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Seeing Is Believing -- Why Respect for Women as Senators Makes a Difference

Ken Briggs | Jun. 14, 2010 NCR Today

When in Rome, the Vatican rulers don't do as the Romans do when it comes to treatment of women. Italians include many enthusiastic feminists while the officials who oversee ground zero of the Catholic church decry "radical feminism" at every sign that women seek ordination or other steps to make them equal partners in Catholicism. The two nation states share the same succulent foods but go separate ways with regard to the roles of women.

That doesn't mean the Vatican can retreat behind its sovereign walls and consider the matter settled. Women's status remains the most crucial issue in Catholicism's future and continued efforts to stay within that conceptual (not theological) fortress will increasingly hamper attempts to soldier on. Ignoring it by decree, as Pope John Paul II did by forbidding even discussion of wormen's ordination, and by launching investigations to suppress feminist thought and action only postpone dire results.

In today's New York Times, Ross Douthat notes the impressive string of victories chalked up by women, most Republican, in the recent primaries. The remarkable part is that they won in such a variety of states, many of them which might have been considered least receptive to the "women's liberation" thinking that started the ball rolling a few decades ago. The corollary is that most of the successful women candidates have won over a conservative, even right wing constituency whose forbears were determined to keep women confined to domestic chores.

Catholics have both accepted and benefitted from the immense flow of women into the professions. Like other Americans, they have become accustomed to women professors, doctors, lawyers, truck drivers and construction workers. It becomes harder for everyone to remember why they were ever kept out. Catholics join the crowd in wanting their daughters to fulfill their talents on an equal footing.

Therefore it's increasingly impossible for Catholics to justify why women don't belong in the priesthood or able to participate fully in deciding what the church teaches and how it conducts its ministries. All the polls show the same thing: a dramatic rise in support for an end to barriers that keep women from occupying such positions. As is, simply put, men run the church. To more and more American Catholics, this doesn't make common sense. It doesn't feel right in the same self-evident way that it feels wrong to deny women the U.S. Senate. Theological arguments, where they show up, don't appear to put a dent in this growing "vox populi" consensus.

The idea that Catholics suspend such assumptions when enter the church door, after they've finished their week's occupations with women co-workers in court rooms and state police headquarters strains credibility, to say the least. More women simply don't go near the door any more. Meanwhile, the highly visible winners of last week's primaries remind Catholic laity that church's policies toward women contradict a basic truth. The Holy Spirit perhaps? Throughout church history, the prophetic message has often come primarily from an outside source, gradually accepted by the church. The anti-slavery cause serves as an example.

Perhaps the Italians who surround the Vatican have a keener perception of divine purposes with regard to modern women than the Pope does. Wouldn't that be something.

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