

One criticism some people make against Catholics is that we do not place women in church leadership. Over the last several decades, as women have assumed positions of authority in civic society, people wonder why they cannot have greater authority in the church. After all, the church sides with the downtrodden. We support a preferential option for the poor. We value all human life, including the unborn, the mentally disabled, and the elderly. If any institution should take the side of women, you would think it should be the church.

In fact, other branches of Christianity have integrated women in their leadership more strongly than Catholics have. Here in our own neighborhood we can find women serving as lead ministers of Christian churches. Some denominations allow women bishops. The experience of churches with whom we share a common baptism is noteworthy.

In the Catholic Church, the arguments against the ordination of women to the priesthood generally boil down to these two: One, we've never done it before. And two, the priest should represent Christ, even in his maleness. These arguments are not persuasive to many theologians and faithful. After all, Jesus accepted women among his disciples, and Paul names at least one woman among those whom the church in Rome regarded as their local "apostles". Nonetheless, in recent years Pope John Paul II has made it a matter of faith that the Catholic Church has no authority to ordain women priests. Still, some women feel that the Spirit has endowed them with gifts of leadership for the church, though the church will not receive the gifts they believe they have.

Sadly, there are instances where people with gifts do not use them for the church. Some do not or feel they cannot offer their gifts for some personal reason. They feel inadequate, embarrassed, or the need for anonymity. Others offer their gifts to the church but then never get invited to use them. A local church may hand out a time and talent survey, but lack the gift of organization to use the results. So some of those who give feel abandoned by those who don't, and some who want to give feel unwelcome when they try.

To read St. Paul, the church in Corinth seems much more exemplary on this point. He looks out over the community and sees many gifts of the Spirit. He sees wisdom, knowledge, and faith. He sees gifts of healing and of mighty deeds. He sees prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues. You might say he sees philosophers, doctors, counselors, and spiritual leaders. No one had every gift. But everybody had something, and they gave it for the benefit of the community.

The Catholic Church will continue to discuss the roles of women in leadership. If the Holy Spirit has endowed women with special gifts for the church, we will want to find ways to receive them more fully. But it is part of a larger picture. We need to help individuals discern the gifts they have received, inspire people to offer their gifts, and then put those gifts to work.