

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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Saint Clare of Assisi!
Pray for us!
Saint Teresa of Avila!
Saints of the Beguine Movement!
Saint Dorothy Day!
Saint Juana Inés de la Cruz!
Saint Therese of Lisieux!
Saint Mary of Magdala!
Saint Angela Merici!
Saint Mary of Nazareth!
Saint Julian of Norwich!
Saint Prisca!
Saint Catherine of Siena!
Saint Hildegard!
Our Lady of Guadalupe!
Saint Perpetua and Felicity!
Saint Phoebe!
Saint Brigid!
Saint Penny Lernoux!
Saint Jeanne d'Arc!
Saint Edith Stein!
Saint Mary Ward!
All holy women!
All holy martyrs!
All disciples of the Lord!
Pray for us!

ANONYMOUS WOMEN

Their Story is Your Story



The Feast of All Saints and All Souls Day in early November are truly celebrations of the

anonymous ones. These are the days in the liturgical cycle intended to honor and celebrate the lives of all those not celebrated elsewhere during the year. Since childhood, I've been captivated by our connection to those holy women whose names, lives, and work are shrouded in mystery. I celebrate these feasts as solemnly as Easter and Christmas. Whenever I join my voice in the chanting of the litany or celebrate the Feasts of All Saints, I feel the presence of the multitudes, that cloud of witnesses, enfolding me and the gathered community in a glorious in-dwelling and out-breaking of the divine love, which transcends time and place. But who are these anonymous ones? Why are their lives a mystery to us?

Who are the Anonymous Ones?

In singing the litany of the saints during our great feasts, we, the gathered community, call upon the saints known and those whose names are not known—the anonymous ones. As a community, we recognize that the work of God and the presence of God in our midst is embodied in all the baptized—all the saints, not just those canonized. With our voices joined in song, we ask the holy ones who have gone before us to gather 'round, embrace us with their holy wisdom and holy presence world. In this embrace, we embody the communion of saints - deep, mystical connection among all members of the Body of Christ.

Herstory Excluded

A piece of the story lies in the limits of human knowledge and in the mystery of the Body of Christ itself. It is not possible to know all who have lived holy lives. The mystical Body of Christ symbolizes the inter-connectedness and interdependence of all life, in all time, in all places and spaces. This symbol calls us into deep relationship, indeed familial relationship, with those we do not know and could not possibly know because of the limitations of knowledge, time and space. Another piece of the story lies in the nature of the historical record. "To the extent that history represents the world view and value

system of those who have ‘won,’ it is to that extent a distortion of the totality of reality systems which could be extant at any period of time. . .” (Collins, *WomenSpirit Rising*, p. 68). Women’s perspectives, values, stories and contributions have not been included in the record because they had no power and were considered to have limited value and importance. Feminist scholars and historians over the past 150 years have pointed out that “herstory” has been excluded. “In a play with words, feminist authors have therefore pointed out that history is rightly called “his story” recorded and interpreted from the point of view of cultural and religious male dominance” (Fiorenza, *WomenSpirit Rising*, p. 87). Women have been working diligently to reclaim herstory by honing “their ability to see through the cracks of the present reality system. . . to distinguish the outlines of another” (Collins, *WomenSpirit Rising*, p. 68-69). In the scope of human time the work to reclaim herstory is yet small. And while we have begun research to discover a multi-dimensional story, it remains a tragic fact that little can be reclaimed beyond mere outlines. For the most part, herstory is lost to us and will remain shrouded in mystery.

Partners in a Mystery of Redemption

Who are the anonymous ones? They are women who have been able to “see through the cracks of the present reality system,” who embrace the indwelling of God while crying out in a loud voice, YES ! They are women becoming partners in the mystery of redemption. They are women who look at their own fractured lives, who witness the suffering of those in their community who fall through the cracks. They are women who see the fissure between Gospel justice and the failing solutions of the day. Women who, through these small openings, see not only the possibility but also the means for making change happen. And then, they do it!

Who are these holy women? The ones who cry out YES! to God and shout NO! to injustice in the community of our world. Unafraid to give birth to the divine work of justice they nurture it along the way impacting their families’ lives and their communities as well. Without waiting for male permission they have taken action to build systems which feed the hungry, heal the sick, comfort the dying, bury the dead and provide resources to people in need. They demand justice for themselves, their families and those they do not know – the excluded, oppressed, abused, en-slaved.

While history assumes that the world changes because of male power, herstory sees it differently. Throughout time, women have often transformed their communities through small, local efforts whose cumulative effect yields important change. Until now history viewed women as less powerful in society but “herstory” knows her power.

The best and most lasting change does not always happen from the top down. Change also occurs because many individuals make conscious decisions to act. Civil rights in this nation happened because multitudes of anonymous women and men walked to work, sat-in, rode buses, marched, registered to vote and organized themselves into a mighty stream of justice which could not be ignored or stopped.

Quilters of a Just Society

This story is often repeated on the continuum of time. Women have been quilters of the very fabric of a human and just society. Most of the institutions which seek to care for human needs today were developed by women and their work. For example, the work of the village midwife and healer developed into several branches of academic medicine and healing arts. Women developed the earliest systems for delivering care for the sick in centralized settings. When education was inadequate or unavailable, women created ways of teaching the young. While women have always chafed at the restraints placed on them, they have used their very roles as mothers, nurturers and first educators to act in powerful and subversive ways.

The story continues today. “Women skilled in the art of survival and resistance, women rich in experience, wasting nothing” are at work (Aldave, *Mary’s Pence Jubilee Prayer*). While many of their efforts are small and local they are essential to transforming individual lives, communities and the world. Through my work with Mary’s Pence, I’ve been a privileged witness living saints throughout the Americas. Their work is truly breathtaking: women promoting new health initiatives, assuring clean water, advocating for workers rights, promoting open dialogue about the church, developing education and work skills and generating new sources of income where before there had been none. These remarkable transformations are created by every-day women, the anonymous and living saints among us.

It is their lives we also celebrate each November. And ours. The Feast of all Saints does not celebrate only those who have gone before us in faith but also the whole communion of saints – including those in the here and now. It is the feast of all the baptized – you and me. Celebrate it well this year, and in singing the litany see not only the named but the unnamed ones. Join the chorus of voices, singing YES! to our compassionate, loving God.

Who are these anonymous ones? They are your mother, your grandmother, your ancestor long ago, your sister, your friend, your sister in solidarity halfway across the world, your neighbor across the way. What is herstory? Herstory is your story.

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Litany of the Anonymous Women

The midwife who put a baby in a rushbasket.

Pray for us!

A teenaged girl who said yes to God. ...

Bereaved women who went out to anoint a common criminal buried in a borrowed tomb...

Women who welcomed the faithful, the widow, the orphan to the clandestine house church...

Women who teach their daughters and granddaughters even when it is unpopular or illegal to do so...

Women who share their arts as healers, midwives, and ministers at the time of death...

Women who refuse to work in unjust workplace and unionize against all odds...

Women who have transmit their traditional cultural heritage despite pressure to conform to the dominant society...

Women who organize campesinos to work for land reform...

Women who led the Underground Railroad and those who managed stations along the way to freedom...

Women who refuse to lose generations of daughters to the sex trade...

Women who walked to work for nearly a year during the Alabama Bus Boycott...

Women who preach despite being told not they cannot...

Women who learned to feed their families from the scraps and passed on their knowledge...

Women who taught themselves to read, studied “men’s” fields, and interjected a woman’s perspective into academia...

Women who cook, clean and raise children so their husbands could work to change the world...

Women who liberate themselves from oppression and then work to liberate others...

Women who ask questions over and over again until they change the status quo to include their voices...

Women who dare to confront abusive spouses in court to change the law at risk of their lives...

Women who realize the strength of numbers and band together for social change...

Women who refuse to be silenced even when it makes them unpopular with their own families...

Women refugees who travel across borders while pregnant or nursing to assure a better life for their children...

Women who plant flowers to beautify the world...

Women who fight for a clean environment...

Women who sacrifice so their children can be fed, clothed and educated...

Women who place their babies for adoption so they grow up in a stable home...

Women who refuse to dress themselves and their daughters in demeaning ways to follow fashion fads...

Women who are unafraid to claim the truth of their experience and proclaim it with love...

All holy women who say YES! to God.

Pray for us!



References:

Cited

Women Spirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow editors. Harper: San Francisco. 1979.

Mary's Pence Jubilee Prayer. Anna Aldave. Mary's Pence, 1998.

Recommended:

The Bond Between Women: A Journey to Fierce Compassion. China Galland. Riverhead Books/ Putnam. 1998

The feast day for Anonymous Women may be celebrated on November 1st or 2nd. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

In 2001, **FutureChurch** developed the original **Celebrating Women Witnesses** projects in creative partnership with Call To Action. Since that time hundreds of educational and prayer programs have been held in schools and churches throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, Latin America, Malaysia and Africa. The popularity demanded the development of **More! Celebrating Women Witnesses**. Currently FutureChurch is solely responsible for administering this very popular project. A special designed **Teacher's Edition** is available from **FutureChurch** which includes lesson plans and special projects geared to junior and senior high school students.

Send for our other organizing packets - **Celebrating Women Witnesses**, **Spanish Celebrando Mjeres Testigos**, **Women in Church Leadership**, **Future of Priestly Ministry**, and **Save Our Parish Communities** (\$10 donation each + \$2 s/h) - or order online at www.futurechurch.org.

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PRAYER SERVICE FOR ANONYMOUS WOMEN

Celebrate November 1 or 2 or at any convenient time

Opening Song: *Taste and See* (James Moore ©1983 G.I. A. # 361 in *Today's Missal Music Issue*) or community choice

Greeting: *The prayer leader welcomes the gathered community and makes sure people are introduced.*

Service of Light: *Light the Easter Candle (or candle representing the Divine Light) and ask each member to come forward and light a taper as the litany is read.*

Litany of the Saints

Side 1

Saint Clare of Assisi! Pray for us!
Saints of the Beguine Movement! Pray for us!
Saint Juana Inés de la Cruz! Pray for us!
Saint Mary of Magdala! Pray for us!
Saint Mary of Nazareth! Pray for us!
Saint Prisca! Pray for us!
Saint Hildegard! Pray for us!
Saint Perpetua and Felicity! Pray for us!
Saint Brigid! Pray for us!
Saint Jeanne d'Arc! Pray for us!
Saint Mary Ward! Pray for us!

Side 2

Saint Teresa of Avila! Pray for us!
Saint Dorothy Day! Pray for us!
Saint Therese of Lisieux! Pray for us!
Saint Angela Merici! Pray for us!
Saint Julian of Norwich! Pray for us!
Saint Catherine of Siena! Pray for us!
Our Lady of Guadalupe! Pray for us!
Saint Phoebe! Pray for us!
Saint Penny Lernoux! Pray for us!
Saint Edith Stein! Pray for us!

Insert here either a list of the community's choosing or ask each participant present to name everyday saints followed by the response "Pray for us!"

All holy martyrs! Pray for us!
All disciples of the Lord! Pray for us!
All holy women! Pray for us!

Opening Prayer: Blessed are you, O God, the Divine Light of Justice in this world. We thank you for the gift of the saints, known and unknown, who embrace us with their holy wisdom and holy presence. May we be inspired to live more deeply our baptismal gifts becoming Your Body and presence in our community and world. We ask this in the name of the Eternal Word, Jesus. Amen.

Liturgy of the Word

First Reading: A Reading from the Book of Exodus (*Exodus 1: 15- 20*)

The king of Egypt told the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was called Shiphrah and the other Puah, "when you act as midwives for the Hebrew women and see them giving birth, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she may live."

The midwives, however, feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt had ordered them, but let the boys live. So the king summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you acted thus, allowing the boys to live?"

The midwives answered Pharaoh, "the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are robust and give birth before the midwife arrives."

Therefore God dealt well with the midwives. The people too, increased and grew strong.

The Word of the Lord
All: Thanks be to God

Psalm: Cantic of Mary (*The Women's Prayer Companion*, Carmelite Monastery, Indianapolis, IN)

Side A: My Soul proclaims your greatness, O my God, and my spirit has rejoiced in you, my Savior
Side B: For your regard has blessed me, poor and a serving woman.
Side A: From this day all generations will call me blessed,
Side B: For you who are mighty, have made me great. Most Holy be your Name.

Side A: Your mercy is on those who fear you throughout all generations.
Side B: You have shown strength with your arm, You have scattered the proud in their hearts' fantasy.

Side A: You have put down the mighty from their seat, and have lifted up the powerless.
Side B: You have filled the hungry with good things, and have sent the rich away empty.

Side A: You, remembering your mercy, have helped your people Israel
Side B: As you promised to Abraham and Sarah. Mercy to their children forever.

All: Glory be to you, Source of all Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning is now and will be forever. Amen.

A Quilt of Gospel Passages:

A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 13:33)

Jesus spoke to them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened."

A Reading from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 15:8 – 9)

Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and say to them, "Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost."

A Reading from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 21:1-4)

When Jesus looked up, he saw some wealthy people putting their offerings into the treasury and he noticed a poor widow putting in two small coins. He said, "I tell you truly, this poor widow putting more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood.

A Reading from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 27:50-52, 55)

"But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit. And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised.

There were many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him.

The Word of the Lord
All: Thanks be to God!

Reflection/Preaching: *One member of the gathered community may offer the preaching, or if the group size allows, all can be invited to offer their reflection or response to the group.*

Meditation: *Play Like Water to the Thirsty by David Haas while the community reflects silently on the preaching or reflection and they ways in which they are able to give birth and to nurture the Divine Light of Justice in this world.*

Closing Song: *We Are Called* (David Haas © 1988 GIA Publications # 518 in *Gather*) or *Community Choice*

Prayer service developed by Karen Flotte who holds a Master of Arts in Theology from Aquinas Institute of Theology.