

# The Gender Tax

by *H. E. Baber*

I was an altar girl at St. Mary the Virgin, New York City—one of the first, in fact. In the mid-70s, one of my friends approached the Rector and negotiated a deal: we women, who were interested in acolyting, would be allowed to serve at mass during the week, in street clothes, on the condition that we form and staff an altar guild.

I was delighted and jumped at the chance. I never much wanted to play a part in the Sunday choreography, which seemed to me much too complex and fussy. And serving during the week got me going to mass every day, which changed my life.

But I did not like being on altar guild one bit. It ate up my Saturdays, and I hated messing with the clothes and silverware. After I succeeded in destroying a priceless chasuble by fusing a page of the *New York Times* to it I was permanently assigned to polishing the brass altar rail, which I hated most of all. It especially irritated me that just because I was a woman I had to pay this price to serve at mass when the guys got to do it for free ....

I just got a call from an older lady in our ECW chapter asking me to bring food for the reception after a funeral thus Saturday. At this point in my career at St. John's everyone knows that I can't cook so I am generally asked to bring ready-mades that I can pick up at the supermarket, typically potato salad or, as in this case, rolls. Sometimes I can even get away with just contributing money. For the ECW bake sale and crafts fair I donate a check; when I have to sell raffle tickets, I simply pay for them myself.

I'm glad that I can pay cash rather than providing services or paying in kind with food or crafts items. But it still vexes me that this special tax is levied on me just because I'm a woman. My husband doesn't have to pay this assessment in cash, in kind, or in services. No one ever asks him to bring food to social events, sell raffle tickets, or help plan fund-raisers, so he doesn't feel any obligation to kick in cash because (like me) he can't cook and is too busy at work to organize parish activities.

I suppose the idea is that *our* pledge is *his* contribution: men, who work outside the home, have disposable income to contribute which they donate to the church as the family pledge; women, who don't have disposable income, donate goods and services, contributing their time and professional skills as homemakers to support the church. I however have no domestic skills and, because I work outside the home, little time to contribute. I prefer to contribute financially. But my share of the household income still doesn't count as part of the family pledge. I am still expected to contribute goods and services, or, failing that, additional money.

There's something peculiar here.

I think it's rather like what happened in the family as it was in the past, when women temporarily dropped out of the labor force to care for their children at home. In the first phase of a marriage, both partners were employed and shared household tasks. Poor but happy newlyweds did the wash together, swinging the laundry basket between them as they hauled their load to the laundromat. Phase II typically began during the wife's first pregnancy when she quit work to specialize in child rearing and other aspects of what economists call "home production." Now there was a washing machine in the house, but she did the wash since she was the home production specialist—perfectly fair since her husband was putting in comparable time and effort outside the home to contribute to the domestic economy.

It was during Phase III, which began when women re-entered the labor force, that a special gender tax was imposed on them. Tasks which women did because they had specialized in home production during Phase II came to be not home production specialists' tasks but *women's* work as such, special responsibilities for women regardless of whether they worked outside the home and regardless of any financial

contributions they made to the family unit. So *in addition to* working outside the home, a Phase III wife continued to do the wash, the cooking, and all the other tasks which she had previously done *instead of* work-ing outside the home.

A woman could minimize this "double shift" by buy-ing substitutes for domestic services—prepared foods and restaurant meals, child care, and cleaning services—but she could not altogether avoid it. Buying and managing the services was itself time and energy consuming, and for some domestic work-keeping the accounts, running errands, and helping with homework—it was exceedingly difficult or prohibitively expensive to buy substitutes.

In short, women initially took on time-consuming, la-bor-intensive tasks in the home to contribute their fair share to the domestic economy in lieu of monetary contri-butions. But subsequently, when they began to contribute financially, they were still held responsible for these tasks, either by providing the services themselves or by contributing additional money to buy substitutes. This additional assessment is the gender tax.

As it was in the home, so it is in the church where women are still expected to do substantially more volunteer work than their male counterparts. Women who work outside the home are allowed to pay in cash rather than in kind or in services, but one way or another, the gender tax has to be paid.

Fewer and fewer women are willing to pay these additional gender-specific costs. In explaining the steady decline in church affiliation in recent decades, one rarely-noticed factor is the disaffection of increasing num-bers of women. Since the Victorian period, church has been women's work—women kept their husbands and families tethered, if loosely, to the Church. Clarence Day expected Vinnie to get him into Heaven: *that*, along with managing the household and caring for the children, was her job.

Women supported the Church and the Church sup-ported women. It gave women a chance to use and display their domestic skills outside the home. Powerful women's organizations within the Church gave capable, energetic women a chance to function in leadership roles from which they were excluded both in secular society and in the Church at large. (Men's groups rarely flourished be-cause they were unnecessary: a man who wanted to exercise leadership in the Church could be a priest or vestryman.) In addition, the Church valued what were regarded as specifically feminine virtues and behavior which were by and large not valued in secular institutions.

Currently, however, the Church has little to offer the growing number of women who no longer play traditional roles in home or workplace. Coming to the Church from a world where there is at least the appearance of min-imizing the significance of gender, we enter a world which is highly sex-segregated, where there are women's groups and, occasionally, men's groups, women's jobs and men's jobs. In addition, women are expected to pay a gender tax: while leadership roles are now open to women, the costs are higher for women who, unlike their male counterparts, are expected to manifest "involvement" by participating in traditional, labor-intensive women's activities. To serve on vestry, a woman must pay her dues just as I had to pay my dues on the altar guild in order to acolyte.

Moreover, the Church's support of what is convention-ally regarded as the feminine ethos has become a dou-ble-edged sword. Women who have invested in cultivating feminine virtues and behavior are happy to see their in-vestment pay off as the Church lauds the value of "caring," nurturance, and niceness, promotes women's allegedly distinctive style of spirituality, and pays lip service to "cir-cling" and non-hierarchal organization which are sup-posed to be characteristic of women's "management styles." Many women however find the expectation that they will be nurturing and exhibit characteristically femi-nine behavior itself oppressive however highly valued these characteristics may be.

Although women's movements and organizations, from conservative anti-feminist groups to radical lesbian separatist organizations, are highly visible within the Church as well as secular society, the fact is that most women don't want to do woman stuff, whether conserva-tive or radical, or belong to sex-segregated organizations, including those which remain a staple of parish life. And many are no longer willing to pay the gender tax that the Church exacts ....

But things are improving. I visited St. Mary the Virgin four years ago and gave a tour to several

friends, including a recent convert of two month's stand-ing who had come into the charismatic-evangelical wing of the Episcopal Church from The Vineyard. He was dumbfounded.

As we sat in the front pew contemplating the stage set and inhaling stale incense, I smelled Brasso. A male, in a cassock, entered stage right with a rag and began polishing the altar rail. The altar rail at St. Mary the Virgin, as every-one knows, is approximately two and a half miles long. I watched him go all the way from right to left, genuflecting as he crossed the center divide, while I inwardly recited the *Nunc*. Yes! Alleluia and amen!

The Anglican *January A.D.* 1999 Pages 16-17

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