

## The Guardian view on the pope's divisions: he should choose what's best for women

The Guardian view on the pope's divisions: he should choose what's best for women.

Sooner or later, the Catholic church must recognise the reality of remarriage. But it must do so in a way that weakens patriarchy



It is an extraordinary reflection that one of the groups that has the greatest influence over women's lives today is composed of celibate men. Yet the decisions made by the pope and his bishops affect hundreds of millions of women. The Catholic church is one of the largest providers of healthcare and education in the world. Sometimes its efforts are malign, as in the campaign against artificial contraception, even when condoms are an effective protection against HIV/Aids. But most of the time, and in most places, it does good that no one else can manage. That is the tradition out of which Pope Francis comes, and his emphasis on the poor is also, as it must be, an attempt to improve conditions for poor women.

That is why the synod on the family, a gathering of bishops from around the world in Rome which ends on Sunday, matters so very much. The arguments about divorce and remarriage which have led to the most extraordinary public bitterness among cardinals are not, in the pejorative sense, theological.

The less controversial parts of the synod's reflections could also affect hundreds of millions of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics. Outside the western developed world, families are the matrix in which almost everyone lives, and to the extent that the church's teaching reaches inside those families, it can make things better, or worse.

It has been difficult for such a profoundly patriarchal organisation as the Catholic church – whose boss is known as the Holy Father – to come to terms with feminism. Just as the 19th and much of the 20th centuries were marked by the church's struggles with (and against) democracy, it is plausible that much of the coming century will be marked by its struggles with feminism. There is no prospect of women being granted equal formal authority with men. They will not be priests or even deacons. The late Pope Saint John Paul II managed to rule that out for at least a couple of centuries and, he hoped, very much longer than that.

Yet outside the hierarchy, the church depends on women, as it always has. If it loses their devotion and their unpaid labour, everything else will fall to bits. It is women who have so decisively rejected the church's official ban on artificial contraception that even a cardinal said at a press conference that "something has changed ... I was one of 10 children, and my siblings only have four or five". It is often nuns who hand out condoms to the women who need them, whether they are sex workers or not.

In the developed world it is women who leave the church and fail to pass the habit of churchgoing on to their children. This is very often because of the official attitude towards divorce and remarriage. Although the church's teaching is universal, the behaviour of Christians is culture-bound. In countries where divorce and remarriage are accepted, that's what Catholics do, too. And when they do, the church will officially refuse to recognise their new families.

This is what Francis and some of the German bishops have been trying to change, in part from compassion and in part from self-interest. There are between 30 and 40 million ex-Catholics in the US alone, and if that rate of attrition continues then no foreseeable amount of immigration will prop up the church there, especially as second and third generation immigrants will tend to drift away.

Against this there is the unbroken tradition of 2,000 years of church law, and Jesus's explicit denunciation of divorce. For the rich or well-connected there have always been annulments available – and it's worth remembering that not even Henry VIII believed in divorce. What he wanted from the pope was not a divorce from Catherine of Aragon but a declaration that they had never been properly married. But, as the example of Henry VIII makes clear, the difference between divorce and annulment is too subtle to survive much contact with reality. His example also suggests a reason why the Catholic

church's refusal to allow second marriages is actually a protection for some women. In societies where women have no economic independence, it saves them from being discarded when they are no longer useful or interesting to tyrannous husbands, painful though it is to admit this.

The real problem facing the pope is whether it is possible to construct a single global sexual ethic that will benefit women and be accepted by them in both the rich and poor worlds. With God, we're told, all things are possible, but this task looks very hard. Still, it must be tried.

The Guardian Editorial- 25/10/2015