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Life is Worth Giving

WHY ARE MANY MEN BORED OUT OF SUNDAY SERVICES?

Two vivid childhood impressions came to this writer's mind while reading about many men who seem to dislike going to church on Sunday. The first was as a young boy being taught my prayers each night by praying with my father. The second was the annual Holy Name parade in the Fall of each year when literally thousands of men of the Holy Name Society marched down the main thoroughfare of West Side Park in Jersey City, N.J., to profess their Catholic Faith. The yearly parade ended with outdoor Benediction in the park.

These memories of the Catholic Church in the 1930s and 1940s came to mind in contrast with the rather dire predictions and assessments of our current religious situation: Where are the men, why are they missing from our churches, and how can we get them back to religious participation?

David Murrow, the father of a devout Presbyterian family, and an elder of that Faith community, asks a bold and thought-provoking question about Sunday morning: Where are all the men? Are they golfing, watching TV, sleeping, mowing the lawn, or catching up on back work? Or perhaps any or all of the above?

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But why not in Church? Less than 40% of adults in most churches are men, and 20-25 % of married church-going women attend without their husbands. And another important question is: Why are the men who actually do go to Church so bored? Why won't they let God change their lives?

Although the book is written more directly for Protestant denominations, the author offers the caution for Catholics: Men have a natural hunger to create something such as a business, a family, a career. Yet the Catholic Church, America's largest denomination, is led by men who create none of these things. And the somewhat recent sexual scandals of abuse of children make ~~men~~ men even more reluctant to place themselves or their children ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ a group of clergy which is reportedly over 50% homosexual. The hierarchy, too, must be conscious of the fact that many of their directives can be viewed by men as emphasizing the role of the female members of the congregation.

But in mainline Proestant churches, the men also stay away in droves, and the author asks many questions as to why this is so. A church that doesn't accept, understand or offer "Discipleship" (people leading each other to maturity in Christ) will often switch to a safer academic model with people in classrooms presented with Biblical knowledge, and then offer a weekly lecture (sermon) from an educated person. What today's churches and people really need is to make their members, both men and women, into disciples.

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"I've read about Jesus in the Bible, and I found this wild man," the author writes. "When I acted that way in church, I earned a rebuke."

Men are changed by what they experience, not necessarily by what they are told.

(DAVID MURROW)

It is important to note, too, adds, that men don't follow programs; they follow men. Throughout their lives, men are transformed through encounters with inspiring men who have made a difference in their lives — such as fathers, uncles, teachers, coaches, or others. Men are dying for a leader to look up to, and say in their heart, "I want to be like him."

Many churches, however, are led by people with passive personalities who drive men away for at least two reasons:

1) passive-led churches are very busy but no one stops to consider whether anything is actually being achieved. Men would rather join the Rotary Club to actually accomplish something. 2)

passive-led churches are not moving toward a compelling vision, as Proverbs says: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (29:18)

Even in conflict resolution in churches, men get angry; women get even. This is not a good way to resolve tensions in a congregation. And all church members are truly called to greatness which is not glory, which clearly belongs to God.

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Think of greatness as reflected glory: just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, a man who achieves something for God's kingdom is simply reflecting God's glory to the world. When men, or women, follow the example of Jesus, they reflect His glory to all.

Churches also need to encourage men to develop their manhood, which differs from simple anatomical maleness. It is not a natural condition that come about spontaneously through biological maturation but rather is a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds. Manhood is something a boy earns, one coin at a time, by doing many things which produce such acts as bravery, heroism, generosity, self-sacrifice, and innovation. If churches call men to such goals in life, pews will become filled with a masculine presence.

The author adds that when men are asked about their non-attendance at church on the Sabbath, most men will give the following reasons: don't have time; church just doesn't seem to work for me; it's boring; it's irrelevant to my life; don't like the pastor; don't want to talk about it; it's too long; they ask for money too much; it's for wimps; and, there are too many hypocrites there.

Pastors and others might well take note of this list, and change the liturgy accordingly.

In addition, men also fear incompetence; singing in public; being singled out and embarrassed; the Christian lifestyle; having to check their minds at the door; their children are being brainwashed; they feel targeted for marriage; they must become super-husbands; they are jealous of Christ or the church; homosexuality in the church; and being afraid of heaven.

The author also cautions that worship must have both heart and mind. It must engage both emotions and thought. Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of authentic worship.

If men are to return to the church, the author adds, ~~the~~ the church must let them be men: ferocious, aggressive, risk-taking men. They need permission to walk with Christ, to use their masculine gifts to change the world, to awaken the long dormant masculine spirit.

Men want to know two things about religion: 1) Does Christianity really work? And 2) Is it really the power of God unleashed on earth, or just religious activity.

Christianity is not simply an insurance policy; it's abundant life, and every man needs a spiritual father. And every man must learn to release the masculine energy within himself. All of this may well bring men back to worship. (Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.)