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November 22, 2018

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There's been a lot of talk about women in church leadership. Any cynic will remind you not much has happened. Even so, the pope has made it clear he wants to have women where they can make a difference.

The members of the recent Synod of Bishops agreed: "An area of particular importance ... is the presence of women in ecclesial bodies at all levels, even in positions of responsibility, and the participation of women in ecclesial decision-making processes, respecting the role of the ordained ministry."

What to do?

How about putting women in charge of a few dioceses?

There are dioceses all over the world without bishops. There are many competent churchwomen — chancellors, former general superiors, Catholic Charities heads, for example — who could easily run a diocese while the Congregation for Bishops and the pope decide what's best down the road. In the United States alone, there are seven or eight vacant sees. One already sets the example.

When Baltimore Archbishop William Lori became administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, he appointed Bryan Minor as his "delegate of administrative affairs." Minor, a 49-year-old married father of four, was the diocese's human resources director and headed its West Virginia Catholic Foundation. Now he manages all of Wheeling-Charleston's day-to-day operations reporting to Lori, who is the last stop for major decisions and who oversees matters involving sacraments and clerics.

What is happening in West Virginia is not the same as what happens when a parish needs a leader and the bishop, following Canon 517.2, "has decided that participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted" to a non-priest (a deacon or a layperson). But it is similar.

Only a priest may be administrator of a diocese or a parish. But Canon 517.2 allows for pastoral life coordinators or parish life directors who supervise the parish's ministerial efforts and financial matters, contracting clerics for the parish's

sacramental needs. Somewhere in the diocese, there is a canonical pastor, but in the best of scenarios, the deacon or layperson is in charge.

At last count, of some 17,000 U.S. parishes, 3,500 do not have resident priest-pastors. But only 347 have parish life directors, down from 553 in 2005, mainly due to the closing and clustering of parishes.

Why? There are competent, prayerful people well-trained to take over. Why not maintain the vibrant small parish with a deacon or a layperson to keep the community going?

And why not give dioceses (and the church universal) the benefit and inspiration of a woman caretaker while episcopal nominations and paperwork float around the Vatican?

There is too much going on in the church for bishops to be closing parishes solely for lack of priest leader-managers. There is too much going on to ignore the chance to place a woman in a major leadership role, if only temporarily.

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Not everyone can run a parish. Not everyone can run a diocese. But something needs to be done to highlight the fact that women are leaders too. The people of God are asking: Why not? They are asking a lot of other questions. When there are no answers, when hope for responsible leadership and management disappears, women are out the door. And every woman who leaves the church brings her husband and children with her.

If there is to be a serious effort to salvage the sinking barque of Peter, more women need to be involved. It is as simple as that. Even San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone reported to the assembled U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that a common response to the sex abuse crisis is that it would not have happened if women were in charge.

The synod supported women in leadership but recognized such could only "be implemented through a work of courageous cultural conversion and change in daily pastoral practice."

Courage. Maybe that's what the church needs.

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Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Phyllis Zagano's column, Just Catholic, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Jan 25-Feb 7, 2019** print issue under the headline: Why not have a woman run a diocese?.