

The Social Construction of a New Leadership Role: Catholic Women Pastors

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The Revision of the Code of Canon Law

Realizing the importance of changes in church law for the implementation of Vatican Council decisions, Pope John XXIII called for the revision of the Code of Canon Law in 1959. The new code, promulgated in 1983, included a change that opened the door for the appointment of laity as parish administrators. In recognition of the priest shortage, this code included a provision for people other than priests to perform some of the duties of the pastor in a parish. The new canon (or rule), number 517.2, reads:

If the diocesan bishop should decide that due to a dearth of priests a participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted to a deacon or some other person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons, he is to appoint some priest endowed with the power and faculties of a pastor, to supervise the pastoral care.

The phrase "due to the dearth of priests" reveals an important demographic

factor as the rationale for this change in church law. In the next section I discuss this and other demographic changes that helped to create the opportunity for a greater empowerment of the laity.

Demographic Changes

The increasing shortage of Catholic priests is the key demographic change that must be examined in order to understand why laity are now heading parishes. . . . American dioceses will lose an average of 40 percent of their active priest population between 1966 and 2005. A fact that is not well known to the average American parishioner is that at the present time only six of every ten vacant positions throughout the United States are being filled by newly ordained priests.

The priest shortage would be less critical if it were not for the continued growth in Catholic membership. . . .

Other demographic factors external to the Catholic Church should be included in this analysis. The contemporary women's movement, which entered a phase of intense mobilization soon after the adjournment of

the Vatican Council, had important repercussions for Catholic women. Chief among the external demographics that have affected the internal demographics of the Catholic church are women's greater participation in the labor force, their increased rate of college attendance, and their completion of postgraduate degrees (Kroe 1989:11-13). All of these facilitating factors—Vatican II changes, the revision of church law, and internal and external demographic changes—have expedited women's entrance into new roles in the Catholic Church.

The Social Construction of a New Leadership Role

Between June and December, 1989, I visited twenty parishes scattered throughout the United States where women had been appointed by the bishop as administrator of the parish. These parishes were situated in six of the nine census regions of the United States. Because I was interested in comparing nuns and married women as pastors, eleven of the parishes I visited were headed by nuns, eight were headed by married women, and one by a lay woman who was not married. It is important to keep in mind, however, that *all* women in the Catholic Church are laity, including nuns, because ordination to the clerical state is denied to women. The women in my study, therefore, share two characteristics: their gender and their lay state, and as I will show, these shared characteristics have an impact on the way they perceive and perform their duties in their role as pastor.

I stayed for a weekend in each parish, usually living with the woman in her parish house or family home. While there I conducted taped formal interviews with each woman pastor, her sacramental minister (the title for the priest who was assigned as her supervisor or moderator), and two parishioners (one male and one female). This is a qualitative research study, based primarily

on formal and informal interviews, and field notes from my own observations. All of the generalizations are based on the clear majority of the subjects, or the dominant pattern. Therefore, when I quote from a particular subject, this represents a common interview theme. Other sources of data were documents such as parish histories, local newspaper articles, diocesan guidelines, church bulletins, contracts, and letters.

Although initially interested in the constraints and resources in the role transition process, I soon realized that these women were not simply following the script of the previous priest pastor. Because they were not ordained, it was impossible for them to perform all of the priestly roles. On the other hand, the lay state that they shared with their parishioners enabled them to break down some of the barriers to communication that had existed under previous pastors. They would not and could not place themselves on a pedestal well above the members of the parish. Instead they were, in conjunction with their parishioners, practicing collaborative leadership, and thus creating a new social reality.

According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), everyday life is socially constructed by the continuous creation, through actions and interactions, of a shared reality that is experienced as objectively factual and subjectively meaningful. Their theory utilizes three key concepts that they describe as moments of a dialectical process: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Each of these concepts will, in turn, be used in explaining the social construction of a new style of leadership.

The Push for Externalization: The Ethos of the Parishes

In the process of externalization, individuals create their social worlds by their activity with others. It is in the externalization phase that people are seen as cre-

ative beings, capable of acting on their environment. The ethos of the parishes upon their arrival was what inspired the women pastors to move toward a new leadership style.

The parishes typically went through a "grieving process" over the loss of their priest pastor. All of these parishes had previously been headed by priests, and the parishioners' identities as Catholics were linked to their priest pastor. In Berger and Luckmann's theory, this change represented a disruption of their previous internalization, a loss of a significant other with whom they strongly identified.

The woman pastor was a "first" for them; many of them had not heard of the legal changes about the appointment of laity to head parishes until shortly before it happened in their parish. Because their new pastor was a layperson, it meant that they would have to depend on a priest to come from another parish, one who was often a stranger to them, to celebrate their Masses and to preside at the other sacraments. Another constraint was a financial one. In addition to their own pastor's salary, a priestless parish is also expected to pay a stipend to the priest who travels to their parish to perform his sacramental duties.

It is not surprising, then, that there was some initial resistance on the part of parishioners, especially during the first year. When one of the nun pastors arrived at the parish, a male parishioner told her:

I hope you're not sensitive, but it was our turn for a good priest, and we got you. It's not you; you have to know that. No matter how good you are, you are not going to be good enough. People are not going to accept you, and you are going to have a hard time.

The idea of a woman pastor is so incongruous for many Catholics that they

can hardly imagine it. It is incompatible with their only image of a Catholic pastor: a priest, an ordained male, the dominant figure in the parish, whose parishioners traditionally both revere and obey him. A woman in charge of a parish does not look like a pastor, does not sound like a pastor, and does not behave like most previous pastors. In short, many Catholics, like the parishioner quoted above, have *reified* the role of pastor, in Berger and Luckmann's terms. They have forgotten that the role of pastor was created by human beings; instead they apprehend the role as a nonhuman fact, incapable of change.

A married woman pastor told of the conflict she had with a very domineering male parishioner who was a member of the parish council. She said "I think the guy had a real problem with women in authority. As long as I would let him have the upper hand, it was okay. One day I didn't do that, and he just blew up."

A belief in patriarchy guarantees a dominant position for males because the primacy of their authority is unquestioned, and the Catholic Church as an institution is the personification of a hierarchical system based on patriarchy. In the Catholic tradition the use of terms like "your eminence" and "your excellency" reserved for cardinals and bishops, all of whom are men, is a case in point. I found that the belief that men should rule was played out in numerous ways in the everyday lives of women pastors. It was particularly evident in the way some of the sacramental ministers (priests) related to them. A nun pastor explained that the priest made it clear to her that he wanted to do things "his way," so she had to be tactful about making any suggestions or recommendations to him. As she described it, "To put it simply, I feel tired if I have to work at being diplomatic with (him), and make a suggestion, and make

it sound like he made it in order to make it work out right. Sometimes that wearies me."

Another nun pastor described what ensued when she stood up to a male parishioner at a parish council meeting.

I certainly didn't want to cause a major eruption, but I wasn't going to let this man rule me for the whole time I was there. I tried to be gentle with him, but firm; [to] listen to him, but he was totally disrespectful. It was really a woman issue. . . . And the whole first year had been a real struggle with him.

A female parishioner in another parish said that there was a lot of "hell-raising" when the parishioners heard "that a woman was going to be boss." She quoted one of the women in the parish who told her: "I know these men. They don't want a woman in charge. They think all we are good for is cooking in the kitchen, making love, and having babies."

In Goffman's (1959) view, the women pastors were not able to present the appropriate "personal front." Not only were they the wrong gender, but they also lacked the institutional status of all previous pastors. Not having been ordained, they arrived at the parish sharing an equal status with their parishioners, as laity.

Armed with the Vatican II definition of the church as the people of God, it is no wonder, then, that they soon decided to recruit their parishioners as co-workers. They accomplished this by a combination of strategies: visiting homes, learning names, including parishioners' concerns in their homilies, and making themselves accessible. On their part, the parishioners were willing accomplices in the creation of this new social reality, partly because they wanted to avoid the alternative, a closing of their parish.

Collaborative Leadership as a Social Fact

One of the most striking differences between the women pastors and their priest predecessors was the leadership style. The dominant pattern of leadership was collaborative. In a collaborative relationship, based on equality rather than hierarchy, all of the persons in an organization work together to achieve a common end. The leader guides, rather than commands, drawing on the talents of others. This is in direct contrast to the priest pastor who typically performs like a "one-man band," rather than a conductor leading the orchestra.

According to Berger and Luckmann, "The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification." Pastors and parishioners alike spoke of the social reality of participating as co-laborers; one of the women pastors explained her perspective on leadership this way:

Leadership is listening to parishioners' initiatives. A leader listens and then articulates the needs and directions of the community, and finds ways to name it and facilitate it. The most valuable thing I think anybody could have who would find themselves in this position [as pastor] would be to maintain their sense of deep respect for all of the people that you work with and not think that you are in a position of authority over them.

Most of the time parishioners responded positively when the pastor asked them to become involved in the running of the parish. It was only on rare occasions that there was an outright refusal. One of the parishioners explained (Wallace, 1992:78), "It's hard to say no to [her] because people respect her and you want to help her. And she just has a way of asking you that puts you at ease. It's not in a demanding sort of way at all. She always asks, never says, 'Do this'."

A priest spoke of the advantages for the married woman pastor in a nearby parish:

One thing that is very highly stressed over there [at her parish] is lay leadership. I can talk about that all day here [at my parish] but it doesn't have the same impact. . . . When [the woman pastor] says, "Well, I'm a mother, too, and I have kids at home, . . . and being the lector is something I enjoy and you would enjoy it, too," they take it in a different way than if it came from me. So in many ways she is better [than I am] with the laity because she is a laywoman.

Parishioners' experience of collaborative leadership is, I would argue, directly related to their changing attitudes and behavior regarding their own women pastors. For example, there was typically not only an increase in the number of parishioners who became actively involved in parish committees, but also an increase in financial contributions in these parishes where parishioners are now making (or contributing to) the parish's financial decisions. One woman pastor said that the finance committee, made up of four parishioners and herself, arrived at the yearly budget by consensus. She explained,

When I meet with them, I give them an update of where we stand, and they see everything. This is something that they have been absolutely flabbergasted with. They never saw the books before. They get an accounting of every last penny. They see everything that comes in, how it is spent, and where we stand.

For their part, many parishioners said that once they responded to their pastor's collaborative leadership by becoming actively engaged in the running of the parish, they became part of the financial solution themselves. A woman pastor described it this way:

Before, [church] services would be over and the people would be gone. Now you see them hanging around, and they really have developed a wonderful sense of community. They are not looking to

the priests any more for their answers. They are really making some decisions in terms of their own parish plans and facilities. Collections have gone way up, and they are making decisions on how to use that.

Internalization of the New Social Reality

When individuals internalize a social reality, they also gain a social identity; and when they conform to the expectations of social institutions, they are simultaneously re-creating them. The creation of a new institution occurs in the moment of externalization; once externalized, it is objectified; and once objectified, it acts back on the individual as an internalized entity (see Berger and Luckmann, 1967).

Having a layperson appointed as their pastor is a "mixed bag" for parishioners. On the one hand, lay identity means that the pastor is "one of them," and leadership that was previously hierarchical is now collaborative. Parishioners in these parishes experience a growing sense of empowerment and of community. On the other hand, the lay state has liturgical and financial costs for the parishioners as well.

Reflecting on the parishioners' internalization, a married woman who had been a member of the parish for several years before her appointment as pastor said,

In all of the years of my gradually doing different things here, being president of the [parish] council, leading prayer services, and all the other things, there was never any time when somebody said, "Wait a minute, [she] can't do that because she's a woman." It's only when you get into the areas of the Sunday Assembly, and the heavy-duty sacramental things, that the issue begins to surface. And it always comes from the top down, from the hierarchy; it isn't a problem for the average people. And those people that do suffer from it and say, "Wait a minute, she's a woman," they didn't learn that themselves. It was taught to them, and they can learn to get past that,

just as they can learn to get past judging a person because they are black or Mexican or Oriental.

The issue of "appropriate" behavior for men and women came up in several of the interviews. For example, the question of whether or not to fire the housecleaner for the parish house was raised. A woman pastor described her response:

[The woman who cleaned the house] came in tears after Father left and said to me, "I suppose now that Father's gone that they won't hire me anymore." She thought that I was going to do the cleaning. I said, "That shouldn't make any difference. I am doing everything Father did. You can be sure as long as I'm here you are going to stay on." Then I heard comments from the people, "Now that Sister is hired she will have more time so she can do her own cleaning." That was all the more reason why I didn't. I said, "I really wasn't trained to do the work of a housecleaner. I know how to do it, but my work is ministry here. And if Father could have somebody, I don't see why I can't." She [the housecleaner] stayed on.

There were several indications that patriarchal beliefs and gender discrimination were being replaced by positive feminist beliefs and gender equality in the parishes I visited. There were a number of occasions when the question of inclusive language emerged. Sometimes it emerged during our conversations, and at other times I observed it in action, usually during the Sunday liturgy. For example, I noticed in one parish that hymns on xeroxed sheets showed words like "his" and other exclusive language had been deleted, and more inclusive language was inserted. In another parish I heard the priest give the last blessing to the congregation at Mass in a more inclusive way. Instead of "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," he said, "In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Holy Spirit." On neither occa-

sion did I witness an uprising or even a mild protest from the congregation.

Often I heard my interviewees allude to the sexist stance of the institutional church. A male parishioner said, "I would like to see more liberal views towards women as far as active roles in the church because they are a valuable resource. I think we have done a disservice. . . . The hierarchy is totally male, so it is hard for them to accept that."

Perhaps the change in attitudes and action that has resulted from a woman pastor's activities in a parish can best be summed up by a statement from a woman parishioner who was the parish organist and choir director:

I have really come to believe that women can do the job, not as well, but *better*. And believe it or not, when [the woman pastor] first came here, I didn't even change the words in the hymns. That was not an issue at all. So I've grown a lot in the last four years, and realize what women can do for this church. And the position that women are in presently, I don't think it's right.

When it came to the issue of ordination of women, however, the women pastors themselves offered carefully nuanced statements. A typical response was made by one of the nun pastors who said that she "wouldn't want ordination to continue as it's been," adding that to ordain women in the present structure would mean having "a masculine structure with feminine bodies in it." She suggested a new, less hierarchical model of ordination that would reflect the more participatory style of leadership modeled by women pastors.

As is evident in statements from parishioners, they witness the whole gamut of challenges stemming from patriarchal beliefs and practices that their woman pastor meets on a daily basis. And the parishioners, as laity, can identify with her treatment as a second-class citizen.

They are beginning to question this inequity. Even those parishioners who described themselves as traditional Catholics told me that they had changed their attitudes and actions regarding women in the church. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the parishioners I interviewed no longer support gender discrimination, and they attribute their change in thinking to their experience with the collaborative leadership of a woman pastor.

Conclusion

Given the continued decrease in number of active priests, accompanied by a growing increase in the Catholic population, we can expect that the phenomenon of priestless parishes will not disappear soon in the United States. In addition to Schoenherr's (1990) demographic data, a different type of indicator of this trend can be seen in a recent advertisement in the *National Catholic Reporter* (1992) by a diocese seeking pastoral administrator applicants. The ad states that they are "uncertain of openings now," but that they are in the process of building a file for the future.

Can we expect a continuation of collaborative leadership in these parishes? In order to address this question further research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed on a number of fronts. For instance, one of the central questions emerging from this study is the extent to which the patterns of behavior and attitudes toward the collaborative leadership exercised in these parishes are due to the lay state or to the gender of the pastor. A comparison of the woman headed parishes with those led by nonordained men (religious brothers and laymen) could help to answer this question. Because most male Catholics who feel called to serve the needs of the church become

priests, the number of such parishes in the United States is small; by 1991 there were thirteen pastored by religious brothers. To my knowledge there has been no systematic research on Catholic parishes headed by laymen.

A comparison with Catholic parishes administered by deacons, of which there were forty-seven in 1991, should also be undertaken. Even though deacons are ordained, their clerical ranking is below that of a priest. In contrast to laity, however, deacons have the right to preach, baptize, perform funeral services, and witness marriages. It would increase our understanding of this phenomenon to know the type of leadership practiced by deacons and the behavior and attitudes of parishioners toward them, as compared with parishes headed by laity.

Although some research on Catholic parishes headed by women in South America has been done (Adriance, 1991; Gilfeather, 1977), additional cross-cultural research on other continents could shed some light on cultural differences regarding the use of collaborative leadership. Another line of research could compare Catholic women pastors with female Episcopal priests, holding gender constant while looking at lay/clerical differences in the practice of parish leadership.

Although my study is the first systematic look at an important religious phenomenon, it represents only the tip of the iceberg. The experiences of women pastors and their important role partners—their parishioners, priests, and bishops—have assisted in the process of what Berger and Luckmann (1967:91) would label the dereification of the role of Catholic pastor. I am convinced that their participation in the construction of a new reality of leadership at the parish level will prepare the way for important structural changes in the Catholic Church of the twenty-first century.

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