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For altar girls, a modest proposal

Kate Childs Graham | Sep. 22, 2011

From the very second I was old enough, I was an altar server. I couldn?t wait to don the garb, light the candles, ring the bells, wash the hands.

I performed my duties with the most piety any 9-year-old could muster, crossing my thumbs for perfect prayer hands, kneeling as straight as possible, hanging off every word that Fr. Jerry uttered -- all the while shooting telling glares to my fellow altar servers that were chewing gum, wearing sneakers, yawning or, heaven forbid, refusing to sing aloud.

I silently mouthed every word of the Eucharistic prayer. And when I went home, I re-imagined the mass for my friends, from ?In the name of the Father...? to ?...go in peace to love and serve the Lord.? I adored my church, my faith, my God.

As an altar server, the Catholic hierarchy was -- in spite of itself -- developing a leader, fostering a vocation in me, a girl.

I understand, then, why certain priests like Fr. John Lankeit of Ss. Simon and Jude Cathedral in Phoenix, Ariz., and Fr. Michael Taylor of Corpus Christi Catholic Mission in South Riding, Va., (a hop and a skip away from my own parish) are prohibiting girls from becoming altar servers.

There is no need to spend time developing leadership that, according to the hierarchy, can never be. Surely, it?s better to be consistent -- best not to make false promises, plant false hope in girls who aren?t supposed to have a vocation to the priesthood, and couldn?t fulfill that vocation even if they were called, at least in the institutional church.

My question is: Why stop there? Perhaps girls shouldn?t receive communion, be confirmed, take reconciliation or be baptized. After all, you really wouldn?t want a bunch of girls running around thinking they are priestly people. Perhaps it?s best for girls to just stay home on Sundays, darning socks or fixing supper. Maybe the church should be a male-only space. There?s no use giving women a sliver of room, when men could easily take up the whole thing.

I challenge Lankeit, Taylor and others to see this decision through: Make sure it is absolutely impossible for girls to ever dream of becoming leaders in the institutional church. Because they can?t, that much is clear.

We know from the field of international development that when they are not privy to the same opportunities, are denied equal access to education, healthcare and so on, adolescent girls are much more likely to live in poverty throughout their lives. And so it is with adolescent girls in the church. In being denied equal access to leadership, young girls are more subject to a spiritual poverty of sorts, a spiritual poverty bred from the fact that even if women and girls receive a call to the vocation of the priesthood, we can never heed that call.

The prohibition of altar girls is merely a symptom of the systemic sexism that is so deeply rooted in our church.

And Lankeit and Taylor are cogs in the system, albeit cogs that are willing to go the extra mile to oppress women. In the end, we need to uproot that system if we ever hope to give young girls a fair shake, if we ever hope to build a truly just and whole community.

We know, too, from international development experts that the oppression of adolescent girls is a cancer to society. In this case, gender inequity keeps our church from reaching its full potential. It saps our faith of the richness that women?s leadership would surely bring. It keeps all of us, most especially women and girls, in a cycle of spiritual poverty.

Certainly, being an altar server stirred my devotion to the Catholic faith. I am sure it has done the same for my brothers in faith. However, while my peers who happened to be male were able to follow that inspiration to wherever it might lead, it is clear now that I was on a dead-end road.

I pray that that road might open for girls today, that the sexism of our church be uprooted and that the cycle of spiritual poverty finally cease.

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