Opinion
Guest Voices



Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, archbishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka, attends a media briefing in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Jan. 13, 2023. (AP/Eranga Jayawardena)



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Sri Lankan Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith has taken the lead in keeping women away from the altar. Last October, he decreed that there would be no female altar servers in his archdiocese.

No matter that the 1983 Code of Canon Law ruled that any lay person could serve as lector or acolyte. No matter that in 1994, the Vatican's then-Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, which Ranjith headed from 2005 to 2009, affirmed that "lay person" included females. No matter that in 2021 Pope Francis amended canon law to include women as candidates for installation as acolytes.

The 77-year-old polyglot cardinal is having none of it. "No girls should be invited to serve at the altar ... it should always be young boys."

His reason? "This is one of the main sources of vocations to the priesthood." For some reason, the cardinal thinks female altar servers will cut down seminary applications and is "a risk (he) cannot take."

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Created a cardinal in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI after his stint at the now-Dicastery for Divine Worship, the Rome-educated Ranjith surely knows the law. He also knows

that, as archbishop, he can override it. A supporter of the Latin Mass, he argues that people should receive Communion while kneeling and on the tongue.

But does he need that many more priests?

There are about 1.6 million Catholics in all of Sri Lanka, comprising about 6% of the predominantly Buddhist population, and there seems to be a surfeit of priests. Ranjith's diocese alone lists 30 diocesan priests (more than 10% of his presbyterate) serving outside the country.

There must be other reasons behind his determination to keep women and girls out of sight and away from the sacred. Aside from embedded cultural misogyny, there is always the inherited memory of women being "unclean" due to menstruation and childbirth.

In addition, the women-as-property mentality, prevalent in too many parts of the world, infects parts of Southeast Asia. In Sri Lanka, women are generally expected to become wives and mothers — fewer than a third have jobs — and, despite there being a woman secretary general, only 10% of its parliament members are female.

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Sri Lanka law explicitly allows for marital rape of girls and women over the age of 12, despite family law that sets the minimum age of marriage as 18. One allowed defense against other charges of rape is that the victim "was of generally immoral character," and recent statistics count an exceptionally low conviction rate — about 3.8% — in rape cases.

One can only wonder if Ranjith has thought through the implications of not following the provisions of canon law that allow women and girls to assist at the altar, to be near the sacred. Does he not believe that girls and women, too, are made in the image and likeness of God? Does he not believe in the baptismal equality of all?

Gisèle Pelicot, the French woman whose husband and 50 other men were sentenced after their infamous drug rape trial in Avignon, offered a comment about other rape victims whom she felt compelled to represent. "I think of the victims, unrecognized, whose stories often remain hidden," she said. She continued, "I have confidence in our ability to collectively seize a future in which everyone, women and men, can live

in harmony, with respect and mutual understanding."

Pelicot's view should give pause to Ranjith, and those who wish to cancel women's participation in any society. Respect and mutual understanding seem lacking in the chancery in the Archdiocese of Colombo. How much longer can a cancel culture be accepted there, or anywhere in the Catholic Church?