Vatican paper comes in praise of altar girls

by John L. Allen Jr.

Earlier this week, more than 50,000 young altar servers from around the world flocked to Rome for a gathering with Pope Benedict XVI. It's a regular event, but this year there was a twist: For the first time, altar girls outnumbered the boys roughly 60-40.

On the front page of Saturday's edition of L'Osservatore Romano (which is released in Rome Friday afternoon), the official Vatican newspaper, essayist Lucetta Scaraffia styles the post-Vatican II acceptance of altar girls as an important breakthrough, saying that it marks the end of "any attribution of impurity" to females, and corrects a "profound inequality."

Here's the relevant section from Scaraffia's essay, in NCR translation:

"Being an altar server was always understood as a service but, at the same time, as a privilege, because it leads one into the heart of the liturgical celebration, in the space of the altar, to direct contact with the Eucharist. The exclusion of girls from all this, for the sole reason of belonging to the female sex, has always weighed heavily and signified a profound inequality within Catholic education, which fortunately has been cancelled by now for several decades. Even if perhaps many pastors have been resigned to altar girls only in the absence of available boys, for young women overcoming this barrier was very important, and in fact that's how it's been understood: the presence of a female majority at the tenth gathering of 'ministrants' which recently took place in the presence of the pope demonstrates it."

"For girls, entering into the space of the altar has meant the end of any attribution of impurity to their sex, it's meant the possibility of living this formative experience of extraordinary importance in religious education, and it's meant a different kind of attention to the liturgy as well as coming closer to the faith by drawing near to its very heart."
As another essay earlier in the week by Gian Maria Vian, the editor-in-chief of L'Osservatore, also did, Scaraffia suggests that the gathering of young altar servers with the pope offered a counter-point to the sexual abuse scandals which have recently swirled around the Vatican.

"These happy youth, celebrating and proud of their role, who came to Rome in order to bring Benedict XVI their affection and enthusiasm were ? certainly not on purpose, but in fact ? a concrete and positive response to the accusations, true and false, which have been launched against the church in these months," she wrote.

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