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Education is a dangerous thing

Nicole Sotelo | Jul. 9, 2009

In 1875 Pauline and Henry Durant opened a Christian college for women. Years later, Pauline was dismayed to know that the women were breaking an inordinate number of dishes during washing duties. But the women were breaking more than fine china. They were breaking long-held beliefs and boundaries around women.

For the first time in history, large groups of women were educated and empowered in the 1800s to earn their own living, create their own households and forgo marriages based on economic necessity. Thousands of these students from Wellesley College and other educational institutions of the time, went on to become leaders in their fields and to change the face of public life in the United States and beyond. A little education goes a long way towards changing society. Similarly, education is going a long way towards changing the church.

With the opening of seminaries, schools of theology and faith formation programs to the laity in the decades since Vatican II, men and women are changing the church in historic ways. Never before in the history of the United States church has there existed such a theologically educated Catholic population and a lay-led church.

Lay people are now seminary professors, religious teachers and superintendents in Catholic schools, and participants in programs of theological and faith formation.

Today, you are more likely to see a woman in parish ministry than an ordained priest. The number of lay ministers, more than 30,000, has now surpassed the number of active diocesan priests. Of these lay ministers, women comprise 80 percent, according to the Lay Parish Ministers study conducted by the National Pastoral Life Center.

In 2008-9, there were more than 17,000 students enrolled in lay ecclesial ministry formation programs, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). In fact, CARA reports that the number of professional church ministry programs for laity has increased by more than 50 percent since its first study of lay ministry formation in 1985.

The face of our church is changing, diversifying and growing thanks, in part, to education.

But not everyone is happy about the increasing education of the laity. Many Catholics remember Bishop Robert Finn's closure of the nationally recognized lay formation program, New Wine, in the Kansas City-St. Joseph Diocese. However, it is just one of an increasing number of lay formation program closures and staff reductions by bishops.

In a 2009 report, CARA noted a 10 percent decline from its prior year's study in active lay ministry programs where two-thirds of program participants are women. Separately, CARA notes that the number of parish life coordinators, often women, declined from 553 in 2005 to 477 in 2008.

While budgetary reasons are often cited for such reductions, many believe that bishops take such actions due to ideological differences with the lay leadership, preferring programs or parishes coordinated by male priests or

sometimes women religious whose theological views support former ministry models with less lay participation.

In fact, Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue of Lancaster in England has said that mass education has resulted in "sickness in the church and wider society" and cautions "every human endeavor has a dark side." (See: **Educated Catholics have sown dissent and confusion in the Church, claims bishop** [1].)

The fear-based actions and statements of bishops are reminiscent of the ominous warnings against women's education. In 1873 Dr. Edward Clark warned that "? a girl could study and learn, but she could not do all this and retain uninjured health. ..." In a December 1933 *Atlantic Monthly* article, the author proclaims "this whole business of educating the middle class girl is a tragic mistake."

I do believe education can be a dangerous thing: to fine china and to former modes of thinking. Luckily, time has proven that women's education doesn't break a society and time will prove that lay education only strengthens the body of Christ.

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