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BONNIE ERBE: This week on *To the Contrary*, first, Pope Francis and Catholic women. Behind the headlines, a former nun says the church should reconsider celibacy. Then, women, money, and politics.

(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, the Vatican and women.

A number of remarkable events surrounding the papacy took place this week. Most recently, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI emerged from retirement to respond to criticism of his handling of the priest pedophilia scandal. He denied accusations that he covered up sexual abuse by priests. Meanwhile, former Father Greg Reynolds of Australia became the first person excommunicated under the papacy of Pope Francis. He's an outspoken supporter of women's ordination and gay marriage.

Then, there was a slew of publicity and positive reaction from Catholics around the world last week to Pope Francis's remarks criticizing the church. In his words, he said the church should drop its obsession with divisive issues such as gay rights and abortion and contraception.

There was less coverage of his reversal a day later. He lectured an audience of Catholic obstetricians about the evils of abortion saying every pregnancy aborted bears the face of Jesus.

So Mercy, was this a flip-flop or does Pope Francis truly want to stay away from divisive issues like abortion?

MERCEDES VIANA SCHLAPP: There is no flip-flop. Pope Francis is as committed to making sure that you define the mission of the church, which is a salvation of Jesus and letting people around the world know about this, as well as committed to the moral teachings of the church.

PATRICIA SOSA: I think Pope Francis wants to have his cake and eat it too. And only time will tell us if he can get away with it.

DARLENE KENNEDY: I don't speak for the Holy Father. However, I do believe his intent in the comments was to say that there are many issues that we have to address in the Catholic Church. Abortion is a sin and he didn't say it wasn't.

LARA BROWN: Yeah, I don't think that this is actually a flip-flop. I think he was trying to contextualize the abortion debate within the larger conversation of all of the church's teachings.

MS. ERBE: Well, I'm thrilled to say – by the way, we have an entirely Catholic panel today, which was wonderful. I am not a Catholic, huge fan of this pope, or at least I was last Thursday, and then on Friday, I figure, what is he doing? So not that he cares whether I'm a fan of his or not. But actually Bill Maher, a big critic of religion has been saying nice things about him, as has Piers Morgan of CNN also.

MS. SCHLAPP: Look, I'm a – a lot of us are communicators here in the panel and I have to tell you, the pope's got the right tone. And that's something that's been missing in the Catholic Church for a long time. Because what's happened is that the Catholic Church has almost wanted to become like a political agency dictating, you know, their positions. And what he's trying to do is he's trying to focus that back to what is the core mission of the church. And that is to introduce people to the love of Christ.

MS. ERBE: OK, but then why – and get away from materialism –

MS. SCHLAPP: No, no –

MS. ERBE: – by the way, get away from a very – what had become a very materialistic church –

MS. SCHLAPP: – simplify –

MS. ERBE: But I do want to get to the role women play in this.

MS. SCHLAPP: Sure.

MS. ERBE: And why a day after giving this incredible interview does he not go back and talk – and put – you know – say anything nasty about gays or homosexuals, but he says – you know – and again, obviously, abortion more of a women's issue than a man's issue. Is it because he has less – when he – when he's trying to make the pope – the church opening and welcoming, is that –

(Cross talk.)

MS. SCHLAPP: That is a moral teaching of the church. The moral teaching of the church is defending the sanctity of life. For instance, he did something that a woman sent him a letter. And actually, I think she was in South America – sent him a letter saying this man who I had sex with, I'm pregnant, he wants me to get an abortion, what do I do? The pope picked up the phone and called this woman and said, you have this – you know – you're – don't abort this child. Have this child. This is a beautiful gift from God. He – it is that touching – it is that personal touch to people. And it is about – again, he's not going to change his positions, the church's teachings on abortion. It is very clear.

MS. SOSA: Well, I think it's going to be very interesting and I – again, time will tell because I think the dialogue – he's expanded a dialogue and I'm very supportive of that. And I think he wants to put the church in a larger context. But there're some realities that eventually he has to go beyond talking. And I would say abortion is one, but most importantly it's the role of women and particularly of nuns.

MS. ERBE: Right, and when –

MS. SOSA: Because this is an issue.

MS. ERBE: He has raised that he wants to come up with a deeper theology of women, which –

MS. SOSA: Which obviously –

MS. ERBE: – a nun wrote in “Time” Magazine this week. She didn't even know what that meant, but I'm asking you –

MS. SOSA: They knew what that meant because there's a lot of deep theological analysis by nuns. So it's not like it's a new concept because he's avoiding the bottom line issue, what is the role that nuns will have. He said the door is closed. He actually had publicly said the ordination of nuns is closed. Obviously, the excommunication of the priest in Australia, who's both but mostly known as supporting the ordination nuns is telling you where he's going. And this is not going to be easy for him. This is not going to get away with words. He's going to have to start acting if he's going to maintain his popularity.

MS. KENNEDY: I was just going to say. The priest that was excommunicated wasn't just because of the issue of supporting nuns being – holding higher offices or seats, but also the fact that he outwardly supported gay marriage, which is a –

MS. ERBE: He officiated some –

MS. KENNEDY: Yes, and that is – that is – he broke the rules, I mean, the bottom line. I mean, and not to get into all of the catechism and all of that stuff. But the fact is he outwardly spoke against the rules of the church. He's not – he's not – that's not his job to do.

MS. BROWN: But I think there is a larger issue, which really speaks to our own sort of characterization of Catholicism. Unfortunately, there are teachings that are both what we would consider liberal and what we would consider conservative. And we so much want to sort of put Catholicism into one group or another and it's really not. It's a much larger, complex religion that looks at – I mean, if you're talking abortion and life, then you also have to talk about the fact that the church doesn't believe in premarital sex. So one of the other issues is, you know, when sort of a relationship is consummated

within a marriage, there is a belief that all of those unions should then essentially turn into children. So there're a lot of more complex, deeper issues –

MS. ERBE: OK.

MS. BROWN: – about the church.

MS. ERBE: But what do you think about what he means about a deeper theology for women and giving women more power within the church?

MS. BROWN: Well, I think what that means is recognizing more – at least the scholars that I would talk to would say sort of the role of Virgin Mary within the stories of the Bible and within essentially a context of Jesus' life. There are, you know, passages within the Bible which speak to Mary –

MS. ERBE: But does it – does it translate into any more real power for nuns?

(Cross talk.)

MS. SCHLAPP: I think it's important to understand that dogma is church's tradition. So the dogma is a moral teaching. This is where we have sanctity of life, sanctity of marriage, et cetera, et cetera. Then, you have the church's traditions, which is the male priests, the fact priests can't get married. That can change. It might not change under Pope Francis, but it could change. And so I think that's where you have to understand where it all kind of plays out.

MS. BROWN: And let me just throw in, you know, Sojourner Truth, years ago, said, you know, how was Jesus born, and essentially she comes back and says it was between God and a woman and men had nothing to do with it. So the other side of this is if you really get into these deep teachings, there are actually questions about the role that women might be able to play, which is a deeper, more expansive role.

MS. SOSA: But the challenge the church has is like there's a lot of churches that have no priests because there's not enough priests to run the church, is losing money because of all the pedophilia cases, is losing followers because it's not a modern church. You know, it's so out of context of the reality. But this whole thing, oh, you have to have –

MS. SCHLAPP: But this is happening across all churches, why? Because our country's becoming more secular. Europe is becoming more secular. It's not just the Catholic Church. There are these crises that are occurring in different churches because unfortunately our country or countries in Europe, they're deciding that they're not going to be religious.

MS. ERBE: And I mean, there's an easy way to sum it up, which I always do, which is educated, more – countries where there's more education – in Italy, women are

having 1.4 children on average. That's the fertility rate. That's nothing. That's not replacement value. It's the see of the Vatican why? Because women have – it's the highest rate –

MS. SCHLAPP: It's an economic issue –

MS. ERBE: No, it's the highest rate of Ph.D. female in all of Europe.

MS. SCHLAPP: And it's also an economic issue plays a role there because they can't afford to have more children. I mean, there're several factors to say besides just the education factor.

MS. ERBE: The truth is you educate women. They have fewer kids. But – but – but – and that's an over – that's a global truth inside and outside the Catholic Church. But last, let's talk about the pedophilia scandal. He hasn't really – is he – is all of the rest of this just a way to push that behind the headlines?

MS. BROWN: Well, I think that some of this has to do with the fact that they still have, you know, essentially legal issues. And certainly the church is not going to come out if they think they have to be on the hook for greater damages with other legal complaints that are still pending.

MS. KENNEDY: But, you know, let's be clear. What happened was wrong. It was illegal. And I certainly do not support those who move face from place to place to hide it. They should have been exposed and kicked out of the church. But I believe that the pope's dialogue or the discussion is about opening this dialogue with the world and understanding who we really are as Catholics because as so many other religions, there's a misinterpretation. Evangelicals are seen to be, you know, lunatics and they, you know, just crazy Bible thumpers. And Catholics, you know, sometimes said the same way. But we're – you know, we're people who have a strong faith in God and we want the world to understand why we have that faith. And I think that's what the pope wants to do.

MS. ERBE: All right. Our behind the headlines segment this week is celibacy and the Catholic Church. Mary Johnson was a nun who spent 20 years in Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity order. She resigned and is now a married atheist and writer living in the Southwest. We spoke with her about her fascinating and daring book, "An Unquenchable Thirst."

(Begin video segment.)

MARY JOHNSON: On the one hand, we were trying to help the poor. We were feeding them, sheltering them, comforting them, but on the other, Mother Teresa understood that suffering was what brought a person close to God. And she felt like the poor were closer to God because they were suffering more.

MS. ERBE: Mary Johnson joined the order to help the poor of Calcutta, India. Instead, her time was riving with inner conflict. Mother Teresa taught nuns not just to abstain from sex, but to avoid touching anyone for any reason whenever possible.

MS. JOHNSON: We were very poor, two sets of cloths, washed one every day, hoped it dried so we could change the next day, obedience. We never really had any say in what we were to do. Chastity was also really extreme. We could write our families once a month. We had to cut off our relationships with any friends that we had. We weren't allowed to talk to one sister alone.

MS. ERBE: Nuns were only allowed to visit families once every 10 years. Strong connections between nuns were discouraged. Johnson began a clandestine physical relationship with another nun.

MS. JOHNSON: I was very lonely. This sister got close to me. It felt really good. It was like someone is paying attention to me. Somebody wants to know who I am, wants to know about me, wants to spend time with me. And at the same time, I knew that I had this vow of chastity where I wasn't supposed to have that kind of relationship. I was supposed to be only for Jesus. I felt guilty. I felt conflicted.

MS. ERBE: Deprived of company and intimacy by her order, Johnson continued her secret entanglements.

MS. JOHNSON: I had a relationship with a priest as well after – afterwards, and you know, I think it's kind of impossible to say that you can really have a healthy relationship with a priest because it always has to be something secret.

MS. ERBE: After 20 years as a nun, Johnson left.

MS. JOHNSON: I just left because I felt so completely suffocated. And I knew that this was not a place that I could flourish. I kept hearing – when I would go to pray, I'd hear these words of Jesus in my mind, "I came that they may have life and have it to the full." And I just felt like my life wasn't full. How could God want me here?

MS. ERBE: Now, Johnson is an atheist. She says she wants to call attention to the issue of church celibacy.

MS. JOHNSON: We all have those needs for intimacy, those needs to love and to be loved, to be known by another person. There's really no theological barrier to having a married clergy. And I hope that that might change.

MS. ERBE: Even in death, Mother Teresa is one of the world's most respected women. She won a Nobel Peace Prize, among many awards during her lifetime. The Catholic Church is moving toward making her a saint. While Johnson admired Mother Teresa's charitable work, she was disappointed by other factors.

MS. JOHNSON: She was the only woman in the church with enough political capital, where the pope and the bishops would listen to here. But she never disagreed with them. She always felt that her place was to obey them. And she just said whatever the church teaches, that's what I'm going to believe. And that's how she got on in the world. But I don't think it was a service to women or to the poor.

(End video segment.)

MS. ERBE: When you hear about how strict – I mean, not see your family but every 10 years. I mean, was Mother Teresa very good to her subordinates?

MS. KENNEDY: Well, I'm not one to question how Mother Teresa or any order is run, and that's just not my place. But I will say this. I had an opportunity to read the memoir and, you know, a memoir is about your perception of your life and things that have happened in your life. So I'm not questioning whether they did or didn't happen in Ms. Johnson's life, but I think something that she didn't discuss is that, you know, sometimes you feel you have a calling, whether it's to be a priest or a preacher or a nun, what have you. And then, there's a time where you realize maybe I don't have that calling and I need to step back. And it seems like she was in a position where she knew very early on that she should have stepped back and didn't. The things that she discusses in her book about, you know, there was a predator – basically she's saying was a predator nun, fellow nun on other people. So she should have been exposed and taken out of the order.

Those kind of things should be, you know, should be addressed.

MS. ERBE: Agree, disagree, and the whole thing about celibacy is – is it just not going to work?

MS. BROWN: Well, I think this is where honestly what you see is this division between what is God and what is man. And when I say that, what I mean is that God at the sort of spiritual level is about love and sort of man and human beings are about power. So the problem is there is always –

MS. ERBE: They're also about hormones.

MS. BROWN: Yes, but there's always this tension between sort of surrendering to God and then allowing human beings to control what that means. And I think that some of what you see here is when human beings are in control of what it means to be faithful to God. There're become these really huge problems.

MS. SCHLAPP: I think it's important also – there's an article that came out on "Washington Post" blog from Father O'Brien. He's a Jesuit priest in Georgetown. And he explains why I choose to live a celibate life. Now, it's not for everybody, for sure. These people make this commitment to God. You might not understand it. You might not understand it. But it is their – what they feel is their calling and their vocation. And

he says it. He said that he was in a committed romantic relationship before he was 29 and he was working his job. And he felt very unfulfilled and it wasn't until he decided to go into the priesthood. And now, he says, he's 46 years old, where he says, look, I'm – I have my struggles with my vows once in a while. I'm human, but I've made a choice. This is a choice. No one's forcing these women to be in this missionary. They can get out. Women have these choices. And so he then decided, I can – you know – I'm fine being servant. This is how I feel. I am fully serving God. And I am fully serving – you know – the people that he serves in Georgetown.

MS. SOSA: Well, I'm not disagreeing with you. And that's true. And sexuality has many dimensions and different people act differently to celibacy.

MS. ERBE: And different people act – the same people act differently in different stages of their life.

MS. SOSA: Exactly, exactly. But I have to say that – I mean, I – kudos to her for telling the story. She told a very intimate, very controversial story. And she's putting on the table the inside of what is to try to live a celibate life. And that, you know, we have to agree that the pedophilia cases are linked to it. And you know, the rumor that – you know, the gay sons of the average families would end up priests, and then, you know, how do they manifest their sexuality. I mean it's – you know, I would say the urban myth, but it is there. So you know, it's hard balance to suppress your sexuality. It's not, you know, a whole new situation based on that. I think that's why we have, again, these pedophilia cases, is a terrible rule to have.

MS. ERBE: And is it sustainable? But you could – right – because like we think back to the Middle Ages, well, somehow, for some reason, they were able to stay celibate and not have all these scandals. Well, the real difference is communication. Back then, there was none. And you could run – you could run a boys choir and do whatever you wanted to the kids and it would not get into the nonexistent local newspaper or on Twitter or–

MS. SOSA: Well, in Latin America, I mean, it's famous that the former president of Paraguay was a priest. And you know, he had kids galore. I mean, it's like it's known that these priests were not actual – they were not celibate.

MS. KENNEDY: But you know, celibacy, the rule of celibacy is not part of the dogma. It is a tradition that's gone –

(Cross talk.)

MS. ERBE: But didn't it start under Augustine or something in the 3rd century?

MS. SCHLAPP: It was in the Middle Ages.

MS. KENNEDY: Yeah, the Middle Ages. And there were priests that were marrying. There were popes that were marrying. So you know, this has come down the line to the point where celibacy has been accepted. And again, as Mercy said, no one's forced to do this. If they have decided they want to take the vows and do so, then that's –

MS. ERBE: Well, but the flip side of that is that there aren't, at least in the states in Europe, there aren't enough –

(Cross talk.)

MS. ERBE: – signing up.

MS. KENNEDY: But I did want to say is, you know, every person who's celibate is not going to be a pedophile or rapist or you know, a predator. I mean, you know, those are –

MS. ERBE: But very large percentages of them will have sex in some way, shape, or form, not predatory.

MS. BROWN: But most of the research on pedophilia and who becomes these are people who've been abused themselves. So this is psychological replication –

MS. ERBE: I'm not talking about pedophilia. I'm talking about just priests and nuns having sex, not in a predatory manner, not with children.

MS. BROWN: Right. And I mean – and I think that when you're talking about just celibacy generally, I mean, again, I take it back to this issue of control and power because a lot of it does have to do with very human beliefs around the fact that you don't want somebody to have divided loyalties. And so you want that person's complete loyalty to Jesus Christ and to the church itself.

MS. SCHLAPP: And the nuns, for example – I mean, I really wish there would be a nun here and a priest right now to really engage in more of a, you know, theological conversation about it, but really, I've met so many nuns and I've been so blessed. Some of them have taught my children. And they feel that they are married to Christ. Again, you might not understand it, Bonnie, but these people, it is the mystery of their lives of how they feel fulfilled in God's graces that they have decided I am going to marry Jesus.

And that can be really odd for some people that aren't Catholic, but for those ladies that have decided I'm going to make this commitment and they –

MS. SOSA: So but why do you have to be celibate in order to be able to run a church?

MS. SCHLAPP: You know, just right now –

MS. SOSA: I mean, that's fine. That's fine for that nun to be celibate and be married to Christ. The problem is –

(Cross talk.)

MS. SCHLAPP: Well, that's interesting because some people say and even talking to a reverend, dear friend of mine, who's a Presbyterian minister, and he always says, when I have to manage my family and then I have the crisis of my people, you know what I mean, I'm divided.

MS. KENNEDY: Divided.

MS. SCHLAPP: When you have the priest, the priest is there on call for you when there is a marriage, when there is a baptism, when there is a death. I mean, he's there for you. I mean, literally, I called my priest this morning; I got a call 30 minutes later. You know, it's like – it is his commitment to his parishioners and to the Lord. And that is why they make that vow. And it is a tough vow. And it is a counter-cultural vow. And we might not understand it. But it is what they have committed their lives to and it's how they best they feel that they serve God and their lives are fulfilled.

MS. ERBE: All right. Let us know what you think. Please follow me on Twitter @BonnieErbe or @TotheContrary.

From the convents to political converts.

Women are slowly increasing our ranks in national office, but as major political donors, not so much. Only 11 percent of the top 100 donors in the 2012 election cycle were women. What's more surprising, that number is just more than half or way lower than it was in 1990, two decades earlier.

While the percentage of all donors who are women has increased, it's done so only slightly. The donor gap is holding steady. Not only the men donate more often, they also generally give more money.

All right, so is it because women don't have as much money as men, which the common thought is that they're not as rich – although, I don't know if that's borne out in the data at all – or is it because they just don't give to politics?

MS. BROWN: Well, I mean, what I've seen, both as a former fundraiser, back in the '90s, and as well as serving academic is really it has more to do with sort of two things. One, women's donor strategy, women tend not to be strategic and they to be more risk adverse than men. And so what you find is that they will distribute sort of the maximum amount to a whole host of candidates, rather than, if you will, placing a big bet on one candidate or in one organization.

So there's that side of it. The other piece is that in the '90s, we had simpler sort of finance laws, so they were easier to navigate and you really did have the ability to sort of give, you know, maximum amounts to a whole host of candidates and then give a big chunk to the party. And that was it. It wasn't much more complicated. Now, many high donors actually essentially hire fundraisers to help them like navigate this incredibly complex world.

MS. SOSA: And we know when there's complexity, women will participate less. I mean, it's just – because their culture and the tradition is not there for participation. So if you need to hire someone to do your donations, it's very difficult, although I have to say that when I was reading the piece, I was thinking of all my connections to political donations in the Latino community, which is where I have donated most of my money, are women. So I guess – maybe it's my little world. Obviously it's not representative of the majority, but there's a whole network of Latinas that are out there fundraising and donating and very active.

MS. KENNEDY: I was going to say, let us not forget, you know, women who are in partnerships, who are married, you know, you're discounting the fact that maybe they, you know, as a couple agree and they're donating it together, as opposed to an individual, you know, giving her money to a candidate.

MS. SCHLAPP: I think this is a great opportunity. I think this shows that we have to get more women engaged in the sense of saying, look, you donate, you get the candidates that you want in office. I think there's just a really – you know, an opportunity for fundraisers to get involved and pull these women in to give money.

MS. ERBE: All right. Get involved and generate some power for women. 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. And whether you agree or think to the contrary, please join us next time.

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