

World & Nation

Theologian urges rejection of women acolytes, lectors

By Greg Erlandson

Vatican City (NC) — A U.S. theologian participating in the World Synod of Bishops has circulated a paper urging delegates to reject calls to allow women to serve as acolytes and lectors.

Such a change in Church law could have major significance and should be approached with "caution and serious reflection," wrote Jesuit Father Joseph Fessio. In addition, a synodal call for such a change would "place enormous pressure" on Pope John Paul II, making it "more difficult for him to uphold the dignity and unique role of women in the Church," he said.

Father Fessio was one of 20 theological experts appointed to the synod by the pope. His seven-page paper, titled "Admittance of Women to Service at the Altar as Acolytes and Lectors," was not presented formally to the synod or read on the synod floor.

Instead, it was circulated informally after "a couple of people" asked him to outline his objections to changes in Church law restricting the non-ordained posts of acolyte and lector to men, the San Francisco-based priest told National Catholic News Service October 28.

One of the controversial recommendations made by some synod delegates has been to open certain non-ordained ministries, such as lector and altar server, to women.

In an October 20 synod press conference, St. Louis Archbishop John L. May said "a strong consensus" had emerged from the synod's small working groups that all non-ordained ministries should be open to men and women, and that boys and girls should be allowed to be altar servers.

The synod does not have any legislative power, but it does draft recommendations which are submitted to the pope. The pope is not bound in any way by the synod's recommendations.

Father Fessio said he drafted his paper "to show that there are some theological and anthropological arguments which should be looked at" before the Church decides to change a longstanding tradition.

He described the paper as a "very very summary" treatment of the major theological, philosophical and pastoral arguments against changing Church practices.

"Intrinsic or doctrinal grounds do exist which argue against admission of women to the exercise of those ministries most directly connected with the sacrifice of the altar," Father Fessio wrote. "At the very least, they would counsel caution and serious reflection and debate before a change is made which, though it might appear to be of small import, in fact may be of great significance."

The first part of the paper outlined the

theological foundations of the Church's teaching on the important distinctiveness of the sexes and the male priesthood.

In applying these teachings to the issue of women as acolytes, Father Fessio said the acolyte, in his role at the Mass "as a helper or assistant of the priest ... becomes as it were, the hands of the priest."

"For this reason, while it would not lead to the invalidity of the sacrament (for a woman to act as acolyte, it would be in serious disharmony with the very nature and character of the whole order of grace and redemption, the mediation of the priests and the symbolic character of men and women," he said.

With regard to lectors, Father Fessio noted that the Second Vatican Council and contemporary scholarship has sought to emphasize the "equal sacredness of God's word

in the eucharistic sacrifice."

"If this revalorization of the sacred Word be thought through to its conclusion, it would raise questions about the appropriateness even of women exercising the role of lector," he said.

In a separate section titled "Pastoral Reasons For Not Admitting Women to the Altar," Father Fessio said there was "a logical connection and progression" from altar boy to acolyte to lector to the priesthood.

If women are admitted to any of these offices, "it may give them the false hope of becoming priests," which is not possible in the Church, he said.

"Allowing them on the altar is unfair to women because it can only end in frustration for them," he said.

Women encouraged to fight Church 'patriarchy'

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — The "patriarchy" governing the Catholic Church "is an evil system based on essentially untrue assumptions," and Catholics should work for its "definitive demise," a national conference on Women in the Church was told.

Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Sandra Schneiders, in the conference's keynote address October 30, said American Catholics have developed a spirituality that is "in many important ways incompatible with the spirituality of those who presently hold power in the Church."

The clash, she added, is "between a spirituality of domination and a spirituality of liberation."

Sister Schneiders, a professor of New Testament studies and spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley,

Calif., called Pope John Paul II an example of "romantic feminism" who defines feminine nature "by its ordination to motherhood," and considers women "fully equal to, even in some ways superior to, but intrinsically different from men."

That view, she said, finds "a threat to humanity itself" in any efforts of women "to enter spheres reserved to men, that is, to non-mothers."

The Oct. 30-Nov. 1 conference in Washington drew about 1,100 people, including 100 from Canada and some from Europe, to discuss developing structures for equality in the Church.

At least four bishops attended the Washington conference, including Bishop Joseph L. Imsch of Joliet, Ill., who heads a committee of bishops currently preparing a national pastoral letter on women's con-

cerns.

One bishop, Auxiliary Bishop P. Francis Murphy of Baltimore, said in a workshop session that "the Church's credibility as a moral teacher is threatened" when it fails to treat women with full justice and equality.

Loretta Jancoski, a project coordinator at the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Pastoral and Social Ministry, called the Church's traditional ecclesiology a theology of "arrogance and rigidity" which uses Scripture to "advocate the subservience of women."

"We have an enormous task ahead of us if we are going to salvage Jesus' liberating message for women," Mrs. Jancoski said in the text for her Oct. 31 address. "We should not be continually forced into a position where we have to choose between feminism and the Scriptures. We deserve them both."



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