

Playing Hooky: Will Boycott of Catholic Church Spur Reform?

Why progressive Catholics will only hurt their cause by boycotting mass this weekend.

By [NATHAN SCHNEIDER](#)

This Sunday, an 80-year-old woman in Ireland, Jennifer Sleeman, won't be attending church. Her hope is that other Catholic women in Ireland will join her.

"Stay at home and pray for change," [she says](#). The mother of a Benedictine monk, she insists she isn't done with church, but that it has done wrong by her, and other women, for far too long.

"Whatever change you long for," Sleeman declares, "recognition, ordination, the end of celibacy, which is another means of keeping women out, join with your sisters and let the hierarchy know by your absence that the days of an exclusively male-dominated church are over."

Nobody knows how many will join her cause. If all the women left, I know my church would be pretty empty — it's most of the way there already. It'll be just me and probably one other guy carrying the hymns, and that isn't a good thing. But is it bad enough to make the collars in Rome reconsider their position?

The truth is, I'm tempted to join her. I don't know exactly how far I'd go on celibacy and women's ordination, but I do know that on both the time for meaningful reconsideration has come. There's no doubt that the habit (so to speak) of leaving women out of Catholic leadership and ministry simply because they're women needs to change. But, as an ally, I fear Sleeman's method is terribly mistaken.

Boycotts are an important tool that people use against businesses and the government policies that support them. If one plays the role of a consumer, then of course one's most powerful recourse is not to consume. But using that same logic against the mass is to misunderstand what should make the church distinctive in the first place, as a community, an institution, and — if I may say so — the bride of Christ on earth.

According to Catholic teaching, mass isn't just a social club meeting, and it certainly isn't a product. It's the Lord's Supper, a mystical encounter with God in community. Before receiving the eucharist, we offer one another the sign of peace, putting aside all that divides us, whatever it

is supposed to come from a wealth beyond. In the presence of God, and among people of different races, classes, and opinions, the mass should nourish us in our common humanity.

So whom exactly is one harming by boycotting, by staying home in solitary prayer? The earthly church might miss your money in the collection — that's less on hand for keeping the priests in their expensive costumes and big chairs, and also less for feeding the hungry. But, theologically speaking, you miss out, and the church carries on. Not attending mass for a faithful Catholic is at worst a sin and at best a pity. It weakens the spiritual bonds of community, the very bonds of trust and unity that we'll need most when the time comes for change.

The mass and the eucharist simply don't make sense as the site for holding a boycott. It runs the risk of directing one's protest against the church's sacraments, rather than against the human beings who mishandle them.

More urgently (and less theologically), however, is what some people's leaving means for those of us who stay. Ex- or lapsed Catholics are everywhere, often well-meaning and progressive. But where does their absence leave those of us who remain in church, and who want to be a force for change?

It's clear that Jennifer Sleeman isn't proposing to abandon the church altogether. But a protest should always be in the image of its goal, the means in keeping with the ends. When I heard of her plan, I couldn't help but think of all the conscientious, passionate people who have already gone, leaving Catholic progressives to fend for ourselves, increasingly isolated. What feels like taking action from the outside can seem more like abdication from within. We need progressives, especially progressive women, *in* the church and speaking up.

A big part of the Catholic story over the last few decades, as the historic reforms of Vatican II have faded into a comparatively reactionary turn, is mass exodus. People disagree with aspects of church teaching, or they suffer at the hands of the clergy, and that's the end. I don't mean to minimize the significance of either — for so many people, enough really is enough. It's too painful to go back. What I'm proposing is a struggle, but a necessary one. But their significance can be exaggerated. When progressives leave their counterparts shape the church more and more as they like it.

Some have tried forming alternative Catholic communities, groups that celebrate their own masses in living rooms and rented halls, sometimes even ordaining their own priests. In the most extreme cases, the result has been marginalization and excommunication. Others have led the way for the mainstream. If these groups are to have any effect beyond their own members, they should be not a replacement but a supplement to participation in the wider community one hopes to reform. Point the way forward, not the way to the door.

For those who want to make a difference in the Catholic Church, I have a simple piece of advice: don't walk out — sit in.

The tradition, fortunately, offers lots of things people can do that honor God even while raising a bit of Cain for man. Form organizations and networks around your concerns. Hone your position in the academy. Hold vigils. Go to meetings, volunteer to help, and speak out when you do. Pray and fast. And repeat. If you have to, start praying in your church as a group and refuse to leave. (Sitting on top of pillars was a favorite attention-getter for ancient saints trying to lead worldly people out of their stupor; so, actually, was celibacy.) But then come to mass, together with the whole community again in peace, to show you are not against the church but for it. We need it, and it is us.

If we Catholics want to help make our church better reflect the hope and faith within us, the first step is to show up.