

Catholics protest altar server policy

Alice Popovici | Dec. 3, 2011



From left, Thea Rossi Barron, Emily Zickel and Michael Piehler join a Nov. 20 vigil to protest the exclusion of girl altar servers in many parishes of the Arlington, Va., diocese. (Ted Majdosz)

ARLINGTON, VA. -- A few dozen people walked along North Glebe Road in front of the Arlington diocesan headquarters Nov. 20, holding bright signs that called for justice and change.

"Pray for our diocese," read one sign, handwritten on fluorescent pink cardboard. "Dignity for our girls," said another. And another: "We support female altar servers." And another: "Bishop we need your leadership."

What the women and men -- most of them Catholics from area parishes -- specifically asked for during the hourlong afternoon vigil was that Bishop Paul Loverde require priests in his diocese to allow both girls and boys to serve at the altar. Though the Vatican has officially allowed female altar servers since 1994, the Arlington diocese has left the decision to individual priests since 2006; as a result, nearly half of the parishes allow girl altar servers while the rest do not.

"What are we saying to young women as they attend Mass?" Jim FitzGerald, executive director of national Catholic organization Call to Action, asked in an interview. Call to Action, which works for justice and equality within the church, counts Arlington as one of two dioceses in the country currently known to exclude girls from serving at the altar. (The Lincoln, Neb., diocese has banned girl altar servers throughout the diocese since 1994.)

"To me, it's a message of sexism and discrimination," FitzGerald said.

He added that it is important for people to understand that even if there are girl altar servers at a particular church, "they are one priest short of having that change."

Jennifer Zickel, who organized the vigil, learned this firsthand a year ago, when the new priest at her church, Corpus Christi Catholic Mission in South Riding, Va., decided he would change the policy and train only boys to be altar servers.

Fr. Michael Taylor had written in the church bulletin: "I would like this service to be a springboard to young men considering the priesthood," adding that, for girls, "it is my hope that we, as a mission, will be able to

create opportunities, and perhaps clubs, for service to others and vocational discernment.?

Girls who were already altar servers at the church have been "grandfathered in" and allowed to continue as altar servers, according to Zickel -- however, they wear different robes than the boys.

As soon as she read the bulletin, Zickel said, "that's when I knew, in my heart, that we couldn't stay any longer at this parish." Since then, she, her husband and daughters have "floated around" between several area parishes, feeling "heartbroken by our church," she said, particularly because it had been one of the main reasons they had chosen the area.

"We are Catholics who want to go to Mass on Sunday, but also be involved with the community," said Zickel, who taught religious education classes at Corpus Christi and enjoyed watching her 7-year-old and 4-year-old daughters play sports and attend Brownie meetings with children from their church.

"We really like to instill in these children a sense of virtue," Zickel said. "It was just so interesting to see that seep into the community and into the schools."

Since leaving her parish, Zickel said she has written and called Loverde several times, asking for a meeting to discuss the issue -- to which the bishop has not responded personally as of yet -- and has worked to get the word out to other parishioners through her blog and a Facebook page called "Let Them Serve."

In June, she and her husband put together a binder of letters written by family and friends to Loverde. Her husband handed it to the bishop. And she called all of the mission churches and parishes in the diocese to ask for their policy on girl altar servers, learning that 29 have girl altar servers and 34 do not. She could not reach anyone at 11 of the offices she called.

Asked for comment on the vigil and parishioners' request to meet Loverde, Soren Johnson, a spokesman for the diocese, sent the following response by e-mail:

"For over five years, the diocese has allowed the option of having female altar servers at the parish level. ... The church allows for a legitimate diversity of options at the parish level. Allowing female altar servers is not a mandate, but rather, an option for the local parish to consider. The decision is at the discretion of the local pastor, in consultation with his parochial vicar(s), deacon(s), and parish pastoral council."

Johnson also noted that women "serve in a variety of capacities throughout our diocese," including leadership positions, such as principals, teachers, extraordinary ministers of Communion, lectors, cantors, sacristans, and members of the Diocesan Finance Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, and Parish Finance and Pastoral Councils.

Caitlin Bootsma, a spokeswoman for the diocese, sent the following response to the question of whether Loverde would meet with parishioners:

"Clearly there are many people in the diocese with strong opinions on both sides of this matter. As a matter of course, Bishop Loverde's staff meet with concerned members of the diocese on a variety of issues. A member of the bishop's senior staff met with Ms. Zickel earlier this year, listened to her concerns, and explained more fully the altar server policy. According to diocesan policy this is a matter between a parishioner and his or her pastor."

NCR tried to contact several priests in the Arlington diocese for comment on the issue of altar servers, and reached two, who said they cannot speak with the media without the specific permission of the diocese.

Taylor, administrator of the Corpus Christi parish, did not return a call for comment.

Zickel said the issue is "not just about our family" and not about liberal or conservative Catholic issues. She said she was happy with the turnout at the event, where she counted about 60 people, coming and going.

One father who walked along North Glebe Road said he came to the vigil because the issue is "a matter of simple justice." Another man carried a sign that read "Dads for Altar Girls = Love."

Thea Rossi Barron, who attends Our Lady Queen of Peace, said, "Christ did not give an example that excluded women."

Zickel's parents, Michael and Kathi Piehler, who live in Rochester, N.Y., visited Arlington specifically for the vigil. Michael walked with a sign that read, "What is so wrong with this?" next to a large photograph of one of his granddaughters, taken when she served as a cross bearer at a relative's funeral.

"The presence of altar girls is not a stumbling block to priestly vocations, and if it were, that's a pretty fragile vocation," Piehler said. "I think the Holy Spirit's much stronger than that."

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