

GIRL SERVERS CAUSE SEXUAL CONFUSION AT THE ALTAR

By David L. Sonnier

With the recent closure of St. Patrick's in Thurles, there is but one remaining seminary in all of Ireland: St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. A grand total of 55 students are there at the time that I write this. There were as many as 350 in 1986 when numerous other seminaries throughout Ireland were open. At least ten seminaries have closed within the last decade.

It was just 30 years ago that Ireland provided priests for numerous parishes throughout the United States. When I was growing up in Mississippi I thought that all priests came from Ireland. Now Ireland can no longer provide priests for her own Churches, much less send any to missionary territory like Mississippi.

This latest bit of bad news for the Church raises the question once again. What is behind this vocations crisis? Are we fostering vocations as we should be doing in our boys and young men? Or are we hiding from an issue we should all be confronting?

It will take some courage to confront an obvious of causes of the decline of vocations -the sudden imposition of "female altar servers" throughout the Church in the U.S. and Europe. Take a moment to recall the circumstances under which this practice was allowed. We lived in a hostile political climate in 1994; the politicians in Washington were condemning the Catholic Church for not ordaining women, and ridiculing the Church for Her stand against abortion. It seemed that according to these critics at the highest level of the Clinton administration, the Catholic Church would not be qualified to address the issue of abortion until women were ordained.

In 1994 a document from the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts gave some room for the novel practice of "female altar servers" under political pressure from the U.S., but nevertheless insisted that "the obligation to support groups of altar boys will always remain..." due, of course, to the relationship between service at the altar and future vocations. Has there been any such support for "groups of altar boys?"

An issue of conscience.

What is a parent to do? Some of us are barred by our conscience from bringing our impressionable children into a politicized liturgical environment. We, like many other Catholic parents I know, are trying to protect, foster and encourage vocations in our sons and daughters, and mixing the Message of Christ with a very un-Christian feminist political statement goes most forcefully against our conscience. For this reason we drive nearly an hour away to a Tridentine Rite Mass. My family is thereby protected from the introduction of political agendas, feminist or otherwise, into the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, thank God. But many Catholics have come to believe that they must quietly accept this and other practices which are, in reality, foreign to and harmful to the faith of our loved ones.

An incomplete and contradictory notion of tradition.

We can hardly speak of such a liturgical novelty, Girl Altar Boys, as something to which we are bound to agree and support. It is possible that a harmful liturgical practice can come into the life of the Church, and when this happens all who are willing and able should work for its reversal.

Let's take it one point at a time. First of all, the Holy Father does not allow Girl Altar Boys within his own Diocese of Rome. That should be enough to give pause to a number of people who currently see nothing wrong with the practice. If the Pope doesn't allow it for his immediate flock, can the head of a family be faulted for likewise rejecting it? Certainly not, since he would be showing solidarity with His Holiness by doing so.

Second, this practice of placing girls at the altar has absolutely nothing to do with Vatican II and was condemned in the strongest of terms twice following the council. In 1970 Pope Paul VI said in *Liturgicae Instaurationes*, "In conformity with norms traditional in the Church, women (single, married, religious), whether in churches, homes, convents, schools, or institutions for women, are barred from serving the priest at the altar." And in 1980 Pope John Paul II stated in *Inaestimabile Donum*, "There are, of course, various roles that women can perform in the liturgical assembly: these include reading of the Word of God and proclaiming the intentions of the Prayer of the Faithful. Women are not, however, permitted to act as altar servers."

The practice has been condemned consistently, through nearly 2000 years of Christian history. In the Vatican journal *Notitiæ* Aimé-Georges Martimort traces the general discipline of the Church against females serving at the altar to canon 44 of the Collection of Laodicea, which dates back to the end of the 4th century. This discipline has been found in almost all canonical collections of East and West.

Martimort points out that popes ever since St. Gelasius in 494 had condemned the practice, and Pope St. Gelasius was obliged to write to bishops of regions in which it was attempted: "We have heard with sorrow of the great contempt with which the sacred mysteries have been treated. It has reached the point where women have been encouraged to serve at the altar, and to carry out roles that are not suited to their sex, having been assigned exclusively to those of masculine gender."

Furthermore, as Fr. Brian Harrison points out in *The New Feminist Face of the Roman Liturgy*, an address given in 1995 during "Christifideles" seminar on liturgical issues, "Every edition of the Roman Missal from 1570 till 1962 carried the prohibition of female altar servers, as did the 1917 Code of Canon Law (c. 813, #2), not to mention the documents of the post-conciliar liturgical reform in their earlier and less radical phase."

Third, we are not required to expose our children to it. In July 2001 the Congregation for Divine Worship issued a response to a bishop's question (*dubium*) concerning whether or not a priest could be forced to accept Girl Altar Boys. The response made it clear that only a diocesan bishop may decide whether to permit female servers in his diocese; furthermore, that no priest is obliged to have female servers, even in dioceses where this is permitted. The letter strongly reaffirmed that altar boys should be encouraged, and stressed that no one has a "right" to serve at the altar.

If a bishop cannot force Girl Altar Boys on a priest, what right has a priest or a bishop to force it on the head of a family, the "Domestic Church?" This question is pertinent especially in view of the fact that Pope John Paul II has never forced it on anyone.

Fourth, Girl Altar Boys were introduced under duress. Anyone old enough to remember the U.S. political climate that existed from 1992 to 1994 can remember the hostility toward the Catholic Church. According to a prominent Catholic apologist, "...My understanding of the Vatican's thinking at the time on altar girls is this: In the United States and in other countries there is a trend toward using litigation to force change for 'gender equality.' In the context of current American jurisprudence, a court suit to force altar girls on the Church might well be successful. Once the courts decided that they had the authority to force altar girls on the Church, they might just go all the way and force women deacons, and finally priests. If the Church approved altar girls, the first lawsuit would address the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which would be easier to defend given the unbroken history in the Old Testament days of male Jewish priests and rabbis, and in the past two thousand years of male priests and deacons. So my understanding is that the Holy Father's decision to approve altar girls was based on a prudential judgment that it would result in less overall damage to the Church."

Of course we are not required to accept a liturgical practice introduced out of fear of lawsuits and in hope of providing temporary relief from a hostile political regime. It was a hostile political environment that made this assault on the liturgy possible; at this moment the political environment in the United States is

far less hostile to Catholics, so shouldn't we be working to overturn this practice? What right does anyone have to use a nation's legal system to force changes in the liturgy for the sake of "gender equality?"

Fifth, there is a direct relationship between the use of Girl Altar Boys and the decline of vocations. This practice has been around long enough now for us to gather data, to observe trends, and to view results. In two cases within the United States, bishops have refused to permit this liturgical practice: the Diocese of Lincoln and the Diocese of Arlington.

I recently contacted the Diocese of Lincoln to look for some numerical data. I soon ended up on the phone with Fr. Jeffrey Eickhoff, Professor of Philosophy at the newly constructed St. Gregory the Great seminary in the Diocese of Lincoln. According to Fr. Eickhoff, last fall there were nine seminarians admitted from within the Diocese, and a total of about 29 including seminarians from other dioceses. I asked Fr. Eickhoff whether he considered that there was a relationship between declining vocations and Girl Altar Boys. He responded, "Yes. That's not the only thing that is causing a loss of vocations, but it is certainly one of them."

He went on to discuss the church he grew up in and where he served as an altar boy. He credited this experience with having contributed to his own vocation. Recently he was informed that at this same church, a relatively large church that is not in the Diocese of Lincoln, the vast majority of altar servers are now girls, not boys.

I then contacted the other diocese that hadn't buckled under political pressure. The Diocese of Arlington, Va., issued a memorandum in late 1994 signed by the Chancellor. The memorandum stated that the tradition of boys only serving on the altar would remain unchanged throughout the diocese, but did provide for a few exceptions. To this date the exceptions have not become the norm.

The memorandum explained: "One of the top priorities of the Diocese of Arlington is to identify and nurture potential vocations to the priesthood, and it is a special gift of God that our corps of diocesan priests has grown over 50% in the past decade.

"One of the best expressions - and reinforcements - of an early inclination to the priesthood is often found in a young boy's voluntary offer to assist the priest at the altar, where the possibility of a role model scenario is clearly present. Perhaps that might explain why over 85% of our priests formerly were altar servers."

I contacted the vocations office to try to find out how many seminarians had been admitted in Fall 2002, and the vocations office would not release the information. However, according to an April 12, 2001 article in the diocesan newspaper there were 34 men in priestly formation at that time. According to a December 25, 2001 article¹¹ in the same paper there were 41, which means that 11 were added between April and December 2001, probably in September.

I then contacted other unnamed dioceses in which Girl Altar Boys have become virtually universal. In those cases in which they would actually respond to my question, there were either zero new seminarians or only one last September.

I brought the issue up in a meeting with a group of Catholic men recently, and one gentleman asked, "Won't the use of both girl and boy altar servers inspire girls to become nuns and boys to become priests?" My response was, "When was the last time you even saw a nun?" He couldn't remember.

On the other hand, we can see that there is no shortage of young men interested in the Legionnaires of Christ, nor is there a shortage with the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter (FSSP) and the Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest. None of the above engages in feminist liturgy, and the latter two follow the

1962 Latin rite. The FSSP had 118 applications for less than 20 positions to begin at their seminary September 2003. That's just within the North American District.

Priests are the lifeblood of the Church. However few these positive examples may be, they deserve the attention and respect of the rest of the Church. What positive, what good have we seen from placing girls at the altar? Is it good for Church unity? No, since many parents are compelled to take great steps to avoid exposing their children to it. Is it bringing the Catholics and the Orthodox together? On the contrary, it is a wedge that is guaranteed to keep us divided, since such liturgical practices are anathema to our Eastern Christian brethren. Given the inclination of so many in the West to attempt to force Western Christianity on the Churches of the East, this has certainly given the Orthodox reason to pause and wait. Likewise, the presence of the "serviettes" has reinforced the rupture with the Society of Saint Pius X.

It is clear at this point that female service in the sanctuary is closely related to the vocations crisis. But a simple reversal of this practice by itself will not resolve the crisis; much more is involved. Orthodoxy, good catechesis, a genuine Catholic spiritual environment in the home, constant study of and imitation of the lives of saints, all of these things practically guarantee vocations. Without them, the decline will continue.

How to respond?

A priest can take whatever prudent steps are possible to end the practice, and every good priest should do so as quickly and expeditiously as possible. According to the July 27, 2001 letter from the Congregation for Divine Worship, a priest cannot be compelled by his bishop to allow Girl Altar Boys. If there is concern over the possibility that feminists in the parish would initiate a lawsuit, recall that there is no requirement for Altar Boys ("servers?") in the Novus Ordo Mass. It would be possible to simply dismiss all, boys and girls, men and women, and wait for better times when a cadre of boys can be trained with the proper understanding of the role.

For heads of families it may be more difficult, but there is still plenty that can be done. You could start by talking with your priest, expressing your concern, and asking him to do something about it - for example, eliminate this practice from one of the scheduled Sunday Masses. Many priests will be unsympathetic, but you should try. You could also attempt to educate the parents of the girls involved. Chances are that they see no wrong in what they are doing. If you are comfortable going to this extent, you could even write to your bishop and ask him to make some provision; be sure to include the fact that you would like to protect whatever vocations your children have.

Often the easiest way to deal with the problem is to consider driving greater distances on Sundays. There may be a parish in a nearby town in which only boys serve. The Catholics attending the English Mass at our parish church did not have Girl Altar Boys forced on them, probably because enough of them expressed their concern over the issue. There may be such a parish near you. Also, it is possible that there is a Tridentine usage parish within driving distance. The Chicago-based Coalition in Support of Ecclesia Dei provides a complete listing. The closer you are to a big city the more likely it is that you will find an alternative of this nature.

I know of very few locations in the country where you would not be able to find a reasonable alternative within one to two hours drive, and the time spent on the road can be well spent in prayer on the Lord's Day.

Whatever the case, do not accept that you have absolutely no choice in the matter; or that out of "obedience," or "charity" you must settle for sexual confusion at the Altar of God.

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