

From the Silent Revolution to Sexual Abuse Scandals The Question of ‘Women’s Place’ in French Catholicism

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Abstract In reviewing the way in which the question of ‘women’s place’ has been handled in French Catholicism since the 1980s, the article unveils three configurations, which, from a chronological point of view, partly overlap. First, during the silent revolution, the existence of a stained-glass ceiling was little decried. This has not, however, prevented women from assuming a wide range of positions and responsibilities in the Church. The second moment focused on the liturgy. It was not until the third moment, when sexual abuse scandals shook the Church’s reputation and influence, that the stained-glass ceiling was openly impugned in French Catholicism. Thus, this article, which constitutes the first existing synthesis on the place of women within this context, endeavors to account for the absence of mobilization in favor of women even though this French specificity definitely erodes at the end of the period under scrutiny.

Keywords Catholicism. Women. Gender. Feminism. Ordination. Liturgy. Sexual abuse scandals. France.

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The ‘place of women’ in Catholicism has been a recurring question over the last fifty years.¹ One the recent issue of the journal *Lumen Vitae* was judiciously entitled: “Where are the women?”.² The issue is worth being investigated.

The expression ‘the place of women’, widely used within the Catholic Church, even by the popes, is not subversive, compared to other formulations referring to the same phenomenon. It is preferred over ‘the women’s access to ministries’, a heavily theologically connoted term, or ‘gender issues’, a notion that remains highly controversial in Catholicism.³ On the surface, to speak of the ‘place of women’ in Catholicism is simply to evoke their statutory situation, i.e., their place in the exercise of ecclesiastical authority. Yet, the question also concerns the “arrangement between the sexes”⁴ in the liturgical space and the asymmetrical position of men and women in this confession. Indeed, this expression is meant to question the place of women – which is sometimes extended to the laity as a whole – and not so much that of men, at least the clerics. Ordination, accessible only to men (*vir*) according to canon law, functions as a rite of institution in the sense of Bourdieu.⁵ What is at stake is not so much the passage from one status to another as the separation of those who have undergone the ritual from those who are excluded from it (in this case, women).

This exclusion has been sanctioned repeatedly by the highest Catholic authorities since 1976 (in the *Inter Insigniores* declaration).⁶ In 1988, the Vatican confirmed that women cannot be ordained.⁷ In 1994, as the Anglican Church was ordaining its first female priests, John Paul II added in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* 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”.⁸ John Paul II’s successors are in line with this stance. While Benedict XVI declared in 2006 that “it is rightful to question whether, also in the service of the ministry, we cannot offer more space and more responsibility to women”, he excluded their access to priesthood from the outset: “The priestly ministry is, as we

1 Cf. *Études*, 2017, “Quelle place pour les femmes?”.

2 Edited by Catherine Chevalier, summer 2022.

3 This has slightly changed since Pope Francis expanded lay ministry to catechist in the *Motu proprio Antiquum ministerium*, and open ministries to laywomen with the *Motu proprio Spiritus Domini* in 2021. He has also encouraged new lay ministries.

4 Goffman, “The Arrangement Between the Sexes”.

5 Bourdieu, “Les rites comme actes d’institution”.

6 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration Inter Insigniores*.

7 John Paul II, *Apostolic letter Mulieris dignitatem*.

8 John Paul II, *Apostolic letter Ordinatio sacerdotalis*.

know it, reserved to men”.⁹ In his interview with the Jesuit cultural reviews dated 19 September 2013, Francis posits that it is “necessary to make more room for a sharper presence of women in the Church”,¹⁰ and he referenced the “feminine genius” evoked by John Paul II, which is precious to the Church. He thus renewed a vague wish already expressed by his predecessors. As he was questioned by journalists a few weeks earlier, he cut off the debates concerning women’s accession to priesthood:

The Church has said no to the ordination of women; Pope John Paul II has said so in a definitive manner. The door is closed.¹¹

The persistent denial of women’s access to ordination in the Catholic Church sets this confession apart from the vast majority of secular activities in Western societies now open to women, as well as from a large number of Protestant denominations. Contrary to what happens within secular occupational environment, barriers are neither invisible nor concealed. The Catholic glass ceiling is, so to speak, a stained-glass ceiling. The barriers preventing women from participating in top leadership positions are “a particularly salient symbolic marker, providing further differentiation between the religious and general occupational settings”.¹²

This article will focus on the French case primarily, from the 1980s to the present day. Two reasons explain this geographical choice. First, although largely governed by norms that transcend borders, the question of the ‘place of women’ is significantly determined according to the different national contexts, depending on various factors both external and internal to Catholicism (the place of feminism in society, in theology and in Catholic women’s movements; the role played by bishops in relaying to the Vatican demands to make more ‘room’ for women in the Church; clerical demography; ecumenical pressure, etc.). Second, France is definitely an outlier with respect to other European or North-American Catholic countries in that the non-ordination of women in the Church has for long not been challenged, even though the process of feminization of the Church’s leadership at the local level is well advanced. This is evidenced in the several field surveys¹³ I have

⁹ *La Croix*, 6 March 2006.

¹⁰ Interview conducted at the end of August 2013 and posted online on 19 September on the website of the journal *Études*. Remarks he repeated in January 2014 before a delegation of Italian women, cf. *La Croix*, 26 January 2014.

¹¹ *Le Monde*, 30 July 2013.

¹² Adams, “Stained Glass Makes the Ceiling Visible”.

¹³ In depth interviewing and participant observations.

conducted over the last twenty years¹⁴ on the new forms of division of religious labor in French dioceses at the very beginning of the 2000s, on the place of little girls at Mass a few years later, on prison and hospital chaplaincies for the past ten years, and more recently on the sexual abuse scandals that have been disclosed concerning the French clergy.

In reviewing the way in which the question of ‘women’s place’ has been handled in French Catholicism since the 1980s, I unveil three configurations, which, from a chronological point of view, partly overlap. First, during the silent revolution, the existence of a stained-glass ceiling was little decried. This has not, however, prevented women from assuming a wide range of positions and responsibilities in the Church. The second moment focused on the liturgy. It was not until the third moment, when sexual abuse scandals shook the Church’s reputation and influence, that the stained-glass ceiling was openly impugned in French Catholicism.

Thus, this article, which constitutes the first existing synthesis on the place of women within this context, endeavors to account for the absence of mobilization in favor of women even though this French specificity definitely erodes at the end of the period under scrutiny.

1 From the Late 1980s, a Silent Revolution

Women do not only represent the majority of churchgoers, they also largely surpass the number of men within the pastoral lay-staff, counting for around 90% of the entire personnel.¹⁵ Yet this significant reality often passes unnoticed.

1.1 The Widespread Feminization of Pastoral Lay-staff

Women carry out pastoral functions close to those performed by priests. They are appointed to positions that used to be occupied solely by ordained men such as managing the parish, officiating to a certain extent in the liturgy or performing spiritual duties in the chaplaincies of public institutions. But, strictly speaking, titles such as ‘chaplain’ or ‘pastor’ are reserved only to priests. And some sacramental functions can be fulfilled only by priests, including cele-

¹⁴ Cf. Béraud, *Prêtres, diacres, laïcs*; “Des petites filles à l’autel?”; *Le catholicisme français*; also Béraud et al., *De la religion en prison*.

¹⁵ Drawing on my own evaluation in the dioceses I investigated (cf. Béraud, *Prêtres, diacres, laïcs*) and on the survey conducted across all the French dioceses by the Catholic news outlet *La Croix*, 25 May 2012.

brating the eucharist, hearing confession and giving absolution, and anointing the sick.

In France, the first women to hold higher positions within the Church were often nuns, who played a pioneering role in the late 1980s. Their title, ‘sister’, their vows and sometimes their dress set them on a different level with respect to their laywomen. This “level above”¹⁶ legitimized their status in the eyes of churchgoers and made them acceptable substitutes to priests to some extent. However, due to the rapid demographic decline in religious female congregations, nuns have soon been succeeded by laywomen,¹⁷ most often married and with children.

Two factors account for this feminization. Firstly, women’s increasing participation unfolded in the post-Vatican II (1962-65) era. This council opened Roman Catholic schools of theology to female students. “While still excluding women from the ordained ministry”, the New Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1983, opened new “positions to women on the diocesan level” such as diocesan chancellors, judges on diocesan courts, members of diocesan synods and financial and pastoral councils, administrators of priestless parishes.¹⁸ However, the key factor in the appointments of women was in actuality the increasing shortage of priests. Bishops who appointed women did so “more out of necessity than due to doctrinal beliefs in gender equality”.¹⁹ The New Code of Canon Law specifically included a provision for non-priests, in a context of “dearth of priests”, to participate “in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish”.²⁰ Thirty years ago, in her book dedicated to lay women in charge of a parish, the American sociologist Ruth Wallace made this enlightening comparison:

Like the subject of the song, ‘Rosie the Riveter’, written during the Second World War, women are being recruited to help out in a manpower shortage crisis. Appointing women as chancellors of dioceses, as canon lawyers in the diocesan tribunal, and as administrators of parishes can free priests for other diocesan needs, just as women working in factories freed male factory workers to fight in Second World War. [...] In contrast to the Second World War manpower shortage, there is no anticipation of a future influx of male workers, because this shortage is due

16 Wallace, *They Call Her Pastor*.

17 According to canon law, nuns are laywomen too. But, in practice, laywoman is used more particularly to speak about non-members of the clergy and religious orders.

18 Wallace, *They Call Her Pastor*, 6.

19 Adams, “Stained Glass Makes the Ceiling Visible”.

20 *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 517: §2.

to retirements, resignations, and a steady decrease in recruitments [...].²¹

This did not fool the laywomen I interviewed at the beginning of the 2000s:

I said to my bishop one day: ‘If one hundred and fifty priests were ordained each year, we would no longer be needed as chaplains in the hospital in N.’ He replied: ‘No, now that I’ve seen how you work, I would not dismiss my pool of laywomen because the feedback I get is that you work at least as properly as a priest!’ I continue to believe that if they leave in the job, that’s because there are no priests...²²

Despite the declining number of Catholic memberships in France,²³ the staffing problem became more and more acute for bishops. Between 1997 and 2007, there was a 25% drop in the total number of priests (diocesan and religious), from 27,200 to 20,277. Between 2011 and 2019, there was an additional 20% decline of priests available for active ministry in French dioceses, from 11,000 to 8,990.²⁴ The Catholic Church could not respond to the demands for rituals, emanating also from highly irregular Catholic practitioners and even non-practicing Catholics – especially for celebrating funerals, nor ensure a presence in public institutions, such as prisons and hospitals, if laywomen were not enlisted.

1.2 A quiet metamorphosis

The fact that some women assumed more prominent roles in the Church constitutes one of the most important transformations that French Catholicism has undergone in the last forty years. However, it remains largely invisible to parishioners. Indeed, with the notable exception of the conduct of funerals, women do not perform worship service, whatever their abilities, experience and training; they only prepare people for the sacraments. Liturgy is the sticking point for a more substantial involvement of women. Now, in Catholicism, the

²¹ Wallace, *They Call Her Pastor*, 9.

²² Isabelle, 59 years old, hospital chaplain.

²³ According to the European Values Study (a representative international replication study, which has been carried out in five waves since 1981), 32 % of respondents in France stated that they felt linked to Catholicism in 2018 (53% in 1999; 70% in 1981). Regular Mass attendance (at least once a month) has declined in the same proportions, from 17% in 1981 to 7% in 2018.

²⁴ Source: Conference of French bishops.

liturgy is the place where the religious legitimacy lies and the vast majority of liturgical performances are still the monopoly of priests, some shared with permanent deacons. Men, already few in number among pastoral lay-staff, may be ordained deacons.²⁵ They then gain visibility in the liturgy as they wear an alb and a stole, and have several liturgical duties.²⁶ The lack of visibility of lay-staff also stems from the fact that French bishops have been slow and probably reluctant to accept the institutionalization of lay pastoral workers' positions. Even today, there are no national statistics produced by the bishops' conference on these figures.²⁷ How they are named also varies. They used to be known as '*animateurs laïcs en pastorale*', '*assistants pastoraux ou paroissiaux*' or '*laïcs en responsabilité*', and eventually received the title '*laïcs en mission ecclésiale*' at the end of the 2000s.

Even though their positions within the Church were vulnerable (low-paid - when paid -, part-time, fixed-term contracts) and their legitimacy - in the absence of ordination - limited to the engagement letter (*lettre de mission*) entrusted by their bishop,²⁸ women did not speak out to demand better conditions to perform their tasks and did not mobilize collectively. In the interviews I conducted in the early 2000s, most French laywomen declared they were happy with their situation and found fulfilment in carrying out their mission. They would show utmost respect to the priest, avoid any posture that could be viewed as feminist (such as the use of gender-neutral language in liturgical texts)²⁹ and strongly disapprove of dissident acts such as unauthorized ordination of women or 'irregular' Masses in which women would endorse the role of priests. The words of Dominique,³⁰ which I recorded during my fieldwork in 2003, are particularly telling on the matter:

Last summer, when I was in Montreal for the World Youth Day, I happened to read articles by Catholic feminists. I really cannot position myself that way because they position themselves in

25 The Second Vatican Council authorized the 'restoration' of the diaconate as a permanent order of ministry and decreed that it could be opened to married men, but not to women.

26 During Mass, they proclaim the Gospel, preach on certain occasions and serve as ordinary ministers of the eucharist. They may administer baptism and witness marriages.

27 Their number was estimated at about 9,500 in 2012 by a journalist from the Catholic news outlet *La Croix*, 25 May 2012.

28 Sometimes in the framework of a public announcement and a formal installation ceremony, but not always.

29 Which has penetrated the Catholic Church in North-America.

30 Dominique, 46 years old, head of a diocesan service.

terms of demands. That is really of no interest to me. I'm beyond that... I believe that pressing demands is useless, it only leads to hardening the opponent's position. American feminists, or at least from what I've gathered reading French Canadian women... it's as if they wanted to replace the power of men with that of women. They always position themselves in terms of power. And that is a problem. You have to think in terms of service. And writing *Dieue* with an 'e' does not help at all...³¹

FHE (Femmes et hommes en Eglise) founded in 1970 is the only Catholic collective, which at that time claimed to be feminist. It is also the only French collective connected to North-American organizations such as WOC (Women's Ordination Conference), L'Autre Parole et Femmes et ministères, and to interdenominational networks such as The Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women. But it was quickly marginalized.

France is therefore characterized by a 'respectful' feminization, similar to what has been observed in other professions in the country.³² Contrary to what happened in Québec, the United States or the Netherlands, very few people among the clergy and the laity in France spoke out in favor of the ordination of women - as priests or even as deaconesses -, even among the women concerned. For example, in 2003, when I asked a woman chaplain if she had ever thought of becoming a deacon, she replied: "No, I have never thought about it because I know that they don't do that, I know that it's impossible". The French episcopal conference has never issued a public statement in support of women's greater participation in the Church. Some support - more implicitly than explicitly - for women's inclusion in ordained ministries came from two renowned theologians, Hervé Legrand³³ and Joseph Moingt,³⁴ but they have remained particularly isolated on that particular topic.

Since the end of the 'crise catholique'³⁵ (1965-78) and until the outbreak of the sex abuse scandals (i.e., from the 1980s to the 2010s), beyond the question of the place of women, any form of complaint and protest within the Church has been largely disqualified. Undoubtedly, such disqualification has been accounted for by the memory of the conflicts that shook the French Catholicism in the 1960s and 1970s.

31 In French, adding a final 'e' is generally a mark of the feminine. This echoes with current debates in the English-speaking world where some advocate that 'they' should be employed as the pronoun referring to God.

32 Cf. Marry, *Les femmes ingénieurs*.

33 Legrand, "*Traditio perpetuo servata?*".

34 Moingt, "Les femmes et l'avenir de l'Église".

35 Pelletier, *La crise catholique*.

Indeed, the younger generations of priests and faithful view this period as a deterrent for what they envision for the Church: they blame it for bearing a heavy responsibility in the decline of Catholicism in France. Besides, Catholics in general have been experiencing an acute feeling of becoming marginalized in France, which has led to stifling any form of internal protest that would reinforce the process of decline, both demographically (in terms of numbers of priests and figures of those identifying themselves as Catholics) and culturally.

As a consequence, the ‘stained glass ceiling’, although partially challenged by new, contingent practices³⁶ on the field, was never seriously criticized.

2 From 2008 Onwards, Intra-church Controversies Over Gender Issues

Already quite confined to operating in the backstage of the ritual, women, including those with important pastoral responsibilities, were further minorized in some French parishes in the last fifteen years.

2.1 Keeping Women Far from the Altar

Since the end of the 2000s, the visibility of women in worship has dramatically decreased in some parishes.

Altar boys, an outdated feature of service after Vatican II, revived at the turn of the twenty-first century. Some French priests, belonging rather to a more conservative current, decided to ban altogether girls from becoming altar servers, despite John Paul II’s approval.³⁷ They considered that altar service could be seen as a path to priesthood vocations.³⁸ In their view, since only men may become priests, only boys may serve the altar. This was clearly expressed by the priest in charge of the Service national de la pastorale liturgique et sacramentelle whom I interviewed in 2008: “Girls will never become priests. We shall not allow them to think they could. To-

³⁶ For instance, during my fieldwork on chaplaincies, some of my women interviewees shared with me that they often hear confessions informally and have to engage in a ‘bricolage’ around a ritual of repentance since they cannot officially give absolution.

³⁷ The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments sent on 15 March 1994 a circular letter to presidents of episcopal conferences that states that it is for each bishop to decide whether to allow female altar servers in his diocese. A later document, from 2001, adds that, even if a bishop permits female altar servers, the priest in charge of a church in that diocese is not obliged to recruit them.

³⁸ After Vatican II, the aim is to help children to engage more in the Mass and to deepen their understanding of what Mass is.

day, this path is not open to them". In this perspective, altar service is to remain a male business: that of priests, of young boys and their fathers, and of seminarians (within the framework of internships in parishes) who supervise them. It is a male activity, which is welcomed by the priest interviewed, even though most of other services in the Church are highly feminized.

In some parishes, boys and girls are separated into two groups: boys are serving the altar and girls, the assembly. Following the notion of complementarity of the sexes, groups of 'female assembly servers' (*servantes d'assemblée*) have been set up. When altar boys wear an alb, assembly girls wear a white T-shirt or a cape and are assigned tasks allegedly in line with their feminine identity (handing out mass hymn leaflets, taking care of the young, carrying the gifts without climbing the steps of the altar, etc.). In other parishes, the service to the altar is open to children, whether male and female, up until their early teen years: after that age, young girls disappear from the sanctuary. When I interviewed a priest in 2010 in a parish where this configuration was being implemented, he expressed some embarrassment:

The risk is that one thinks that men may have access to the sanctuary, when women may not. Immediately, the issue of purity and impurity arises. From a theological point of view, this is not proper... Let's say that there are masculine functions and feminine functions... okay... but let's not connect them to questions of purity... Or it may be a cultural issue. Practitioners are not ready to see a 17-year-old girl at the altar...³⁹

Beyond the case of altar girls, women were excluded from the sanctuary and, as a matter of fact, from some liturgical functions they had been performing for several years, such as serving the altar, distributing communion (as extraordinary ministers of the eucharist) and even reading scriptures at Mass. Even if Pope Francis allowed women to be formally installed as lectors and acolytes (roles reserved only to men according to canon law until 2021, but fulfilled by women on a casual basis), some local priests and bishops continue to ignore these changes.

Liturgical and more generally devotional practices are being promoted with the aim of differentiating genders, such as: single-sex pilgrimages - like the *Pèlerinage des pères de famille*, that combines physical activity and faith in order to reinforce manly identities,⁴⁰

³⁹ Gérard, 70 years old, parish priest.

⁴⁰ Practices and values that echo those of the Anglo-American muscular Christianity movement in the late nineteenth century - beginning of the twentieth century. Cf. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*.

whose counterpart is the Pèlerinage des mères de famille, which is meant to allow them to carve out some time for themselves; fraternal organizations, such as the Knights of Columbus;⁴¹ and finally prayer groups, such as the Hommes adorateurs du Saint Sacrement (Male Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament) in the diocese of Fréjus-Toulon and L'oraison des mamans (Mother's Prayer) in the dioceses of Paris and Lyon.⁴² These practices have been very popular within the conservative wing of French Catholicism. Since these practices were also endorsed by priests, it appears that the latter faithful genuinely believed that they act as good Catholics by embracing those gender identities "performed"⁴³ as 'truly' masculine on the one hand, and 'truly' feminine on the other.

2.2 Controversies Mirroring the Internal Plurality of French Catholicism

The presence of women in the sanctuary during Mass, a presence that used to be strictly forbidden before Vatican II, sparked controversies around the same time as the mobilization against same-sex marriage.⁴⁴ These controversies about the place of women in relation to worship are actually rooted in the broader anti-gender campaign⁴⁵ that some Catholics (including bishops, priests, and lay activists) orchestrated.

Such practices of exclusion of women were not unanimously accepted. They led to conflicts and tensions at the local level. Some groups fiercely opposed what they considered a clear form of discrimination. The Comité de la Jupe (the Skirt Committee) was founded by two Catholic women: the theologian and biblical scholar, Anne Soupa, and the journalist and publisher, Christine Pedotti, in 2008, who were offended by a sexist remark uttered by Cardinal André Vingt-Trois

⁴¹ The Knights of Columbus is a Catholic fraternal service founded in the United States in 1882 whose membership is restricted to practicing Catholic men. They have been established in France, in several dioceses since 2012.

⁴² Cf. Aubourg, "L'Oraison des mamans".

⁴³ Performing must be understood here in the sense given by Judith Butler: to 'perform' a gender identity is to behave in accordance with a socially constructed gender model (acting, representing according to a theatrical metaphor) and thus to make it happen. Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

⁴⁴ The debate on marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples was highly controversial in France. Among the opponents to the bill, some Catholics appeared as key protagonists, for they considered the bill a threat to the family. This condemnation of same-sex unions evolved into a critique of the so-called 'gender ideology', viewed as endangering mankind because it refutes alleged natural sexual differences and gender complementarity. Cf. Béraud, Portier, "Mariage pour tous".

⁴⁵ Kuhar, Paternotte, *Anti-gender Campaigns in Europe*.

on the radio.⁴⁶ To promote gender equality in the Church, they used a wide repertoire of contention that included mapping the exclusion of women from the liturgy (in collaboration with the Catholic news outlet *La Croix*, in 2012 and in 2022), organizing a women's conclave (72 female chaplains, catechists, theologians, historians - nuns or laywomen) in the parish of Saint-Merri in Paris (in March 2013)⁴⁷ and demonstrations in front of the building of the episcopal conference (in April 2013). For a long time, great caution prevailed in liturgical matters. It was only on Saturday 7 March 2020 (on occasion of the International Women's Rights Day) that the Comité de la Jupe organized a liturgical event, *Enfin, elles célèbrent* (Women finally celebrate), in a venue belonging to a women religious community in the 7th arrondissement of Paris. When I asked one of the founding members of the collective, who attended that day, why they did not engage in celebrating earlier on, she replied that they "had not authorized themselves do so until then". Yet, no aspect in this celebration I observed was in contradiction with by canon law (the eucharist was not celebrated).

Even though this activism was expressed with precaution, only non-radical demands - e.g. recognition of the ministry of chaplaincy, access to preaching by giving occasional sermons at mass, restoration of women's permanent diaconate - being put forward, the audience of the collective among French Catholicism has been limited.

Three conclusions can be drawn from these debates. First, the question of 'the place of women' remains open. More specifically issue of the place of women in the liturgy pits Catholics against each other, thus revealing the internal plurality of French Catholicism and the balance of power between its different poles. Transposing the analysis of Mark Chaves,⁴⁸ one can hypothesize that the positioning in relation to questions of gender highlights internal fragmentations within Catholicism that have arisen over the last fifteen years (as it is the case also in Protestantism and Judaism).⁴⁹ Second, keeping women far from the altar - like disapproving of same-sex mar-

46 In November 2008, the archbishop of Paris, asked of the place of women in worship services (and more specifically on the opportunity to open lay ministries of lector and acolyte to women), declared that women did not only "need a skirt" but also something 'between the ears' ("Le tout n'est pas d'avoir une jupe, c'est d'avoir quelque chose dans la tête"). Cf. *La Croix*, 22 November 2008.

47 When the college of cardinals (only men) gathered in Rome to elect the new pope, after the resignation of Benedict XVI.

48 According to Chaves, formal denominational policies abouts women's ordination possess a "symbolic significance". It signals a conservative or, on the contrary, a liberal agenda. Cf. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*.

49 Cf. Gasquet, "Le balcon, les pots de fleurs et la *mehitza*".

riage - “serve to project a level of conservatism”.⁵⁰ Third, the conservative trends within the French Church have the upper hand. But women and LGBT+ people appear to be bearing the brunt of this religious conservatism.

3 Since 2019, Sexual Abuse Scandals as an Opportunity Structure to Openly Challenge the ‘Stained Glass Ceiling’

Sexual abuse scandals in the clergy, that erupted in France in the last four years (2019-23), have major impacts on the Catholic Church, including how the issue of ‘women’s place’ is now being addressed.

3.1 A possibility for social transformation

Sexual abuse cases by priests made major headlines in 2019.⁵¹ The scandal reached its *acme* in the autumn of 2021 after the CIASE (Commission indépendante sur les abus sexuels dans l’Église)⁵² issued its report before being rekindled in the fall of 2022.⁵³ On these occasions, denouncing an exclusively male clerical power, which may have led to sexual abuses, helped to fuel a debate on women’s role in the Church of France on an unprecedented scale. Sexual abuse scandals had a major repercussion in France on Catholic public consciousness of gender inequalities between a male clergy and a female laity and on the contradiction between a high level of participation of women in dioceses, parishes and chaplaincies, and their non-representation among the top-level Catholic leadership. It constituted a powerful incentive to rethinking the place of women in the Church. In March 2019, when I observed a meeting organized in a Parisian parish discussing the scandals that were then breaking out, to my great surprise, the debate revolved more around how authority is exercised in the Church than the issue of sexual violence itself. Several people

⁵⁰ Adams, “Stained Glass Makes the Ceiling Visible”, 87.

⁵¹ The very starting point of the scandal is the Preynat/Barbarin case in the mid 2010s. Until then, French bishops considered wrongly that they have managed to keep the scandal at bay. But the Preynat/Barbarin case shattered their hopes.

⁵² The Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church estimated the number of victims and offenders, formulated explanatory causes and stated 45 recommendations. Cf. CIASE, *Rapport final*.

⁵³ It was exposed that Bishop Santier had engaged in an inappropriate behavior with young men during confession, which led to his condemnation by Rome at the end of 2021. This condemnation was covered up by the Catholic authorities even though they have pledged to be transparent on such misdemeanors.

spoke up to advocate that women should be given more responsibility and even be ordained. In 2021, the CIASE report stated that:

the presence of the laity in general and of women in particular in the decision-making spheres of the Catholic Church must be powerfully reinforced.⁵⁴

Such demands erupted much earlier in other countries. The United States, where feminism had already made rapid advances in the churches, was shook by such debates in the 1980s:

For the [American] feminist theologians, sexual abuse and violence were rooted in the patriarchal structure of the whole society, including the churches, and only by thorough social reconstruction could they be eradicated.⁵⁵

According to the historian Philip Jenkins, the American clergy's sexual abuses provided:

a weapon in the arsenal of reformers anxious to restructure the church away from the traditional concepts of hierarchy, male dominance, and clerical elitism.⁵⁶

I personally consider that the pragmatic sociology theoretical framework on scandals developed by Damien de Blic et Cyril Lemieux, is more accurate than Jenkins' analysis in terms of 'uses of abuses'. According to de Blic's and Lemieux's perspective:

[scandal] never leaves things as they were [...] it leads to repositionings, a redistribution of institutional cards [...].⁵⁷

Scandal always produces something new. but the transformations are not fully predictable. They constitute an opportunity structure for change.⁵⁸ The clergy sexual abuse scandal is:

intersecting with the narrative of the reforms of the Vatican II period [...] and has provoked a series of questions about ecclesiology from a systematic point of view.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ CIASE, *Les violences sexuelles dans l'Église catholique*.

⁵⁵ Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests*, 118.

⁵⁶ Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests*, 122.

⁵⁷ Blic, Lemieux, "The Scandal as Test".

⁵⁸ Tilly, Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*.

⁵⁹ Faggioli, "The Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis".

Gender issues fully participate in those questions, like the liturgy, moral theology and priesthood celibacy.

3.2 The Revival of Catholic Feminism

A new generation of Catholic feminist activists have recently emerged, such as the collectives Oh My Goddess! and Feminism in the Church, which are now openly criticizing the ‘stained-glass ceiling’. The young Catholic women, members of Oh My Goddess!, claim to be intersectional feminists and ambition to speak with an inclusive voice. They put interviews on gender issues in the Church and podcasts of Sunday homilies online. As for Feminism in the Church, a group of young practicing Catholics concerned with gender equality in religion, it was founded in 2020 in the parish of Saint-Pierre de Montrouge in Paris where they had regularly organized conferences and events between 2020 and 2022.

And older Catholic feminists, such as Anne Soupa, have adopted a more radical stance. In May 2020, Anne Soupa publicized her will to become the next archbishop of Lyon, a position vacant due to the Cardinal Barbarin’s resignation in the context of the Preynat case.⁶⁰ Her aim was to expose the lack of visibility of women and their exclusion from the governance of the Church. In July 2022, seven women founded the collective Toutes Apôtres! (“All Women Apostles!”) in order to “make sure that Anne Soupa’s gesture does not only make the headlines but initiates a movement”.⁶¹ They advocate an inclusive Church and demand equal access to ordination regardless of gender, marital status or sexual orientation. Following Anne Soupa, they wrote to the papal nuncio to apply for ecclesial positions traditionally open only to men and declared they felt a deep call to the ministry as lay preachers, deacons, priests or bishops:

In order to accomplish its universal mission, we are convinced that the Roman Catholic institution must allow women to have access to the various ordained ministries and to take part in the govern-

⁶⁰ Bernard Preynat, a Catholic priest and boy scouts leader, has abused dozens of children during decades. The Lyon case broke in the mid 2010s when lawyers for nine adult plaintiffs – former boy scouts – took legal action against Barbarin, the archbishop of Lyon, saying he should have gone to police as early as 2010 when he spoke to the priest about the allegations. Actually, Preynat was first interviewed by church leaders in 1991 and was prevented from leading scout groups, but he was later allowed to teach children again and held positions of authority. Barbarin only suspended him and stopped him from working with children in September 2015.

⁶¹ Toutes Apôtres!, *Dare to candidate!*.

ance of our parishes, our dioceses as well as the Vatican. Then only can the Church be renewed.⁶²

This challenge has been met with fierce opposition. This was obvious in the controversy surrounding the “feminist Mass” that was celebrated in a private chapel belonging to a women religious community in the 15th arrondissement of Paris, on 3 April 2022:

[an] inclusive Mass, where women can finally celebrate God around the altar and in the service of the Word.⁶³

During the Mass, all the readings were performed by women, the commentary of the Gospel pronounced by a woman theologian but the eucharist was celebrated by a priest in conformity with canon law. The collective behind the event, Feminism in the Church, was flooded with “hate speech on social media, organized by groups close to the traditionalist movement”⁶⁴ [the correct quote is “a wave of hatred on social networks, organized by groups close to the traditionalist movement”] and have been excluded from the parish of Saint-Pierre de Montrouge. The demands for women’s access to ordination and ordination expressed in the synodal process and relayed to Rome in 2022⁶⁵ encountered also deep resistance. Intra-ecclesial conflict, which has emerged on gender issues over the past decade, remains sharp.

4 Conclusion

To state that the Catholic Church is an institution that discriminates against women is self-evident. Nevertheless, until 2018-19, arguments expressing such an opinion were extremely rare or very marginal within the French Catholicism. One of the effects of the sex abuse scandals is precisely to have allowed Catholics to speak out and to open challenge the stained-glass ceiling. The fact that Catholics claim to be feminists is not unrelated to a more global revival of feminism in France, in the wake of the #MeToo movement. The theological debate has thus regained momentum in French Catholicism. The cause of women appears to be one of its structuring axes.

But another, less visible, effect of these scandals is that it has become a burden on the budget of dioceses. In the fieldwork I have con-

⁶² Toutes Apôtres!, *About Us*.

⁶³ “A ‘feminist mass’ irritates the diocese of Paris”.

⁶⁴ “A ‘feminist mass’ irritates the diocese of Paris”.

⁶⁵ Conférence des Évêques de France, *Collecte des synthèses synodales*.

ducted since 2019, the women who are *laïcs en mission ecclésiales* are the ones that bear the brunt of budget cuts, whether regarding funding for their training or of their salaries (some missions that were fulfilled under a work contract are now carried out on a voluntary basis).

Besides, these debates are not specific to France. The recent German “synodal journey”⁶⁶ considers that it is one of the most pressing issues that the Church faces and the archbishop of Hamburg called for an open debate on the ordination of women considering that new arguments have emerged since 1994. Naming women deaconesses could be a first step in a gradual process of change. Two commissions on the question have been launched by the Vatican during Francis’s pontificate. But no decision has been made yet.

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⁶⁶ In response to a 2018 report on sexual abuse in the German Church.

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