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Women, combat, church

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

A lot of folks have been writing about the Pentagon's decision to allow women in combat. I don't think any of them has ever put on a uniform and sworn an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic.

I have.

Women in combat? I don't want it. I don't like it. But I understand where it came from and wonder how much it reflects what might happen in the church. The general culture, after all, does not buy the idea that women can't do something -- or anything. It especially does not buy the idea that women cannot image Christ.

The church and the military are not all that different. Each has a stratified membership, with a hierarchy of authority and power, various titles of rank, and matching (often colorful) uniforms and regalia.

Relatively early on, the church segregated itself into male and female systems. The house churches run by women and the diaconal offices they held were absorbed into an all-male system. Women retained their own authority in abbeys and monasteries, as did men, but a larger all-male church hierarchy developed outside those walls.

Many years later; also outside those walls in many modern Western countries, women served in military and often naval forces, but in wholly separate corps and commands. As women's units supported war efforts, Rosie the Riveter and her civilian companions remained outside the system.

About 30 years ago, when separate promotion boards ended, men and women competed together and were judged by identical criteria. Yet women were de facto noncombatants. Some branches of the

services differed in how they interpreted the law, but for the most part, women in uniform remained part of the home and country male warriors protected, even as they competed with them for promotion.

Over the years, as women graduates of U.S. service academies failed promotion, the temper and tenor of the policy discussion changed. Here and there, a woman was assigned command of a small ship or training base or intelligence unit. Women were gradually accepted in more and more places and positions. The changes had less to do with the military culture and more to do with the ways of the civilian world, where single-sex education fell by the wayside, men and women shared college dorms, and women's equality was a given. Naval and military forces became more civilized, focusing on the job and not on "la difference."

With the changes came requirements. Women, even though not in combat assignments, were expected to qualify with weapons. I've shot M16 assault rifles and .45-caliber, .38-caliber and 9 mm handguns at targets. It is not a nice feeling.

Has it gone too far? Now women can be in combat. Now they can get another ticket punched. For what? What is the society saying about itself? What does it mean for women to have more opportunities to kill other human beings?

This is what I want to happen. I want the Catholic church to change the culture. I want the church to be relevant again.

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Do the clerical managers of the separate male system know no one is listening to them? Do they understand that the world at large sees -- rightfully or wrongly -- that the women of the church have been pulling the weight of teaching and preaching and consoling and blessing without equal access to church jobs and promotions? Virtually none has a permanent relationship directly with the diocese, even when witnessing a marriage, baptizing, or preaching -- it is by rare exception.

The numbers tell the story. There are more than 300,000 more women religious in the world than priests -- Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate reports 412,236 priests and 721,935 sisters in 2010. There are about 38,000 lay ecclesial ministers in the U.S. alone, 80 percent of them women.

The world wants to know what the church thinks of women. Unless and until it states -- argues, even -- that women can image Christ, the men in the sanctuary are going to see the backs of more and more people walking out the door for the last time. The overwhelming teaching of Christianity is that Christ became human. Equal is not the same, but the church can argue women's equality without overturning doctrine -- the ordained diaconate is perfectly and reasonably available to women.

I want the church to change the culture, but until the culture of the church changes, it's stuck in a foxhole, out of ammunition, and taking enemy fire.

Bottom line: Either women are included inside the system to minister, to teach, to govern, even to preach against war, or there will be no one left to minister to.

Take your pick.

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