

**Good Catholic Girls  
How Women Are Leading the Fight to Change the Church  
by Angela Bonavoglia**

**I N T R O D U C T I O N**

*“We shall honor and support our women leaders  
and prophets that their days be long in the land and  
their voice be heard among the people.”*

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza

“Ten Statements of Feminist Commitment”

Women Moving Church Conference, 1981

I grew up Catholic. As a girl, I spent a lot of time, perhaps an inordinate amount of time, visiting the basement chapel of Saint Ann’s Church, atop the sprawling monastery grounds in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I can still hear the click of my shoes on the marble floor. Feel the cool air against my face. I’d settle alone in the near darkness, before the long, sleek body of Jesus Christ—crucified on one side of the altar, risen on the other. Resting my child’s knees on the soft leather kneeler, leaning my hands on the wooden pew, I’d chat with God. I told God everything. And God listened. I’ve taken those moments of trust and peace with me all my life.

But that was my private Catholic Church. As I grew up, I saw how miserably the public Church failed to live up to its own ideals, deeply instilled in me, of justice and equality. I came to deplore the Church’s demonization of sexuality, its arrogance, and its hypocrisy. I saw the Church as depriving women of authority not only in the public sphere, by forbidding women’s ordination and access to the highest levels of sacramental and jurisdictional power but also in the private sphere,

by usurping a woman's right to her own conscience and moral voice on matters sexual, marital, and maternal.

By the time I was in my twenties, I became a Catholic in revolt. Later, I marched. I wrote. But somewhere along the way, I gave up. I became a Catholic in exile, and a Catholic trapped. Being Catholic isn't something I can change, any more than I can change the configuration of my bones. I love the sensuality of the religion—the imagery, the incense, the music, and the Mass. I love the saints, especially Mary's mother, Ann, to whose grotto I wore a path. I find enormous comfort in the Resurrection, and could not live without the Eucharist. It is food for my journey.

Today, I am an itinerant Catholic. I make my way to Mass as often as I can, hoping the sermon will not drive me away. I go on Christmas and Easter because they celebrate beginnings and hope; on Good Friday because I need help facing death; and on many other days, when I am especially grateful, when I am lost, and when I have been brought to my knees by life.

I pray everywhere and all the time. I have long known that born a Catholic, I will die a Catholic. I had been resigned to dying with a broken heart. Then, in 2001, I thought I detected a shift in the winds. I heard about a woman—a nun, no less—who found the courage to say no to the pope. I was shocked to think that change might be possible. That woman, Sister Joan Chittister, was the reason I arrived at the Adam's Mark Hotel in Philadelphia on a Saturday morning in September 2001. The twenty-fifth-anniversary conference of the then largest Roman Catholic reform organization Call to Action was in full swing. Just four days had passed since the

attacks on the World Trade Center. Despite the catastrophe that had befallen America, 1,100 people turned out. While my interest in one woman working for change in the Church brought me to that conference, I learned that there were many such women, all over the world.

Principled, brave, and brimming with well-earned indignation, they have inspired a movement, a literature, and a network of organizations hell-bent on restoring women and lay Catholics to their rightful place in the Church. Devoted nuns, newly ordained women priests, lay ministers, theologians, and activists, they are passionate advocates all. Like their Muslim, Jewish, and Christian sisters, they have stepped forward to challenge one of the last and most impenetrable bastions of male authority.

I began to follow these women and the global movement they represent at a time of unprecedented upheaval in the U.S. Catholic Church, amid breaking news of an epidemic of priest child sex abuse, decades-long and nationwide. I found these women involved in all aspects of progressive Church reform, beginning with the Second Vatican Council and continuing to the present portentous moment. I found them heading up parishes; leading the fight for women's ordination; creating a new Catholic theology and reenvisioning God. They were resisting Vatican silencing, challenging the Church's sexual repression, and rescuing female Church leaders from the trash heap of history. They were bringing the Church's human rights commitment home—to gays and lesbians, to the divorced and remarried, and to the survivors of priest child sexual abuse. They were organizing Catholics never before active to call the Church to accountability and change.

In reality, the heyday of the Catholic women-led Church reform movement, in sheer numbers, occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, paralleling the rise of this nation's second wave of secular feminism. It was a time when Catholic women's organizations mounted huge conferences, to which Catholic women full of energy and hope flocked by the thousands. But the reign of Pope John Paul II, with his vision of a deeply authoritarian Church without an opportunity for the full participation of women, squelched their enthusiasm and shattered their hopes. In response, Catholic women in droves left the Church as well as the women-led Church reform groups. And while nuns led the women's movement for change in the Church originally, their numbers have declined precipitously, and they are not being replaced.

Yet, what becomes of women in the Catholic Church will dictate what becomes of the Church itself. Women make up more than half of the Church's one billion members. When they leave, so do their children. Worldwide, the Church is in crisis. The priest shortage is pressing in the United States, a major factor in parish closings but downright dire in many poor regions of the world. Catholics in large parts of Africa and Latin America have been without regular Eucharist for years. Yet, America is raiding priests from the Third World, assigning them to parishes in the United States where they are unfamiliar with the culture. Priest sex abuse scandals have shaken the Church not only in the United States but in other countries as well, such as Austria and Australia, Ireland and Canada, the Philippines and South Africa. Finances are shrinking, attendance at Mass is declining, and the Church's credibility is in tatters.

In an effort to regain its lost moral voice, the Vatican is attempting to reestablish its authority over the Catholic family. But it cannot exercise authority over the Catholic family without the cooperation of women. Hence, the Vatican in 2004 issued a startling letter to the world's bishops "On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World." It approved of married women having careers, as long as they maintain complete openness to motherhood and do not seek "liberation from biological determinism." It denounced women who talk about their "subordination" because it causes "antagonism"; who seek power because it disadvantages men and is "lethal" to the family; who dare to be "for themselves" instead of following their true "feminine" natures "to live for the other and because of the other"; and who give insufficient importance to Jesus' maleness—which, not coincidentally, is the Church's foundation for an all-male priesthood. The document makes crystal clear that controlling women—their understanding of their nature, their sexuality, and their place in the family and in the Church—is the keystone to the male clerical hierarchy's ability to retain its absolute power.

We are at a pivotal moment in terms of the Catholic women who are storming the Church's gates today. They include the fiercest fighters who have persisted for decades against incredible odds. They also include thousands of new recruits, from Catholic women ministers to fiery advocates for change spurred on by the tragedy of the sex abuse crisis. Together—and separately—these women are fighting for the soul of the Catholic Church, and they will not be moved. Not by a Vatican that threatens them, censures them, or evicts them from their convents. Not

by bishops who boycott their speeches or bar them from Church property. This is their story.

As to the form of the story, I knew it would be a narrative, a journey of sorts. But at first I thought I would divide it into two sections—one on power and one on sex. I soon found, however, that sex and power were too deeply intertwined in terms of the Church's treatment of women to parse them out that way. So I chose instead to focus on voice, beginning with a recent Church effort to silence one woman's voice. I then move on to a brief history of how the Church has tried to silence women through time—from the earliest periods of Christianity to the years following Vatican II to the present day—and how Catholic women, undaunted, have persevered.

The sex abuse crisis of 2002 ended one of the Church's most deadly silences, and this book looks at the impact of that crisis on women and reform. That impact includes the emergence of women leaders of new reform groups—one called, aptly enough, Voice of the Faithful—and the struggle between the new-guard reformers and the old-guard reformers to find common ground. The sex abuse crisis empowered female survivors and their advocates to lead the way in turning pain into hope, and they are in this book. Because the clergy sex abuse scandal speaks to a much deeper problem of sexual secrecy in the Church, you will also find the voices of female reformers demanding an end to mandatory clerical celibacy; arguing for women's moral authority on birth control, homosexuality, divorce, and abortion—though that remains a most vexing issue, as I show, even for reformers; and advocating for a new Christian sexual ethic. Finally, the book brings out women's

voices in two crucial areas of Church life—in theology, including biblical history, and in the ever expanding array of Catholic women’s ministries. As you read, I know the question will arise: Why do these women *stay*? You will find multiple answers to that burning question, too, throughout the book and in the Epilogue.

This story is by no means the whole story. There are many more Catholic women fighting for reform than I could ever fit in this book. And this book is part of a modern history of this movement that has just begun to be written. After all, thanks to feminist theologians, and even the provocative work of novelists like *The Da Vinci Code*’s Dan Brown, we are just beginning to hear about the real women of the early Church, like Mary Magdalene. Much remains to be written about the contemporary women who are following in their footsteps.

Part of the reason for this delay is that Catholic women reformers have been ignored not only by the Church but by the secular feminist community as well. To that end, the women’s studies in religion program of Harvard Divinity School held an extraordinary conference in 2002 called Religion and the Feminist Movement. It was mounted in response to the general failure within the feminist movement to recognize and respect the women who have been laboring for decades to change the nature of patriarchal religion, and to include their efforts in second-wave feminist history. One after another, extraordinary change-makers—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Mormon—stepped up to the podium to share their harrowing experiences taking on the most misogynistic and powerful institutions in the world. It reminded me once again that it is sheer folly to think that we can ignore the world’s major

religions—and the meaning of religion in people’s lives—and still change women’s place in the world.

And this is certainly not the only way to tell this story. I am a journalist, not an academic or a Church historian. I did not establish a checklist for change-agents and demand that all of the women who would be in these pages—including the more than one hundred I spoke to personally—agree with each item, with one another, or with me. They have diverse viewpoints. I looked for women delivering the most dynamic challenges; for women quietly modeling change; for those with booming prophetic voices; and for ordinary Catholic women stepping up to leadership because they love the Church so much. It is, in that sense, a subjective history.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there are many Catholic women—moderate to conservative—working toward what they see as women’s best interests in an unchanging Church. They want to hold the line, to keep the pre-Vatican II institution alive. Some even call themselves “papal feminists” because they support Pope John Paul II’s vision of gender relations, a vision that maintains the Church’s status quo. They have their own books. They are spirited and devoted, too. But they don’t represent the future I want to see for the Church.

So I am no innocent bystander. I am a woman with a history, a woman scarred, a woman at her wit’s end. I abide the women in this book. I echo their words. I applaud their patience. And I remind this Church how fortunate it is to have such brilliant and devoted women clamoring for the Catholic hierarchy to open

**its doors, bring the wizard out of the sacristy, rethink the sacred with women in mind, and make a new Catholic Church.**

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