

Women carry clout in parish ministry

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

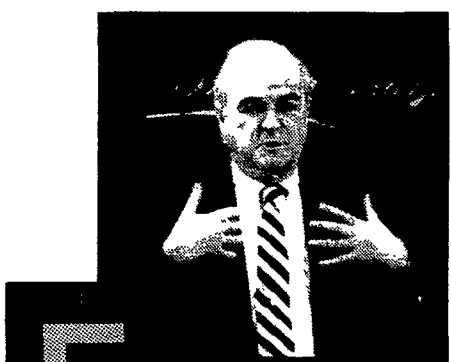
A recently published study of parish ministry in the United States confirms what most observers have known for some time: since Vatican II parish ministry has become increasingly non-clerical and feminine in character.

The unstated practical consequence of this trend is clear: if women, under whatever institutional pressures, were ever to withdraw en masse from parish ministry, the Catholic Church's pastoral activity would grind to an almost complete halt.

This is so because parish ministry is the point at which the ecclesiastical rubber, so to speak, hits the road of pastoral reality.

If people experience church at all, they do so at the parish level. And their experience at that level is determined almost entirely by the efforts of those ministers who shape and direct the normal activities of parish life — worship, sacraments and education as well as service to the young, the elderly, the sick, the bereaved, the troubled, and the poor.

According to New Parish Ministers, a Lilly-funded study undertaken by the National Pastoral Life Center at the request of the Committee on Pastoral Practices of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, about 20,000 lay people and religious are employed at least 20 hours a week as parish ministers in half of the 19,000 Catholic parishes across the country. This is in addition to



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teachers and staff in Catholic schools and those employed in maintenance positions.

Eighty-five percent of these new parish ministers are women, of whom about 60 percent are lay and about 40 percent are religious. Taken together, they are a very well-educated group as more than half have a master's degree.

One might refer to this post-conciliar trend as the feminization of parish ministry.

But feminization is not just a matter of the high percentage of women now in formal ministerial positions at the parish level. It has to do, rather, with "the extent to which parishes are engaged in the kinds of support and nurturing activities that have been characteristically associated with women and with the church."

Although there were always nurturing and supportive activities in the past, the study reminds us, most traditional parish activities were directed towards "empowering community organizations."

Priests built churches, schools, rectories and convents, ministered to the sick in their homes, and mobilized the men and boys of the parish into clubs, sports programs, and such helping organizations as the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

But the pastoral landscape has changed. Parishioners, by and large, no longer look to their parishes for support and fraternity; the sick are whisked away to hospitals and other health-care institutions before the priest is even aware of their illness; and sports programs are now organized and sponsored by schools, local communities and voluntary organizations.

What today's parishes offer — in addition to the communal experience of worship — are not so much "firm teaching and discipline" as "small group experiences of prayer and discussion that allow parishioners to feel support for their own achievements and concerns."

"It is not authority that is entailed here," the study observes, "but understanding and empathy." In this sense, parish ministry is being given a new, feminized orientation.

This is especially pertinent to the way the pastor and the parish minister relate to each other.

"Many women who are in parish ministry," the study notes, "come with expectations or hopes that they

and the pastors and others in parish ministry will not just carry out their independent tasks, but will enjoy collaboration.

"Such collaboration calls for staff meetings, opportunities for sharing faith, and at least some occasions for socializing and looking to long-range dreams and plans."

Although men also share these concerns and values, the study finds that women in ministry tend to place greater emphasis on such relationships than do most priests.

The study suggests, however, that priests often judge their relationships with the women on their parish staffs as better than the women themselves do. Such priests think of themselves as more accessible, more team-oriented, and more personalistic than do the women who work with them.

Even so, the study points out, "it is a tribute to the church that the relationships are as good as they are."

Perhaps. But institutional forces beyond the parish and beyond the control of its ministers often serve to weaken and undermine those relationships.

Ecclesiastical officials may wince at this and deny that it is so. But thousands of those women still serving in parish ministry today will tell a different story of how the institutional church values — or fails to value — their pastoral insights, experience, and wisdom.

One need only listen, a too-tall order for some.

Some in politics do advocate spirituality

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

Is there a spirituality of politics? In the midst of a tough election campaign, it often seems impossible to find any.

Yet two politicians — one a Democrat and the other a Republican — offered a vision of such spirituality at their respective national conventions this summer.

"There must be a spirituality to what we in politics do," insisted former Senator Paul Tsongas in his remarks to the Democratic convention. "There must be a bedrock sense of sacred duty to future generations."

"Let us all renew our commitment," said former President Ronald Reagan in his speech at the Republican convention. "Renew our pledge to day by day, person by person,



FAITH AND WORK

make our country and the world a better place to live."

Here is the challenge to politicians, according to Tsongas: "To be

guided not by polls, but by principles and beliefs and convictions. To point to the path that America must travel no matter what the political consequences."

Reagan, likewise, gave his guiding principles as a politician: "My fellow citizens — those of you here in this hall and those of you at home — I want you to know that I have always had the highest respect for you, for your common sense and intelligence and for your decency. I have always believed in you and in what you could accomplish for yourselves and for others."

"Whatever else history may say about me when I'm gone," Reagan mused, "I hope it will record that I appealed to your best hopes, not your worst fears, to your confidence rather than your doubts."

"Our time on this earth is limited," Tsongas concluded. "We will

some day be judged by those who will be the Americans of tomorrow — those who will carry our blood. May God grant us the wisdom and the courage to deserve their gratitude and their love."

Reagan, too, was aware of the responsibility of those in political life to future generations. "My fondest hope for each one of you — and especially for the young people here," he said, "is that you will love your country, not for her power or wealth, but for her selflessness and her idealism. May each of you have the heart to conceive, the understanding to direct, and the hand to execute works that will make the world a little better place."

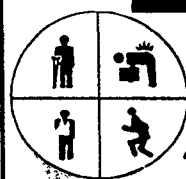
Would that more politicians actually practiced the kind of spiritual approach to their work advocated by Reagan and Tsongas.

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