ourselves to a functional approach, but enter instead into the inmost structure of the Church” (Pope Francis 2020, No. 101). Because of this connection between anthropology and church structure, Hans Urs von Balthasar as early as 1979 called the Catholic Church the probably “last bulwark in humanity of a genuine appreciation of the difference of the sexes” (von Balthasar 1979, p. 114). Regardless of whether one wants to share this assessment or not, against the background of the described anthropology of the Church’s magisterium, the gender-specific provisions of canon law, according to which women do not validly receive ordination (c. 1024 *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983) because they cannot act “in persona Christi capitis” qua being women, or there is no male counterpart for the state of consecrated virgins (c. 604 *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983) because only a woman can adequately represent the bridal dimension of the Church integrally (cf. Anuth 2015; Hip-Flores 2018, p. 36), become understandable.

## 6. Consequences and Perspectives

All Catholics are obliged by canon law to obediently accept what the Church’s magisterium presents as an interpretation of God’s plan for men and women, including the expectations and assignments regarding their distinct roles (cc. 212 § 1, 750, 752 *Codex Iuris Canonici* 1983). By tracing its doctrine back to Revelation, the magisterium immunizes itself against criticism and consistently rejects it as a dangerous “(gender) ideology” (cf. e.g., AL 56; Congregation for Catholic Education 2019). Under the label of “gender ideology”, the Catholic Church has been trying to reframe the human rights discourse since the mid-1990s. Against the UN Conferences of Cairo (“Population and Development”, 1994) and Beijing (Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995), with the demand for equal sexual and

reproductive rights on the one hand and the introduction of the gender concept into the UN context on the other hand, the Catholic Church sets its positions of “equality of dignity without equal rights” and complementarity of the sexes (cf. [Paternotte 2015](#), pp. 135–42; [Werner 2021](#), pp. 230–35). “Gender” is presented as a treacherous political strategy (“submarine”) aiming at an anthropological revolution and as a threat for man and woman as persons; while in contrast, a new, i.e., Catholic “feminism” is being propagated, and a link to the discourse of ecology is being established. In addition to the aforementioned use of the Church’s magisterium, political alliances are being forged with Evangelicals and Muslims, Catholic intellectuals with anti-gender positions are being internationally connected, and ecclesial movements such as Opus Dei, the Neocatechumenal Way, and Comunione e Liberazione are being mobilized for protest (cf. [Paternotte 2015](#), pp. 135–42; [Leimgruber 2020](#)).

In the Catholic Church, interpretive authority over the “being” and “genius” of women lies exclusively with the Pope and Bishops, i.e., with men. However, Catholic women are less and less willing to have essence and role attributed to them in this way. They consider it neither theologically nor sociologically justified that women are treated “as second-class beings in teaching and practice” of the Church ([Ganz 2021](#), p. 40). For them, the “half of humanity” is still “negatively discriminated against” by the Church ([Fischer 2019](#), p. 269), and they call the Church’s anthropology of sexes “a damning paean to women [ . . . ] which in its romantic exaggeration of virginity, sexuality and motherhood is a pure mockery of any woman” ([Reisinger 2019](#), p. 1).

These problems of acceptance of the Church’s doctrine are not new but have become even more acute in the context of the gender discourse. Moreover, in recent years, there has also been a growing awareness that sexual violence against women is usually related to hierarchical gender concepts, unequally distributed power, and dependencies (cf. [Heyder and Leimgruber 2020](#), pp. 188, 201–05). In this respect, Doris Reisinger is probably right in pointing out that the “patriarchal basic order of the Church has its share in the abuse crisis, because the systematic exclusion of women inevitably leads to equally systematic violence against women and children, no matter the society or the institution” ([Reisinger 2019](#), p. 1). However, as long as the Pope and the Bishops see themselves bound to God’s plan for man and woman—as established and taught by them—and consequently as not free to reform the Church’s doctrine, women must realistically adjust to the fact that the official anthropology of the Catholic Church as well as its gender-hierarchical constitution based on this doctrine will remain unchanged and therefore present a systemic risk factor.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The following text is based on an earlier study by the author, which was revised, updated and translated for this publication (cf. [Anuth 2017](#)).

## References

- Anuth, Bernhard Sven. 2015. Gottgeweihte Jungfrauen in der römisch-katholischen Kirche. Kanonistische Bemerkungen zu einer spezifisch weiblichen Lebensform. In *Ius quia iustum. Festschrift für Helmuth Pree zum 65. Geburtstag*. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, pp. 569–93.
- Anuth, Bernhard Sven. 2017. Gottes Plan für Frau und Mann. Beobachtungen zur lehramtlichen Geschlechteranthropologie. In *Gender studieren. Lernprozess für Theologie und Kirche*. Edited by Margit Eckholt. Ostfildern: Grünewald, pp. 171–88.
- Anuth, Bernhard Sven. 2020. Möglichkeit und Konsequenzen eines sakramentalen Frauendiakonats. Kanonistische Perspektiven. In *“Von Barmherzigkeit und Recht will ich singen”*. Festschrift für Andreas Weiß. Edited by Bernhard S. Anuth, Bernd Dennemarck and Stefan Ihli. Regensburg: Pustet, pp. 41–70.
- Bucher, Rainer. 2009. Die Macht der Frauen und die Ohnmacht der katholischen Kirche. Zum Ausklingen der patriarchalen Definitionsmacht. In *“ . . . männlich und weiblich schuf er sie”*. (Gen 1,27). Zur Brisanz der Geschlechterfrage in Religion und Gesellschaft. Edited by Sigrid Eder and Irtraud Fischer. Innsbruck: Tyrolia, pp. 281–96.



- Burggraf, Jutta. 1999. Johannes Paul II. und die Berufung der Frau. In *Johannes Paul II.—Zeuge des Evangeliums. Perspektiven des Papstes an der Schwelle zum dritten Jahrtausend*. Edited by Stephan O. Horn and Alexander Riebel. Würzburg: Naumann, pp. 322–35.
- Codex Iuris Canonici. 1983. Auctoritate Ioannis Pauli PP. II promulgatus. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 75: Pars II, 1–301 with Corrigenda ibid., 321–24, last modified by Pope Francis. 2022. Motuproprio “Assegnare alcune competenze”, 11 February 2022. *L’Osservatore Romano* 8. 15 February 2022.
- Congregation for Catholic Education. 2019. “Male and Female He Created Them”. *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*. Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education. Available online: [http://www.educatio.va/content/dam/cec/Documenti/19\\_0997\\_INGLESE.pdf](http://www.educatio.va/content/dam/cec/Documenti/19_0997_INGLESE.pdf) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2004. Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world, 31 May 2004. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 96: 671–87. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Fischer, Irmtraud. 2019. Gleichwertig, andersartig—und daher nicht gleichberechtigt. Zur Problematik des traditionell-katholischen Menschenbildes in Geschlechterdemokratien—und was man dafür aus der Bibel und deren Auslegung lernen könnte. In *Kirche und Welt—ein notwendiger Dialog. Stimmen katholischer Theologie*. Edited by Johanna Rahner, Thomas Söding and Margit Eckholt. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, pp. 269–82.
- Ganz, Katharina. 2021. Wesen zweiter Klasse. Zur Frauenfrage in der katholischen Kirche. *Herder-Korrespondenz* 75: 37–40, (translation B. A.).
- Heimbach-Steins, Marianne. 2007. “Mann und Frau besitzen dieselbe Würde und sind gleichwertig”. *Gottesbildlichkeit und Geschlechterverhältnis in christlicher Sicht. zur Debatte* 37: 32–34.
- Heyder, Regina, and Ute Leimgruber. 2020. Spiritueller und sexueller Missbrauch an erwachsenen Frauen. Was aus den Berichten von Betroffenen zu lernen ist. In *Erzählen als Widerstand. Berichte über spirituellen und sexuellen Missbrauch an erwachsenen Frauen in der katholischen Kirche*. Edited by Barbara Haslbeck, Regina Heyder, Ute Leimgruber and Dorothee Sandherr-Klemp. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, pp. 187–220.
- Hip-Flores, Christina. 2018. *Hermits and Consecrated Virgins, Ancient Vocations in the Contemporary Catholic Church. A Canonical-Pastoral Study of Canons 603 and 604 Individual Forms of Consecrated Life*. Washington, DC: Fiat Press.
- Holy Congregation for Catholic Education. 1983. Instructio. Principia et criteria circa institutionem de re sexuali apud familias et scholas tradendam, 1. November 1983. In *Leges Ecclesiae post Codex iuris canonici editae VI*. Edited by Xaverius Ochoa. 1987, No. 5006. Rome: Ediurcla, p. 8696. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_19831101\\_sexual-education\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19831101_sexual-education_en.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Ladaria, Luis. 2018. Il carattere definitivo della dottrina di “Ordinatio sacerdotalis”. A proposito di alcuni dubbi. *L’Osservatore Romano*. May 30, p. 6. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/ladaria-ferrer/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20180529\\_caratteredefinitivo-ordinatisacerdotalis\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/ladaria-ferrer/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180529_caratteredefinitivo-ordinatisacerdotalis_en.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Leahy, Breandán. 1996. *The Marian principle in the Church according to Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Leimgruber, Ute. 2020. Hostility toward Gender in Catholic and Political Right-Wing Movements. *Religions* 11: 301. [CrossRef]
- Leimgruber, Ute. 2021. Fürsorgliche Krankenschwestern und hingebungsvolle Mütter. Problematische Implikationen des Frauenideals bei Papst Franziskus. In *Die Leere halten. Skizzen zu einer Theologie, die loslässt*. Edited by Ute Leimgruber, Michael Lohausen, Jörg Seip and Bernhard Spielberg. Würzburg: Echter, pp. 171–78.
- Lüdecke, Norbert. 2004. Recta collaboratio per veram aequalitatem. Kanonistische Bemerkungen zum Schreiben der Kongregation für die Glaubenslehre über die Zusammenarbeit von Mann und Frau in der Kirche und in der Welt. *Intams Review. Journal for the Study of Marriage and Spirituality* 10: 232–40.
- Lüdecke, Norbert. 2012. Mehr Geschlecht als Recht? Zur Stellung der Frau nach Lehre und Recht der römisch-katholischen Kirche. In “... männlich und weiblich schuf er sie.” (Gen 1,27). *Zur Brisanz der Geschlechterfrage in Religion und Gesellschaft*. Edited by Sigrid Eder and Irmtraud Fischer. Innsbruck: Tyrolia, pp. 183–216, (translation B. A.).
- Paternotte, David. 2015. Blessing the Crowds. Catholic Mobilisations against Gender in Europe. In *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*. Edited by Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 129–47.
- Pope Benedict XVI. 2006. Address at the Meeting with Members of the Roman Clergy, 2 March 2006. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 146: 266–79. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/march/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060302\\_roman-clergy.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060302_roman-clergy.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope Benedict XVI. 2008. Address to participants in the International Convention “Woman and Man, the Humanum in Its Entirety”, 9 February 2008. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 148: 163–65. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080209\\_donna-uomo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080209_donna-uomo.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope Benedict XVI. 2009. Address after the Angelus, 8 March 2009. *L’Osservatore Romano*. March 9/10, p. 6. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_ang\\_20090308.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20090308.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope Francis. 2013. Apostolic Exhortation “Evangelii gaudium” on the Proclamation of the Gospel in today’s World, 24 November 2013. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 105: 1019–137. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost-exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost-exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).

- Pope Francis. 2015a. Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture, 7 February 2015. *L'Osservatore Romano*. February 7/8, p. 7. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/february/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150207\\_pontificio-consiglio-cultura.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/february/documents/papa-francesco_20150207_pontificio-consiglio-cultura.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope Francis. 2015b. Address to the delegate women of the “Conférence Internationale Catholique du Guidisme”, 26 June 2015. *L'Osservatore Romano* 8, 27 June 2015 (translation B. A.).
- Pope Francis. 2016. In-Flight Press Conference from Sweden to Rome, 1 November 2016. *L'Osservatore Romano*. November 2/3, p. 8. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161101\\_svezia-conferenza-stampa.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/november/documents/papa-francesco_20161101_svezia-conferenza-stampa.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope Francis. 2020. Apostolic Exhortation “Querida Amazonia”, 2 February 2020. *L'Osservatore Romano*. February 13, pp. 3–8. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope Francis. 2021. Motu proprio “Spiritus Domini”, 10 January 2021. *L'Osservatore Romano*. January 10/11 In English. Available online: [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110\\_spiritus-domini.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210110_spiritus-domini.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope John Paul II. 1980. Address at the General Audience, 16 January 1980. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, III*. vol. 1, pp. 148–52. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1980/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_1980\\_0116.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_1980_0116.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope John Paul II. 1981. Apostolic Exhortation “Familiaris consortio” on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, 12 November 1981. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 74: 81–191. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope John Paul II. 1987. Encyclical “Redemptoris Mater” on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church, 25 April 1987. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 79: 361–433. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031987\\_redemptoris-mater.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope John Paul II. 1988. Apostolic Letter “Mulieris dignitatem”, 15 August 1988. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 80: 1653–729. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html#](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html#) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope John Paul II. 1989. Apostolic Exhortation “Christifideles laici” on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, 30 December 1988. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 81: 393–521. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope John Paul II. 1994. Apostolic Letter “Ordinatio sacerdotalis” on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, 22 May 1994. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 86: 545–48. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Pope John Paul II. 1995. Letter to Women, 29 June 1995. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87: 803–12. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_29061995\\_women.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Raming, Ida. 1990. Die Frauen in der Kirche. *Stimmen der Zeit* 208: 415–26, (translation B. A.).
- Reisinger, Doris. 2019. Schämst Du Dich noch? *Christ & Welt* 1. September 5, (translation B. A.).
- Second Vatican Council. 1966. Dogmatic Constitution “Dei verbum” on Divine Revelation, 18 November 1965. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58: 817–30. In English. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html) (accessed on 15 February 2022).
- Secretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference, ed. 1981. *Zu Fragen der Stellung der Frau in Kirche und Gesellschaft*. Bonn: German Bishops’ Conference.
- von Balthasar, Hans Urs. 1978. Das marianische Prinzip. In *Klarstellungen. Zur Prüfung der Geister*. Edited by Balthasar Hans Urs von. Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, pp. 65–72.
- von Balthasar, Hans Urs. 1979. Frauenpriestertum? In *Neue Klarstellungen*. Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, pp. 109–15.
- Werner, Gunda. 2021. Die Kontinuität des Frauenbildes in römischen Dokumenten. Ein dogmatisches *close reading*. In *Anti-Genderismus in Europa. Allianzen von Rechtspopulismus und religiösem Fundamentalismus. Mobilisierung—Vernetzung—Transformation*. Edited by Sonja A. Strube, Rita Perintfalvi, Raphaela Hemet, Miriam Metzke and Cicek Sahbaz. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp. 229–40.