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Lay ecclesial ministry and the feminization of the church

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 29, 2007 All Things Catholic

Cultures invent new words when they've got new things to name, and so it is with the American church, which has recently contributed a new bit of taxonomy to Catholic conversation: "lay ecclesial ministry." The term refers to a new class of lay professionals performing tasks that were once the near-exclusive province of priests, such as parish administration, bereavement counseling and sick calls, sacramental preparation, liturgical planning, catechesis, faith formation, and a host of other roles. Today's reality is that, save for Mass and the other sacraments, most people's experience of pastoral ministry in the Catholic church is increasingly with a lay person rather than a priest.

The late Msgr. Philip J. Murnion, who conducted the first studies on this trend, called it "a virtual revolution in parish ministry."

Revolutions, as any historian knows, have unpredictable consequences. That's also the case with lay ecclesial ministry. Though no one planned it this way, the plain truth is that lay ecclesial ministry is rapidly "feminizing" pastoral leadership in the Catholic church. As the 21st century develops, that trend is sure to excite some and to worry others.

According to the National Pastoral Life Center, there are 31,000 lay ecclesial ministers working in Catholic parishes in the United States today, surpassing the 29,000 diocesan priests in the country. Growth has been rapid. As of 1990, there were just 22,000 lay ministers, meaning that American Catholicism generated an additional 9,000 lay ministers in just a decade and a half. During the same period, the total number of priests, diocesan and religious, dropped by almost 6,000, from 49,054 to 43,304. This imbalance is destined to grow under even the most wildly optimistic projections of priestly vocations. There are currently 18,000 people preparing to become lay ecclesial ministers, roughly six times the number of seminarians preparing to become priests.

For a church long perceived as bastion of male privilege, it's striking that these new lay professional roles are held disproportionately by women. As of 2005, roughly 80 percent of lay ecclesial ministers in the United States were women. A 2005 document from the American bishops provides this breakdown: lay women, 64 percent; religious women, 16 percent; and lay men, 20 percent. While the percentage of male lay ministers grew from 15 percent in 1990 to 20 percent in 2005, the overall pattern seems to be that the bulk of these positions will be held by women.

Drawing on U.S. Census Bureau data, "lay ecclesial ministry" takes its place among the following job categories

in the United States which are disproportionately occupied by women:

- Secretaries/administrative assistants, 97 percent
- Registered nurses, 92 percent
- Elementary school teachers, 91 percent
- Hairdressers, 90 percent
- Travel agents, 83 percent
- Lay ecclesial ministers, 80 percent
- Waiter/waitresses, 77 percent
- Cashiers, 77 percent

So far, most writers on lay ministry tend to see this development positively, as a means of restoring gender balance to a ministerial corps which has traditionally been all-male.

David DeLambo, who worked on a 2005 study of lay ministry for the National Pastoral Life Center, has said that women ministers "bring sensitivity to lay concerns and to families, as well as to issues related to gender and inclusion," calling this "a gift to the church." He also noted that women ministers emphasize the relational dimension of their work, favoring experiences such as staff prayer, socializing outside of work, work retreats, days of recollection and faith-sharing. Male pastors tend to take a more functional view of parish tasks. DeLambo suggested that if parish ministry is going to work well, more attention needs to be paid to "workplace expectations," which in practice means the expectations of women.

Seeing lay ecclesial ministry as a means of including women, however, depends upon focusing on who's in the parish office. If one reverses the perspective and considers who's in the pews, things look quite different. From that angle, the predominantly female composition of the church's ministerial workforce could be seen as another chapter in the *exclusion* of men.

From the outside, such concern may seem counter-intuitive. Given that the clerical ranks in Catholicism are open only to men, it has long been conventional wisdom that women are "marginalized." Even in Protestant traditions where, in principle, women can serve as ministers, the reality is often male dominance. A 2001 study by the Barna Group, one of the leading sources for statistical data on American Protestantism, found that 95 percent of senior pastors in Protestant churches in the United States are men.

Yet below the top levels, the sociological pattern in Christianity has long been a predominance of women, both among church workers and church-goers. Sociologists Rodney Stark and Alan Miller have studied the religious gender gap, concluding that women are more religious than men by virtually every measure in virtually every culture. While the gender gap is smaller in highly traditional societies in which high levels of religious faith and practice are the norm for both sexes, nevertheless there's still a noticeable tendency for women to be more involved than men.

How to explain this gender gap is one of the great debates in religious sociology, and so far there's no consensus, but the underlying reality seems a fact of life.

In that light, some recent writers have voiced concern that Christianity actually alienates men. David Murrow's *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nelson Books, 2004) and Leon J. Podles' *The Church Impotent: The Feminization of Christianity* (Spence, 1999), illustrate the point. Murrow is a Presbyterian and Podles a Catholic, but both have noticed something similar about their respective denominations.

As Podles put it succinctly, "Women go to church, men go to football games."

Podles believes that Western Christianity has been feminizing itself for the better part of 1,000 years, beginning with medieval imagery about the church as the "Bride of Christ," which he associates with St. Bernard of Clairvaux and exhortations to "fall in love" with Jesus. While that kind of imagery has a powerful impact on women, Podles wrote, it's off-putting for men. Podles argued that Christian men have sublimated their religious instincts into sports, soldiering, fraternal organizations, and even fascism. When they do engage in religious activity, he wrote, it's more likely to be in a more masculine para-church organization such as the Knights of Columbus (note the martial imagery) or Promise-Keepers.

Even reviewers who didn't buy Podles' historical arguments generally conceded that he was onto something in terms of Christian sociology.

On a less theoretical note, Murrow, a media and advertising specialist, said he looked around after attending weekly church services for almost 30 years, and drew what to him seemed an obvious conclusion: "It's not too hard to discern the target audience of the modern church," he wrote. "It's a middle-aged to elderly woman."

This was never anyone's intention, Murrow said, but it's the inevitable result of the fact that these women have two things every church needs: time and money. In that light, he said, it's no surprise that "church culture has subtly evolved to meet women's needs." Murrow agreed with Podles that "contemporary churches are heavily tilted toward feminine themes in the preaching, the music and the sentiments expressed in worship."

"If our definition of a 'good Christian' is someone who's nurturing, tender, gentle, receptive and guilt-driven, it's going to be a lot easier to find women who will sign up," Murrow wrote.

Whether this diagnosis is correct, and, if so, what to do about it, is not something that can be settled here. It seems a safe bet, however, that the rapid shift in parochial leadership towards women will exacerbate alarm about the "feminization" of the church. Put in its most basic form, the concern will be this: If the tone in most parishes is being set by female ministers, what will that do to the comfort level of men, given that women are already over-represented?

Also in the background, of course, is worry in some quarters that the overwhelmingly female composition of lay ecclesial ministry in the Catholic church is a stalking horse for the ordination of women to the priesthood.

One might expect that in light of these concerns, Catholic bishops and pastors in the future will practice a form of "affirmative action," seeking to hire more men. That may indeed be the case, though to some extent they're

trapped between a rock and a hard place, because they also don't want to encourage young Catholic men to see lay ecclesial ministry as an alternative to the priesthood.

One bit of data in this regard: If 20 percent of the lay ecclesial ministers in the United States are men, that works out to about 6,200 male lay ministers. Perhaps it's not entirely a coincidence that the number of priests in the country dropped by precisely this amount between 1994 and 2005. While more study would be needed to establish a connection, it seems reasonable that at least some of those Catholic men wanted to serve the church, but didn't want the obligation of priestly celibacy, and lay ecclesial ministry provided another option.

For that reason, I suspect bishops and priests will be cautious about targeting men as lay ministers, which probably means non-sacramental parish ministry in Catholicism will remain a predominantly female enterprise. Pastorally, that may mean parishes will need to be alert to the possibility that the "feel" of church life will exacerbate the tendency for men to opt out.

One final observation is worth making. If lay ecclesial ministry continues to be a largely female profession, church officials will want to pay close attention to its impact on salary levels.

A 2007 study by the AFL-CIO found that as job categories come to be dominated by women, the social prestige attached to the position declines, as do average wages. Employment categories in which women occupy 70 percent or more of the jobs, the study found, typically pay a third less than jobs that are similar in terms of the skills required and the nature of the work, but which are more likely to be held by men. The 25.6 million American women who work in these predominantly female jobs lose an average of $3,446 in income each per year, compared to holding a similar job which is less gender-defined. Since men typically earn more than women across the board, the four million men who work in predominately female occupations lose an average of $6,259 each per year. Together, this amounts to a whopping $114 billion loss for men and women in predominately female jobs in the United States.

For a church that supports a "just wage" in the broader society, making sure its own employees are not the object of gender-based discrimination in wages will be an on-going challenge.

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