

Women chip Vatican's glass ceiling

VATICAN CITY - If he looked around the chapel during his Lenten retreat this year, Pope Benedict XVI would have seen an all-male assembly.

The absence of women was not deliberate. The invitation to attend the pope's spiritual exercises goes out to the top two or three officials of Vatican agencies, and almost all of them are men.

The retreat chapel offered a snapshot of a Vatican reality: The number of women working in the Roman Curia has steadily increased but, with rare exceptions, they have not broken through to the upper levels.

Six months ago Pope Benedict said that, leaving aside the ordained priesthood, women need to "make their own space" in the church and that the hierarchy shouldn't stand in their way.

The pope expressed satisfaction that women today were "very present in the departments of the Holy See." But he noted one problem: The power to make legally binding decisions in the Roman Curia is linked to holy orders.

That means the top two positions in each Vatican agency are filled by cardinals and bishops.

In a breakthrough in 2004, Salesian Sister Enrica Rosanna was named an undersecretary of the Vatican congregation that deals with religious orders. That's No. 3 in the chain of command, and it made her the highest-ranking woman at the Vatican. But it didn't settle the question of whether she could exercise the power of governance in her role.

In general, the presence of women at the Vatican has increased dramatically over the last 30 years or so. Since the beginning of Pope John Paul II's pontificate in 1978, the percentage of women employees in the main Roman Curia offices - Secretariat of State, congregations and councils - has approximately doubled, from 11 percent to 21 percent.

"I've definitely seen a change," said Filomena D'Antoni, who has worked at the Congregation for Eastern Churches for 25 years.

"When I came here, there were not only fewer women but they were also more closely monitored, in terms of behavior, dress and mentality. Today it's much more open and women are more accepted," she said.

Others who work in these offices, however, pointed out that most women are in support staff positions and have little decision-making input.

And there are whole sectors of the Vatican that still have no women: the tribunal system, for example.

The Vatican's diplomatic corps also remains all-male and all-clerical. The thinking is that these men are not only diplomats, but personal representatives of the pope to the local church and therefore should be ordained.

Among the top curial departments, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments is the only one with no women employees.

The agency with the most significant female presence is the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, where women make up about half the staff and fill some of the most important positions.

"It's an unusual situation. Probably it was not done by design, but we're happy with the outcome," said Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, secretary of the migrants council.

One of the first women to become a "capo d'ufficio" or section chief at a major Vatican agency was U.S. Sister Sharon Holland, a member of the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary who works at the congregation for religious.

"I have seen an increase in the number of women, and I think it would be safe to say there's an increase in the level of work they're doing," Sister Holland said. Women officials are more directly involved in laying the groundwork for decisions by higher-ups, she said.

“None of us make the decisions finally, but the better they’re prepared, the more likely they are to move forward,” she said.

Strangely, women remain a small minority – about 10 percent – in the ranks of consultors to Vatican agencies. These are experts around the world who advise the congregations or councils on matters under study, and who generally come to the Vatican once or twice a year for meetings.

Most congregations have between 30 and 40 consultors. But at present, the congregations dealing with doctrine, liturgy, clergy, saints’ causes and Eastern churches have no women consultors at all.

Some sources noted that while attention is often given to the men-women ratio at the Vatican another slow but significant shift has occurred in the number of lay employees in the Curia.

Laypeople now represent about 38 percent of employees in major curial agencies, numbering close to 300 people. Fifty years ago, half of the 12 Vatican congregations had no laypeople on their staffs; among the handful of laity who did work there at the time, none were women.