



HOST:

BONNIE ERBE

GUESTS:

FRANCESCA CHAMBERS,

HADLEY HEATH,

DEL. ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON (D-DC),

ERIN MATSON,

MANAL OMAR

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2013

**TRANSCRIPT PROVIDED BY
DC TRANSCRIPTION – WWW.DCTMR.COM**

BONNIE ERBE: This week on *To the Contrary*, first, gays, women, and the new pope. Then, women's issues high on the U.N. agenda. Behind the headlines: "Wadjda." We introduce you to the female director of the first theatrical release film ever shot in Saudi Arabia.

(Musical break.)

MS. ERBE: Hello. I'm Bonnie Erbe. Welcome to *To the Contrary*, a discussion of news and social trends from diverse perspectives. Up first, papal revelations.

A watershed moment for the Catholic Church on social issues? This week, Pope Francis warned in an expansive interview that the Catholic Church will lose its moral authority or, as he put it, the church's moral structure might, quote, "fall like a house of cards," end quote, if it keeps focusing on abortion, gay rights, and contraception.

In an interview with an Italian Jesuit magazine, Pope Francis said the church must balance its divisive rules on those issues with the greater need to make it a more merciful, more welcoming place for all.

In the interview, he laid out his vision for the church on these and other issues that contrast sharply with many of the priorities of his immediate predecessors, John Paul the Second and Benedict the Sixteenth.

Instead of being divisive, he said the Catholic Church must be like a, quote, "field hospital after battle," end quote, healing the wounds of its faithful and going out to find those who have been hurt, excluded, or fallen away.

So Erin Matson, what impact will the pope's words have on the social issue divide that we have here at home?

ERIN MATSON: Well, Pope Francis has taken an important first step towards reducing harms inflicted on women and LGBT people around the world with these comments. But we need to see some action.

FRANCESCA CHAMBERS: Look, if anyone thinks that the first thing on the pope's mind is what's going in American politics when he makes policy, then they've been living inside the beltway for way too long.

DEL. ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON (D-DC): Bonnie, I think this fearless pope may yet relax the right wing rigidity that has defied us mere mortals.

HADLEY HEATH: I think there's been some misinterpretation of the pope's words and maybe taken them out of context because in this 12,000-word interview, the

mention of homosexuality was fairly small. And he really just suggested that we take the issue in context, in the greater context of the gospel of Jesus Christ, knowing that there are moral prohibitions for Christians, but there's also grace, and love, and compassion.

MS. ERBE: But he also – he said that – but he said that the Catholic Church is obsessed with these issues. That's not a soft word. He approved the 12,000-word manuscript after the interview was, you know, written down and an article was written about it. So I don't see – I truly don't see where you're saying these words are being taken out of context.

MS. HEATH: I think the real obsession is in the American media. When we look at a 12,000-word essay and then we hone in on this specific issue, you know, what did the rest of the interview say? What is the rest of the –

DEL. NORTON: Oh, my goodness. I think you really have missed the point. When a pope speaks, particularly when he goes on the record about an issue that has – or that has had a rigid doctrine for as long as any of us can think, you can bet your bottom dollar, and you ought to at least give this pope that credit that he thought – that he thought very carefully, and he was sending a real message all over the world. And all I can say is, message received.

MS. ERBE: But let's just – let's just go with – that meant it because, apparently, the world is responding that way. And you were raised Catholic. What will it do to the political divide here over these social issues that a lot of people, even on the right are saying Republicans need to get off this stuff and move on to where they're really strong, which is financial issues?

MS. CHAMBERS: Yes. Well, again, I don't think this was necessarily a commentary about what Republicans or Democrats arguing –

MS. ERBE: No, of course not. No. No. And we're not saying that. I'm just asking – I want to bring – you know, this was – this happened in Italy. I want to bring its impact home to Catholics here in the United States and to social issues here in the United States.

MS. CHAMBERS: Sure. Well, I don't think it's that controversial that he said to look at the rest of the Bible, and all the other issues, and the 10 commandments that God gave. Those three things, not in the 10 commandments. Why is it so controversial to say that we need to look at lying and cheating and stealing and coveting and the rest of commandments when we're considering the things that we should be doing to live good Christian lives?

MS. MATSON: Well, in the context of the Roman-Catholic hierarchy, which is all male, it absolutely is controversial. You know, he had a bishop speaking out just in the past few weeks saying, why isn't he focusing more on abortion? And so – and that is

an incredible amount of insubordination within the Catholic Church, by the way, that the pope is being challenged, which is also something to look at.

But I think we need to look at moving this into, you know, deeds and not words, and what are concrete things that the Roman-Catholic hierarchy could do to follow the path set forward by that.

MS. ERBE: But will the – will the hierarchy, who’s all – you know, who are the children, if you will, of Benedict and John Paul the Second, who were very conservative on these issues, will they change?

Because I have a friend who left the Catholic Church just a couple of years ago because a young priest, who had just come to take over her very influential parish in Alexandria, Virginia, came in and went around the room, and said, who in here is using birth control – during a ceremony – raise your hands. You know who you are. And she and her husband, who were – already have their two kids and – you know, it just wasn’t relevant. They said, we’ve got to get out of here.

MS. MATSON: Well, and 98 percent of Catholics use contraception at some point in their lives, which is, you know, just 99 percent of everyone else. And so it’s very similar to normal patterns. But the fact is that a number of Catholics have chosen to leave. One in 10 people in this country identify as an ex-Catholic. And so this is an important step within the church.

MS. ERBE: And is that – is this message aimed at them?

DEL. NORTON: Of course.

MS. MATSON: Of course, but the question is: will the Catholic bishops take it seriously? Will they stop trying to – (inaudible)?

(Cross talk.)

DEL. NORTON: Let me – let me speak to your point. It’s an important point about, well, first of all, I think the words from a pope are amazing. And this is an authoritarian church. So I wouldn’t put words to the side, but, all right.

I take this notion about actions. I think this pope has acted in keeping with those words. This is a pope that drives around in a small car, that does not live in the big palace where the popes do, who is reaching out to people in every conceivable way. He is living in –

MS. ERBE: Washing the feet of the poor.

DEL. NORTON: Yes. But he, even more so than any pope or, my goodness, any cardinal for that matter, that you have seen, he’s first living by example. Also, remember

who this is. This is the first Jesuit pope. The Jesuits are the great intellectuals of the Catholic Church. And he's lived in the real world. And he's had that real world come up to him in Latin America. And he's trying to internalize that as pope, and he is going – whatever else he does, he is going to be seen as a great human being.

MS. ERBE: Last word.

MS. CHAMBERS: Well, I was just going to say, for the record, that's not necessarily why I left the Catholic Church. We were talking about this before and had nothing to do with those issues. It was because in high school, the youth groups of the other churches were just more fun.

MS. ERBE: Well, but do you – do you think these changes will do anything to bring fallen away Catholics back to the church in the United States?

MS. CHAMBERS: Yes. I think that that's possible, that him saying that they were going to start focusing on these other issues would maybe – that are maybe less divisive issues could possibly bring more Catholics back.

MS. HEATH: And I think that's the thrust of it, that he's talking about focus. He's talking about including this issue as a part of a broader focus on what the gospel is. I don't think that he's suggesting that the church's position on these matters is changing. In fact, he says that the teachings of the church are clear on these matters.

MS. ERBE: OK. One quick question. Will Christian churches in the United States, who have – who have made, obviously, a huge focus, placed a huge focus on abortion, gay rights, et cetera, will they be listening in any way?

MS. HEATH: You know, I would maybe push back on that question a little bit because I'm a Christian and I attend church most Sundays when I can. And it's very rare. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon on homosexuality or abortion.

MS. CHAMBERS: Or contraception.

MS. HEATH: I hear sermons about the love of Jesus Christ and the love of God for people and how that pervades every aspect of my life. And so I don't know that that's truly the focus of the churches. I think that our media has a real obsession with it, the intersection of church and culture.

MS. ERBE: I think it depends – it varies church to church because I've been – I've been a guest at sermons at churches where that's all they're talking about.

But anyway – but let us know what you think – and, by the way, this patch is not permanent. It's just for medical reasons for this week.

Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe. From church doctrine to women's empowerment.

As the U.N. kicks off its 68th General Assembly, there's lots of speculation about a possible meeting between President Obama and Iran's new president. But our focus is how and why this will be a pivotal session for women. The session's theme is the post-2015 development agenda.

So next week, member countries, NGOs and philanthropists will try to design a way to meet the global needs of women and children in such areas as health care, gender equality, education, and HIV/AIDS. They'll also brainstorm strategies to maximize contributions women and teens can make toward those development goals.

So, Congresswoman Norton, although the whole world's focus will be on whether the president meets with his counterpart from Iran, and what's going on in Syria, there are huge events going on around women, women's development goals, gender equality in government, and end – eradication of poverty. Should those things be more of a focus and should they be getting more attention?

DEL. NORTON: Well, this deadline of 2015 that the United Nations has put on issues of this kind are coming to the fore. You have a new leadership at the United Nations. And I think that, increasingly, we are seeing that the issues the world still has to work on are issues that flow from gender in one fashion or the other, the women who take care of the children, the children – that puts us back to women, the women who cannot contribute to the full economy, and, therefore, live in poverty and have to perpetuate poverty. You can't escape the female phalanx of all of this. And I think that that it's coming to the fore at a time when we're just coming out of the great recession and people are willing to listen.

MS. HEATH: I think the real enemy to women's advancement, aside from certain governments in other parts of the world who are truly antagonistic towards women's rights, is poverty. And we look at worldwide poverty –

MS. ERBE: Poverty and lack of education.

MS. HEATH: Right. And we know that the real hurdle in the way of poverty is a lack of free enterprise. Free enterprise has done more to bring people out of poverty than any government system. And so I would suggest that the U.N. really consider part of their development goals and increasing access to free enterprise.

MS. MATSON: And well, when we were just talking about a kinder, gentler Vatican – and this is an area where a kinder, gentler Vatican could really make a difference, because you've had interference a number of times with passing treaties that would, you know, help women, that would reduce violence over concerns about contraception and abortion. So this would be a wonderful place for the Vatican to step up with deeds.

MS. ERBE: That's an excellent point because we actually – we at “To the Contrary” covered the '94 conference on population and development, part of which was to get access to birth control and contraceptives to women who need it, every woman in the world who needed it as well as access to education. And the Vatican came in and said, no, we're opposed to this, and blocked it.

MS. MATSON: And that's unfortunate that it stops progress in other realms and also that, you know, access to contraception reduced maternal mortality and brings along a whole host of health benefits. And so it's important for those reasons as well.

MS. CHAMBERS: This is such a complicated issue. Other than the gender issues, going back to what you were talking about, about the economic issues, that has a lot to do with the political issues because you're not going to see free enterprise a lot of times in a stable economic situation until you have a stable political situation. And the U.N. or the U.S. or other nations can't just, you know, bust in the doors, you know, and take over these countries and put in place stable political situations so that they can have, you know, better education and lower unemployment and a whole other host of issues that the U.N. is concerned with.

MS. ERBE: But should the U.N. be taking a strong stance on, for example, maternal and child health care? There are 220 million women in the world who have access to none of that. And there are lots of – there are I think almost 100,000 maternal deaths in child birth every year in the world. Should that be more of an issue? Should the U.N. – should this be part of the U.N.'s portfolio?

MS. CHAMBERS: Well, that's a whole other debate about what the U.N. should or shouldn't be doing. I think the U.N. does a lot of things that we could debate maybe that the U.N. shouldn't be getting involved in. But there are other issues that they're looking into, like the HIV/AIDS things. Those are very wonderful. The higher education issues, unemployment. But I do think it's great for nations to come together and figure out how we solve those problems.

MS. HEATH: I think with – you know, you look at infant mortality or maternal health, any measure of health is almost across the board better off in countries that are wealthier, in countries that are more economically developed. So when we talk about dollars and cents, it seems separated from human development but it's really not. When these countries have stronger, more stable economies then we will see improvements in health care.

MS. ERBE: All right. Join us Tuesday at 2:00 p.m. Eastern Time for a special interactive screening of our “To the Contrary” documentary, “Saving Women and Girls.” We'll hear from Melinda Gates and other leaders about their commitment to women's reproductive health, and show you what it's like for women overseas who have no access to maternal health. Log in and use the URL on the screen, or visit our website for more information.

Behind the headlines: “Wadjda,” the first film by a Saudi woman and the first feature film shot in Saudi Arabia, opened in theaters across the country this weekend. “To the Contrary” spoke with director Haifaa al-Mansour about why and how she wrote and directed this film.

(Begin video segment.)

MS. ERBE: “Wadjda” is the story of a young Saudi girl who just wants to ride a bicycle. It’s also about love and freedom in a sometimes repressive and sexist society.

HAIFAA AL-MANSOUR [Director, “Wadjda”]: It’s a film about hope, about embracing potential. And it moves away from picturing women coming in the Arab world as victims and helpless because an image like this does not change and does not contribute. And I felt that depicting women as survivors, as people who are – can change their destiny if they work hard. And that is a tough place like anywhere else in the world. Sometimes it’s tougher for a woman for sure, but it’s very important to give them those inspiring characters that are willing to fight and change things for their favor.

MS. ERBE: The movie was filmed in Saudi Arabia with the participation and endorsement of the Saudi government, a very unusual thing as the country is known for its repressive policies towards women. Al-Mansour had to direct the movie indirectly, from a nearby van, hidden from sight. She saw her cast and crew on monitors and instructed them via radio.

MS. AL-MANSOUR: For me, it was very frustrating and I was really – sometimes, I wanted to jump out of that van. It’s confined and I wanted to change things and feel the (blocking ?) and change where the actors are. But I’m very – I feel good that I was able to film the first film in Saudi. And for me it wasn’t a clash with people as much as being engaged with the art and bring something – tolerance on film and all that. And if we have to be a van, we’ll be in a van. It’s worth that.

MS. ERBE: Al-Mansour may have been confined to a van, but Wadjda was riding a bicycle. For al-Mansour and other filmmakers, such as Steven Spielberg, the bike is a powerful symbol.

MS. AL-MANSOUR: In a lot of films, they have the bicycle and the heart. And I felt that will bring with it a lot to the film. And then, it is also about mobility and freedom and being modern in a way different than what we have in Saudi. That is why I also had a young girl to be the protagonist because I wanted her mobility, her freedom. Maybe I am in a van but she at least can go. I can film her while she’s running and enjoying the open air.

MS. ERBE: Another theme she tackled in “Wadjda” is polygamy.

MS. AL-MANSOUR: It is allowed for men to take up to four wives in the society. She refused to be with him. She refused to be a second wife. And she would prefer to be a single woman. And it is hard to be a single woman in Saudi. We cannot go out without permission from a man, but she's willing to be that individual who fights for herself.

MS. ERBE: Despite worldwide acclaim, "Wadjda" is controversial in al-Mansour's home country.

MS. AL-MANSOUR: More traditional people are really – they don't want to see a woman making a film or make it about empowering women and all that. You will always find that resistance. But younger people are really happy, and they are a lot of them students like in the U.S. and everything, and they take pictures of like the poster or whatever with their pads, sending in their own Tweets.

MS. ERBE: Al-Mansour grew up in a middle-class Saudi home, in a small town. One of 12 children, she was allowed access to books, film and TV. She says she's not trying to provoke or disrespect those who adhere to a more conservative culture. Rather, she simply wants to be heard.

MS. AL-MANSOUR: I was more trying to tell them an emotional story and tell them how it feels when you are a little girl who has this amazing energy and stuff. And maybe you cannot do things because you are a woman and have people believe in her. And maybe if they have a daughter or like a sister, they give her that support.

(End video segment.)

MS. ERBE: So thank you for joining the panel, Manal Omar. Tell me, how significant is this in the world of Islamic women?

MANAL OMAR: I think it's incredibly significant. I think not only in terms of Islamic women, but particularly for Saudi Arabia, it's very significant for the nation as a whole.

But what I particularly admire is her approach. She's not trying to be excessively controversial. She's not trying to marginalize. She's really just trying to be heard and bring out a very essential topic that is important for Saudi Arabia, important for the region, and important for the Islamic world. And I think she does it quite gracefully.

MS. ERBE: And why – tell me the significance of the Saudi Arabian government giving her permission, you know, to shoot the film there. That was pretty – that's pretty watershed moment too, isn't it?

MS. OMAR: It is. You know, it's very groundbreaking, again, not only for women but I think for al Saudi, you know, in the world of art and filmmaking. And, again, it takes – you know, to the point of why she handled it gracefully. It took five

years to get the film, to get the official permission. It means that it won't be banned in Saudi Arabia. It's very important that there are viewings of this film in Saudi Arabia to initiate conversation.

And it also really brings a very crucial element, which is that women's rights in civil society don't have to be anti-government, that you can work with government to have incremental change, which I think is the most important thing for women throughout the Islamic world.

MS. ERBE: And since they don't have movie theaters in Saudi Arabia, how are Saudi women going to see this film?

MS. OMAR: Well, I think that – you know, one of the things that I did a few years ago when I did training in Saudi Arabia was really surprised at the level of education and the level of leadership that Saudi women have. I mean, it's no longer your grandmother's (gulf?). So I think that you will see private viewings. I think you'll have discussions. I think Saudi women, as she said, are very in touch with social media. So it will be a huge push out from more of a local community organizing standpoint.

DEL. NORTON: You know, we've seen some gradual relaxations in Saudi Arabia, women elected to whatever council there is that does get to govern. And I wonder if this is the Saudi government seeing this as part of its – this continuum just enough but not too much, and her delicate handling of it in keeping with that.

MS. ERBE: And the Independent Women's Forum, which you're a member of, has done a lot to work with Islamic women. What's the reaction from conservative women in America?

MS. HEATH: Well, I'm very excited about this film. And I hope that it has implications in the United States as well. I hope that many Americans get a chance to see this film for several reasons.

One, I think it's a refreshing bit of perspective about the world and about the plight of women in other countries. And it helps us to recognize how blessed we are to be American women.

And, secondly, also important, the makers of this film, we have a lot to learn from them as American women because, as you heard in the interview, the director says victimhood mentalities don't advance women.

MS. MATSON: I think this film is inspirational and that the filmmaker herself is also inspirational. And there are some deeper truths here at play. You know, every single time a woman takes a deep breath and tells her story or tells the story of women like her, I believe that has radical power to advance society. And that's what's happening with this film. It's just beautiful.

MS. ERBE: But you've been a member of the American Women's Movement your whole career and you work at it now. And, of course, the American Women's Movement was a lot more open, in your face – you know, in the '60s and '70s, bra burning, but are there parallels between our women's movement and theirs?

MS. MATSON: I believe there are. In fact, it goes back to that truth of telling your story, which is something that has happened with maybe some more controversial feminists from the past. There are also ones that didn't take that confrontational approach. Just like today, there are feminists who take a very controversial approach. There are many of us who just simply are sharing our stories and pushing for change on our own terms.

DEL. NORTON: But I think that each is emerging in the context of our own culture and what works best. And I think that the approach that American women took in the '60s was directly in keeping with our culture, just as what is happening in Saudi Arabia matches how women will gradually get their freedom there.

MS. ERBE: And I understand that this king, by the way, the current king of Saudi Arabia, is very sympathetic from that cultural perspective too, but he's also very old, and a lot of women leaders, Islamic feminists are worried about what's going to happen when he passes. Tell us about that.

MS. OMAR: I think that's true. I mean, one thing is, you know, the Saudi women are incredibly bold. Let's not forget the protests that – where they've been driving in public, which may not seem like a big deal but has led to, you know, prison sentences. So there's been very vocal and bold movements.

So a multi-directional approach is very important because it really then complements other approaches which may not be as controversial. And I think that the importance is the grassroots so that the support that's initiated by the king will be more long-lasting and that people on the ground believe in it.

MS. ERBE: Thank you, Manal. That's it for this edition of *To the Contrary*. Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe and #tothecontrary. And visit our website, pbs.org/tothecontrary, where the discussion continues. Whether you agree or think to the contrary, please join us next time.

(END)