

Sr. Theresa's Kane's Message for Popes John Paul and Francis:

Eradicate the Scandal of Gender Inequality

It was arguably the most notable request of a pope in modern times. In 1979 Mercy Sister Theresa Kane, serving as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, after consulting with a few friends, decided to ask Pope John Paul II, in his first visit to the United States to open all church ministries to women.

The story of that request is etched in the psyches of reform-minded Catholics around the globe. It was not only the request itself, but also Kane's direct, simple, respectful, confident demeanor that captures widespread attention. No person to that moment had ever seemed an equal to a pope. Catholic perceptions changed in the Washington D.C. basilica that day.

In Kane's brief address gender balance seemed to shift perceptibly within Roman Catholicism. If, or as women ordination advocates more frequently say, when the first licit ordination of a woman priest takes place within the church, that sacramental act will inexorably be connected to a Sister of Mercy.

"We have heard the powerful message of our church addressing the dignity and reverence of all persons," Kane told Pope John Paul II that day as he peered ahead stone faced. "As women, we have pondered these words." The church "must respond by providing the possibility of women as persons being included in all ministries." Three and a half decades later Kane's words echo around the world as women (and men) gather to reflect on what they view to be the inevitable, an inclusive church that can fully model justice to a justice-hungry world: the ordination of women.



Sr. Theresa Kane in Philadelphia, September 19, 2015

Sponsored by the U.S.-based WOC advocates have gathered to lament what they see as a major failure by the bishops to end gender discrimination within the church. WOC organizers estimate some 500 delegates will participate in the gathering during its three days of meetings, speeches, and workshops. Dozens of exhibitors have already setup tables on the 4th floor of the downtown Marriott hotel here in Philadelphia, hoping to draw delegates' attention. Most exhibitors share visions of a reformed Catholic church.

And so as a frail, but no less spirited Kane stepped onto the dais before a packed Philadelphia hotel ballroom gathering, they jumped to their feet and began clapping their hands in an extended applause of respect and gratitude. “We did it,” Kane said. “We gather this evening from various states and a diversity of countries. We can truly say: “We did it” and be so proud of our WOC community.

WOC organizers had just announced their new “Theresa Kane Woman of Vision and Courage Awards,” to be given to feminists working for justice and an inclusive church leadership. “It is with deep humility and great pride indeed to receive and accept this honor,” she told the gathering. “I do so not for me; I do it as an expression and reflection of you. So I thank you one and all. Our journey as a WOC community has, at times, been difficult; we have been criticized for envisioning, for desiring of and working for something not possible, according to the present mentality in the Catholic church institution.

But we have endured. And we have created a significant structure and system within the heart and spirit of the Catholic community that now yearns for and is committed to the God-given gifts of women as innately equal with men, to be within every sphere and walk of life, in religion, government, and society. Endurance is a quality of prophets and prophecy.” She then said some people have asked her what she might say to Pope Francis if she had the opportunity. She did not shy from answering their call. The following is the full text of her ‘message to Pope Francis’ in Philadelphia:

“Pope Francis, although your formal titles are ‘Holy Father’ and ‘Supreme Pontiff,’ I take this sacred opportunity to greet you as a brother, a friend, a collaborator in our service to and with God and with others. I have no doubt your many years in Argentina engaged with the many economically poor people has been a powerful source of strength and grace. Those experiences prepared you to be noted for your deep pastoral spirit, your desire for collegiality, and your vision that all in the Catholic community are called to be saints.

I am a Catholic woman a woman religious, a Sister of Mercy, born and raised in the United States, New York city. Through both education and life experiences I have come to a conviction that anything less than all women in the Catholic community having the possibility of being in all ministries of our church, not only is wrong; it is a scandal to our church and to our world.

For a long time I have believed the Catholic community might serve as a role model and an instrument of reform for governments and religions throughout our world that allow and even legislates that women are less than fully human; that women are objects to be exploited; that it is unacceptable and even at times believed natural to violate to beat and abuse women physically, psychologically, and sexually. For the Catholic church to be agents of God’s message to our 21st century we need to have a vision that the degradation of women worldwide, all over the planet, is the primary, root issue of social and religious violence and not of God

We as a Catholic community are called to proclaim fully and lovingly to our entire planet community that such scandalous beliefs and actions of gender inequality are forms and expressions of idolatry. When idolatry is present God is not in our midst. We need to bring a loving, caring, creative God into the center of our everyday lives by eradicating all forms of gender inequality. Only then will God as Companion, as Mother, as our Divine source of grace be present in our world.

I urge you, Pope Francis, to listen to the women of our church and world who cry out in anguish as women throughout the ages have done. Only radical (at its roots) gender equality in church and in society will begin to diminish the violence, hatred and other forms of inhumanity in our world today.”

Thirty-six years later, Kane’s leadership is no less stunning.

By Tom Fox in the *National Catholic Reporter*: September 19, 2015.