

IN THE IMAGE
of Christ

ESSAYS ON BEING CATHOLIC AND FEMALE

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Introduction

There is always something to say about the Catholic Church, its teachings, its foibles, its influence, and its people. During the past several years I have had the privilege of writing a column from the Catholic perspective, for a few years nationally syndicated by the Religion News Service, more recently online and occasionally in print editions of the *National Catholic Reporter* and various other journals in the United States and around the world.

Column writing is a difficult art, far different from the academic writing I more usually do, although in many respects equally measured and researched. For me, the columns grow from reading the news—Catholic and otherwise—and thinking and praying about how the news impacts what I see as the basic impetus of faith: Justice. So my column is called “Just Catholic.” I take no quarrel with the teachings of the faith, but I do disagree mightily with some of the disciplines overlaid on the church’s history, the disciplines that ignore the needs of the people of God.

The columnist typically returns to one or a few favored topics, as world news turns the wheel again to show another side to the story. Much of my writing—academic and journalistic—is about women in ministry in the Catholic

Church. So I write about that. Another deep theme is the ways women around the world are treated, often mistreated, simply because they are female.

In my writing and in my thought I draw a straight line from the ways in which some in authority in Catholicism speak about women to the general disrespect too many women suffer in too many parts of the world. The blindness to this fact astonishes me.

On the one hand, the church rightfully says that all are made in the image and likeness of God. On the other hand, the church (or at least some parts of it) presents an argument that women cannot be sacramentally ordained because women cannot image Christ.

My academic research into the restoration of women as deacons proceeds from these truths. I do not disagree that the church believes it has definitively ruled out women in the priesthood. But, if that indeed is the case, what is the argument against women in the diaconate? I find only two points:

- 1) women deacons of history only ministered to women;
- 2) women cannot image Christ.

The second argument (women cannot image Christ) requires that the first argument (women only ministered to women) be rescued from the ash heaps of history. If women were then needed to minister to other women, how much more is women's ministry needed today, when the church seems to argue that women cannot image Christ? Jesus, the Christ, was indeed male. But the sign and symbol of every sacrament is the Risen Lord who has transcended the bonds of flesh and who

lives today in the church.

The Christian vocation is to become another Christ. The simple fact of the matter is that we all image Christ. To say a woman cannot receive the sacrament of order to the rank of deacon because she is a woman is to say a woman is somehow less than human, that, like the cat or lamppost I recall in one of my columns here, she cannot image Christ.

I respectfully disagree with those who intimate that I and half the population of the planet are somehow less than human.

The few columns here printed were selected by ACTA publisher Greg Pierce, whose enthusiastic support of the project has been matched by his careful eye—and ear—and his belief in what I have tried to point out about women in the church and in the world in columns published during months and years past. Not all of my essays on women are here printed, but the carefully-selected few coherently present my case and my views. The essays are slightly edited and updated. I am grateful for the care everyone at ACTA have shown my writing.

I am grateful as well for the able assistance I have received over the years at Hofstra University on this and other projects from my research assistant, Dr. Carmela Leonforte-Plimack, from my student assistant for this project Sarah Andrea Esteban, from Department of Religion and Philosophy administrative assistant, Joanne Herlihy, and from manager of instructional design Monica Yatsyla and the students and staff of Faculty Computing Services.

While several of these essays appeared in print in various publications around the world, most first appeared in *National*

Catholic Reporter online under the careful eyes and pens of Stephanie Yeagle, Pam Cohen, and Dennis Coday. As always, I am grateful for their encouragement and assistance.

The work is dedicated to my dear friend Irene Kelly, RSHM, who served as reader for each column prior to its first publication. My sense of what the church and the world needed me to say was enhanced by her sense of how to say it.

Phyllis Zagano
Feast of St. Martha
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I. IN THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

In the Image of Christ

I love the church. I love the people of God. I belong to it. I belong to them.

I do not belong to a church of good-old-boy camaraderie or to one that looks the other way when its ministers do something wrong. I know the criticisms of Catholic clergy and hierarchy today, yet I know not all priest and bishops or even popes can or should be criticized. The complaints about the church are not all that different from those about any bureaucracy. The church has grown into a multinational corporation that can rival any other, and it has its own bureaucracy to manage its affairs. (That, of course, is the church's Achilles' heel: Ministry in too many places has been replaced by bureaucracy.)

But I do not belong to the church of the bureaucrats. I belong to the church that is the People of God who have seen and heard and believe and act on the Good News proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

I think the bishops and their priests believe the Gospel. But they are increasingly tangled in the bureaucratic web that complicates their every move and reminds them there's a lawyer around every bend.

If you look down the toll road that bureaucracy says leads

to salvation, you will see that many toll booths make some sense, and some others make a lot of sense. It's just that too many church toll-takers are so bored, so angry, so heartless in their unwillingness to make any change that the road backs up and folks go over the median to someplace...anyplace...else.

But to whom shall we go? The fact is, being Catholic does not mean being a toll payer any more than it means being a toll taker. It means carrying or being carried by the Gospel in all its forms, in all its iterations. It is less about judging and more about enjoying the very precious days of life we have been given.

I know the church's hierarchy seems to have transcribed every single saying of Jesus into one law or another. But the church I belong to is not one of law any more than it is the church of bureaucracy. No, the church I belong to is the church of the prophets. It is the church of Oscar Romero and of Dorothy Day. It is the church of soup kitchens and children's shelters. It is the church that knows both women and men are made in the image and likeness of God, and that we all can, and really do, image Christ.

And Then the Angel Left Her

Luke ends the annunciation narrative with a bang: “And then the angel left her.” Mary agrees to the mystery and now is on her own. What does she feel, this young woman about to become pregnant who-knows-how? Alone.

There are what, 3.5 billion women and girls in the world? How many are alone? I don’t mean without friends or family. I mean alone in their choices, in their situations, in their lives. How many look up and see, for just a moment, an angel to light the way? How many, like Mary, accept the will of God?

No life is easy.

How could Mary be so free? What fine cuts to her character prepared her to shine so? How did she manage, knowing—as we must presume—that her child would be just as the angel said: holy, the Son of God?

I’d be scared to death.

Of course, we know little about Mary beyond Scripture’s testimony. From it we can assume that Mary spent a lot of time on her own, before, during, and after Jesus’ birth.

As the story unwinds every Christmas, Mary is still surrounded by men. The crèche figures near the Christ child

are all male. There are shepherds, not shepherdesses. There are kings, not queens. Animals, yes, and in many depictions a few angels hovering about. But following the narrative, there is no sister, no midwife, no female helper to be found.

Was the nativity an entirely male affair? Did Mary have female friends along the way to Jerusalem, or when she and poor, dear Joseph got stranded in Bethlehem? Did a midwife send Joseph out for warm water when her time came? Did a woman help her nurse the child?

Did “the girls” come round to see Mary’s baby boy once the three of them got back to Nazareth? Did her mother and her sisters and her female cousins crowd into the little house to celebrate his circumcision?

Why is all this testimony about the birth of a child, about the birth of this Child, so devoid of women?

Two points here: First, there is not one woman in the annunciation or incarnation narrative besides Mary, even as the angel points to Elizabeth’s pregnancy for proof of God’s power; second, we can only assume that Mary sought and received the support of women, as she did when she went to see her cousin Elizabeth. But there is nothing more in Scripture.

Yes, there are women with her when her son died, but now it is Christmas, and the Christ is breaking forth into, let’s face it, an all-male world. That is a silly and unnatural rendering of this most magnificent example of God’s largesse. How could the God of our fathers—and our mothers—send his son to a world without women? How could the God who according to the philosophers is neither male nor female choose to be with

only half the race? It makes no sense. In fact, it makes no sense at all.

Yet that is what the centuries have handed on to us today. That is how it reads in Scripture. But the God who is both mother and father to the ages and to us each and all could never be so selective.

Mary knew this. Mary knew no doubt that, even though imprisoned by her culture, she could face the truth the angel announced and bring it into the world. Her choice, her yes, her fiat, resounded then and echoes now. Her yes serves to cheer along those other women, all alone, who follow her example and who follow their own roads and paths.

There is very little we can do to unravel what may be a huge misreporting of the story, but there are many ways to encourage the women hearing it to pick up their heads and say—no, to pick up their heads and cry out—for all the world to hear: the story of woman, any woman, is not of subjugation, and it is not of fear.

The world can and should call forth its own angels to be with the women who, like Mary, have impossible tasks before them. The world must supply the graces for the women living with improbable requests made by fleeting angels who brought good and wonderful news but who, when all is said and done, left them.

It is up to the rest of us to take up wings and help those women stay the course. Then, may they and we welcome the Christ Child and, not incidentally, image him.

What Would Mary Magdalene Do?

Once a pope trashes you, it's pretty much downhill from there. So once Pope Gregory the Great in 591 declared that the “sinful” woman in Luke’s Gospel who anointed Jesus’ feet was Mary Magdalene, a whole industry developed to discredit her. That’s big stuff. I mean, she is the one who announced the Resurrection.

Or have they changed that, too?

I can’t help but wonder what Mary Magdalene would have done if she heard—even got a copy of—old St. Gregory’s homily on Luke 7:36-50 erasing all she had done, all she had said, all she had been.

How would she receive it? What pain would it cause? Would she be able to respond?

Who knows if Gregory wrote it himself? Still, it was quite obviously written by a man, for men. No matter the history of women in ministry, by the sixth century women who wished to serve the church were steered toward cloisters. And beyond an occasional queen or two, women were not well-received in the papal courts. So Mary’s successors had little—if any—input to the papacy’s day-to-day business. For sure, they were pretty

much shut out.

So what would she have seen and heard?

Bring Mary Magdalene to Rome just as Gregory is about to preach. Picture her as she somehow snuck into the back of the church or the basilica or wherever that particular 50-year-old successor to St. Peter was speaking that day. Sit next to her and hear him say, “It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts.”

Whoa! Did he say that? I always thought the perfume—the jar of nard—was all she owned. I always thought it was what she had for her own burial. I mean, it never occurred to me she used it for, shall we say, business transactions. In fact, it never occurred to me that—whether she was Mary Magdalene or not—the woman was a prostitute at all. If the current penalty for adultery or prostitution in lands not far from Magdala is death by stoning, I can’t see how Luke’s Mary made it through life, let alone through the door to be near Jesus.

So, yes, see Mary Magdalene sitting there, listening to the indictments read against her. Would she have recognized herself? Doubtful. Would she have been able to answer? No. Would she be troubled? You bet.

So what’s her situation? She has been unfairly accused. Her actions (and probably her words) have been taken out of context. She has been publicly excoriated by the highest church authority. And she is essentially helpless.

Is she in tears? Can she sleep? How can she defend herself against lies? How can she recover from the assault, from the

abuse, at the hands of that pope (and, not incidentally, his minions through the ages)?

Can we detect a pattern here?

Public excoriation seems to be a favorite indoor sport in the winding halls and storied walls where mostly clerics serve the pope. And, as if today's pope does not produce enough words on his own, there's now a traditionalist rumor afloat that every word from every Vatican congregation or commission flows directly from the pope's mind. It's as if the whole crowd of them was sitting on some funhouse Chair of Peter.

Once upon a time, Rome's message-control department only needed wax for the papal seal. Later, things got out of hand with everybody claiming papal authority, directly or indirectly. It's just plain silly. Think schoolyard children: "My boss is bigger than your boss."

There's a zinger for everyone: sisters, nuns, married women, working women. OK, not quite everyone, just the female everyones. You know the litany: the LCWR thing, the birth control thing, the "radical feminist" thing. From here, it looks like half the church has been labeled reborn Magdalenes and locked out of curial offices, with no way to respond, no way to react, no way out.

That is the sadness in the church today. It took almost a millennium and a half for Pope Paul VI, in 1969, to indirectly disconnect Mary Magdalene from the slur Gregory "the Great" levied on her.

We are all Magdalenes. How long will it take for the rest of us to be restored?