

The Catholic Church and Its Historical Beliefs on Women

Taken from Mistress of the Vatican by Eleanor Herman

Mistress of the Vatican is the story of Olimpia Maidalchini who became “the unofficial ruler of the most powerful institution in the world, the Roman Catholic Church” through her connection as sister-in-law and presumed mistress of Pope Innocent X (reigned 1644-1655).

These represent some of the beliefs of the Catholic Church fathers who hone the theology of male leadership. Some of these go back to Greek philosophy.

Pope Innocent III (reigned 1198-1216) confidently declared that menstrual blood was “so detestable and impure that, from contact therewith, fruits and grains are blighted, bushes dry up, grasses die, trees lose their fruits, and if dogs chance to eat of it, they go (Mistress of the Vatican, .”

The fourth-century B.C. Greek philosopher Aristotle and the Renaissance culture that quoted him believed that a uterus was a kind of soil—dirt, actually—in which the man planted his seed. A woman merely provided a nine-month lease for a warm rented room. In the *Oresteia*, the classical Greek trilogy by Aeschylus, the god Apollo argued that it was impossible for a man to kill his mother, since no one actually had a mother.

All pregnancies, it was thought, started off as male, nature attempting to replicate its own perfection. But at some point in about half of pregnancies, something went terribly wrong, an irremediable birth defect, and the fetus became female. A female’s reproductive organs proved her defectiveness; they were small and misshapen, most of them tucked away in an evil-smelling cavity inside the body, unlike the robust, fully formed private parts of men, which enjoyed the fresh air and dangled proudly.

According to popular medieval literature, which was still widely read in sixteenth-century Italy, if a woman spread her legs very far, her female organs would fall out and she would become a man. If this were true, many ambitious women, including Olimpia, would have spread their legs wide, pushed their organs onto the floor, and luxuriated in the advantages of being a man in a man’s world.

The church, too, looked on females as defective creatures. Jesus and his disciples had all been male. The church fathers, who in the second through fifth centuries grappled with Scripture to hammer out Catholic theology, were notorious misogynists. In the third century, Tertullian wrote a scathing commentary on women in the early church who preached, healed, and baptized. “The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcism, to undertake cures—it may be even to baptize.”

In the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas, arguable the most influential theologian in the history of the Catholic Church, declared women to be “misbegotten men,” inferior by nature and therefore incapable of leadership. Defective women, it was believed, had no place in business, politics, or finance. They certainly had no place in Christ’s church. The Latin word for woman—*femina*—was said to have come from *fe* for “faith” and *minus* for “less,” since women were thought to be too weak to hold and preserve the faith. Moreover, it was believed that women’s handling the holy Eucharist or stepping foot inside the Vatican would contaminate the holiness with their impurity.

Olimpia’s world was shaped by the 1563 Council of Trent—the belated Vatican response to accusations of Church abuse lobbed by Martin Luther and his followers forty years earlier—and reforming bishops decided that wifely virtues were threatened by female education. An educated female would be less satisfied managing her household and raising her children; she would want to go gadding about town, meddling in government and business. Up north, the heretics would laugh at Catholics who couldn’t even control their women.

But a young and attractive widow was thought to be more sexually insatiable than a virgin; she had know the pleasures of coitus and would likely do anything to enjoy them again. According to contemporary documents, even if a sex-starved widow found the strength to behave herself, she would most likely break out in pimples and lose her mind as the “naughty vapors” rose from her private parts up to her head. Suffering from the “unruly motions of tickling lust,” she would require either a wall or a husband to keep her in line.

Controlling Women

A father had very limited choices as to what to do with his daughters. And the reason was this: throughout history, women’s lusts were considered insatiable, in contrast to the lethargic sexual desires of men. The daughters of Eve, if they were allowed to run free, would rape all the men and dishonor their families. After all, it was a woman who had gotten everyone thrown out of Paradise, and her daughters had to be locked up to keep society pure and wholesome. Oddly, no one ever came up with the idea that if a community truly wanted to become pure and wholesome—and less violent—it might consider locking up the men and handing the keys to the women.

A girl, kept under the stern eye of a father, would be handed over to a husband, who would fix an equally stern eye upon her. Or she would be walled up in a convent, where the abbess and bishop would make sure she got into no trouble and had no chance to escape. It was unthinkable for a woman to live alone, independent of men, unless she was a widow over forty, in which case she was thought to be so shriveled up that her private parts had turned to dust.

Dowry

To marry honorably, that is, to marry a man of the same or higher social status, a girl would have to bring with her real estate, cash, furniture, jewels, or livestock. To marry a man of lower social status—a carpenter, or tavern keeper, say—would cost far less but would bring shame to a family such as Sforza's perched on its upward climb.

In the fifteenth century the Papal States recognized the dangers of excessively high dowries: unwanted daughters with no religious vocation crammed into convents against their will, decreasing marriage and birth rates, and a resulting decline in economic productivity. The government legislated caps of dowry amounts, and any family going over the prescribed cap was forced to pay a substantial fine. But inflation and social pressure swelled the dowries, and the caps grudgingly followed suit.

Although convents required dowries from the brides of Christ, Jesus in his infinite mercy was satisfied with one-tenth the amount demanded by flesh-and-blood sons of leading families.