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COMMENTARY

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Needed: new role models for men

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Women's estimates of men are changing, for the worse, according to a Roper Organization poll. Women are increasingly experiencing men as macho, rather than as kind, gentle and thoughtful. According to the Roper analysts, this change can be explained by the fact that women have greater expectations of men today than 20 years ago. That may be.

But it's also possible that the behavior pattern of males has, in fact, deteriorated in the past two decades.

Whatever the reason, it seems clear that male behavior patterns in this society need some attention. Something is surely wrong when 42 percent of the women surveyed said that men are "basically selfish and self-centered." No wonder so many marriages fail. Call it the pathology of the macho male.

Young men have been suffering from an absent-father syndrome for years. More recently, young men have also been inflicted with the absent-mother syndrome, as more women, driven by economic necessity, have moved into the work force.

The result has been a role-model vacuum for young men — and for young women, too. Who, then, are the young men's role-models? The vacuum left by the absent parents, it appears, has been filled by the media, especially by TV and popular films. The male media heroes — whether a Wade Boggs, a James Brown, a Donald J. Trump, or a Jim Bakker — typically appear in public as high-rolling, philandering, self-preoccupied macho types.

Where are young men to find the selfless rather than self-centered role models that so many of

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them clearly and urgently need? Not in the home, given the severe economic pressures on many families.

Whether paternity leave for new fathers will have a positive ripple effect remains to be seen. This is dependent, of course, on whether men are willing — and permitted — to change their work patterns to take care of a child.

Perhaps the time has come for religious communities to take on this challenge. Call this a mission for males.

Religious communities could fill the gap by providing healthy models of male and female behavior. This would allow young men to experience, in the context of worship, study and social interaction, a viable alternative to the media-inspired macho model.

A number of things in the religious communities must change to accomplish this. Exclusive reliance on masculine language for God will have to be abandoned. In traditional Western liturgies, God tends to come across as a he-man, by default, if not by intention. This is surely not a good divine model for young males.

Female clergy will have to be accepted as professionals in their own right, too, not merely as assistants or directors of religious education. If male professionals run the show in religious communities, young males are surely not going to learn anything different.

Most important, perhaps, adult males who are members of these communities will have to overcome their own macho socialization patterns, and make new commitments to become "big brothers" or mentors for younger males.

All this will take some doing, since it is never easy to change, especially for those of us who have been socialized to be the "top dogs."

But this mission for males will be worth it since it is so urgently needed. Who really wants to live in a world where most of the shots are being called by Marlboro men?

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