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Pope Francis walks past cardinals as he leaves a consistory in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican June 28, 2017. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Every time I write about gender equality in the church, I feel like a broken record. But of course, I am part of a global chorus of women (and men) who have been calling on the Vatican for years to recognize the equality of women and men — which it proclaims in theory — in the structures of the church.

That means, of course, welcoming (and ordaining) women deacons and priests, and ultimately bishops and cardinals. That prospect is surely frightening for many in the hierarchy. Women! Yikes!

Now, Mary McAleese, former president of Ireland, has [called on Pope Francis](#) to develop a "credible strategy" to include women at every level in the Catholic Church's global structure, saying their exclusion from decision-making roles "has left the church flapping about awkwardly on one wing."

McAleese, speaking at the annual Voices of Faith event March 8 [in Rome](#), said the church "has long since been a primary global carrier of the virus of misogyny."

How true. And this is an area where Pope Francis, for all his wonderful human traits, has fallen way short. He has appointed a few women to Vatican posts, but has yet to consider admitting women to the diaconate, let alone the priesthood.

If he has any such instincts or desires, I am sure he is held back by the Vatican's male hierarchy, who no doubt consider such ideas one step from heresy. (Or maybe heresy itself, who knows?)

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If I were speaking to Francis directly, I would want him to know that those male hierarchs are living in another world, a world that the 21st century has left behind. If he wants to be a true prophet in the 21st century, he needs to move forward with new and equal roles for women in the church.

He might hold conversations with leaders of denominations that have ordained women for decades. They know that such ordinations have enriched their denominations.

March 8 was International Women's Day. It's the perfect time of year for Francis to step forward and promote the rights of women.

Francis has now passed the [five-year point](#) in his papacy. It's time that he forge his lasting legacy in church structures. And nothing would be more memorable than recognizing the equality of women. And nothing is more needed in our time.