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Leaving the church is a luxury the world cannot afford

Jamie Manson | Jun. 27, 2012 Grace on the Margins

It was no surprise when, last week, Bill Keller's *New York Times* column [1] declaring that progressive and liberal Catholics should leave the church, received a seemingly endless screed of online comments, as well as Facebook shares, tweets and recurring spins on blog rolls.

It was easy for those feeling demoralized by the hierarchy's condemnation of nuns, its thinly veiled political campaign for religious freedom and its ongoing, unhealthy preoccupation with matters of the pelvic zone to resonate with Keller's disappointment and despair.

The hostile takeover of the church by archconservative forces, best summed up in the rants of Bill Donohue, is a *fait accompli*, Keller concluded, and things are not going to change.

I share Keller's assessment that church officials seem to *want* Catholics who dissent from some, if not all, of the church's teachings related to sexuality -- the ordination of women, support for same-sex marriage -- to leave the church. How else can one explain the unpleasant, reactionary atmosphere the hierarchy is straining to cultivate within the church's walls?

But what seems to elude Keller, as it does many of those who comment on this topic, is that the ability to leave the church is a luxury afforded only to Catholics in the West.

Catholics in the United States and Europe *can* leave the church. Few have to worry about bringing shame on their families or being ostracized from their communities. They don't believe the decision will affect the fate of their souls or God's disposition toward them. They are free to shop in the vast spiritual marketplace, offering everything from zen meditation to the prosperity gospel, vying for their attention, devotion and money.

In the United States and Europe, the doctrines of the Vatican have little influence over legislation, culture or individual moral decision-making. According to a recent study, as few as 8 percent of Catholics in the U.S. think the bishops' advice is very important when deciding how to vote.

But Roman Catholics in the U.S. and Europe make up only about a third of global Catholic population. The rest, who live mostly in the global south, are not as free to walk away from their religion. And even those who have left Catholicism for Evangelical or Pentecostal churches still live in countries in which the Vatican still wields significant political influence. In some of these countries, the Roman Catholic Church's power has proven to be downright destructive.

In the Philippines, for example, overpopulation has put an extreme strain on the nation's food supply. Countless starving children are born into slums with little hope of getting out. The overfishing from the demand of so many hungry people is destroying coral reefs.

The best solution to this mounting crisis is state-sponsored contraception programs. But more than 80 percent of the Philippines is Roman Catholic. The hierarchy has threatened with excommunication the president and other

government officials who support making birth control accessible and affordable.

For several years now in Uganda, some members of the Ugandan government have tried to pass a draconian bill that would demand a seven-year jail sentence for consenting adults who have same-sex relations, a life sentence for people in same-sex marriages and imprisonment for anyone who doesn't report suspected gay people within 24 hours.

Forty-two percent of Ugandans are Catholic, making it the largest denomination in the country. Top religious leaders, including Ugandan Roman Catholic bishop Cyprian Lwanga, have asked Parliament to speed up the process of passing the anti-homosexuality law to prevent what they called "an attack on the Bible and the institution of marriage."

Throughout the world, the hierarchy's refusal to allow the use of condoms in preventing HIV/AIDS has been a major contributing factor to the continuing spread of the pandemic. Most new cases affect women, some of who then give birth to babies with HIV.

Throughout the global south, women suffer disproportionately from poor access to health services, discrimination, gender inequality and victimization by harmful religious and cultural traditions. While in most cases the hardships of women were not created by the Roman Catholic Church, the hierarchy's position on women helps reinforce these social ills.

The magisterium teaches that, because of a woman's genitalia, God is unable to call a woman to the priesthood. It also insists that any woman who "simulates" the consecration of the Eucharist commits a "grave sin" against the sacrament (equal to pedophilia). How can women ever achieve true empowerment and equality in a country where its religious leaders declare that *even God* views a woman's body as inadequate and invalid?

Those in the U.S. and Europe can roll their eyes, shake their heads and throw up their hands at the hierarchy's arcane teachings on sexuality, but in many parts of our world, these doctrines have life-or-death consequences.

For these reasons alone, regardless of how we personally feel about the Roman Catholic hierarchy, it is important to remain in solidarity with Catholics worldwide and to continue to dedicate our activism to reforming the church's teachings.

The ability to dissent from the institutional church's teachings and to live lives free of the church's teachings is a privilege. But it is a privilege that can bear fruit for the wider church if we use this gift well.

We must think differently about what leaving the church looks like now. The traditional line in the church justice movement has been that "one can only change the church from within." But I think the hierarchy has made it clear there is little if any room left for the prophetic voice within the institutional church.

So while there are some who can still manage to be prophetic voices within their parishes or church-based institutions, we must accept that authentic, prophetic, Catholic work is also being done in intentional eucharistic communities, in Catholic communities led by Roman Catholic Womenpriests or ordained members of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion, and in groups that have been ejected by the institutional church, like Spiritus Christi or Dignity USA.

Although these groups technically stand outside of the institutional church, they still maintain their Catholic identity through their love of Catholicism's sacramental life, social justice teachings, and mystical and spiritual tradition. They are "working out" in the present what an inclusive, Catholic community might look like in a reformed church in the future.

This is why, in addition to offering a spiritual home to Catholics who are psychologically distressed by the hierarchy's treatment of the LCWR, women and LGBT persons, these Catholic communities continue to have a vested interest in reforming the teachings of the magisterium. They recognize that, though they may have chosen to dissent from some of these teachings, the hierarchy's doctrines about sexuality still have a profound impact in our world.

If the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church were realizing their prophetic potential, they would muster the courage to be a living witness to the equality of women and the dignity of LGBT persons in our world. They would use their intellectual power and pastoral sensitivity to apply sophisticated, ethical discernment in matters related to the life-saving use of contraceptives.

We know that the hierarchy isn't doing this, but that doesn't mean that Catholics with the resources and privilege shouldn't be. Ministering on the margins, questioning religious authority and speaking truth to religious power do not equal "leaving the church." In fact, as our own faith history has taught us time and again, these are most important steps to becoming the church that the world most deeply needs.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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