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Without women priests, Catholics miss out on ministry

Bill Tammeus | Aug. 11, 2010 A small c catholic

For decades now I?ve watched Catholics debate whether to ordain women as priests, an issue that flared again recently when the Vatican named ?attempted women?s ordination? among ?grave crimes.? [1]

As you might expect from a Presbyterian like me (my denomination [2] began ordaining women in 1956), I support ordination for otherwise-qualified women -- support it, that is, in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I do my best not to presume to tell other communities of faith what to believe or do on issues of theology.

But sometimes I wonder if Catholics know what they?re missing by not having female priests. Yes, Catholics get a sense of ministry by women through the often remarkable work of women religious. But even that is different from authorizing women to engage in the full range of ministry, including administering the sacraments.

The first woman to join my church?s [3] pastoral staff was called in the mid-1980s. She had her weaknesses (What member of the clergy doesn?t?), but I remember my older daughter (then an early teenager) telling me she now could think of the possibility of becoming a pastor herself. Well, she didn?t do that. Instead, she?s a university administrator and a darn good one. But at least she could think realistically about being a clergy member.

Since then we?ve had two other female associate pastors and we seriously considered women to call as our new senior pastor before calling a male [4], who starts duties with us this month.

The first of those female associates was a native of Brazil -- a strong woman with many pastoral skills and special expertise in music. She mothered the church into fresh understandings of hymnody in ways that most males could not have done, with a combination of sharp intellect and passionate heart.

Our last female associate pastor was young and vibrant. She had studied the theatrical arts before sensing a call to ministry and her ministry reflected a flair for the arts, from her children?s sermons using puppet characters she had created to the warm, personal way she celebrated Communion at an evening service she initiated.

But Catherine?s real skill was being a feminine ministerial presence in the midst of pain. When my 31-year-old nephew died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a passenger on the first plane to hit the World Trade Center, she dropped whatever else was on her agenda and came to our house to mourn with us -- several times.

She didn?t come with clear and headstrong theological answers for us, though of course she was willing to struggle with our questions. Rather, she brought her presence, an absorbing warmth and understanding that I?ve never felt from a male member of the clergy. To survive in ministry as a female, she knew she needed both head and heart, and she had managed not to abandon her nurturing heart as she lived her life on a playing field dominated by men.

She later moved 500 miles away and got cancer. It was no surprise to me when a group of her female friends in

our church formed a small group that met periodically to pray for Catherine and, long-distance, support her in various ways. Some in the group visited her periodically as she struggled with the disease that eventually would kill her [5].

Even after Catherine?s death, this small group of women continues to meet from time to time to support and love one another in Catherine?s name.

I admit that it?s a bit of a triple-bank-shot to get from the first female Presbyterian pastor [6] in 1956 (who?s still alive and active in church life in Florida) to this collection of female friends from my church who gather periodically to care for one another?s souls. But I?m convinced that this group would not exist if we had not made the decision 54 years ago to allow women to be pastors.

I wish all Christians could experience this kind of ministry.

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