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On lack of vocations, Francis' diagnosis comes up short

Jamie Manson | Dec. 5, 2013 Grace on the Margins

Like many who care passionately about a fully inclusive priesthood in the Catholic church, I read paragraph 104 of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium [1]* with deep sadness, though not surprise.

"The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion," Francis wrote, "but it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general."

"It must be remembered that when we speak of sacramental power 'we are in the realm of function, not that of dignity or holiness,' " the document continues. "The ministerial priesthood is one means employed by Jesus for the service of his people, yet our great dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all.

"The configuration of the priest to Christ the head -- namely, as the principal source of grace -- does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others."

Much as Francis would like to erase the dynamic of domination from the priesthood, his teaching will remain unrealistic if he continues to reinforce an unjust power structure in which only celibate males are permitted to consecrate the Eucharist.

Try as he may to reframe the issue, an imbalance of power will persist as long as the vast majority of Catholics are excluded from sacramental power strictly on the basis of their anatomy, marital status, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Even as Francis perpetuates the same rigid restrictions on who may and may not answer God's calling to the priesthood, just three paragraphs later, in section 107, he goes on to blame the "dearth of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life" on "a lack of contagious apostolic fervour in communities which results in a cooling of enthusiasm and attractiveness."

Apparently for the pope, "vocations" are limited to the number of people in Roman Catholic seminaries or novitiate programs. He seems unaware that if he were to look into divinity schools and graduate programs in theology and ministerial formation, he would find no lack of Catholic young adults with a fervent desire to devote themselves fully to serving the church.

I can personally attest to knowing at least 100 Catholic young adults who have entered these programs of study and ministerial formation not for power or privilege, but out of a deep enthusiasm for the church and earnest longing to answer God's call to be a leader in the church.

They do not wish to dominate anyone, but rather to be present to God's people in their times of great joy and suffering, to offer them and their children the church's sacraments, and to consecrate their lives to the church's many works of justice.

There are thousands of young Catholics who want to discern a vocation to the priesthood but are immediately rejected because of their female anatomy, or sexual orientation, or gender identity, or desire to fall in love.

Nevertheless, they labor on in theology departments and ministerial formation programs, hoping to find work in a job market that continues to dwindle because of parish closures -- closures that are happening largely because of a priest shortage.

Even if a parish job does arise, many of these young people will be quickly eliminated from consideration if, in their interview, they espouse feminist views or identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or present themselves as LGBT allies.

Young adult Catholics learn quickly that if they want to publicly exercise their individual consciences, they probably won't find a place in ministry within the Catholic institution.

This is sad because an overwhelming majority of young adult Catholics believe that the full inclusion of women and LGBT people in the life and ministry of the church is no longer a prophetic idea. It's just common sense.

And their beliefs are not simply a U.S. phenomenon. When Pope Francis went to Brazil for World Youth Day, for example, polls demonstrated [2] that the majority of Brazilian young adults also disagree with the hierarchy's teaching on priestly celibacy, women's ordination, contraception and abortion.

These issues aren't simply driving away Catholics from the pews. They are forcing the church to lose many of its most promising, gifted ministers.

We know that Pope Francis gets a lot of mail. I wonder if he receives the same anguished emails that I do from Catholic young adults who yearn to serve the people of the church they love but who constantly have the doors closed to them.

Pope Francis does conclude paragraph 107 of *Evangelii Gaudium* by recognizing that the church doesn't always accept the best candidates for the priesthood: "On the other hand, despite the scarcity of vocations, today we are increasingly aware of the need for a better process of selecting candidates to the priesthood. Seminaries cannot accept candidates on the basis of any motivation whatsoever, especially if those motivations have to do with affective insecurity or the pursuit of power, human glory or economic well-being."

But how can the church select the best candidates when they choose from such a severely limited talent pool? What other large organization in the world could possibly survive if it chose its leadership strictly from a group of men who claim to be able to remain celibate for the duration of their lives?

In any other organization, this would be a set up for failure. The Roman Catholic church must accept that it is not exempt from this reality.

Many argue that the hierarchy should open the priesthood to married men. But this change alone would not create the structural justice so desperately needed in the church's leadership. Most of the young married men I know would not be ordained into an organization that discriminates against women and their LGBT friends because to do so would be to cooperate in an oppressive system.

An all-male, heterosexual, married clergy still eliminates many of the best and brightest young adult Catholics from church leadership.

If the church is to bring light, life and meaning to our world, we must have our most gifted young people leading it. As post-ecclesial as our culture is becoming, in times of suffering and tragedy, people still

instinctively run to church. They deserve to be met at the parish doors by priests who have the gifts of presence, emotional maturity and spiritual depth.

The young people I know who feel called to Catholic ministerial leadership may be very diverse, but they are united in a deep longing to feed, comfort and care for their sisters and brothers.

To his credit, Pope Francis concludes his section on vocations by acknowledging that he has "not sought to offer a complete diagnosis, but I invite communities to complete and enrich these perspectives on the basis of their awareness of the challenges facing them and their neighbours. It is my hope that, in doing so, they will realize that whenever we attempt to read the signs of the times it is helpful to listen to young people and the elderly."

In this season of hope and anticipation, I will continue to pray that Francis will open himself up to listening to the hearts of *all* young adult Catholics, and, at long last, remove the painful and unnecessary obstacles that the church has placed between the young adults called forth by God and the people of God who are so hungry for their leadership and service.

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