

Breaking through the Stained-Glass Ceiling During John Paul II's Pontificate? Women, Feminism and World Youth Days

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Abstract John Paul II's World Youth Days (hereafter WYDs) were mega-events that happened eight times between 1987 and 2002. They took place in Europe, Asia, North America and South America. Observing the role women played in these global gatherings of young Catholics provides essential insights into gender issues within Catholicism during John Paul II's pontificate. First, this paper shows that, within the organization chart of the WYDs, women faced a "stained glass ceiling", but a few did manage to obtain a position of responsibility. Secondly, the paper studies how Catholic feminist culture found a place in WYDs, even though theologically conservative prelates, who did not back the idea of an inclusive Church, often organized them. This second part is focused on the Denver WYD (1993), marked by several feminist performances, which led to strong disputes between liberal and conservative Catholics. The way in which women became involved in this debate and the reaction of the Catholic hierarchy is studied in the third part.

Keywords Catholic Church. Feminism. Agency. Tokenism. Gender issues. John Paul II.

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1 Introduction

For Giovanni Miccoli, “the variety of orientations, positions and impulses, often contradictory, at least in appearance”¹ characterizes the pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005). This diversity favors the co-existence of divergent interpretations of his legacy, which are based on different words or decisions. The question of his action regarding the place of women in the Catholic Church is one of the issues under discussion.

For many feminist theologians, as Anne Soupa or Denise Couture, the pontificate of the Polish pope corresponds to a moment when the Catholic institution, structurally patriarchal, sought to curb with all its might the movement of women's emancipation. While reusing certain concepts of feminism, and while proclaiming the dignity of women, John Paul II shaped an androcentric theology, affirming, from an oriented reading of the biblical account of the creation of man and woman, that woman's vocation consisted in helping man.² This subordination was doctrinally translated in the letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* which irrevocably locked the door that would have allowed equal access to the priesthood, by declaring “that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful”.³ Regarding the internal organization of the Catholic Church, this has led to the implementation of “a division of roles between men and women that assigns to women functions of service to men”.⁴ In the international and political arena, the Holy See used women to promote an anti-feminist vision, aimed at keeping women in the home and preventing any change in gender norms.⁵ The subsequent discovery of abuse of women, especially nuns, by clerics promoted and valorized by John Paul II, has given credibility to this reading.⁶ The increasingly documented cases of violence and oppression, not only sexual⁷ but also psychological or even economic (one can think of the

1 Miccoli, *Le Pontificat de Jean-Paul II*, 7, (translated from French). On the complex and, in some cases, contradictory aspects of John Paul II's work, cf. also Menozzi, *Giovanni Paolo II*.

2 Soupa, “Le recul de la cause des femmes”.

3 John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, § 4.

4 Couture, “L'antiféminisme”, 24. Cf. also Pedotti, Favier, *Jean-Paul II*, 197-201.

5 Couture, “L'antiféminisme”, 26-7. The Holy See's own efforts to counter feminist movements, perceived as denying the difference between men and women, have resulted in putting women forward in delegations to represent its views at major UN conferences, including the 1995 Beijing conference on women. Cf. Lecomte, *Jean-Paul II*, 503.

6 Cf. the foreword of the 2004 edition of Schneiders, *Beyond Patching*, originally published in 1991.

7 Quintin, Raimbault, *Religieuses abusées*.

nuns placed at the service of cardinals and bishops in the Vatican, almost treated as indentured servants and very poorly paid)⁸ appear to be the symptoms of a Church that chose to continue to subordinate women to men, particularly within the clergy, even though Western societies were evolving towards greater equality.⁹

On the contrary, other analysts consider that feminists misunderstood John Paul II and point out the advances that took place during his pontificate. Historian Richard Camp formulates the hypothesis that the Polish pope tried to adjust “the papal ideology on women to modern demands for female social and political emancipation without abandoning the traditional claim that women have a unique, irreplaceable role in family, Church and society”.¹⁰ Georg Weigel, a Catholic neoconservative American intellectual, underlines the originality of Karol Wojtyła’s thoughts on women’s issues. By making the figure of Mary (mother of Jesus) pre-eminent over that of Peter (first apostle), he made the power and authority of priests subordinate to the holiness of Christ’s disciples, whatever their function. According to him, the Pope was a differentialist feminist who believed that the true liberation of women did not come through the appropriation of male characteristics, which was another way of prolonging the domination of men, but through the deployment of their own originality.¹¹ In his biography published in 2004, journalist Bernard Lecomte mentions the apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), which denounced the male domination of women, especially in sexuality. He also mentions the *Letter to Women*, published by John Paul II in 1995, designated as Women’s Year by the United Nations. Wojtyła advocated the full integration of women “into social, political and social life”, recognized the value of feminist struggles of the past, and began to repent for the Church’s contribution to the marginalization of women in society.¹² Lecomte also recalls that the years 1980-1990 were marked, in the Vatican, by the access of women to a level of responsibility that was minor, but unprecedented: in 2003, the Italian Letizia Pani Ermini was appointed president of the Pontifical Academy of Archaeology.¹³

The aim of this article is to shed light on this debate on the evolution of the place of women during John Paul II’s pontificate, by making a double shift in relation to the works cited. The analysis is centered not on the discourses and decisions taken at the top of the Catholic

8 Malzac, “Le journal du Vatican dénonce l’exploitation des religieuses dans l’Église”.

9 Roy, “Abus sexuels dans l’Église catholique”.

10 Camp, “From Passive Subordination”, 524.

11 Weigel, *Witness to Hope*.

12 Lecomte, *Jean-Paul II*, 501-2.

13 Lecomte, *Jean-Paul II*, 505.

institution, but on the concrete functioning of the latter. The focus is not on the pope and his entourage but on women and their experience. In this, my approach is in line with the trends that have become classic in religious historiography over the last forty years. Under the crossed influence of the quotidian turn¹⁴ and gender studies,¹⁵ ‘feminine Catholicism’¹⁶ has been studied more and more from the point of view of women’s trajectories (and less and less from the point of view of the institutional framework).¹⁷ This approach has made it possible to highlight situations in which women were subordinated to men, but also situations in which women found in the Catholic universe a space where they could build and strengthen their agency.¹⁸

In this article, I will analyze John Paul II’s pontificate from this perspective, which has so far been applied mainly to the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. To do so, I will focus my analysis on the World Youth Days (WYD). Launched by John Paul II in 1985, these international world events provide essential insights into gender issues within Catholicism, both in its organizational structure (by studying women’s functions in the preparatory committees), in its rites and ceremonies (by analyzing the place women occupy in the celebrations) and in its internal debates (by observing women’s participation in the controversies generated by the gatherings). Having been held in different countries and on different dates (Argentina in 1987, Spain in 1989, Poland in 1991, the United States in 1993, the Philippines in 1995, France in 1997, Italy in 2000, Canada in 2002), the WYDs make it possible to identify, analyze and compare the different ways in which women have been able, if not to break through the “stained glass ceiling”,¹⁹ at least to reach a position of influence and responsibility. How did they get to these places, and how did they establish their authority? How did the institution react to their empowerment?

My research is mainly based on interviews with people involved in the organization of WYDs, on press articles and on ecclesiastical archives from the 1993 Denver WYD and the 1995 Manila WYD, stored in Rome, Manila, Washington DC, and Denver.²⁰

14 Tweed, “Catholic Studies After the Quotidian Turn”, 361-85.

15 Cova, Dumons, *Femmes, genre et catholicisme*; Brejon de Lavergnée, Della Sudda, *Genre et christianisme*.

16 Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin*.

17 Despite the recent revival of this approach. Cf. in particular Ciciliot, *Donne sugli altari*.

18 Cf. in particular the works of Della Sudda, “Militanti e professioniste cattoliche”, 742-63; Brejon de Lavergnée, *Le temps des cornettes*; Sprows Cummings, “Frances Cabrini”, 1-22; Duriez et al., *Femmes catholiques*; Massam, *A Bridge Between Spanish Benedictine Missionary Women in Australia*.

19 Gasquet, “La barrière et le plafond de vitrail”, 218-36.

20 Some of these data have already been used in my book: Mercier, *L’Église, les jeunes et la mondialisation*.

First, I will show that women faced a 'stained glass ceiling' within the WYDs' organization chart but a few did manage to obtain responsibility. Following the itinerary of three of them will help to identify the reasons why some women were able to gain access to power within John Paul II's Church. It will also shed light on how they conceived their responsibility. Secondly, the paper will study how Catholic feminist culture found a place in WYDs, even though theologically conservative prelates, who did not back the idea of an inclusive church, often organized them. This second part will be focused on the Denver gathering (1993), marked by several feminist performances which led to strong disputes between liberal and conservative Catholics. The way in which women became involved in this debate, and the reactions of the Catholic hierarchy will be studied in the third part.

2 Women in the Organization, a 'Stained-Glass Ceiling'?

2.1 Limited Access to Responsibilities

A study of the WYDs organization charts during John Paul II's pontificate reveals that women were underrepresented in positions of responsibility. This was partly a 'barrier' effect, specific to Catholicism: since a bishop, a function incompatible with the female gender, must supervise the preparations, women were systematically excluded from chairing organizing committees on an 'explicit' criterion. But the phenomenon must be understood in a broader context. In the 1990s, gender disparity in access to power, including the persistence of subtle mechanisms of disqualification, marked all sectors of social, economic and political life.²¹

Regarding the second level of the hierarchy, of the eight coordinators or general secretaries of World Youth Days under John Paul II, the Filipina Henrietta de Villa was the only woman. At the third level of the organizational chart, that of the heads of departments, women were also very underrepresented compared to men. At the Denver WYD, of the six department heads, Sister Mary Ann Walsh, director of communications, was the only female.²² At the Manila WYD, the ratio was the same, about one woman for every six men.²³ For the Paris WYD, the ratio dropped to 1 in 12.²⁴ The French edition was not

²¹ Laufer, "Le plafond de verre", 298-308.

²² *Corporate structure and organizational chart*, in UNDA, WYD 1993 collection.

²³ *Papal Visit '95 Manila*, 91, in APCL, WYD 1995 collection

²⁴ *Organigramme JMJ 1997* (1996), in Archives JMJ, 257.32.

part of the feminization of French Catholicism's middle management that had been observed by Céline Béraud.²⁵

Classically, lower positions were less masculinized. For instance, two women supported the Denver WYD's program manager: Terri Crovato, hired as executive assistant,²⁶ and Maureen Gross, hired as secretary.²⁷

If we look not at the national committees but at the Pontifical Council for the Laity (PCL), the department of the Roman Curia responsible for organizing WYDs, the same observation can be made. The supervision of the preparations was carried out by the president of the PCL, a cardinal or a bishop, and then by the person in charge of the youth section, a function occupied by priests throughout the period. The women employees, which included Giovanna Guerrieri, Carmen Apparicio, and Jo Grafil, were at the bottom of the organizational chart even though they carried out a large part of the work.

2.2 Trajectories of Access to Responsibilities

The career paths of the few women who have reached a position of responsibility in the WYDs organization charts are varied.

The story of Henrietta de Villa is particularly interesting and shows the complex role of the religious factor in women's careers.²⁸ Born in the second half of the 1930s into a family of the Filipino upper middle class, de Villa was educated in a Manila school run by "very strict" Belgian nuns, who made her aware of social justice issues while giving her a taste for excellence: "They couldn't stand mediocrity". Very active by temperament, de Villa became the executive secretary of Catholic Action at the school. Admitted to the university, she abandoned her studies before graduating because of her marriage. Her husband, who wanted her to be present at home, nevertheless allowed her to continue her involvement in the Mother Butler Guild, an association of "Catholic laywomen whose main concern would be to make and take care of priestly vestments and altar linens, as well as ensure the cleanliness and beautification of their respective parish churches".²⁹ The association, which overlapped perfectly with the domestic roles traditionally assigned to women, seemed fully reassuring for de Villa's husband, but was to prove to be an unexpected place for access to responsibilities. Beyond its official pur-

²⁵ Béraud, *Prêtres, diacres, laïcs*.

²⁶ Crovato, *Letter*, 2018.

²⁷ Gross, *Interview*, 2018.

²⁸ De Villa, *Interview*, 2019.

²⁹ De Villa, "A Brief History of the Mother Butler Guild".

pose, the group played a fundamental role in the parishes, by organizing the collection of material resources which allowed them to function. As fundraisers, the members of the Mother Butler Guild occupied a central position within their community, in a process that seems similar to what Gilkes observed in African-American churches.³⁰ De Villa was quickly noticed for her initiative and ideas. In the 1970s, Cardinal Sin, archbishop of Manila, asked her, even though she was the youngest, to become the leader of the movement and to extend its outreach to all the parishes in Manila and then throughout the Philippines.³¹ She successfully fulfilled this mission. Realizing that he was trying “to hold back the talents God gave [her]” her husband changed his attitude towards her. He accepted her new responsibilities just as he agreed that his wife should become the coordinator of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in 1991, a landmark event in the contemporary history of Filipino Catholicism, which notably strengthened the participation of the laity in the life of the Church.³² De Villa saw this as the result of her prayers. Her appointment by Cardinal Sin as coordinator of the 1995 papal visit continued this upward trajectory. De Villa's success was based both on personal resources (linked to her education, her wealth, and perhaps the relational network that her parents and husband had built up)³³ and on a form of spiritual sublimation of her fate, which allowed her to consent to patriarchal expectations without giving up her desire to make use of her gifts.

Sister Mary Ann Walsh's story is different. Born into a modest family of Irish immigrants, she did not have the same relational and financial capital as Henrietta de Villa, but a talent for writing she developed during her schooling at the Sisters of Mercy in Albany, New York, a religious congregation in which she took her vows.³⁴ She attended the College of St. Rose in Albany (where she earned a master's degree in English) and Loyola College of Maryland (where she earned a master's degree in pastoral counseling) before beginning a career as a journalist for the Albany diocesan periodical. She then became a correspondent for a Catholic news agency in Rome and then in Washington, D.C.,³⁵ where she was hired as the communications director for WYD 1993 by the U.S. bishops' conference. In Walsh's case, the rise to a position of responsibility seems to be based on both personal talent and the strength of the network of

30 Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women ...*.

31 De Villa, “A Brief History of the Mother Butler Guild”.

32 On this event, cf. Moreno, *Church, State, and Civil Society*, 70-3.

33 Gasquet, “La barrière et le plafond de vitrail”, 12.

34 Walsh, *Facing Terminal Illness with Mercy*.

35 Guibson. “Sister Mary Ann Walsh”; “A Journalist's Life”.

American nuns. Perhaps there was also a symbolic reason: in a context where gender issues were becoming central in American society, recruiting a woman as director of communications could give the appearance of sexual equality within the WYD corporation and deflect accusations of discrimination against the Catholic Church. If this assumption was true, the hiring of this nun to fill the most media-friendly position on the WYD organization chart would be part of what Anglo-Saxons call 'tokenism,' the cosmetic practice of inclusion for branding purposes.³⁶

The trajectory of Jo Grafil, who assumed the position of secretary general of WYD Manila at the age of 35, is different again. With a degree in applied economics and close ties to the Salesians of Don Bosco, this young woman from the Filipino middle class should have gone to volunteer in Papua New Guinea. However, as she was involved in the national team of Catholic youth ministry and had helped to organize several gatherings, Cardinal Sin asked her to postpone her project, which she agreed to do, but not without some resistance. Devoting all her time to the WYD without being paid, her family supported her during the two years of preparations. She was not bitter about it, even though the Philippine Church in general, and the Archdiocese of Manila in particular, was rich. She was not the only one in this situation: "Since we were all volunteers, it created a special spirit".³⁷ The fact that positions of responsibility were based entirely or partially on volunteerism may explain why women occupied these posts since their spouse or family could support them. Except for the priests, who have no family responsibilities and whose dioceses provide for their subsistence, women would be more likely than men to accept these missions, given the traditional distribution of roles. However, this hypothesis must be considered with caution, as there were also laymen among the volunteer leaders of the organization.

2.3 Ways of exercising responsibilities

In the stories that these women tell of how they carried out their work, we can see different kinds of presentations of the Self and of the Church. When I asked her if it had not been difficult to work in this male-dominated world, Jo Grafil said that she had no difficulty because she had previous experiences of collaboration with the priests of the Salesian movement to which she belonged. She then paused and told me:

³⁶ Nesbitt, "Gender, Tokenism", 193-210.

³⁷ Grafil, *Interview*, 2019.

Actually, I work very well with men, better than with women, because I find that men have a higher level, I apologize... When they say yes, it's yes, no it's no. With women, it's always... I'm a very strict person. I am not a 'yes person'. When I say yes it's yes, no it's no [...]. I was respected, I was trusted. It was a very positive experience. [...] I had a voice, I was listened to. Some people said that I was actually the boss. I had a very good experience of the Church where I felt I had a place.³⁸

The feeling of being recognized for her competence by the Catholic hierarchy seemed to create an adhesion to qualities seen as masculine (ability to decide, rigor). Even if Jo Grafil does not adhere to universalist feminism, whose theses she may not be familiar with, she nevertheless came close to this way of thinking in that she relativized the effects of biological difference on behavior: as a woman, she could work the way men do and be recognized by them.

Mary Ann Walsh's discourse on her experience as a woman working for WYD is more in line with differentialist feminism, which is widespread in religious circles,³⁹ especially Christian ones, which see it as respectful of biblical anthropology. This feminism postulates that biological differences create specifically feminine qualities, complementary to male qualities, which ought to be more recognized and used so that social organization becomes less patriarchal and, therefore, more harmonious. In an article published in 2015, shortly before her death, Walsh highlighted how her feminine approach had helped to 'humanize' the organization of WYD:

A 19-year-old with a fatal disease wanted to meet the Pope. That became a priority, and I gave her a special place at Mass and made it happen. A male organizer objected, saying she should be with children to meet the Pope later. I argued that a 19-year-old belonged with adults. I saw a nuance that my male colleague did not.

While emphasizing that her "maternal side took over," she also acknowledged that she adopted a "so called male mindset to make the event work". She followed the advice of a friend of hers, Tim Russel, a well-known media man whom she had consulted before taking up her position:

Tim knew most of the people I would deal with were men and offered a common male approach. 'You own the pope, so you're in

³⁸ Grafil, *Interview*, 2019.

³⁹ Gasquet, "La barrière et le plafond de vitrail", 11.

charge!' It was an adult version of sandlot sports: whoever owns the ball decides what position he will play. ⁴⁰

In fact, the records show that Walsh did not hesitate to confront others head-on when the interests of the WYD were at stake. For example, through the media, she battled with a sheriff who threatened to ban the pope's Mass if the organizers did not cover all security expenses. She used this experience as an argument to promote greater access of women to leadership in Catholic organizations: "Women's gifts, which include intuition and relational skills, are not taken advantage of in decision making".⁴¹

Henrietta de Villa is in a similar vein when she describes how she carried out her role as coordinator of the 1995 papal visit. When I asked her if it was not too complicated, as a woman, to give orders to the priests who were hierarchically under her in the organizational chart, and if she did not experience misogyny, she replied:

Never. It's a grace of God. Because... you know, I guess it's also my nature: whenever I ask something of priests, I don't command. I don't want to make them feel that they have to obey me. Rather, I say to them: 'Father, could you help me, I don't know how to do it' [...]. It's a question of approach, of kindness. ⁴²

This self-presentation is consistent with de Villa's account of how she managed to persuade the Jesuit in charge of organizing the pope's trip to change the location of one of the WYD events (to satisfy the archbishop of Manila), or to convince the owner of Philippines Airlines to waive the fee for John Paul II's flight from Manila to Rome. This way of exercising responsibility, through a form of humility, kindness, or even 'gentle manipulation', could be referred back to the stereotypes about the power of women, who would formally accept male domination while developing their capacity to influence. De Villa pointed out that she was trained in this mode of relating to priests in the Mother Butler Guild. But she also connected this behavior to the male model of Christ, as described by St. Paul:

though he was in the form of God, [Christ Jesus] did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. ⁴³

⁴⁰ Walsh, "Take These Gifts".

⁴¹ Walsh, "Take These Gifts".

⁴² De Villa, *Interview*, 2019.

⁴³ De Villa, *Interview*, 2019.

She mentioned passages from the New Testament to justify that one should “never think oneself better than others” and consider oneself “as the last, as a servant”. If one follows her, it is the application of the subversive approach to power that is characteristic of Christianity (“the last shall be first”) that is the cornerstone of her leadership. Her success in solving sensitive cases involving the Roman Curia and Filipino organizers led to her appointment in 1995 as Philippine ambassador to the Holy See.⁴⁴

3 The Place of Women in the Catholic Celebration

If we now look at the celebrations during John Paul II's WYDs, what place was given to women, the majority of pilgrims being women? The survey carried out by the PCL in 1989 during the Compostela WYD showed a proportion of 58% girls against 42% boys,⁴⁵ figures that were quite similar to those of a survey carried out by the weekly magazine *La Vie* on the young French participants in the WYD in Madrid (56% girls against 44% boys).⁴⁶

The WYDs have been a mix of large ceremonies around the pope and meetings in small, linguistically homogeneous groups, especially for catechesis. In the first editions of WYDs, catechesis was given mainly by men but also by some women, such as Chiara Lubich, president of the Focolare, a new community she founded in 1943, or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, founder and superior of the Missionary Sisters of Charity. However, since 1991, the year when WYD was held in Czechochowa, Poland, only bishops have been selected.⁴⁷

As for the great ceremonies, while the celebrants have been all male because of the Catholic rules of ordination, there has been a certain effort towards parity as regards the young people who took the podium. For the 1985 Palm Sunday gathering in Rome, the WYD prototype, the organizers wanted the Saturday vigil with the pope to be presented by a boy and a girl.⁴⁸ For the Paris WYD baptism ceremony, during the Saturday evening vigil, priority seems to have been given to ethnic and cultural diversity rather than gender equality, but parity was almost respected: the group of catechumens included four young women (Tahitian, Cuban, Kenyan, American) against six young men (French, Cambodian, Russian, Burkinabe, Taiwanese

⁴⁴ De Villa, *Interview*, 2019.

⁴⁵ Conseil Pontifical pour les Laïcs, *Que cherchez-vous jeunes pèlerins?*, 181.

⁴⁶ Barbier-Bouvet, “Qui sont les jeunes participants aux JMJ”.

⁴⁷ Duda, *VI Światowy Dzień Młodzieży*. 230.

⁴⁸ *Incontro con il S. Padre* (1985), in APCL, *Gathering 1985 collection*, 1.

and Bolivian).⁴⁹ While the altar servers were boys, the readings that the laity could provide during the Masses were generally equally distributed between the two sexes.⁵⁰ On the other hand, for the Denver WYD, there was not a single woman on the podium during the final Mass, the liturgy of which was prepared by the Italians.⁵¹ The American edition of the WYDs was, however, a pleasant surprise for Catholic feminists, insofar as the flaws in the organization made it possible to make some of their struggles visible on several occasions.

The first 'performance' highlighting women was not intentionally feminist according to its protagonists. It occurred on Friday, 13 August 1993, when 70,000 pilgrims gathered at Mile High Stadium to watch a mimed Way of the Cross. The theater company, commissioned by the organizers to present a mime of the Passion in the medieval tradition, chose to entrust the role of Jesus to a young woman, Christiana Brown, who was twenty-three years old. The director of the troupe, Franciscan Father Dan Anderson, explained that, of the four actors involved in the performance, it was she who most resembled the popular depictions of Christ, particularly because of her long black hair. According to Christiana Brown and Dan Anderson, the choice was devoid of any ideological bias. The WYD organizers, not consulted beforehand, did not have the opportunity to validate this option since, overwhelmed by last-minute tasks, neither Bishop Boccardo of the PCL, nor Paul Henderson (program manager), nor Father Schnurr (general coordinator), attended the dress rehearsal.⁵² Most of the young people, away from the stage and following the mime through the big screens, did not pay attention to the gender of Jesus. However, those near the podium and even more so, those watching the broadcast of the mime on the Catholic television station EWTN (Eternal Word Television Network), could see that Christiana Brown was female, even though the director sought to masculinize her by compressing her breasts and dressing her as a man.⁵³

The second event was intentionally militant. It took place during the Saturday night vigil. One of the mistresses of ceremony, Mev Puleo, a young Catholic theologian inspired by Liberation theology, was "frustrated by the evidence of patriarchy she saw" even if "the

49 "Hier, Paris encerclé", 3.

50 Issues related to the presence of girls and women around the altar are sensitive especially in French Catholicism. Cf. Béraud, "La cause des femmes dans le catholicisme français", 316.

51 Puleo, "Emcee for Pope Raises Justice Issues", 1.

52 Henderson, *Interview*, 2018; Crovato, *Letter*, 2018.

53 Niebuhr, "Use of Actress"; Keeler, *Letter to Cacciavillan*, 1993, in UNDA, MCN 51/05; *The Catholic World Report*, 20.

Pope struck her as such a kind and sweet man”.⁵⁴ She decided to read, in the presence of the pope, an inclusive version of the Magnificat prayer attributed to Mary in the Gospel of Luke. She turned third person masculine pronouns used to refer to God into second person neutral pronouns: “He has filled the starving with good things” became “You have filled the starving with good things”.⁵⁵ Mev Puleo, who had asked the prior permission of one of the organizers whom she knew “would say yes”,⁵⁶ was part of a tradition of feminist affirmation during the U.S. visits of John Paul II. During his first stay as pope on American soil, in the fall of 1979, a nun asked him to allow the ordination of women during a ceremony in the National Shrine, the great basilica of Washington DC, which constitutes the symbolic heart of American Catholicism. In response to his refusal, several nuns refused to bow to him in protest.⁵⁷

The pronoun change she made seems innocuous, but it had strong symbolic resonance as the issue of inclusive language in liturgical translations pitted conservatives against liberals within American Catholicism. A few months earlier, Archbishop Stafford, the host archbishop of the Denver WYD, who belonged to the first camp, had denounced the inclusive liturgical translations approved in 1992 by the bishops’ conference of his country in a letter to Cardinal Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He saw in them the realization of the “feminist agenda”, itself inspired by “secular modernity” which attacked “the sacramental efficacy of Catholic worship” in order to realize its project of “dissociation of sexuality from nuptiality”.⁵⁸

The third initiative to include more women in the Catholic liturgy also took place during the Saturday evening vigil. It was connected to the “Pilgrim’s Litany”, published in different languages in the participants’ booklet, and recited in the presence of John Paul II. Initially, the PCL was to provide all the prayers. However, when the American organizers realized that their Roman partner would not be able to carry out its mission in time, they wrote the missing texts in a hurry. The youth department of the Archdiocese of Denver took care of the litany.⁵⁹ With several students, Bill Jaster, who coordinated youth ministry in the diocese, wrote an inclusive prayer⁶⁰ in which both the motherhood and fatherhood of God were emphasized. Among the long

54 Puleo, “Emcee for Pope Raises Justice Issues”, 1.

55 Keeler, *Letter to Cacciavillan*, 1993, in UNDA, MCN 51/05.

56 Puleo, “Emcee for Pope Raises Justice Issues”, 1.

57 Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 352-4.

58 Stafford, *Letter to Ratzinger*, 1993, in AAD, WYD collection, 7.

59 Keeler, *Letter to Cacciavillan*, 1993, in UNDA, MCN 51/05.

60 Jaster, *Interview*, 2018.

series of invocations were “Womb of all” and “Mother of my heart”.⁶¹ Dennis Murray, who followed this dossier from a distance, considers that the approach was particularly legitimate:

Young men and women from all over the world were coming to Denver to experience the official Church caring for them and hearing their voice. Why would we not have prayers that would allow all of them, regardless of gender, to have the experience of being able to find themselves in that prayer?⁶²

In the heat of the preparations, Paul Henderson reread the texts that were to be sent to the printer, but Bishop Boccardo probably did not, for lack of time, and he gave his *imprimatur* without being aware of the content.⁶³

4 Women in Controversy

Ironically, of these three performances, it was the one that was presumably not intentionally activist that generated the most passionate reaction, not so much from pilgrims as from EWTN viewers. Liberal feminist Catholics could not believe their eyes. Ruth Fitzpatrick, the national coordinator of the Women's Ordination Conference, formed in 1975 to promote the ordination of women to the priesthood, declared:

I was watching it on TV and said to myself, ‘No, that’s not a woman’. Then the woman beside me said, ‘Hey, that’s a woman’. It’s amazing how conditioned you get by patriarchy. I never thought I’d see it! I was delighted!⁶⁴

When she heard the news, Maureen Fiedler, coordinator of Catholics Speak Out, another liberal Catholic organization, thought it was an external protest and not a performance that was part of the official program. When she realized what had happened, she felt galvanized, seeing it as an (unintended) recognition of her struggle:

The whole reason the Vatican claims women can’t be priests is that we do not image [*sic*] Christ. [...] But obviously, if they’re imaging Christ as a woman, someone in there thinks that we can

⁶¹ *Voices*, 3.

⁶² Murray, *Letter*, 2018.

⁶³ Henderson, *Interview*, 2018.

⁶⁴ *Voices*, 3.

image Jesus. [...] By their own hand they have demolished one of their major arguments.⁶⁵

On the other side of the spectrum of Catholic sensibilities, the show was also interpreted as a manifesto in favor of women priests. Mother Angelica, the powerful Mother Abbess of Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Alabama, founder and patron of EWTN, which broadcasted the Stations of the Cross, was offended. She felt that she had been duped and that she had unwittingly involved her subscribers in a feminist 'happening'. The day after the performance, speaking on air as she regularly did, she strongly criticized the mime that she called an "abomination to the Eternal Father".⁶⁶ Her team began to investigate to find out who was responsible for the "scandal". The following week, this nun, who believed she had some answers, intensified her admonitions, speaking of an "affront to the Holy Father".⁶⁷ She openly accused liberal Catholics of having instrumentalized the WYD for their own cause, in the same way that, in her opinion, they had been distorting the documents of the Second Vatican Council since the mid-1960s: "you have hidden your agenda in a mime, my agenda is not hidden",⁶⁸ she scolded. The bishops' conference, which had tried in vain to thwart Mother Angelica in her enterprise of building a Catholic audiovisual empire by unsuccessfully launching its own channel, was also targeted. Mother Angelica believed that liberal Catholics who had infiltrated the Church bureaucracy had engineered the affair.⁶⁹

Mother Angelica's comments, which had a powerful influence on EWTN viewers, were causing an influx of "hate mail" to the bishops' conference headquarters.⁷⁰ Bishop Stafford, who was spared by the abbess who saw him as an ally, also received many letters from outraged Catholics. Some correspondents amplified the affair, claiming that not only Jesus but also St. Peter had been played by women while the man in the troupe had played the Virgin.⁷¹

In a coordinated manner, twelve conservative Catholic personalities close to Mother Angelica went on the offensive on 8 September 1993, by writing an open letter addressed to the pope, Cardinal Ratzinger (prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), Cardinal Pironio (president of the PCL), Mons. Cacciavillan

⁶⁵ *Voices*, 3.

⁶⁶ *The Catholic World Report*, 20.

⁶⁷ *The Catholic World Report*, 20.

⁶⁸ *The Catholic World Report*, 20.

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, "Use of Actress in Jesus Role Stirs Dispute".

⁷⁰ Crovato, *Letter*, 2018.

⁷¹ Kelly, *Letter to Laghi*, 1993, in AAD, WYD collection, 7.

(apostolic nuncio) and Archbishop Keeler (president of the US Bishops' Conference).⁷² The letter was published in *Voices*, the magazine of the conservative Catholic organization Women for Faith and Family, whose president, Helen Hitchcock, appears to be the main instigator of the initiative. After giving their support to the president of EWTN, the signatories explained why the case of the mimed performance was so important to them. On the one hand, the show conveyed "the impression that the masculine gender of Jesus is a matter of indifference", and on the other, as part of the official WYD program, it misled many pilgrims "in a context of highly publicized dissent from the Church's constant teaching on ordination to the priesthood". Like Mother Angelica, they saw the performance as:

the latest indication of the continual suborning [...] of the Catholic faithful by those whose explicit agenda is radical 'reform' of the Church in a way directly contradictory to the Catholic faith.

The American Catholic hierarchy has been called to account. It responded along several lines of defense. The first one was to play down the affair. When questioned by journalists, WYD spokespersons, relying on a statement by the director of the Holy See's pressroom, recalled that the mimes did not claim to be historically accurate. Mary Ann Walsh disputed the fact that John Paul II had been offended and even claimed that he would have liked the performance: "you know he used to be an actor. He understands these things".⁷³ Writing to the apostolic nuncio a few days after the open letter,⁷⁴ Archbishop Keeler emphasized that the portrayal of Jesus by a woman had been motivated by pragmatic, not ideological, considerations, and that the theater company had expressed regret for the controversy its performance had caused. On the question of the litany, he partly defended the choices made, noting that "references to God as being 'the womb of all creation' are to be found in the writings of some of the Church Fathers".

The second line of defense consisted in discrediting the initiators of the cabal, who Bishop Keeler called "highly organized", by pointing out that the terms they used to describe the mime ("blasphemous, heretical and disrespectful") were "hateful" and "vociferous". The president of the American episcopate reproached the signatories of the open letter for being locked in a "paranoia" that prevented them from recognizing the pastoral success of WYD, and for interpreting a few meaningless problems in the light of their obsessions.

⁷² *Voices*, 3.

⁷³ *Voices*, 3; *The Catholic World Report*, 20.

⁷⁴ Keeler, *Letter to Cacciavillan*, 1993, in UNDA, MCN, 51/05.

The third line was to deny responsibility. Bishop Keeler reminded the nuncio that the inclusive litany was written by the services of the Archdiocese of Denver, and that Mev Puleo had been selected by the PCL. The vicar general of the Archdiocese of Denver responded to Catholics concerned that the pope was offended that it was the PCL which had approved the mime.⁷⁵ When Bishop Cordes, vice-president of the PCL, learned of it, he let Bishop Stafford know that he was angered that his collaborator had suggested that the Roman curia had endorsed the performance.⁷⁶ The archbishop of Denver responded his vicar general had merely repeated the talking points of the US Bishops' Conference.⁷⁷

Despite the displeasure of Bishop Cordes, the Vatican did not follow up on the crusade of Mother Angelica and her supporters, who, after learning about the contents of the letter sent by Archbishop Keeler to the apostolic nuncio, tried to go on the offensive again.⁷⁸ While the American organizers remembered the worried reaction of some members of the PCL just after the performance,⁷⁹ several members of the Roman Curia tried to put an end to the controversy.⁸⁰ Cardinal Pironio,⁸¹ president of the PCL, said that the pope and his entourage were delighted with the WYD, perhaps because the department he headed was partly responsible for the organizational flaws. In addition to their concern to spare one of the Holy See's services, the solidarity of the Roman prelates with their American counterparts may also be explained by their desire not to aggravate this paradoxical affair in which an abbess and Catholic women attacked the power of bishops in the name of anti-feminist and conservative positions.⁸²

During the following editions of WYDs, the question of the place of women in the celebrations no longer seemed to be as central an issue. The publication of *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* in June 1994 irrevocably closing the priesthood to women, may have discouraged initiatives. This may also be due to the fact that Catholic feminism was less developed in the Philippines, France and Italy than in North America.⁸³ As for the Toronto WYD, the preparations seemed to be less conducive to unexpected happenings. While liberal Catholics ad-

75 Jones, *Letter to Schlafly*, 1993, in AAD, WYD collection, 7.

76 Cordes, *Letter to Stafford*, 1993, in AAD, WYD collection, 1, 39.

77 Stafford, *Letter to Cordes*, 1994, in AAD, WYD collection, 1.

78 Hitchcock, *Letter to Cacciavillan*, 1993, in CUA, WYD 1993 collection, 1, 54.

79 Henderson, *Interview*, 2018.

80 Foley, *Letter to Schnurr*, 1993, in CUA, WYD 1993 collection, 1, 54.

81 Buelt, *Interview*, 2018.

82 Coste, "Conservative Women and Feminism in the United States", 167-76.

83 On the weakness of feminism among French Catholic women, cf. Béraud, "La cause des femmes dans le catholicisme français", 311.

vocating for women's ordination were present at the Canadian WYD, they operated outside the official program. It was on the sidelines of the welcome days in Montreal that activists from the Mouvement Action Justice association asked WYD participants to fill out a survey on women priests.⁸⁴ In Toronto, while attracting media attention, the mass celebrated by Mary Ramerman,⁸⁵ ordained as a priest the previous year by an old Catholic bishop,⁸⁶ had a very limited impact on the participants.

5 Conclusion

The study of John Paul II's WYDs reveals different strategies for Catholic women to exert influence. The first strategy consisted in betting that a humble attitude and personal exemplarity would build a form of authority. This was the attitude of Henrietta de Villa, which was similar to that of the French nuns studied by Claude Langlois.⁸⁷ As Philippe Portier wrote, it was paradoxically by "an overkill of conformity" that they could escape gender assignment, and reverse their subordination.⁸⁸ The second strategy was based on the appropriation of a differentialist feminism, acceptable to the Catholic hierarchy. The argument consisted in showing that the inclusion of women in decision-making processes was an opportunity for the Catholic Church, because women had gifts that complemented those of men. This was the discourse of Mary Ann Walsh. A third strategy was to use the resources of feminism to fight the Catholic patriarchy. This choice of protest could be lived on the margins of the WYD (Mass celebrated by Mary Ramerman), or in the heart of it, by taking advantage of the spaces of freedom (initiative of Mev Puleo). A fourth strategy was to embrace and defend a patriarchal view of religion, to gain legitimacy within conservative Catholicism.⁸⁹ This was the trajectory of Mother Angelica. Finally, a last strategy, which was partly that of Jo Grafil, consisted in relativizing femininity, and endorsing so-called masculine values and practices.

The reactions of the male Catholic hierarchy to these female empowerment varied according to the context. The first two strategies seemed to be well received, both for ethical reasons and for strategic considerations (tokenism). The third was discouraged, but para-

⁸⁴ Cauchy, "À l'aube de la Journée mondiale de la jeunesse (JMJ)", 2.

⁸⁵ "Des catholiques pas très orthodoxes", A2.

⁸⁶ Bonavoglia, "One Woman Who Refused to Wait", 239-56.

⁸⁷ Langlois, *Le catholicisme au féminin*.

⁸⁸ Portier, "Introduction", 14 (translated from French).

⁸⁹ Ecklund, "Catholic Women Negotiate Feminism", 516.

doxically seemed to raise less concern than the fourth, as if Mother Angelica's conservative crusade was paradoxically more threatening to male power.

The diversity of these stories leads to a nuanced view of the evolution of the place of women during John Paul II's pontificate. Certainly, these accounts reinforce the idea that the Catholic Church, marked by a structural clerical culture, has entrusted the keys of the institution to ordained men, and placed women in a subordinate position. At the same time, however, these stories show the agency of Catholic women and their ability to play with constraints in order to develop certain forms of emancipation.

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