

Liberals, Women Priest Advocates Urge Change After Benedict

Supporters of **liberal** reform in the **Catholic Church** said on Monday they hoped **Pope Benedict's** successor would give a greater voice to women and reconsider rules on priestly celibacy, women priests and same-sex couples.

Benedict, who, like his predecessor John Paul, firmly opposed the ordination of women priests and described gay marriage as a threat to humanity's future, said on Monday he would resign at the end of February, announcing the first papal abdication in 700 years.

The Women's Ordination Conference (WOC), an advocate group for female priests, said the Church was crying out for a leader who would give women a greater role in decision making.

"The current system remains an 'old boys club' and does not allow for women's voices to participate in the decision of the next leader of our Church," said WOC director Erin Saiz Hanna.

"The people of the Church are desperate for a leader who will be open to dialogue, and will have the courage to create systems that will address the sexism, exclusion, and abuse in our Church," she said.

WOC said it respected Benedict's decision to resign and was concerned for his health, but it said the 85-year-old pontiff had taken what it called "significant steps backwards" for women during his papacy.

Last year, the pope restated the Catholic Church's ban on **women priests** and said he would not tolerate disobedience by clerics on fundamental teachings.

Under his leadership, the Vatican cracked down on advocates of female ordination, disciplining Austrian priest Father Helmut Schueller for challenging views on women priests and dismissing American priest Father Ray Bourgeois for similar activism.

Broader Discussion

The **Vatican** says women cannot be ordained priests because Jesus Christ willingly chose only men as his apostles.

Advocates of a female priesthood reject this position, saying Jesus was merely conforming to the customs of his times.

The Vatican reprimanded a U.S. **Catholic** nuns group, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, last year for promoting “radical feminist themes” and expressing positions on political issues that it said differed at times from views held by American bishops.

Liberal groups said that it was time to broaden discussions in the Church and share power more widely.

“The Roman Catholic Church needs a pope who does not always decide everything by himself alone,” said the Austrian movement We Are Church, adding that the next pope should give more responsibilities to local churches and bishops.

The group called for “the full recognition” of **same-sex couples**, the relaxation of **celibacy** rules and allowing women and lay Catholics to hold more positions in the Church.

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