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If the church ordained women, there would be no sex abuse crisis

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | May. 21, 2010 Bulletins from the Human Side

Some years ago I asked in a column, "If the church ordained women would there be fewer abortions?" I suggested that recognizing women as fully equal with men would have obviated centuries of the repression, injustice, and pain inflicted on women and cleared the air of the edgy suspicion and anxiety with which many men, including church leaders, have regarded women throughout the centuries.

In the last century, women sought equal rights for themselves as human beings from the men who had grown up believing that they constituted a second and lesser sex whose main role was, in ways too many to number and too scandalous to name, to take care of them. Had the church ordained women it would have automatically changed history, making them equal in all ways, and striking off the emotional chains that had bound them, voiceless, in time's dungeon. Men would have had to relate to them on the same footing and much of the longing for independence that is symbolized in the abortion struggle would have been lessened.

This is beginning to sound as improbable as "Avatar," but duck away from the cascade of unconvincing arguments dumped on women (e.g., "Women don't look like men so they can't represent Jesus,"} by the usual suspects of the curial all-star theology team. Imagine instead that the church had affirmed their human equality by welcoming women into the priesthood. What would the results be?

Such action would have killed Clerical Culture: Like a noxious species wiped out by a meteor before it could evolve into a monstrosity, Clerical Culture would never have come into being. Women would not have stood for it. To grow, it needed an all-male environment, an agar plate as smooth as a fairway on which women were forbidden to play.

Some women were granted visiting rights to Clerical Culture -- the mothers of priests who were also necessary for its flourishing. These women had enormous influence on little Johnny's going to and remaining in the seminary, and were happy to spoil him on his vacations and later on his days off. They were, we might say, enablers who were glad to have their priest sons hanging around the exclusive clerical club house. They could be boys forever.

Priests' mothers cannot be faulted for accepting the honored place, right next to the statue of the Blessed Mother, where Clerical Culture placed them. Their revered presence -- symbolized by their hands being bound at death with the same linen cloth that bound their sons' hands at ordination -- meant that other women were not welcome, at least not as close range, another prerequisite for a booming Clerical Culture.

In classic Clerical Culture, women were handmaids of the lords, allowed in by the servants' entrance and regularly reminded by men, from the pope on down, that they were inferior by nature and, much like slaves cruelly counted as half persons, they were expected to know their place and meet male demands without making any of their own.

Priests liked to make jokes that you could not have women priests because they couldn't keep the secret of the confessional and Pope John Paul II became so exercised over the issue that he instructed then Cardinal

Ratzinger to fashion a prohibition in the form of an infallible declaration. Not surprisingly, led by sensible women, Catholics paid little attention to this.

Would sex abuse have occurred if there were adult women in the priesthood standing up to and confronting the troubled male priests who preyed on the children in their care? Indeed, would Clerical Culture, with its locker room ambience and it odors of cigar smoke, bay rum, and Bushmill's whisky, have survived the clear eyed gaze of women who made clerics put away their toys and grow up?

Clerical Culture was the essential breeding ground of the sex abuse crisis. This crisis was also hidden in the violet trimmed folds of this unique social milieu. It conferred respect, esteem, and the benefit of the doubt on those priests who could not earn it on their own and who carried out furtive erotic raids on the innocent in its maze-like structure. This culture allowed the unhealthy to pass for healthy and lead secret lives whose corrupt form they themselves did not understand.

Women priests would not have allowed this tragic feasting on children to go on for an hour without taking action to end it. Healthy women do not put up with unhealthy men and this crisis would have been averted had the priesthood had enough healthy women in it to make the unhealthy men either grow up or get out.

The church would have been wise to adapt the old advertising slogan, "Do you want him to be more of a man? Try being more of a woman." Did the church want to avoid the sex abuse crisis and guarantee the manliness of its priests? It should have tried letting women do the job.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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