

Women's conference defies Vatican over nuns and equality

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“Powerful vested interests” within the Catholic church will be challenged at a conference in Rome on International Women’s Day this week, amid calls for women to be given positions of authority and influence.

In a sign that a new assertive mood in relation to women’s rights has reached the Vatican’s doors, the Voices of Faith conference will hear demands for bold steps towards gender equality within the male-dominated church.

Meanwhile a document calling for women’s roles that “are coherent with our competences and capacities” is circulating on social media. The Manifesto of Women for the Church says: “As adult women we experience daily the subordinate role of women in the church.”

The rallying cry comes after a magazine article exposed exploitation of nuns at the Vatican. The article in *Women, Church, World*, a magazine distributed with the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, revealed dire economic conditions experienced by many nuns, as well as resentment about the low value placed on their vocations.

Nuns worked long hours cooking, cleaning and serving the cardinals, bishops and officials who run the church, it claimed. With nominal or no pay, and no contracts of employment, the nuns were barely acknowledged by the men they provided for.

Several nuns spoke anonymously to the magazine. “In the eyes of Jesus we are all children of God, but in their concrete life some nuns do not live this,” said one.

Only a handful of women hold senior positions in the Vatican hierarchy, including Barbara Jatta, who heads the Vatican Museums.

The exploitation of nuns is likely to be raised at the Voices of Faith conference on Thursday, whose theme is “Why Women Matter”.

Its organisers said in a statement: “There are places where gender equality is being systematically overlooked. The Catholic church is one of them.

“The crises we must confront in our world today demand leaders, women and men, who are prepared to think the unthinkable and who will risk upsetting powerful vested interests and take bold steps forward for the greater good.”

In previous years the conference has been held at the Vatican, but the organisers switched venues last month after the Holy See refused to approve Mary McAleese, the former president of Ireland, and two other speakers. No reasons were given, but McAleese has spoken in favour of women’s ordination – which has been ruled out by Pope Francis – and LGBT rights.

Chantal Götz of Voices of Faith told the National Catholic Reporter: “We did not see a reason why these women should have to go through an ‘approval process’ by anyone.”

Pope Francis and several cardinals have been invited to the conference.

In an audience two years ago, Francis was asked if the church could be “more open to receiving the genius of women”. He replied: “It is true that women are excluded from decisionmaking processes

in the church: not excluded, but the presence of women is very weak there, in decision-making processes. We must move forward.”

He also warned women in religious orders against drudgery. When asked to perform work that was “more servitude than service”, he said nuns should have the courage to say no.