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Lack of women will irreversibly harm the church

Joan Chittister | Oct. 17, 2011 From Where I Stand

The story is an old one and I've told it before, but never has it felt so ominous as it does right now.

It happened this way:

About 15 or 20 years ago, I gave a series of conferences in a parish in Canada.

I like Canada a lot ? its beauty, its pace, its seeming patience with conflict and its apparent calmer approach to otherwise disruptive subjects ? subjects that lead to almost immediate choosing up of sides down here. Maybe it's the Brit in them. Or maybe, given their smaller population and more far-flung population centers, wildfire simply isn't as wild north the border as it is here. Whatever.

At any rate, what was already euphemistically called "The women's issue" here appeared at that time to be a great deal less of an issue to our neighbors to the north.

So I was surprised when the topic came up at lunch from the couple hosting my visit. More than that, I was surprised at what triggered it.

It wasn't the dearth of theology around the question of the ordination of women that piqued them. It wasn't the growing statistic on the coming decline in the priesthood that worried them. It wasn't the fear of merging parishes that troubled them.

On the contrary. They had a good parish, they said, a fine and loving parish priest, the kind of congregation that was family to them and the kind of faith to trust the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit among them.

What bothered them was their 4-year-old daughter. She was a quick-minded child. Precocious. Persistent. Confident. They knew, they told me, that some day, she would question the difference between what her brother could do in the church and what she could do. That would be years away, of course, but still ? maybe more for themselves than for her ? they were struggling, to no avail, to find a reason good enough to appease her, they said.

Then, suddenly, one Sunday morning after Mass as they sat at the family breakfast table, it happened.

"Mama," she said suddenly, "why don't we have any girl priests at our church?"

They looked at one another, dumbstruck, unprepared. Too late. There was nothing left to do now but be honest.

"Because, darling," the mother said, "our church doesn't allow girl priests."

The little girl pursed her lips and frowned. "Then why do we go there?" she demanded.

With the retreat to Vatican I in full force, this question and its answer get closer and closer.

Feminine language is fast being cut from the very prayers of the church. The invisibility of women is official policy again. Women have been removed from various church boards stealthily but steadily.

All talk of the restoration of the diaconate has been suffocated.

"If the diaconate is restored for women," an official spokesperson is reported to have said, "they will assume they can then be ordained to the priesthood."

It has not occurred to the spokesman, it seems, that the restoration of the diaconate for married men did not launch an assault on the chancery doors to require a married priesthood. Either that, or the old "you know how irrational women are" argument is being dusted off again, too.

And now, in places even in this country, some dioceses are denying girls the opportunity to become altar servers, despite official church acceptance of female servers since 1983 and the long-established practice in churches everywhere.

The idea that women are to be "seen and not heard" is fast becoming "neither seen nor heard."

Here and there, little by little, the hoary head of chauvinism, of patriarchy, of sick and petty and adolescent sexism is making one last desperate attempt to make us a totally male church again.

Correction: To make us a serving female church, a parading male church again. And all of it, as usual, in the name of God. In defense of the faith. In imitation of the church of Christ.

It?s one thing for a city council in Topeka, Kan., to repeal the city's ordinance against domestic violence [1] so they can save money by not prosecuting this endemic and dangerous holdover from the days of women as chattel. The Constitution will eventually resolve that one in favor of "liberty and justice for all."

But when a church can simply erase the women in its midst, refuse to discuss the subject and attempt to go on calling itself church, Christian and holy, that is another matter entirely.

Which is when I find myself thinking about that little girl in Canada again.

That little girl in Canada is still out there somewhere. She's in her 20s now ? still watching, still wondering what church it is that treats her like the full human being God means her to be. She's out there determining what church it is that really looks like the Christians they claim to be. And she is out there deciding what church it is that not only preaches the Gospel but lives it.

From where I stand, it is clear that the church already lost a good proportion of one generation of women in the last 25 years and is now willing to lose the next one to reassert its maleness. The question rises again with new and demanding urgency for many: Why do we go there?

The answer to it will not only affect the women and their children for generations to come. It will affect the church in ways no number of male altar boys can begin to heal it.

[Editor's note: An earlier version of this column incorrectly characterized the action of the Topeka, Kan., city council in regards to domestic violence.]

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[1] http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/44868091/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/t/kansas-capital-city-repeals-domestic-violence-law/#.TqcXlLI1Rfw