

Catholic group says women are 'invisible' in lectionary texts: An appeal to Pope Benedict XVI

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An appeal to Pope Benedict XVI to make biblical women more visible in Catholic liturgical readings has been sent to Vatican City by an American-based sister who heads an international renewal group that has sent thousands of similar pleas to bishops.

"We want women to stop being invisible in the church's proclamation," said Sister Christine Schenk, executive director of Ohio-based FutureChurch. "If you try to make it look like God likes men better than women, people just aren't going to buy it."

FutureChurch, an independent Catholic renewal group that counts some 5,000 members worldwide, is broadcasting its plea ahead of a key Vatican meeting in October, a synod on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church."

The group wants more Bible passages featuring women to be read at Catholic masses and says it has sent more than 18,000 e-mails and letters to bishops. Some U.S. Catholic officials have expressed unofficial support for their arguments.

"When we heard that the synod was going to focus primarily on scripture, we knew that we had to raise awareness about the hidden women of the lectionary," said Schenk, a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph, based in Cleveland. For churchgoers who seldom read the Bible, those lectionary extracts may represent their main exposure to biblical narratives, Schenk said.

And women are conspicuously absent from the lectionary, she added. "It sends a really unhealthy message to our daughters and our sons," she said.

Schenk's argument appears to be bolstered by a 1996 article in the *American Benedictine Review*. The article's author, Sister Ruth Fox, cites lectionary readings that stop just before a woman's vital role is mentioned or leave her out altogether.

For example, Fox wrote, take Exodus 15:20-21, in which Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, is identified as a prophet and leads a liturgy of thanksgiving after the crossing of the Red Sea. That passage is not in the lectionary.

Nor do the variously described roles of Mary Magdalene, who is one of the witnesses to the empty tomb and to the risen Christ, ever get recounted on Sundays, according to FutureChurch.

At a time when women hold powerful political offices worldwide, the lectionary seems outdated at best, the sister said.

The one woman the lectionary does mention is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who, as a virgin and a mother, is “a pretty hard act to follow,” Schenk said. “And it’s not all women can be. We also need to hear about women leaders who evangelized, proclaimed the gospel and founded churches.”

Anthony Sherman, a monsignor who is executive director of the Secretariat for Divine Worship at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said FutureChurch is not alone in questioning the mass readings.

The world—and the status of women—has changed drastically since the current lectionary was approved in the 1960s, Sherman said. But the lectionary has not. “It’s been around for 40 years, since Vatican II. A lot of people have problems with it.”

Schenk said most bishops have responded positively. Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, met with FutureChurch women, she said, and other bishops say they are interested. None, however, have committed to bringing the topic to the synod.

Even if the issue gets play next month, Sherman said, rewriting the lectionary is a “monumental” task. But that doesn’t mean the Bible’s women will necessarily go unheard. As Sherman pointed out, “There’s nothing preventing Catholics from owning and reading a whole copy of the Bible themselves.” *-Religion News Service*