

The New Catholic Manliness

By Todd M. Aglialoro

“The Catholic Church makes men. . . . Of such she may also someday make soldiers.”
—Hilaire Belloc

It is a source of no small irony that, even as radical feminists within and without the Church have railed for two generations against patriarchy and phallocentrism, it can be quite plausibly said that the post-conciliar Church in this country has, for all intents and purposes, been run by women.

Consider a Sunday in the life of a typical American parish. Father Reilly, once his mother’s darling, says Mass before a congregation disproportionately representative of widows (both the traditional and the football kind), soccer moms flying solo, and budding young *liturgistas*. At the elevation of the Host, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist (80-20 female) and altar servettes gather around the sanctuary to lend him moral support.

After Mass, he enjoys a donut in the church basement while regaling the ladies of the Hospitality Guild before heading back upstairs to sit in as the token male at a meeting of parish CCD teachers. Later that afternoon, Sister Dorothy fills him in on the doings of the confirmation class, peace and justice committee, RCIA candidates, and youth group. At dinner he lingers over the new pastoral letter from his bishop, urging the flock to get more in touch with the God Who Nurtures. Finally, in the evening, he pokes his head into the weekly gathering of the Divorced and Separated Support Group, whose overwhelmingly female members and leaders thank him for his solicitude.

Do I exaggerate? Perhaps. (Father probably wouldn’t have checked up on his catechists like that.) But common experience nonetheless bears out the point: We may yet have a male-only clergy and hierarchy, but where the rubber meets the road—in those mundane areas of church life where laity and institution most commonly interact—the flavor is feminine. Whether you want to speak in terms of liturgy, ministry (lay and clerical), religious education, or sheer congregational numbers, official ecclesial *power* may not rest in the hands of women, but considerable unofficial *influence* clearly does, and has for some time. And we in the Church have been subject to its effects.

Not all these effects, as we shall see, have been bad. But one of the worst has been a subjugation of traditional masculine virtue: the concept of distinctly and properly *manly* Catholicism repressed, stigmatized, covered up, or otherwise forgotten for lack of practice. And the more “feminized” Catholicism thus became—the more its pews became recognized as the province of wives, children, and the effete—the more likely were men and their post-pubescent sons to stay away. All of this is making today’s Church, according to Leon Podles, author of *The Church Impotent*, “essentially a women’s club with some male officers.”

Men Struggle to Be Brides

A certain feminine spin to Christianity is no modern novelty, of course. To the early pagans, our religion must have reeked of unmanly weakness, with its insistence on monogamy and celibacy,

its idealized pacifism, its exaltation of mercy, its preference for the poor and helpless, and its meek-and-mild founder whose humiliation and death were somehow a blessing. Around the high Middle Ages, according to Podles, Aristotle's idea of the "passive" female became enmeshed with the ecclesiology of the Church as Bride of Christ. To be a good Christian from then on, he says, meant to recognize that "God is the father, the groom, active; while we were to be the bride—passive and receptive."

Msgr. Stuart Swetland, director of Pre-Theology at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, agrees that in Christian spirituality "the default position is always going to be the feminine," because we are fundamentally called "to be receptive to God, to give way to His agenda." But he insists that "there is a way to do this without being 'effeminate'—a properly masculine way to yield to God's active principle." Unfortunately, he says, in the male's fallen state it is difficult to shake the presumption that to yield to God is to be less than a real man. Throughout all ages and cultures we witness the scene of men gathering for gossip, drink, or shared idleness while their wives bundle the children off to church. These men, like their modern HDTV-ogling counterparts, might darken a church door on Easter Sunday, sweating in their suits, but they'd sooner take up sewing than a regular sacramental life.

The Over-Correction

Despite these handicaps, the Church has undeniably left us a historical legacy of masculine role models: saintly warriors, rugged missionaries, martyr-priests. In fact, just the last century may have seen something of a mini-renaissance of masculinity. Podles theorizes that in the decades immediately preceding Vatican II, many men, "hardened by the horrors of war," became priests and bishops, leading to a stereotype of the rough or aloof cleric, and to a style of catechesis that strenuously emphasized God's fatherhood, strict moral norms, and a hyper-rationalized approach to theological questions. Meanwhile, the lay members of the Greatest Generation fell into a pattern of rigid, narrowly defined gender roles, of which men had uncontested dominance.

Ironically, this brief spike in Catholic manliness may have contributed to its own downfall, for by the 1960s a counter-movement had begun. In families there emerged a widespread rebellion against "paternalistic" authority. Priests and religious strove for softer, more "pastoral" approaches. And according to Ron Bolster, director of the Office of Catechetics at Franciscan University of Steubenville, religious education "began to emphasize methodology over content—the person being catechized over the object of catechesis." The old regime's stern and systematic approach to the Faith, with its "forced memorization, casuistry, rulers on the knuckles," no longer served.

In many instances, Monsignor Swetland and Bolster both insist, there was a genuine correction in order, a worthy contribution from the "feminine" perspective to be made. But it all went too far, and quickly. (Consider as a parallel how the revolutionary affirmation-based child-rearing philosophy of Dr. Spock morphed into the coddling excesses of the baby boomers.) Suddenly a generation of men—both lay and clergy—that not long before had finally been able to admit that it was "okay to cry" became the Phil Donahue Generation: limp caricatures of sensitivity. Fathers—of families and of souls—lost their authoritative voice, or abandoned their responsibilities to seek self-

fulfillment. Meanwhile, catechists, newly unchained from dry and rote formulas, soon reduced the content of the Faith, as Bolster puts it, to “Jesus loves you, now let’s make a collage.”

At this time, too, radical feminism stepped out of the universities and muscled in on the pews with its now-familiar list of demands, seeking (with considerable local success) to enforce a new, gender-neutral brand of “God-talk.” And also—let it not go unsaid—the *Goodbye, Good Men* generation of clergy entered active ministry, their male psychosexual identities malformed, inflicting on the Church everything from priests with squishy handshakes to the worst crimes of the Lavender Mafia.

But a funny thing happened on the way to a testosterone-free Church, beginning perhaps in the early 1980s: Following a trail blazed first by Evangelical Protestants, in what appears to be part of another historical correction, manly Catholicism—chastened and wiser—began to make a modest comeback. Let us look at some examples of Catholic manhood’s counter-offensive, how it is manifesting itself in different areas of Church life, and what it may mean for its future.

The Counterattack

“Where did it begin? Right in the bosom of the family,” says Tarek Saab, founder of Lionheart Apparel, a line of casual men’s clothing featuring Christian symbols and slogans. Saab, who parlayed his 15 minutes of fame as a contestant on the TV show *The Apprentice* into a platform for promoting masculine Catholic ideals, believes that many children of the 1970s, burdened with their parents’ social debt of divorce, fatherlessness, and sexual misery, were determined to do things differently. For Christian men especially, that meant carving out a brave new counterculture in which fathers reclaimed their position as head of the family, planted themselves in the pews alongside their wives and kids, and adopted a “provide and protect” stance in the face of the world’s trials and temptations.

Saab sees a parallel phenomenon among younger, unmarried Christian men, to whom his company’s products and Web site content are mostly aimed. They actively reject the “cheap version of manhood” that their generation has devised in an attempt to fill the masculinity vacuum: the “lowest-common-denominator” man who worships sports, electronics, and sex (yet who still somehow escapes feminist censure, presumably by agreeing to pay for half the abortion). Conscious of oppression from a world that wants to rob them of their piety, their self-control, and their chastity, they’re banding together for fellowship and strength. In a sort of return to the low-profile symbols used by the persecuted early Church, Saab envisions items such as his company’s Christ-themed T-shirts (cut to show off muscles) and hats—as well as papal crucifixes, rosary rings, or Miraculous Medal tattoos—being worn in health clubs and on college campuses as a way for such men to identify and silently affirm each other.

What Does It Mean to Be a Man?

Shift from the relatively superficial to the sublime and you have “That Man Is You!,” a program of Houston-based family ministry *Paradisus Dei*. Its founder, Steve Bollman, has mapped out an ambitious approach to men’s ministry that begins by mining the social and biological sciences in search of a comprehensive vision of gender differences and roles—of what makes a man a man, and why. In so doing, he has discovered what he thinks is the key to male under-representation in the Church—in short, the “pastorally sensitive” approach bores them. “Men respond to a

challenge,” Bollman says. “To offer them a ‘soft’ program doesn’t take into account how men work.”

So Bollman set out to provide that challenge—with early morning prayer groups; with demanding “covenants” that call men to be self-sacrificing leaders in their families; and with an intellectually rigorous 68-week program, spread over three years, that unites science, Scripture, theology, and spirituality in a “thinking-man’s quest” for the full truth of what it means to be a man—and a man of God. To date, more than 5,000 men in Texas, Canada, and satellite programs nationwide have participated.

Bollman sees his ministry as part of a larger wave. “There’s definitely something going on here,” he says. Throughout the Church, “God is awakening in more men the desire to be real men.” This means making sacrifices, being “willing to pay the price to do the right thing.” In order to make such a sacrifice a man must “draw on all his masculine strength,” Bollman says, and in so doing he steers clear of the two extremes of false manhood that are “deadly to male participation in the Church”: the “wimpish Christianity” that presents neither challenge nor reward, and the machismo that keeps proud men off their knees.

Hello, Good Men

In what is certainly a corollary to Christian manhood’s renaissance in family life and among young men, we have also begun to witness a discernible return to masculinity in our seminaries and, consequently, our parishes. Both Monsignor Swetland and his confrere Msgr. Steven Rohlf, rector for the Mount, see promising signs in the men coming through their seminary doors today.

For one, they are carrying themselves differently: “They take pride in their masculine attributes,” says Monsignor Swetland. “The last couple generations of priests generally weren’t too concerned about taking care of themselves physically,” but these days “they work out, they play sports, they want to look and dress and act like men.” Also in contrast to their predecessors, they’re interested in pursuing “a distinctly masculine spirituality,” says Monsignor Rohlf—in part, he adds with a laugh, because “there’s a sense of relief that it’s now acceptable to talk that way.”

This didn’t happen by accident, of course. Good seminaries are not simply enjoying a serendipitous influx of manlier applicants; they’re expressly targeting them. In what ought instantly to become the mantra of every rector and vocations director in the country, Monsignor Rohlf tells how he seeks candidates who “exude a personality of quiet confidence and strength”; who demonstrate “an ability to relate to men and to fathers of families, as well as to children as a spiritual father”; and finally, “a spirituality that brings together the best qualities of a man.”

Those qualities exceed the external trappings of speech and physique. “We’re addressing what it means to talk about ‘maleness,’ beyond just the body,” says Monsignor Swetland. Seminarians who, a generation ago, might have been “knocked down for appearing too aggressive” are now confident in showing initiative—no longer bound by “a false sense of what it means to be pastoral,” these men are “not afraid to be Christ-centered men of action,” not afraid to preach boldly about “God’s ferociousness of heart.”

The change has begun to bear evident fruits in the interactions among younger clergy and seminarians, thanks to a reemphasis on the classical sense of friendship, which helps guard against same-sex attraction while building a lifelong foundation for priestly fellowship and mutual help. Among such men there is virtually no evidence of the affectation of feminine traits and roles that has plagued many seminaries. And the conversations at support groups, Monsignor Swetland adds, “aren’t all psychobabble like they used to be.” Instead, the young men challenge and demand accountability of each other.

Perhaps above all else, this new breed of seminarian has a fundamentally different orientation toward the Church, a posture that is decidedly husbandly. “The priests we’re forming now,” says Monsignor Swetland, “their mission is to love, cherish, and protect their Bride the Church. Whereas so many priests and seminarians of my generation, they wanted to *change* the Church.” This doesn’t mean that these men are blind to the Church’s faults and failings; however, they view those troubles in the larger context of a “battle to fight on her behalf.” This spirit of spousal fidelity, combined with a healthy accent on God’s transcendence (whereas the feminine approach, Monsignor Rohlf’s muses, “tends to accentuate His immanence”), has the added effect of sealing these young priests with a deep and trustworthy orthodoxy.

Despite positive signs, this part of the “battle,” such as it is, remains far from won. In many seminaries, even those that have cleared their staffs of ideologues, who before would give unabashed preference to effeminate candidates while straining out the masculine ones, there are still future priests with a seriously deficient—or skewed—sense of what it means to be a man. Some of these will become deadbeat spiritual fathers; others will have to battle—or will succumb to—homosexual urges. Interestingly, some of these seminarians are the same ones displaying a conspicuously fervent piety or orthodoxy. More than one source mentions the acronym DOT—“Daughter of Trent,” house slang for an effeminate or presumptively gay seminarian who affects (or adopts in a compensatory way) an old-school spirituality or flame-throwing orthodoxy. Nonetheless, there is a definite and promising trend here, the benefits of which we have just begun to reap in parishes nationwide.

Toward a Crunchier Catechesis

Partly thanks to the initiative of some of these solid young priests, religious education has also begun to show signs of a renewed emphasis on masculine concepts and methodology. After the perfect storm of feminism, weak spiritual fatherhood, heterodox mischief, and dissatisfaction with rote approaches left Catholic catechesis touchy-feely in method and devoid of content in the 1970s and 1980s, the roots of yet another historical correction began to take hold. The next generation “discovered they were missing something,” Bolster says. They weren’t burdened by the hang-ups or bad memories of their parents, so when they chanced to hear some small aspect of the Faith “delivered to them in a meaningful way,” he says, “they became hungry for more.”

This yearning for content in catechesis is not exclusively masculine, of course. Theological curiosity and rigor are not solely male qualities. The mind and the heart, dogma and experience, definition and mystery, truth and love—both men and women need to receive the Faith from all angles and engage it with all their faculties. But we return to natural gender differences again, to what Bollman calls “percentages and proportions” favoring this or that trait: Not only do they want to be spiritual “providers and protectors,” but men will, on average, be drawn more strongly

to a religion that provides purchase for their intellects to grasp, distinguish, and, finally, submit to.

In practice, this means a return to teaching hard or “crunchy” doctrine, a return to transcendence, a return to the fullness of Christian mysteries. Not, Bolster stresses, a return to the days of rote catechesis, but rather a new approach that “corrects current imbalances” without being merely reactionary. Thus, for example, in teaching Christology Jesus will still be “our friend”—as CCD children drew on their felt banners in the Seventies—but He will also be presented “as our God and Creator and Judge of the universe,” with fully divine and human natures united in the Second Person of the Trinity. A lesson on the four marks of the Church will include the translation of “catholic” as “universal,” and therefore welcoming of all, but now to be followed by emphasis on evangelization and penance rather than on cheery inclusivism.

As a professor of catechetics, Bolster is on the vanguard of a global movement toward the restoration—and more than restoration—of religious education in the Church, a movement in which men will find special benefit. In happy cooperation with the burgeoning spirit of Christian manhood in homes and parishes, it is poised to provide the next generation of faithful with a formation that is intellectual but not dry, warm and personal but not frivolous or compromising, geared to the current situation but rooted in eternal certainties. Such formation, it can be hopefully expected, will in turn produce for the Church more good male teachers, husbands, fathers, and priests.

Onward, Christian Soldiers

As I pursued this investigation of the new Catholic manliness, two common threads emerged. The first was the influence of Pope John Paul II, who by all accounts was the inspiration, motivation, and architect of the whole project. First, as a pastor and spiritual father: In him “the orphans of living parents found their Papa,” as Bolster puts it. And second, by laying down a theological and philosophical trail for Catholic priests, ministers, and laymen to follow. The late pope’s writings on the theology of the body helped us to understand how gender “gets right to the core of who we are,” says Monsignor Swetland. Bollman concurs, adding that John Paul took the “impoverished anthropology” that his era had inherited and replaced it with a “Christian anthropology based on the inherent dignity of man and woman.” Only from that foundation, he says, could we begin to rebuild an authentic male spirituality.

The second common thread was the martial metaphor. Every one of my sources spoke of a *battle* against the temptations and obstacles the modern world puts before men, a war against the false, cheap version of manhood it whispers in our ears. Again and again they made use of military imagery in defining male spirituality: Bolster and Monsignor Swetland—both former naval lieutenants—stressed the need to adapt the military virtues of discipline, valor, and self-sacrifice to the work of spiritual combat.

It may one day be recognized that the growing use and acceptance of military language to define manhood within the Church turned out to be not just apt but critical. For there is one religion that has no problem attracting and keeping male followers. Its wholly transcendent God doesn’t desire spiritual conjugality with His people. Its leaders don’t preach mercy, or celibacy, or

strength through weakness; they do not have to contend with the paradox of the Cross. And the zealous adherents of Islam do not turn the other cheek.

Todd M. Agliano is the editor of Sophia Institute Press