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Opinion



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by Sr. Christine Schenk

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I suppose Women's History Month is a good time to weigh in on current discussions and disagreements about women deacons and women priests in the Catholic Church.

In some ways, it seems a fluffy conversation in light of recent revelations about our grievously wounded clerical system.

But perhaps that is exactly why we need to have this discussion.

Is Catholic governance fatally crippled by our failure to address/accept human sexuality and/or unhealthy shame over one's God-given gender or sexual orientation?

Yes, I have been reading Frédéric Martel's *In the Closet of the Vatican*.

Martel writes that a high percentage of priests and bishops are gay, and that they protected predators out of fear that their own homosexuality would be revealed. For Martel, the need to maintain silence about the prevalence of homosexuality within the clerical system allowed sexual abuse to be hidden and predators to act.

While his book has been both praised and reviled, I found his hypothesis about the systemic effects of shame-based duplicity and homophobia worth considering. Sean Larson's online symposium on the book is a signal contribution to evaluating some of the substantive issues it raises, including accusations of systemic misogyny. Jesuit Fr. James Martin's lament over Martel's failure to even consider that many gay priests live their vows of chastity and promises of celibacy with fidelity is especially compelling.

But for me, it is a supreme irony to consider that much, if not most, of the ministry in the church is being performed by the very ones we have rejected — gay priests and women.

If you doubt the prevalence of women in ministry, consider current worldwide statistics showing there are roughly 513,000 priests, deacons and brothers compared to 648,910 women religious. And that doesn't take into account the 3.4 million catechists and lay missionaries, of whom at least half are probably female,

given U.S. studies showing that 80 percent of lay ecclesial ministers are women.

Yet women ministers have no voice in church governance, and gay priests have voice only at the cost of concealing the gift of their sexual orientation.

Is God calling us to a radical metanoia? A turning ourselves around so as to celebrate human sexual differences and reconsider who has decision-making voice in the church?

Two recent perspectives about women's roles by my respected colleagues (and friends) Phyllis Zagano and Jamie Manson have given me food for thought.

In her zeal to separate the female diaconate from a female priesthood, Zagano writes that Pope Gelasius' late fifth-century letter complaining about women at the altar referred to women deacons, and that there is no evidence for female priests. This is not accurate. There is significant literary and inscriptional evidence that women held presbyteral titles and assumed priestly functions in both the Eastern and Western church.

Gelasius' letter to the bishops in Southern Italy objected that women had been encouraged — presumably by their bishops — "to serve at the sacred altars, and to perform all the other tasks [*cunctaque*] that are assigned only to the service of men." Latin experts affirm that Gelasius' use of the word *cunctaque* signifies the same liturgical, juridical and magisterial duties performed by male priests. (See *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, edited and translated by Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek.)

Moreover, contemporaneous fourth- and fifth-century funerary inscriptions reveal that Kale the *presbyter* served in Sicily, and Leta the *presbytera* served in Italy. Leta and Kale may have been representative of the women priests to whom Gelasius objected.

Jamie Manson rightly worries that if Pope Francis reinstates the tradition of a female diaconate, the new women deacons will have to self-censor over the possibility of women's priestly ordination.

I do not share Manson's fear that this issue could end up "dividing and conquering" ecclesial women who aspire to priestly ministry. I studied to be a pastoral minister in my home diocese and can attest that many women ministers are well-acquainted

with the ambiguity of the present moment.

It seems to me that the nearly 32,000 female lay ecclesial ministers now serving the U.S. church are already serving in diaconal roles. They are living the dilemma right now.

Yet female ministers have found a way to serve with integrity and prudence while awaiting — and working for — that kairos moment when the institutional church at last opens all the ministries of the church, including governance, to women. I sincerely hope this process begins with Francis' restoration of the female diaconate.

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In the final analysis, I agree with the late Scripture scholar Fr. Raymond Brown. While observing that the New Testament cannot be used to prove or disprove the possibility of women priests, Brown suggested it is a matter to be discerned by the people of God. We are unwise to depend only on tradition or only on early church history. We must also seek the Spirit's guidance as to the desires of God for our world today.

Still, authority in our church does not rest only with ordained ministers. It also rests with each one of us as baptized members of the body of Christ.

Since we too have the Spirit of God, how do we exercise our own responsibility to heal the broken governance structures that now plague us?

I know a small group of women who decided to exercise their authority on behalf of a broken clerical system. Here is their story.

Last August, after the sickening revelations of the cover-up of Cardinal Theodore McCarrick's sexual abuse, the pastor at Cleveland's Blessed Trinity Parish — Fr. Doug Koesel — preached a powerful homily. In reflecting on the apostles' grievous betrayals of Christ, he shared his experiences with individual parishioners. In them, he found that "Jesus' risen presence was too powerful to be undone by a new set of Peters, Thomases and Judases. ... You give me hope because you are the shapers of the future, the remnant who will rebuild the sparkling water of renewal."

My friend Martha Campbell — who is a Jungian therapist and a spiritual director — was deeply challenged by Koesel's words. During her prayer time, she came to this deep conviction: "By grace, I am Christ's physical presence in the world ... and so are others. Together, *we* are the body of Christ. How is the Spirit inspiring me to take action to participate in the healing of our church's deep wound of corruption?"

Martha shared her insight with Father Doug, who put an announcement in the bulletin inviting parishioners to come to the rectory for an hour of silent prayer each week. Five women responded. The image that came to Martha at the time was that of "the weak little community in the upper room subsequent to Jesus' crucifixion." After four months of silent listening, this small group identified its purpose:

> We meet here as the Body of Christ, a cell in the Church at Blessed Trinity, acknowledging that we are imperfect human beings in an imperfect church standing in the need of God's mercy.
>
> We name the corruption in our Church to be evil and beg for the gift of healing and discernment as to what the Spirit is inviting us individually and/or communally with regard to responding to our church crisis.

Two weeks ago, Martha spoke at all the weekend Masses to share the group's discernment. She invited parishioners to engage in "four courageous conversations" about the clergy sex abuse crisis on an upcoming Thursday in April. The conversations will be facilitated by a local expert in group processes and seven surrounding Catholic parishes are invited to attend. A report will be sent to the bishop. She also shared a "Healing Our Church Initiatives and Timeline 2019-2020," detailing other programs and action steps extending until Lent of 2020.

What are we to conclude?

Only this: Women do not have to wait to be ordained as deacons or priests to begin exercising our authority in the church.

Because, you see, Christ has no body now but ours.

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*