

## Female power and the power of God

Jamie Manson | Feb. 12, 2009



A few summers ago at a conference

on the prophetic voice, I heard a well-known priest tell a story that gave me an insight into the depth of harm -- both to God and humanity -- that the ban on women's ordination has created. He was celebrating Mass on a pueblo in New Mexico. To honor the culture of the people gathered with him, he used a tortilla for the eucharistic bread. This got reported to the diocese, and the priest received a call from the bishop's office. The chancellor asked, "Is it true that you used a tortilla at the Mass on the pueblo?" "Yes," the priest said. The chancellor replied, "I hope there was no baking soda in that bread!" The priest responded: "Are you telling me that if there was baking soda, God ceased to be present in that bread? Are you really going to place those kinds of limits on God's power to work in this world?"

I'm not sure why I'm surprised, but each time I read an NCRonline reader's comment that denounces the notion of women priests, I'm struck by how deeply distressing the issue of women's ordination is of some of our readers. The excommunication of Fr. Roy Bourgeois offers a painful reminder that these convictions are very much in line with the governing authority of the Catholic church.

There are many levels at which these comments and excommunications are disturbing. They are laced with deliberate misogyny and a complete, unkind lack of regard for half of the church's population. But what is, for me, most exasperating about this searing opposition to women's ordination, is that it is a rejection of faith in the power of God to work in our world. By banning women from serving as priests, the church is saying that God simply cannot work sacramentally in the body of a woman. The church places limits on God and God's own capacity to work inside God's very own creation. Now, not only does this demonstrate a cosmic level of chutzpah, it also runs completely contrary to good, centuries-old Catholic sacramental teaching. There is a fundamental Catholic belief that all of creation -- all finite things existing in the world -- are capable of revealing infinite meanings about goodness, holiness, and God. By barring women from ordination, the church suggests that God is incapable of working through the body of a woman because it does not match the bodily design of Jesus and his disciples.

The irony is that the ban is also a rejection of the life and work of Jesus. Throughout the Gospels, we are given account after account of Jesus' encounters with women of extraordinary faith. In John's Gospel, the Samaritan woman is the first to inspire followers of Jesus (4:39), while Martha, sister of Lazarus, makes a confession of faith in Jesus that is unparalleled in any of the four Gospels (11:27). These exceptional women demonstrate great faith while the disciples, particularly Peter, continually misunderstand Jesus' teachings (4:33; 11:12).

Those who denounce the ordination of women ought to be reminded that their intense love affair with conformity with the church stands in direct conflict with the life of Jesus and a fundamental principle of sacramental theology. Their appeals to doctrines and canons and catechisms are sorrowful evidence that the

power of the church has a much greater hold over their hearts and imaginations than the power of God. church teaching has been made into an idol, while the work and witness of Jesus and the continually unfolding revelation of God's work in creation goes largely ignored.

I know that I am not alone when I say that I have grown weary of the church's blatant fear of female power. It is no secret that women are the fabric that holds together the Catholic church in this country. They are the teachers, the principals, the liturgical coordinators, the family faith and outreach ministers, the pastoral administrators and associates. Many of them have educations far superior to most current Catholic seminarians, yet still, they cannot preach the sermon or consecrate the Eucharist because of their bodies. Though they hold the master of divinity degrees and years of ministerial experience, they still cannot baptize the baby, or give the second grader first Communion, or marry the couple (though they do all of the sacramental preparation work!), because of their bodies. Though they have more passion for the poor and the broken than many of the priests with whom they work, they cannot anoint them or grant them absolution, because of their bodies.

Often I am asked by older Catholics why there are fewer and fewer young women in the pews. I explain that newer generations of women are not compelled by a tradition that excludes them from acting with religious or spiritual authority on the basis of their physical form. I cannot stress enough how isolating and disempowering it is to a woman's spirit not to have ever seen her own bodily form stand behind an altar, place her hands in the waters of a baptismal font, or offer last rites at the side of the hospital bed.

The more I become painfully acquainted with the exclusion of women, the more I become aware of a relationship between the rejection of female power and the rejection of the power of God. In order to allow women the full dignity to which they are entitled as leaders in the church, those who are in power would have to be willing to make themselves vulnerable to change, to being surprised, to being moved. But, if we read the scriptures and truly open ourselves up to experiencing God in everyday life, we know that our God is a Being who loves to constantly re-attune our vision, a God who lives to surprise us with paradoxes, a God who always leads us into unexpected places. As believers, we must always be prepared for God to pull the rug out from under us, the way Jesus did with the priests and scribes.

The most mournful repercussion of the church's treatment of women is the increasing multitudes of people who are being left hungry because of the exclusion of women from the ministerial priesthood. In alienating the many women who, like Jesus, long to give of their bodies in service to God, an ever-deepening chasm is created between the hungry and the God who longs to feed them.

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