

Deb Rose Witness

Synod Session # 3

Women's Equality and Full Participation in the Catholic Church.

I appreciate this chance to offer a witness. But, it is just that , one witness. I will inevitably fall short in saying what needs to be said on this topic. I will not capture the full picture, nor name all the women I want to name; those whom I want this Church to love, and to love fiercely.

When people at parties ask me what I do , Catholic or not , they usually laugh at my answer, the perceived futility of my work. Or, they go quiet; that awkward, stilted quiet that usually leads to one of us deciding we need another drink at the bar, or, the bathroom.

But if the other person is curious enough to learn more, somewhere around the 8 minute mark they inevitably ask, "Why do you stay?"

"Why would any woman stay in the Catholic Church after being treated the way they are treated?"

Well, every woman on this call, every man, every person, will have their own answer to that question – a question I am sure you've also been asked.

But, for me, its personal.

There's a fire in my belly that hasn't been extinguished in the 66 years I've been on this planet. I expect I will die with it. Since I was young, I have always passionately cared for the poorest women and children at the edges of existence. As my mother told me over and over again growing up, "You, Debbie, are always for the underdog."

And I recognize the role that this behemoth, the Catholic Church, plays in exacting justice for vulnerable women, or hobbling and endangering them by sacralizing men's worst impulses. Working for, and alongside women so they might gain equality, dignity, autonomy, access; that is what I was born to do.

As a kid, I went to church most every day in the summers, during Lent, and on First Fridays. I lived about 5 minutes from the “compound” – the graveyard, grotto, convent, priest house, school and parish, and loved being there. I had a happy existence and I felt very close to God.

But, as I grew up, like most women, I began to recognize the limitations that were being placed on my life.

College was out for the girls in our family. I married young; became a mother. In my small town, I got condolences instead of congratulations when I had daughters three and four.

But, like most women, I learned to resist. On vocation Sunday, with my four daughters lined up in the pew next to me, Father aimed his homily at the men and boys. My girls and I and all the rest of the women at Mass were invisible. The injustice infuriated me. When I went to receive the Eucharist, and Father offered, “The Body of Christ” I replied, “Not yet.” Jesuit Daniel Berrigan once said, “Until women are fully integrated into the Catholic Church, every time I go to the altar, I feel compromised.”

I have never felt called to the priesthood, but I understand how important it is for women to be priests. I remember the first time I saw a woman priest. She was an Episcopal priest that I had heard about because of her work on the streets with the poor. I was late getting to the church, and by the time I was able to slip into the back bench, she was already preaching. She was petite, but she had on the full priestly regalia; green for a Sunday in Ordinary time. And she had both hands in the air as she energetically preached the Gospel. But, as I watched I noticed her vestments were moving. And the movement did not coincide with her preaching body. It continued about a minute more, and then, out from under her vestments popped this tiny, toddling, blond boy; who then, began running circles around her as she preached. It was her grandson. And he was just being a kid. And she was just being a grandma, even as she preached about the plight of the poor and Jesus to her parishioners. As I sat in the back pew, I wept, watching the familiarity of it all, the joy, the humanity. I thought, what would it be like if we Catholics saw that modeled at our altars?

We are an impoverished bunch. That's for sure. We are left starving for, women's voices, women's faith, women's wisdom, women's love throughout our Catholic land.

And many of us struggle on, working ever so hard to squeeze out meaning in a communal life, too narrowly imagined by a group of elitist, clericalist men.

The same men who:

- fuss about which pronouns can be used in baptisms;
- try to determine which form of contraception women can use;
- discount women of color who, because of their Catholic faith, say Black Lives Matter
- condemn women who love and marry other women;
- punish women religious when they step out of line;
- and cover up when little girls and vulnerable women are sexually abused by one of their own.

This is a corrupted, clericalist structure; one that women are resisting; that women are dismantling; that women are re-imagining and re-building.

Women are rising. They always have. They always will.

Think of Mary Magdalene. She was close to Jesus. I dare say his co-equal in Spirit. And HE recognized her faith, her relationship with God in her own right. And he relied on her, her gifts, her support, and her courage in the face of brutality. When others fled, she and the other women stayed. When the church in the West tried to downgrade her to prostitute status, feminist theologians and biblical scholars recovered her and her true historical role; a role for which she was finally officially recognized in 2016 from the Vatican - the Apostle to the Apostles.

Think of Phoebe. She is named *diakonos* in the Bible, and although she is an underachiever in the tradition of a male dominated church that applies one set of interpretive rules to men and another set to women, women theologians, biblical scholars, and canonists have recovered her historical role – her authentic leadership and ministry – for all the Church to follow.

Recall the way women organized into religious communities where they could expand their autonomy and their missions in the face of an increasingly patriarchal and hierarchical church. Religious sisters played a critical role in shaping Christianity establishing schools, hospitals, orphanages - and confronting poverty and injustice of every sort. And, as we witnessed in 2009 and 2012, when the Vatican and the US bishops tried to crack down on them, they resisted. And I might say, in stellar form!

Think of the way Black Catholic women religious disrupted slavery's ravages, desegregated white religious congregations, confronted racism within the Catholic Church, and challenged the oppression of their day by educating and caring for children of color. We rightly know John Augustus Tolton, the first Black priest in the United States, but have not yet understood and appreciated the role his mother, Martha. She played a critical role in the life of the Church when, with three small children in tow, including John, she escaped slavery by rowing a broken down boat across the Mississippi to Illinois.

Consider the way women have pioneered a pathway to the priesthood today in the face of excommunication by churchmen. They are growing a community of ordained equals who are rebuilding the priesthood into a servant priesthood.

Since Vatican II

- Women religious refashioned their communities. They have "come out" as CEO, CFOs, Canon lawyers, heads of Catholic Universities, pastors at parishes, advocates for the poor and for those whom the church shamed and excluded. Think of Jeannine Gramick.

Since Vatican II

- Women entered male dominated fields and become theologians, historians, biblical scholars, canon lawyers, ecclesiologists, liturgists, chancellors and more. Womanist, feminist, mujerista and queer theology took hold and offered a life-giving lens by which to re-read our scriptures and our tradition.

Since Vatican II

- 80% of all lay ecclesial ministers are women. Most of them have been educated, often at their own expense.

And although there were troubles aplenty under Pope John Paul II, who wanted to remarket the sacralized repression of women under the clever new title “complementarity”, with its famous descriptors of women, as “feminine geniuses”, women are rising.

After the election of Pope Francis in 2013, there have been some significant changes. And these changes have come about because of the decades long work of women.

In 2014

- Sr. Mary Melone was appointed the first female rector of a Roman pontifical university.
- Marie Collins, Irish survivor of priest abuse, and a number of other women were appointed to the first ever Vatican commission for the protection of children from clergy sex abuse.

In 2015

- Francis halted the Vatican crackdown on Leadership Conference of Women Religious because of their faithful tenacity.
- At the 2015 Synod on the Family, the head of the International Union of Superiors General, Sr. Carmen Sammut, lobbied hard for the inclusion of women. And Francis’ new synod structure with small language groups offered more opportunities for those women to influence the process.
- And at that same synod, Canadian Archbishop Paul-Andre Durocher was the first to publicly call for women deacons in such a setting. He would not be the last as we will see in 2019.

In 2016

- Francis issued the [*Decree on Holy Thursday's Foot Washing Ceremony*](#) to include women. While that may not seem important to Catholics in the west, in some regions, the bishops quit offering the ceremony rather than include women.
- In May, because the women of the International Union of Superiors General pressed, Pope Francis created a commission with half women and half men to study women deacons. Phyllis Zagano was a force to be reckoned with in Rome and beyond.
- In June, Pope Francis elevated the memorial of St. Mary Magdalene to a feast day, calling her the Apostle to the Apostles.
- Barbara Jatta was the first woman appointed as director of the Vatican Museums.

In 2017

- Two lay women, were appointed as under-secretaries in the Vatican Dicastery for the Laity, the Family and Life.

In 2018

- At the Synod on Youth, for the first time, the final document called for the inclusion of women as a “matter of justice.” Young women and men would not be silenced.

In 2019

- Because women courageously came forward, Pope Francis publicly acknowledged [*for the first time*](#) that women religious were being sexually abused by priests.
- The first women consultors were appointed to the organizing structure for the Synod of Bishops. And, later, in 2021, Sr. Nathalie Becquart was named

as undersecretary which, for the very first time, and quite importantly, gives a woman the right to vote at the synod.

- That year, seven women were appointed to the governing body of the Congregation for Religious Life; a very important shift, since clerics had always maintained control.
- And in October, the bishops of the Amazon called for women deacons in a region where priests are scarce, and women have always led and built up the Church.

In 2020

- The first woman was appointed to one of the highest-ranking posts at the Secretariat of State.
- In August of that year, six European women with backgrounds in finance were appointed to join eight cardinals as members of the Council for the Economy.

In 2021

- Pope Francis issued the *motu proprio*, [Spiritus Domini](#) which officially and canonically sanctioned women to serve as lectors and acolytes.

Women are rising. All over the world.

They are making new demands for women's equality in Germany as they continue their synodal process.

They are holding churchmen accountable in Australia as their plenary process proceeds.

And they are gathering in the streets in India and crying out for justice, when criminals dressed in bishops' clothing rape and abuse nuns.

Women are the lifeblood of the church.

They have shaped me in profound ways: whether it was struggling over a theological treatise by Rosemary Radford Ruther; being challenged to see my own participation in racist structures by Diana Hayes, Shawn Copeland and Shannen Dee Williams; or witnessing the courage, candor, and strength of women under direct attack by churchmen, like Chris Schenk, Louise Akers, and Pat Farrell.

I have been forever transformed by women in our church. And I am profoundly grateful. How about you?