

The Viewpoint of an Orthodox Theologian

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Phyllis Zagano's *Women & Catholicism: Gender, Communion, and Authority*¹ provides excellent reading, not only for those who do not possess knowledge about the current discussion concerning the position of women in the Roman Catholic Church in general, but also for those who are more familiar with the matter.² The book is written in such form that every layperson can understand it, and we must admit that we are all laypeople in one way or another—at least in the “nonexpert” way, if not in the original “nonclergy” meaning of the word.³

Zagano analyzes the situation in the Roman Catholic Church in general by using two extreme positions as examples: Bishop Bruskewitz as the extreme conservative and Archbishop Milingo as (at least from the standpoint of the Vatican) the extreme liberal. Zagano exhibits both sides of the story and, for the most part, lets the reader decide how to feel about them. She simultaneously respects the official Roman Catholic teaching while stretching the boundaries.

In these first two parts of the book, Zagano deals with the problems that, in my judgment, come mainly from the application of a universalist ecclesiology on the local church. A universalist ecclesiology is one that automatically subordinates the local churches to the church universal, with the church universal being conceived as existing above and even detached from them. Zagano tells the story of a group of U.S. Catholics in the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, who, in more or less legitimate ways, try to take part in making decisions in their local church. At first, their demands are concentrated on “women’s legitimate participation in liturgy” (14). Bishop Bruskewitz was denying women even those liturgical and ministerial services that are allowed by the rest of the Roman Catholic Church and in some countries, such as Germany for example, are today considered to be something quite normal.

Zagano next deals with Emanuel Milingo, forcibly retired Archbishop of Lusaka (Zambia) and his “adaptations in service of inculturation of Catholicism in Africa” (49) in the form of a so-called faith healing practice. In this case it is the archbishop himself whose situation worsens as he hits a wall of nonunderstanding from the official Church authorities.

The first thing that is obvious from both these examples, that of Call to Action and that of Archbishop Milingo, is that the U.S. Christians and the African Christians view the same (Roman Catholic) Church in two different ways and that this is due to the simple fact that they do not necessarily share the same cultural values. What seems likely from my Orthodox perspective is that in both cases, Rome does not show sufficient understanding for either of these local variations/implementations of Catholicism. Instead, the official church is supporting persons such as Bishop Bruskewitz, who is implementing the Vatican’s *current policy* without question. I say “*current policy*” here because even many Catholic theologians argue that the bishops’ approach does not represent the official policy of the Roman Catholic Church as it has developed since the Second Vatican Council; instead, it is rather a step back into preconciliar ways of thinking.

From these two examples, one could conclude that, due to its centralization, the Roman Catholic Church cannot adequately respond to the particular demands and needs of each local diocese or region.⁴ Nikolai Afanasiev, one of the official orthodox observers at the Vatican II, devoted his article, “The Church Which Presides in Love,” precisely to the problem of the universalist ecclesiology and its negative aspects.⁵ Participants of the Second Vatican Council were aware of this problem, and for this reason they started introducing an ecclesiological approach that Zagano calls the “‘communal’ (collegial, ecclesial) model against the ‘juridical’ (collaborative, political model)” (9). This “communal” model might also be labeled “communion ecclesiology” and has significant overlap, albeit with some distinction, with what Afanasiev depicts as “eucharistic ecclesiology.”⁶

The reception of the Council is still not finished, and I think that, especially in the light of the ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox Church, there is still a space for abandoning the universalist and overly centralized system and replacing it with a more suitable one, which does not necessarily need to be something entirely new.⁷ Pope John Paul II can be interpreted as actually starting the process of jettisoning the universalist system with his encyclical letter *Ut Unum Sint* in which he expresses a desire “to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.”⁸ Many churches responded very positively to this call, but Rome appears to have done little, if anything, as yet to put any of these ideas into practice.