News



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America magazine and Kerry Weber have provided us with an in-depth portrait of women in the church, both in the past and in the present.

Not surprisingly we learn that women have historically had a powerful influence on the church. That influence was of course behind the scenes and did not involve any leadership roles. Women were the humble and indispensable foundation of the church, but when important decisions were being made it was time for women to leave the room. Just as was often the case with African-Americans in our country's history, it was important that women knew and understood their place in the church.

Now, the America article and its survey show that women in the church have had enough. They are choosing to no longer be the mainstay of keeping the church afloat. The issue is not that women are actually leaving. Women surveyed indicated that 82 percent of them had not considered leaving the church.

Instead, they are disengaging and do not consider active involvement in the church important. Only 24 percent of women surveyed went to Mass weekly or more often. Less that half of respondents felt it very important or somewhat important to be involved in one's parish.

Specifically, millennial women have chosen to back off their involvement in the church. Their disengagement is even greater that that of their male counterparts. The article also indicates that this same phenomenon is not occurring in Protestant denominations.

What does this data mean? How serious is the problem? Kathleen Sprows Cummings, associate professor at the University of Notre Dame, and director of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, provides a pretty stark analysis. She states, "We are at a crisis point. . . . If you lose the women, you lose the children." No one can doubt the formative role women have always played in the religious training of their children.

It seems fair to say that a combination of the rise of women in every secular sphere of influence, along with a continued refusal to consider women for leadership roles in the church, is affecting the willingness of women to be engaged in the church. It is even more true for young women who are part of the current culture and have a different understanding of what the role of women should be in the world and in the

church. Although not that many women have actually left the church, it may be instructive to note that of those who have considered it, 48 percent mentioned the lack of an appropriate place for women in the church, and 69 percent mention disagreement with church teaching.

It is also likely true that many women are unaware of a number of leadership positions that are available to women in the church today. The article profiles a number of these women in important positions, including the chancellor of the diocese, pastoral associate, parish life director, etc. I certainly concur that there needs to be many more of such openings available, and the more people learn about these important opportunities the more it could sway the thinking of some women.

I believe these are genuine signs of progress in the church, and I do not want to downplay their importance. It is also true that the church needs to start making progress somewhere. Yet, many in the clergy and hierarchy remain strongly opposed to even these limited steps.

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It is my sense, moreover, that sacramental change is really the whole ball game. As long as this men’s club of priesthood is off limits to women, there is no way women can consider themselves anything other than second class citizens. Barriers to women are breaking down in every sphere outside the church, which puts the church in the category of continuing to depict women as containing some kind of fatal flaw that removes them from consideration for making the Eucharist present for the faithful. What is worse, so much of the opposition is not theologically based, but based on a cadre of celibate old men being uncomfortable with allowing women into their private club.

Mary brought the Lord Jesus into the world. Mary Magdalene was the "Apostle to the Apostles," being the first witness to the Resurrection. Surely, it is time women be considered worthy to preside at the Eucharistic table.