

The Catholic Church & Women Voting

by Andrew Lisa, Demand Media

When the women's suffrage movement saw resolution with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution in 1920, among its most ardent, powerful and well-funded opponents was the Roman Catholic Church. Church leaders opposed voting rights on the grounds that it contradicted biblical patriarchy and male dominance, because they linked suffrage to socialism and viewed feminism as a corrupting influence on morality. Today, Vatican City is one of only five countries in the world that forbid women from voting, and is projected to be the only one by 2015.

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A WOMAN'S PLACE

The Bible repeatedly states — specifically in the Old Testament — that God created women to play a subservient role to men. The Catholic Church used this as the basis for their argument against suffrage, claiming that the natural order is for women to work in the household and for men to lead it. In a column in the New York Times on April 22, 1913, Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore stated that while the church isn't political, a woman is "queen of the domestic kingdom, and her proper sphere is the home . . . The country already has quite enough votes."

THE SOCIALIST CONNECTION

The church viewed the socialist movement, which was sweeping Russia and large portions of Europe, as a secular threat to papal authority, and it linked suffrage to socialism. In a pamphlet titled "Lest Catholic Men Be Misled" an anti-suffrage Catholic named Mary Nash Crofoot wrote, "First, there are a million socialists in this country, and all are unanimous for woman suffrage . . . All socialists are opposed to anything Christian, but they bitterly hate and attack Catholics. Why should Catholics join themselves with such a body?"

THE FEMINIST THREAT

In 1930 Pope Pius XI condemned the previous decades' women's emancipation movement as undermining the divinely founded obedience of the wife to her husband and a false deflection from her true and sole role as mother and homemaker. Feminism was intrinsically linked to suffrage and therefore abhorred by the church. Nearly 50 years later in the late 1960s and early 70s, the women at the helm of the second feminist movement again found the Catholic Church to be among their staunchest foes.

HISTORICAL HURDLES

St. Augustine, the foundational thinker for Latin Christianity in the fourth century, laid the groundwork for the religious justification of female subjugation that permeated the next 1,500 years. Based largely on the biblical implication that Eve bore more responsibility than Adam for the falling of man into sin, the idea that women were defective and inferior was later reinforced by great Catholic thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas. To this day, women cannot be ordained, achieve positions of leadership, perform sacramental rituals or vote in the Catholic Church.

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- [Opposition to Women's Suffrage: Religious Opposition](http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/frameset_reset.html)(http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/frameset_reset.html)
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- [International Business Times: Saudi Women Vote: Which Countries Still Don't Allow Women's Suffrage?](http://www.ibtimes.com/saudi-women-vote-which-countries-still-dont-allow-womens-suffrage-318260#)(<http://www.ibtimes.com/saudi-women-vote-which-countries-still-dont-allow-womens-suffrage-318260#>)

RESOURCES

- [Catholics for Choice: Women, Reproductive Choice and the Catholic Church](http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/reform/documents/2006womenreproductiverightsandthecatholicchurch.asp)(<http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/topics/reform/documents/2006womenreproductiverightsandthecatholicchurch.asp>)
- [Feminist Majority Blog: Catholic Church Continues Fight Against Women and LGBT Rights](http://feminist.org/blog/index.php/2012/11/13/catholic-church-continues-fight-against-womens-and-lgbt-rights/)(<http://feminist.org/blog/index.php/2012/11/13/catholic-church-continues-fight-against-womens-and-lgbt-rights/>)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Women play a key role in Catholic culture, but are excluded from leadership roles in the church.

Andrew Lisa has been writing professionally since 2001. A graduate of Hofstra University, he was a section editor for "amNewYork", the most widely distributed paper in Manhattan. He was a nationally syndicated columnist with Gannett News Service, the largest news syndicate in the country, and works as a writer in Los Angeles.

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