

Cardinal Tobin: ‘I hope women will continue to speak the truth’

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Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R., was named by Pope Francis to the College of Cardinals on Oct. 9, 2016, while serving as archbishop of Indianapolis. On the eve of that announcement, he participated in a panel discussion alongside Bishop Charles Thompson of Evansville at the Women of the Church Catholic leadership conference in Ferdinand, Ind. I moderated their conversation.

On Jan. 6, 2017, Cardinal Tobin was installed as archbishop of Newark, and Bishop Thompson later was named as his successor in the archdiocese of Indianapolis. Cardinal Tobin and I met again in August 2017 to renew our conversation about women in the Catholic Church. The interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.

Baker: Pope Francis has captured the attention of many people with his call for a more incisive female presence in the church. What do you think he has in mind?

Tobin: I would think he's talking at a couple levels, because Francis believes in a sense of collegiality and subsidiarity. He has good respect for the local churches but even more for the network of local churches. I think he's not simply thinking of the leadership at the level of the universal church, but he's also speaking to his brother bishops. He's saying you have to ensure that the gifts of women are reflected in the local church that has been entrusted to you.

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Every bishop, before he is ordained, has to go through some formularies in which he makes the profession of faith and declares himself in union with the church's teaching but also recognizing his own responsibility to discern the gifts that are given to the local church and to coordinate them. I think that it's also at that level that the Holy Father is hoping for a new vision and a new horizon.

People seem to be hearing what Pope Francis is saying in a fresh and new way. Do you have any thoughts about what makes it fresh? Because he's not the first to talk about the gifts of women.

Let me give you an analogy. Like the popes before him, he carries the title *servus servorum Dei*, “the servant of the servants of God.” He's living that in a very visible way, through simplicity of life, through his spurning of any pomp and circumstance, by his preferential choice for people who normally wouldn't have access to the pope.

My hope is that he's not just going to be content with a sort of ideology, because, as he says in “The Joy of the Gospel,” the reality is much more important than ideas. If I were speaking to him in American English, I would say ‘Eventually you have to hike the ball.’ You have to connect some concrete choices with what you're talking about.

What are examples of the concrete choices, the concrete actions, that he's done to show this is not an ideology but a reality?

I think that one would be certainly the study commission that he's named to look at the question of women in the diaconate. For me, what was significant was not simply that he named this commission but who he put on it. Here from North America, we're delighted that Phyllis Zagano, who is a very erudite woman and also a very clearly spoken woman on the issue, was named to it.

As soon as I heard that, I said, “This is going to be credible.” I think that the others that are on the commission, although I don’t know them as well, will give it a greater credibility, also. What he does with this is going to be interesting, but I think that was a hopeful sign.

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There’s a woman who is now the rector of one of the pontifical universities of Rome [Sr. Mary Melone, S.F.A., of the Pontifical University Antonianum], which is another indication that in the area of academia women already play a role, even in the ecclesiastical culture. These are the doors that are opening. I think those would be a couple of examples.

What are some examples of collaboration that you have had with women?

A study was done by CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, on the role of women in diocesan leadership. One of the assumptions of the study was if you take orders off the table, what are the most significant or incisive positions for women at the diocesan level? They named three: the chancellor, the superintendent of schools and the chief financial officer.

In Indianapolis, no credit to me but to my good predecessor, two out of the three were women. I always used to kid the C.F.O., who was a man. I said, “You know, we could go three for three!” The chancellor and the superintendent of schools certainly brought to that level gifts and insights without which we would have been impoverished otherwise.

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That convinces me of something that Benedict XVI used to say frequently about religious life. He’d say a diocese or particular church that does not have religious is impoverished. It doesn’t mean that it can’t function, but it functions with one or both arms tied behind its back. Now, of course, you could say that even with that example he’s talking about women, because women are 80 percent of religious life. I think that analogously, I can’t imagine a diocese that would want to minister in the fullness of the church’s mission without having the voice of women represented in its decisions.

In the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, I think particularly of Annette “Mickey” Lentz, who is the chancellor. She is serving in a number of places we wouldn’t normally expect to see a laywoman.

She was present and participative in the priests’ council, in the college of deans and at all levels of the archdiocesan leadership. She is the face of the archdiocese.

What motivates you to promote and encourage women in leadership, whether on the local level or on the level of the universal church?

I think some of the most deeply held values are values that we experienced as children. Growing up in a family that had a lot of women—a mother, her two sisters who lived with us and eight sisters of my own—and to see all of them encouraged and confident in themselves, with a very strong and noncoerced connection with their faith, encouraged me. In fact, people would thank me or challenge me for stances that I’ve taken in the past. I would explain, this is something I don’t have to think a whole lot about.

What has struck me in the years that followed, especially years in ministry, is being more and more aware of how women have been given a lot of reason to abandon the church—the sort of disrespect, and even more than disrespect. If you look at the Gospels, Jesus doesn’t really get on people for overtly oppressing the poor. What he does get on them for is not seeing them. And I think it’s true with women, who often, in particular outside of North America, form the real poor. The first sin is to not see them and to go on your merry way. Or if you see them, to cross to the other side of the road.

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The guidelines for seminary formation that were released in December 2016 from the Vatican [the “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis”], speak of the “formative significance” of the presence of women in seminary formation. You will be heading up the process of implementing these new guidelines here in the United States [as the chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations]. When you think about seminary formation, particularly about forming seminarians to have healthy and collaborative relationships with women, what would you hope to see in the next 10 years?

Well, first there’s the overarching challenge of clericalism, which is not simply a potentially misogynistic mindset, but it’s a closed mindset. It’s a closed mindset that believes in certain privilege and entitlement. Francis has challenged that.

I think that one important thing is not simply exposure to women in healthy relationships but relationships that at times make a cleric responsible to a woman. Now I found that very interesting in Indianapolis because there are women in the Catholic Center who supervise clerics, priests and even Monsignors. I think the ability to relate in that manner to a woman is also important. In my own formation, before ordination and when newly ordained, I had women supervisors, as a catechist and then as a community organizer, and it was a good thing.



You noted that sometimes women leave the church because they feel that they’re not seen or that there’s not a place for their gifts. Recent studies have shown that among millennials, for the first time in the United States more Catholic young women are moving away from the Catholic faith than Catholic young men. What would you say to a young woman who’s considering leaving the Catholic Church?

I hear this pronouncement with kind of a sad frequency. I always ask, “What do you think you’re leaving?” At least in my belief, it’s not the Elks or the good old boys club. This is the body of Christ, and this is where his word is proclaimed and the sacraments are celebrated. I wouldn’t let anybody drive me out of that. In saying this, I don’t want to minimize the sort of estrangement that I think younger women feel.

I think that bishops have to be very concerned about this, because of the incredible implications of that. I had a very good friend, a writer in England, who was a professed atheist. He said one of his big obstacles was that both of his parents were atheists, but his mother was more convinced. He said that's harder for me to get over, because, I think, that of all of the nurturing he received from his mom, he also received that. That's who we could be looking at on a massive scale if young women no longer feel a connection to the church as sacrament of salvation. That's really serious.

I think one way we could respond is for women who stay in the church to be open and eloquent as to why. To say, despite the disappointments and the suffering, this is why I'm there.

As you look to the future, what would be your hopes for women in the church?

First, my hope would be that they embrace it as their home. I remember back in 2010 I promised to lead a retreat for our Irish brothers in Ireland. There was a lot of turmoil there, and still is, in the Irish church. There was a lot of anger towards the institutional church. I said: But, where do you hear the word of God; where do you celebrate the Eucharist? What church is that? That's the home. That's it, you know.

My favorite definition of heresy is an unwillingness to deal with complexity. It's a desire to simplify into one bite-sized morsel. My hope is that the complexity of the mystery of the church is always revered. And that people don't lose faith in the power of Christ, present in his church. Then you settle for something that's less.

I hope that women will continue to speak the truth and speak the truth to power when they need to. And most of all that they don't lose a sense of joy. Not to lose the joy that we have because of God's incredible love.

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