

PBS' "TO THE CONTRARY"

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GUESTS:

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TO THE CONTRARY."

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MS. ERBE: The popularity of breast implants is rising despite startling health risks, including repeat operations, internal infections and tissue hardening. Should women discard health concerns in pursuit of the perfect body?

MS. NATIVIDAD: There is no perfect body and ruining perfect health to get there through surgery is ridiculous.

MS. MCGLOWAN: There are health risks, but I think there's some misconceptions about breast augmentation and your choices.

MS. PFLOTENHAUER: Women amplify, they don't ignore health risks and as such they are perfectly capable of making this decision for themselves.

MS. BEYER: We must, we must, we must improve our medical research.

MS. ERBE: Hello, I'm Bonnie Erbe. Welcome To The Contrary, a discussion of news and social trends from a variety of women's perspectives. In the news, more and more women are opting for breast implants despite considerable health risks. Behind the headlines, Francis Kissling, President of Catholics for a Free Choice has a mission to "neutralize" the political power of the Catholic Church. We profile this controversial American woman. Up first, the ever-popular breast implant.

A record 220,000 women had saline breast implants last year and the plastic surgery industry expects a ten percent expansion over that figure for this year; 220,000 is still twice as many as the number of women who opted for the surgery a decade earlier. Many of those implant pioneers suffered major debilitating consequences from silicone implants that are now largely banned.

The silicone implants were later linked to a host of often debilitating illnesses known as connective tissue disease. Most women today receive saline or salt water filled implants, but studies find almost one quarter of women with saline implants will need follow up surgery within five years will experience hardening of the breast tissue around the implant and maybe unable to breast feed.

The health dangers associated with silicone implants are nothing short of astonishing. According to a joint National Cancer Institute/FDA study, women with them are twice as likely to die from breast cancer, three times as likely to die from lung cancer or other respiratory diseases and four times as likely to commit suicide.

I saw the shocked look on your face, Angela McGlowan and I was shocked too. How do they relate -- four times as likely to commit suicide with breast implants? It's got to be a self-esteem issue, right?

MS. MCGLOWAN: Well, it's a self-esteem issue and a lot of times in doing my research to prepare myself for this program, a lot of times when you have cosmetic surgery you have

expectations and you sometimes -- you have a period of depression after surgery and I think, Bonnie, there are some misconceptions on cosmetic surgery and the choices. Saline solutions in a texturized silicone implant -- now, the problems that they had in the past with silicone implants was not the actual implant, but the gel in the implant.

MS. ERBE: And the implant would break and the gel --

MS. MCGLOWAN: And the gel would go into --

MS. ERBE: And you had silicone gel running around in your body.

MS. MCGLOWAN: Right. And let's look at why women are doing more often -- it's cheaper. You can finance it and number two, sometimes it's not just because of cosmetic reasons, it may be reconstructive reasons, the breasts are not asymmetrical, you might have had a lumpectomy, you might have had a mastectomy and if you get the operation under the muscle, if you have a mammogram it's better for you to see if you have cancer or not. So to answer the question --

MS. ERBE: So you're saying there's actually one health benefit in terms of detecting breast cancer.

MS. MCGLOWAN: There is.

MS. ERBE: If it is properly inserted.

MS. MCGLOWAN: If it's properly inserted, but they say that with saline solution the reason why someone has to have it every five years because women sunbathe and that raises --

MS. NATIVIDAD: I mean why even do it? What I don't understand the same time that we've had increase in the number of these breast implants there has been an American obsession with health, you know, I mean there are always these health magazines et cetera and fitness magazines --

MS. ERBE: But maybe you've hit on something brilliant there. Maybe it's health for beauty sake, not health for health sake.

MS. NATIVIDAD: I think it's still part of the American obsession with looking young. You know, uptight, uplifted breasts. Okay --

(Cross-talk.)

MS. NATIVIDAD: It is not a permanent state of affairs and so, I think, it is really harming women in the long term in terms of their health in order to just achieve a brief moment of beauty.

MS. ERBE: I've already been out, but I'm going to out myself again on this show. I've

had three plastic surgeries -- nose job, face job, eyes done and what do you feel now? Yeah, I really do feel much better about myself, no doubt, however, so I'm not knocking plastic surgery, obviously, I would be a hypocrite to do that, however, I am knocking putting anything foreign in me -- it's one thing to sort of nip and tuck. It's quite another thing to insert a foreign object into your body. Why are women so attracted to this? You know, forget about the reconstruction, we all understand that.

MS. BEYER: Well, you know, there's more to understand here because we see there are 220,000 happening a year, 80,000 of those are for reconstruction, but a lot of women -- baby boomers in particular who have their children later in life -- you haven't had children, but I can tell you having children especially if you were breast feeding results in a drastic change in your breast and so when you look at that number and you think of women trying to be different -- but these women may not trying to be Britney Spears, but they're simply trying to feel like themselves again.

MS. PFOTENHAUER: And that's what I hear most commonly from my friends who have elected to have the surgery and I kind of take a libertarian approach on it and if people are educated on the risk and they make that decision it's fine with me, but the women who I know who have done this have done it after second, third, fourth child and they say, I just want to look like myself again.

MS. ERBE: Well, let me ask you this though. Do they want to look like themselves again for themselves for other women or for men?

(Cross-talk.)

MS. MCGLOWAN: I think it's a self-image for themselves, but I want to just go back to reconstruction. I had a friend that was a 32 AA and had a lumpectomy and they had to remove almost all of her breast. She was so depressed and you're talking about the long-term some people with depression end up committing suicide. After she got her breast done she was so happy and every time she would look in the mirror she looked ugly.

MS. PFOTENHAUER: She even would recoil that's what I hear people saying that they would recoil from their --

MS. NATIVIDAD: But Angela, I think everyone understands the need for reconstructive surgery and I think for that reason alone it should be available. What I'm railing against -- are the women themselves to decide to do this they're now younger and younger women who are getting implants done. Why? There are 18-year-olds; they are in the bloom of their youth. Why put a foreign object in, you still have all the rest of your life for all that tissue to do bad things around the implant.

MS. BEYER: Well, I put this under the rubric of choice and that's why at the top of the show that we've got to really examine these decisions that we're making, but I am a member of you don't know until you get there club -- one way or another. Well, maybe I don't but in -- I used to think plastic surgery when I was in my twenties -- or another. I would never do that,

well, I'm 45.

(Cross-talk.)

MS. ERBE: And on those lovely notes we will move along to the next topic behind the headlines, women the gentler gender? Well, even in these repeatedly progressive days, women who oppose large organizations and express no fear in so doing are labeled sharp elbowed or aggressive, a stereotype many believe is unfair.

Frances Kissling's job is to take on and in her words "neutralize" the political power of the Catholic Church, a campaign she has been waging for the past quarter of a century. To The Contrary profiles the woman who is leading the charge against the Church.

Whether she's tracing down the halls of Congress, attending an international conference or holding a news conference, Frances Kissling is a woman on a mission, a mission to defrock the Catholic Church of its massive political power.

Your goal is to represent the Catholics who are pro-choice and to get the Church to change its philosophy, right? Am I stating your goal?

MS. KISSLING: Two goals. I mean one goal I think is achievable in our lifetime and that is to neutralize the enormous political power that the Catholic Church has in Congress, at the United Nations and in other countries and in that sense not only to work with reproductive rights, but to work for good separation of church and state.

MS. ERBE: Why neutralize it?

MS. KISSLING: Well, I think that's the best that one can do. I mean when you start a campaign you look strategically at what you can accomplish. We started this organization with the Church having in '73, in 1973 with the Church having enormous political power with legislators believing that the Catholic bishops represented the viewpoints of the Catholic people. We still have a situation where represented lobbyists of the Catholic Church are writing healthcare legislation for members of Congress.

MS. ERBE: On this day, we take Ms. Kissling and other staffers from the organization she runs, Catholics for a Free Choice, meeting with assistants to California Democrat Nancy Pelosi, the House Majority Whip and highest ranking woman in Congress. There is no issue too controversial; no Church position too sacrosanct for Ms. Kissling to challenge. It's a daunting task. Despite her organization's polls would show, a majority of American Catholics agree with her.

MS. KISSLING: I mean we've had polls taken on this subject ad nauseum in the United States and the reality is that anywhere from 70 to 85 percent of Catholics have the basic belief that the abortion decision is a moral decision best left to the conscience of women. Of course, Catholics have complex views on abortion as do I think most people, but they believe -- whatever they believe about abortion morally, whatever they believe about the reasons that

justify abortion; they believe that abortion should be legal.

MS. ERBE: Despite this, Ms. Kissling has been harassed and threatened -- told by others she's not Catholic and accused of worse.

MS. KISSLING: It's not very pleasant to be called a heretic, to know that every time you're invited to speak somewhere, some Church authority calls up the host or institution and says this woman is not a Catholic, this woman doesn't know what she's talking about. This woman is anti-Catholic. I mean that's the current thrust in the Church, which has been very successful I think is to claim that every critic is anti-Catholic and this has frightened a lot of people. It's frightened media, its frightened politicians.

MS. ERBE: But it doesn't frighten Ms. Kissling, who has been the subject of a "60 Minutes" essay and a wide variety of other high profile media reports for her mouse versus the elephant type crusade. She not only challenges the Church on abortion rights, she also challenges the Vatican's designation as a state in international forums, such as the United Nations and UN conferences. We caught her in 1994 at the U.N. Conference on Population and Development. For this and other stands the personal charges against her own faith flow, including a call from Reverend Jerry Falwell during this 1984 appearance on C-SPAN.

REV. FALWELL: I'm very sorry that you as a Catholic have repudiated the teaching of your own Church, which is in my opinion biblical teaching and I really think you do the Church a disservice by going under the heading Catholics for a Free Choice. You may be an individual for a free choice, but you're not a Catholic for a free choice because, frankly, the Roman Catholic Church stands totally and entirely against what you're proposing tonight.

MS. KISSLING: Yes, except for the fact of the matter, Reverend Falwell, I think I probably know a lot more about Catholic teachings than you do number one, and secondly, the Catholic Church is not a club, so that we don't just simply -- membership is not based simply upon the following of certain set rules and regulations they're being allowed in or allowed out arbitrarily. The Catholic Church is, in fact, a Church of the people. It is a contract and a covenant that I have with God personally and quite frankly it is not up to you as a non-Catholic to tell me whether I am a Catholic or not.

MS. ERBE: One would think the recent church/priest pedophilia scandal would make Ms. Kissling's job easier, after all, many prominent Catholics have spoken out against the Church in recent months, something that would have been unheard of a year ago.

MS. KISSLING: I don't think it's the current crisis around clergy sexual abuse that has impacted on the institutional church at all. I don't think the Pope gets it; I don't think the cardinals get it. I think that you have a classic defensive mechanism going on. I think that the institutional church is reacting to clergy sexual abuse in the same way it has reacted to any other criticism and that is to close the doors to become extremely defensive and in some cases, to even attack the victims of clergy sexual abuse, but the Pope doesn't get it, the cardinals don't get it, the priests don't get it and there really doesn't seem to be any understanding that the Church needs to change, so I have very little hope that the institutional church will change of its own

volition as a result of this scandal.

What I do think is different is, first of all, I think that the bishops have totally lost in America -- have totally lost all moral credibility. That people who thought Catholics for a Free Choice was too extreme in its criticism of the institutional church now come to us and say, you know, you people were right.

MS. ERBE: However, widespread embarrassment of the Church hierarchy has energized the Church reform movement and Ms. Kissling along with it.

MS. KISSLING: The Church should change its position on contraception. It should allow people to get divorced and remarry and have the sacraments. It should recognize homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle -- legitimate life. It should, of course, allow women to have abortions and follow their own consciences, but changing the Church is not something we can accomplish in my lifetime.

MS. ERBE: Then why bother?

MS. KISSLING: The Church is a very powerful institution. You look at the United States of America, it's almost 25 percent of American people are Catholic. The Church employs lobbyists in 30 states in the United States who influence legislation. We have a health care system that is changing dramatically where Catholic and non-Catholic hospitals are emerging and where reproductive health services are being eliminated. Eighty two percent of Catholic hospitals do not provide women with emergency contraception. You can't ignore this as a Catholic. I mean when I grew up I had a good Catholic education and what I was taught was being a Catholic doesn't mean you're popular, doesn't mean being popular. It means taking a stand for what you believe in and in this case what needs to change, what needs to change in order for their to be social justice are the positions of the Roman Catholic Church.

And so it's very important in what I am as a Catholic is a change agent. If you set yourself out there everyday as I do saying that the Church is wrong on this, the Church is wrong on that, you -- go home at night and you say can I continue to be a member of this Church? Can I call myself a Catholic? And the more I think about it the more strongly I feel that, of course, I am Catholic, but what it means to be a Catholic is to seek truth to power. This is what Jesus Christ did. This is what Galileo did. This is what Joan of Arc did, not that I'm any of those people, but this is what good Catholics have done. They have resisted injustice even in the Church and you know there's a thing about religion in a sense. I mean you really can't ask anybody why are you Methodist? Why are you Catholic? Why are you a Buddhist? Because religion is a transcendental and irrational experience. You can't prove it, so why I am attached to the Catholic Church is a mystery. It's part of the sacramental reality that I have lived from my infancy. It's not a part of the politics. The politics is the politics. The Church as a government or the Church as a political institution needs to be resisted as do all unjust institutions and that has nothing to do with the spirituality or the message of Jesus Christ, which is one part and soul.

MS. ERBE: Is the Church able to withstand or even support dissent within the Church? Is the Church like the Republican Party a big tent or does it want to dictate? Does the hierarchy

want to dictate a particular set of rules and if you don't adopt those rules issued by those humans who interpreted supposedly God's word, you're out and if you do accept them, you're in?

MS. PFOTENHAUER: You know, I think it's fascinating to listen to her and I certainly can feel her conviction and her passion, but I believe that it's the Church's role to point to that which is enduring an eternal whatever faith we happen to be discussing and that historically in the past when this Church -- the Catholic Church has tried to emulate popular opinion rather than going back to that which was enduring an eternal, we have seen some fairly scary things happen. The Reformation -- when you had Catholic priests selling indulgences. We saw the Catholic Church look the other way on slavery for a long, long time and we saw them at least implicitly condone what the Nazis were doing.

So I'm just saying that we want to be very careful. I think that there is room for the public to help bring this to the attention of the Church leaders, but that we shouldn't so quickly apply the rules of politics and political agendas to the Catholic faith.

MS. NATIVIDAD: But the Church is a political institution. The Vatican has asked for representation within the United Nations for instance and as was mentioned by Frances it hires lobbyists. It has a political presence.

MS. ERBE: At one time it had an Army.

MS. NATIVIDAD: Exactly. The purveyor of those eternal truths that you're talking about that many of us and I'm a practicing Catholic believe in are mental or faulty as you know just evidenced by all the sex scandals that we've had. The rules that they are putting in place are rules that they themselves have broken and so what's happened of late is that there is a questioning of the rules that are based on those eternal truths that have been enacted by these faulty men.

MS. PFOTENHAUER: And that's why I think that there is the potential for the public to inform the Church because there's kind of a question about what is true here and what has become an action that was really never intended and is not biblically based and that's why there is room here --

MS. ERBE: Wait a minute, but I think that almost needs to be clerically determined by a --

MS. BEYER: There is something calls census medea and it's one of the tenets of the Catholic Church and it's defense of the flock and I think clearly that this woman is fighting essentially the separation of church and state and if you look at what gave us the right to vote by a very narrow margin in this country it was the argument for the separation of church and state. Not only does she that there's a dichotomy between what the flock of the Catholic Church is interested in with regard at a minimum to birth control. There is a dichotomy between what people in the United States think relative to some of these very right wing causes that are lobbied for by the Catholic Church --

MS. PFOTENHAUER: And the Church also lobbies very hard under the rubric of social justice, but are considered hard lapse; so I think that should be mentioned also. They're mainly a religion that really doesn't have a presence on Capitol Hill. AIPAC, which is the Jewish political action committee, is one of the most powerful forces on Capitol Hill among Republicans and Democrats.

MS. NATIVIDAD: But your address actually answered the question that was posed by Bonnie earlier. Is there a big gap in the Jewish religion? There is a reform part and there is a very conservative part.

MS. ERBE: And more than the orthodox they are stricter than the conservatives.

MS. NATIVIDAD: Yeah, well, but what I'm saying is that why could the Catholic Church not have the same spectrum if you will of beliefs and that's what she's fighting for, the right to have differing views within the same umbrellas that we call --

MS. McGLOWAN: Bonnie, I'm just so confused because I cannot see how you can -- I cannot see how you can be spiritual and religious and be a Catholic and be pro-choice. I just can't see it. I mean it's the basis of the Catholic Church --

MS. ERBE: Let me throw out this question. If you follow Catholic laws says or Catholic rules say no abortion. They also say no birth control other than the rhythm method.

MS. McGLOWAN: Right.

MS. ERBE: How many Catholics do you know who use the rhythm method?

MS. McGLOWAN: I haven't taken a poll, I haven't taken a poll but why be in the Catholic religion if you can't go by the rules?

MS. ERBE: But then what you're saying is that 90 -- just on that alone, 99 percent of the people, men and women who are in the Church should not be in it.

MS. McGLOWAN: And on that note -- If you can't go by the rules -- I don't see the change.

MS. NATIVIDAD: But I'm just telling you that the rules have been established by a faulty group of people who have desires just like anybody else, so why would they lay dictum regarding the sexual life of Americans in this country when they themselves could not follow those rules, which then leads you to question the authority that the Church imposes?

(Cross-talk.)

MS. McGLOWAN: We should all be able to do things --

MS. ERBE: One at a time. One at a time.

MS. NATIVIDAD: But I think that Catholics that have a right to dissent within the structured authority, which is what she's asking for. It is not a question of you being more right than me because you happen to where a cloth.

MS. PFOTENHAUER: But there are degrees that you could take issue with and I think what it comes down to is figuring out whether it's an issue that really gets at the heart and soul of the Catholic faith or whether it's something that's secondary or tertiary and I think that there probably is room for movement and that secondary or tertiary --

MS. BEYER: And she is fighting for those.

MS. PFOTENHAUER: That is -- if you get to something that's considered integral to the faith itself than I think the church leadership has to question whether or not she's pointing in the right direction or the wrong direction.

MS. ERBE: And the To The Contrary leadership has to question that we're out of time, but hold that thought for after credits. That's it for this edition of To The Contrary. Next week, we talk with controversial feminist writer Phyllis Chesler about her new book, *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*. Why women are often cruel to each other on the next To The Contrary.

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(End of program.)