

New norms are much more than a PR disaster

Jamie Manson | Jul. 23, 2010

In reading about the Vatican's calling clergy sexual abuse and the ordination of women equally *delectia gavioria* (or grave sins), I was struck by how many commentators reduced this incident to yet another public relations disaster for the Roman Catholic church.

For women across the globe, it is so much more than this. It is a statement of profound spiritual violence against half of the human race already routinely victimized on the basis of their God-given anatomy. In a world where 39,000 baby girls die in China annually because they do not receive medical care equal to male infants, brides in India are burned once every two hours, and 35,000 Colombian women are trafficked to the sex trade every year, the church's statements only reinforce the idea that female bodies are not of equal value in the eyes of God, that they do not hold the same potential to be a sacred vessel of the life of God in our world.

At the same time that the Vatican freed bishops from being accountable for criminal activity (by failing to order them to report every instance of abuse and refusing to create sanctions against those who cover up abuse), it saw fit to define new kinds of crimes that have everything to do with gender, but nothing to do with sexual abuse.

Women, and those who attempt to ordain them, were classified as committing crimes against the sacraments. Such crimes are metaphysically serious in that they constitute any action that desecrates the Eucharist. Not only can God not work through the body of a woman, now, it seems, women's bodies actually defile the Eucharist.

For many women living in the West, where the Roman Catholic church's moral authority holds far less power than do the opinions of Oprah, these latest pronouncements are little more than the institutional church's reassertion of fundamental fear of female power and its antiquated belief that the female body is incapable of realizing the power of God.

But for those women struggling to worship or work in the Catholic church, these latest norms demonstrate unequivocally a painful truth: The church can be, and often is, a very toxic place for women.

This latest act of codified violence against women leads me to ask: Why shouldn't Catholic women allow God to act to God's fullest potential in them? Why shouldn't they seek ordination or create lay-led eucharistic communities that will truly nurture anyone who seeks the peace, community, sacramental nourishment, and social justice that is sorely lacking both in our society and in our church?

There is a long-held belief among many members of the Catholic reform movement that change can only come by working from within the Roman Catholic institution. Breakaway groups that ordain women, like Spiritus Christi, the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, and Roman Catholic Womenpriests, though respected by many reformers, have a compromised view in the eyes of some because they did not "stay in the church and fight." I know many liberal Catholics who will occasionally attend Masses led by ordained Catholic women, but, whether out of fear or love of their particular parish, continue to also attend a local Roman Catholic parish Mass so as not to break away completely from the institution.

But, really, what do women have to lose at this point? In the Roman Catholic church, they have no status and no potential to work in a church environment that will courageously and creatively supportive their callings to and gifts for ministry. Unless their jobs or livelihoods depend on at least appearing to keep within the fold, what is the real risk? As a young adult grappling to understand the future of the church -- and my own role in it -- the benefits of the emergence of new kinds of smaller, alternative eucharistic communities seem to far outweigh any risk.

Such communities, I believe, will be a vital remedy for the aching need for communal support and spiritual nurture that will define new generations of women and men. These new forms of Catholic communities would be uniquely positioned to convey the best parts of the Catholic tradition, those fundamental beliefs -- in ritual and sacrament, mysticism and spirituality, the preferential option for the poor and the pursuit of social justice -- that keep them calling themselves Catholic. They would also teach the next generation that they do not need to participate in their own oppression in order to be a member of a church community. These communities can begin to model now what may very well be the life-giving future of the church.

Women who are interested in using their bodies to allow God to continue to build up the body of Christ only need to consider the extraordinary, sacramental work that has been done and can be done outside of the walls of an institution bent on fortifying its spiritually violent, paranoid and medieval structure. As they gather together in community, one of their first orders of business may be to reach out to the women in developing countries who do not have even a modicum of the privilege and power held by many women in the West. They must use their money and their influence to help free these women from the poverty to which they are enslaved. And they must reach out to those places where the institutional church's oppressive stances on women only support the social and cultural beliefs that subject women to so much abuse, violence and exploitation.

The Vatican's new norms are only proof that movements that empower women to answer God's call are being perceived as viable threats to an institution desperate not to lose control over people who are too educated and faithful to be controlled. By claiming that the ordination of women is a grave sin against the Eucharist, they have continued their legacy of perpetuating spiritual violence against women. But the graver sin has been committed against God.

It is the human institution that believes it can control and regulate how and where God chooses to become fully present that truly commits a sin against the Eucharist. Like the meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples, the Eucharist always rises out of the people. Women who feel called by God must be, in even greater and more creative ways, a living, ministering reminder that the Eucharist is present anywhere that the people of God gather to live the teachings of the Gospels and to honor the life of God in all of creation.

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