

Four years ago at the re-dedication of a nearby renovated cathedral, I read the impressive eight-page booklet celebrating its history. The names of every pastor and every young priest from that Parish were listed. An asterisk led me to a note: "Because of incomplete records and for fear of missing someone, we have omitted all Sisters' names." And I wonder why.

Three years ago as I sang in the Schola at the Abbey Church, I watched 250 bishops--all male--march shoulder to shoulder into the sanctuary. And I wonder why.

This year, seeing newspaper headlines--"Why Forgive?"--and the picture of Pope John Paul and his would-be assassin in an embrace, I wonder why again--not why he chooses to forgive, but why, after many requests, he consistently refuses an audience to Sister Theresa Kane, head of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, who publicly challenged him to consider the needs of women in the Church when he visited the U.S. five years ago.

These are just three examples of what Anne Wilson Schaefer calls the White Male System, a system which renders invisible, ignores, marginalizes, and discounts women. Sexism in the Church is a scandal, yet we--men and women--continue to perpetuate it. In Three Guineas (1938) Virginia Woolf wonders if the work of the Church could go on if women absented themselves from Church entirely (117). She quotes the report of the Archbishops' Commission on the Ministry of Women (1936) barring women from the priesthood: Although women can remain recollected before God and a male minister, "it would be impossible for the male members of the average Anglican congregation to be present at a service at which a woman ministered without becoming unduly conscious of her sex." Woolf ironically comments: "In the opinion of the Commissioners, therefore, Christian women are more spiritually minded than Christian men--a remarkable, but no doubt adequate, reason for excluding them from the priesthood." (161).

This ludicrous situation has not changed much in 50 years, or even in 2,000! A faculty member asks me, "How do you stand it? Men run everything in the Church; they make the rules, and women follow them."

My response is similar to Abigail McCarthy who spoke at St. John's about "Stifled Voices, Stifled Praise" in 1982. She said: "It is hard for women my age to admit, face, or accept what has happened. We kept silent and did not take responsibility. We are caught between brave, new women who do speak out and hostile men who do not understand what is happening.

Faced with this double bind, I might choose to follow Boston theologian Mary Daly who, after arguing with the "old Boys" in the sixties, dropped out of the Church in the seventies, and now spends all her energy and time on raising women's perception of their own worth, giving back to them the power of naming things.

But I would rather stick around and see what happens when women take us into Vatican III! I have a dream--yes, I do. Vatican III is where women and men listen to one another; where the dualist vision of flesh and spirit marking women as the "occasion of sin" is abolished; where the language of Scripture and liturgy celebrates both female and male; where all ministries, including priesthood, are open to those women and men who are called and qualified; where equal status is given to laywomen and women in religious orders; where women heroines of the past are remembered and celebrated.

Vatican II did not count on the impact of the Women's Movement. When it told religious women to renew themselves, it did not count on the startling transformation from "child nun to assertive sister." Sister Joan Chittister, prioress of Benedictines in Erie, says: "Women have come from being owned to being owners, from being kept to being keepers, from being led to being leaders." And the most valuable lesson they have learned, says Joan Ohanneson, is that "they are survivors and they are strong!" (Woman Survivor in the Church, 137) With the help of God, our mother and father, I plan to be a survivor.

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