

Counter arguments didn't sway pope

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Seven years ago a Jesuit priest with strong connections to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger circulated a paper at the World Synod of Bishops in Rome. It listed various reasons why girls could not function as acolytes (altar servers) at the Eucharist (see *Origins*, Nov. 12, 1987, pp. 397-99).

The paper asserted that the basis for the prohibition was doctrinal and theological in character, and not simply a matter of pastoral discipline or custom.

It said the prohibition against altar girls was "derived from philosophical anthropology, Trinitarian doctrine, Christology and ecclesiology."

The document then offered several paragraphs attempting to support this grandiose claim.

It made assorted references to the distinction of persons in the Trinity, the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ, the distinction between grace and creation, sexual differences between men and women, and the role of Mary in the Church.

Apparently, the reader was expected to conclude that all of this somehow proves that girls can never serve at the altar.

The real reason for its opposition to altar girls became clear in the second half of the paper. If girls are admitted as servers, even donning the clerical garments of cassock and surplice, pressure for women's ordination will intensify.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Since women can never be ordained, the paper argued, girls should not be given any false signals in that regard.

After all, the paper asserted, clerical ministry is by nature masculine and paternal. This is so because the priest represents the male Christ, who is the bridegroom. Therefore, only a male can be a priest.

The church, on the other hand, is by nature feminine and maternal. This is so because the church is the bride of Christ. Therefore ...

What should follow the "therefore?" That only a female can be a member of the church?

To be sure, the paper didn't draw that conclusion. The logic either escaped or petrified the author. Stepping around that potential roadblock, he pressed his case against altar girls.

Since the altar server is "the immediate assistant at the altar of the priest acting in *persona Christi* (in the person of Christ), "by helping to prepare the sacrificial gifts" the altar server "becomes, as it were, the hands of the priest."

Conceding that a female server "would not lead to the invalidity of the sacrament," the paper nonetheless argued that admitting girls to the altar would be "in serious disharmony with the very nature and character of the whole order of grace and redemption, the mediation of the priest and the symbolic character of men and women."

"In addition," the paper continued, "it would be a confusion of the role which is specifically that of the woman as representative of creation and the church."

By implication, the paper was saying that the priest is not a representative of the church, that he represents only Christ. But the church is the Body of Christ, and in representing Christ the priest also represents the church. Here again, logic took a back seat.

But the author remained undeterred in his purpose; namely, to fortify the pope's resolve in support of the 2,000-year-old tradition against altar girls.

If the pope were to change that tradition, the paper warned, various dire consequences would occur: 1) women would be frustrated by the false hope of ordination; 2) vocations would decline because boys would no longer want to take a job girls were allowed to

do; 3) girls would incur an identity problem and the faithful would be confused; 4) those who had already allowed altar girls would feel rewarded for their disobedience; 5) the Church would be divided; 6) "orthodox, faithful Catholics" who loyally opposed communion in the hand — and lost — and who loyally opposed communion under two forms — and lost — would be demoralized; and 7) feminists would be emboldened to seek even greater victories.

We now have a chance to test those predictions, because on March 15 of this year the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments informed bishops' conferences throughout the world that the pope had decided women and girls may serve at the altar with the approval of their bishops.

Evidently, none of the anthropological, Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesiological arguments to the contrary troubled the Holy Father.

When the author of the paper learned of the pope's decision, he blamed it on "nameless experts and bureaucrats" who roam "the corridors of the Vatican."

By contrast, when decisions come down from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, we are usually reminded that such decisions come from "the highest authority" because the pope speaks through the Curia. No talk then of "nameless experts and bureaucrats."

Perhaps that's what they mean by "cafeteria Catholicism."

Holy Spirit sweeps hearts clean

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:19-23; (R1) Acts 2:1-11; (R2) 1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13.

One of the 12 labors of Hercules was to clean the Augean stables in a single day. Augeas, the king of Elis, had a herd of 3,000 oxen, whose stalls had not been cleaned for 30 years. Hercules diverted the course of two rivers, the Alpheus and the Peneus, and made them flow through the stables in a great flood that washed them clean in a single day.

For centuries, filthy sin had piled mountain high in the world and had corrupted the hearts of men. A great washing was needed. So God the Father sent His Son, and He, like a mighty Hercules, unleashed the flood of the Holy Spirit upon the world. And the Spirit came like a hurricane sweeping clean the world and — like a fervent fire — cleansing the hearts of people who so wished it.

The first coming of the Spirit was on the first Easter eve. The risen Jesus breathed upon His apostles, for the Spirit is the breath of God, and He



A WORD FOR SUNDAY

said: "Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

His next coming was on the Jewish feast of Pentecost. The Jews celebrated Pentecost to commemorate the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and to give thanks for the spring harvest.

Pentecost means "the 50th." An-

other name for it was "The Feast of Weeks," for it was celebrated on the 50th day, a week of weeks — seven times seven — after Passover.

The Passover generally fell in April. Pentecost was celebrated about the beginning of June; the Pentecost of Acts (R1) occurred on May 29, A.D. 30. Since traveling conditions in May were far better than in April, the feast of Pentecost usually attracted more people than did the Passover feast. This accounts for the international character of St. Luke's list of nations, starting with the Parthians and Medes in the far east to the regions around Libya in the far west.

Also, servile work was forbidden on this day, so the feast had a distinct holiday flavor that brought greater crowds than usual into the streets.

It was on this feast of Pentecost, May 29, A.D. 30, that the Holy Spirit suddenly came down upon the church. The Holy Spirit never works at a slow pace. He is swift as a strong driving wind. It is Satan who creeps like a serpent.

There was wind and fire. The wind filled the house to symbolize the church being filled with the Spirit.

The fire — long the sign of divinity for the Jews — burst like a rocket on the Fourth of July into flaming tongues. This symbolized the diversity of operation of the one Spirit — "different gifts but the same Spirit" (R2).

Like a mighty wind, the Spirit still blows through the church, sweeping away rites, rituals and regulations long obsolete, as the wind sweeps away dead leaves and dead branches.

Like a fervent fire, the Spirit also burns yet in the hearts of people. That is why we focus more on what goes on within a person than on what goes on outside. God wants more than lip service; He wants more than externalism.

God wants hearts that are guileless, sincere, loving — hearts that will speak in a language that does not divide, but unites; that does not wound, but heals; that does not condemn, but condones; that does not boast, but confesses its sins; that does not foster hate, but love. "To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (R2).

The Spirit has been sent to create anew the world and its people!

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