

**A BREATH OF FRESH AIR:
WOMEN FINDING LEADERSHIP SPACE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

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Despite continuing restrictions, strong women leaders continue to arise and flourish in the Roman Catholic Church. How do they do so? What sustains them? My research indicates it is women's way of proceeding in their spiritual practices and their entire lives, their focus on the post-conventional style of human being, relationship, and leadership that Jesus modeled.

Globally speaking, most development experts believe that education and promotion of women is one key to alleviating poverty and religious/political tensions, particularly in developing countries. The promotion of women is central to the development of democracy and healthy civil societies.¹ Educated women, for example, are more likely to resist oppressive leadership, which is critical in countries with instable governments. And because women are such relational beings, it has been said, "educate women and you educate a whole village." If our academies, seminaries, and classrooms are a microcosm of our globe, then what does a global classroom of integrity look like? I believe that in such a classroom there is room for feminine genius not just in the role of student but also in leadership and authority roles.

The late Dr. Maria Harris, my beloved mentor, opened her "Teaching and religious imagination" class at Boston College by leading her students in rounds of singing Micah 6:8:

¹Retrieved on October 21, 2010 from <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/cardinals-consistories-and-caritas-veritate>

“What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.”

Harris brought to us budding religious educators Micah’s challenge of justice as the cornerstone on which all religious education depends for its integrity and efficacy. For Maria, form was as instructive as content. If our global classrooms reflect an imbalance or injustice in what Harris referred to as the implicit (what is implied, not stated) and null curriculum (what is missing from the curriculum)², it seems they cannot bear fruit. In other words, if our seminary, university, and church faculty and administration all look alike, and largely represent only one perspective and worldview, how can educators teach students in a global culture with any integrity? How can our explicit curriculum be effective or believable unless educators embody what we teach? The implicit curriculum that Maria embodied resonated with one of the earliest lessons I learned at my home parish as a ten year old in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. While I had memorized the formal prayer for my first act of reconciliation, also known as confession, I was a little nervous. I chose the more simple option, a brief excerpt from the biblical story of the Prodigal Son. When my childhood pastor, Fr. Michael, asked me to recite my act of contrition, I uttered, “Father, I have sinned against you and am no longer worthy to be called your son. Be merciful to me, a sinner.”

² Examples of an explicit curriculum in conflict with an implicit curriculum might be in a church that proclaims concerns for poverty but tithes nothing of its own budget for the poor; claims a love for children but tolerates abuse of children in its midst; calls itself a community open to all but supports closing of integrated schools. The implicit curriculum is also revelatory when one examines curriculum in terms of guiding images and metaphors and in terms of who makes decisions regarding curriculum and curriculum implementation. Examples of the null curriculum might be the absence of wheelchair access for those who need it or signing for the deaf. The null curriculum may also become apparent at this step if a church realizes it has no programs or support for prayer outside of its Sunday worship. For helpful publication in this area, see the Council on Interracial Books for Children Bulletin (1841 Broadway, NY, NY 10023) which promotes anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-stereotypical education in an eight-times-a-year publication. Harris, M. (1989) *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 196.

“Why did you say ‘son’?” he asked me. I pointed to the script in my hand. Wasn’t it obvious? “Do you feel like God’s *son*?” “Yes,” I nervously nodded, wondering why he wasn’t going along with the script we had prepared with for weeks in religion class. “Don’t you feel more like God’s *daughter*?” he asked, smiling. Before that transformative moment, I had never dreamed that I or anyone else could change the words of sacred scripture to include myself.

This experience of the all-inclusive love of God and of my church has stayed with me through the peaks and valleys of my Catholic life. When it came time for me to discern a dissertation topic, I looked at my church’s explicit, implicit, and null curriculum, and decided that one of my priorities in religious education would be to honor this original vision, to “do justice” in the area of gender equity.

Rather than add to the literature on the problem of gender injustice in the Catholic Church, I’d like to offer snapshots of several remarkable women who have managed to cultivate agency and voice in the church in spite of obstacles.

Women have been at the heart of the Catholic Church since its inception. However, outside of a few named saints and doctors of the church, communities of vowed religious women, or small circles of women, they are not generally perceived as leaders. Tremendous ambivalence exists between this church and the women who comprise more than half of its population.

Despite the Second Vatican Council’s professed intentions, despite ongoing scandal concerning abuse of power, and despite the preponderance of women in the Roman Catholic Church (R.C.C.), the male hierarchical structure of the R.C.C. continues to limit women’s

leadership roles and voice in the Church. In spite of overt barriers, Catholic women in the United States continue to outnumber men in pursuit of advanced degrees in theology, religious education, and pastoral ministry. Many of these women eventually emigrate from the Catholic Church after earning their degrees, disillusioned by the “stained glass ceiling” they find in a patriarchal institution.

However, a select group of theologically-trained, professionally-engaged women has worked in post-conventional leadership positions in the institutional Catholic Church for sustained periods of time in the urban areas of Boston, Massachusetts, and metropolitan New York, all areas with high clergy concentrations.

Despite continuing restrictions, these strong women leaders continue to arise and flourish in the R.C.C. As priest numbers continue to dwindle, women are taking up leadership roles that have traditionally been held by clergy. Why do they bother? What enables them to do so? What have I learned from in-depth conversations with these women that I can pass along to my colleagues, daughters, and students? This paper addresses these questions.

I am a Catholic woman and religious educator deeply concerned about the current situation for all Catholics but especially for women who desire to be engaged with their faith and church. I wanted to learn from others how to live, work, and grow in this institution—if that was even a realistic possibility in our current climate.

My narrative inquiry explores the various supports in the work and spiritual life of eleven theologically-trained professional Catholic women who have found ways to flourish in leadership capacities in their church. These women do not refer to themselves as feminists or social activists. They are ordinary women, not unlike one's mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, teacher, partner, or wife. Often with great sacrifice, little compensation, and deep love, they engage in spiritual practices that lead them to endure adversity and create pioneering spaces for women in a system that is often inhospitable and even hostile to their gender.

This study includes the raw, mostly unknown reality of, Catholic women today. It describes the call, presence, challenge, and creativity of the Spirit of God in women's lives. I see each one of the women I interviewed, as Pope John XXIII might, as "a breath of fresh air" in the Catholic Church. They share an intimacy with Jesus that is rare and precious, and that serves as a holding space when people and institutions don't come through for them. Jesus also offers them an imaginative style of leadership that trumps that of church hierarchs. These women have made clear commitments to the Catholic Church, which challenges and sustains them. They make belief believable, practical, and transformative.

The women who describe their childhood and young adulthood years here are sustained through individual and communal spiritual practices they learned through Sunday church attendance, or Catholic schooling, or in the spiritual formation inherent in schools run by the Congregation of Saint Joseph, Jesuit colleges, and graduate programs. The women are practicing Catholic Christians, primarily influenced by Catholic tradition, community, and

spiritual practice. As the women shared their spiritual practices with me, it was clear that most found comfort and strength in the sacramental life of the church—particularly the sacraments of Eucharist and reconciliation. They attend daily or weekly Mass or light candles in the church or sit quietly in the chapel. In describing the spirituality of these women, I would paraphrase the description offered by Maria Harris—as “a way of being in relationship to others in light of the universal force at the core of the universe.”³ She might describe some of these women as she described herself, as “essentially sacramental, essentially communal” (Dorney & Flood, 1997).

The women seem to actively engage in a transformative “pruning process,” perhaps because they trust that it is how they can grow. “The gospel image of the vine and the branches reveals to us a fundamental aspect of the lay faithful’s life and mission: the call to growth and a continual process of maturation, of always bearing much fruit” (Christifideles Laici, no. 57). A vine that is pruned well, removing what is dead or not useful any longer, bears more fruit.

Effective leaders are called to constant conversion, which leads to personal and spiritual maturity. These women’s spiritual practices seem to cultivate in them a mature perspective and approach to life, particularly in challenging times. The fruits of these women’s spiritual lives are apparent in how they navigate relationships in all areas of their lives. I offer a sampling of their spiritual practices and perspectives, which cultivate empowering relationship with Jesus, who they see in various roles, including teacher, friend, companion, brother, lover, and spouse.

³Harris, M. (1993). Personal communication.

The core spiritual practices and perspectives of 7 out of 10 of the women I met stems from Ignatian spirituality. Ignatian spirituality, an approach to the spiritual life based on the insights of St. Ignatius Loyola, is one of the most influential spirituality movements of the modern age. Fleming (2008) describes the ideas and attitudes that make this approach distinctive:

Ignatian spirituality is not captured in a rule or set of practices or a certain method of praying or devotional observances. It is a spiritual “way of proceeding” that offers a vision of life, an understanding of God, a reflective approach to living, a contemplative form of praying, a reverential attitude to our world, and an expectation of finding God daily. (Fleming, 2008, p. viii)

The key components of the Spiritual Exercises are contemplative prayer, discernment, and active involvement in service and mission. The teachings of St. Ignatius promote an active attentiveness and prompt responsiveness to God, who is perceived as always active in people’s lives (Fleming, 2008).

Sr. Mary Loyola Engel enjoys the image of God as Mother Eagle, perhaps because it engages the imagination. The loss of her mother when she was only 8 years old may also play a part in her attraction to this image.

The image of God as mother eagle tossing her beloved creatures out into the open air, but hovering nearby to offer immediate assistance, serves as a useful image for this paper.⁴

⁴ In Exodus, the first image we get of God is this: “You see how I bore you up on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself?” When the eagle’s eggs begin to mature, she carries the whole nest she has made out of twigs and stuff on her wings and flies to the top of a peak and sets it there. She stays there with the eggs. And when the first eaglet is ready to fly, she tosses it out and scoops it up and brings it in. “I found you in wilderness, philandering, but I scooped and picked you up and brought you back to the nest ... but only to put you out again.” So she’s nurturing and teaching but also challenging and without that you would never learn to fly. (Engel, ML. (2008). Personal communication)

Many of the women described precisely such a pivotal transitional or transformative moment, a moment that I identify here as “crossing the threshold.”

Crossing the Threshold

In our conversations, the threshold moment that they discussed the women often described as an impasse—the crossing of which remains in sharp relief in their memory to this day, serving as a touchstone that seems to have set them on a certain path and that continues to sustain them in their different ministries and in their lives.

I define a threshold moment as a pivotal or transformative moment in one’s life, when one figuratively exists in liminal space for a period of time and then crosses a threshold into a new space. It may be likened to the moment a high-flying trapeze artist has let go of one bar and flies in mid-air, before grabbing onto the next bar. Crossing, these women suggest, involves facing a moment of trust and surrendering to something new and unknown. In their cases, it was typically a major decision about how to proceed in their lives, such as whether or not to pursue advanced education or whether to stay or leave a challenging situation. For some it was whether or not to remain in vowed religious life, or how to maintain their integrity while working in the institutional church, given the scandalous behavior they were witnessing and increasing challenges they faced. In such moments of impasse or threshold, many were discerning whether or not to deepen their educational or faith commitments in a church that might not recognize their efforts and accomplishments. In these cases, there is struggle, wrestling, and bargaining with God, a dark moment with little clarity, and finally an opening, light, and an underlying peace that seems to sustain them as they journey forward, however imperfect or tension-filled their paths may be.

I use the word “moment” in the sense described by Virginia Woolf, who saw that such a time-filled moment of being can be a profound inner experience, as important as public events of the world (Gillies, 1996). Since women’s work in the church is generally less public than men’s work, and since women’s initiation process is often unseen by others, these inner moments seem significant to gaining an understanding of women’s experience in this particular institution.

While I will describe moments that seem to be crystallized in the women’s memories, I acknowledge that the situations they faced are typically complex. Visually, I see it as a doorway that leads to a new way of being, though the doorway’s threshold may not be fixed and the processes may be murky and porous. These women may have experienced more than one transformative moment, but in our conversations, for each woman one moment stood out for them as pivotal in their spiritual journey.

In two cases, the moment involved a simple exchange with a child. In another two cases, the epiphany took place while the person was working in the kitchen—one at the sink and one at the stove. In some cases, particularly when the woman has a consistent contemplative practice, as does Sr. Shiela, for example, the moment was more of an impasse, perhaps an extended period of time in liminal space at a critical juncture, like the dark night of the soul that the ancient spiritual teachers John of the Cross and Theresa of Avila have described.

In the experience of the women with whom I spoke, it often took them extensive soul searching, deep prayer, silence, consultation with spiritual companions, and the God of their understanding to cross a threshold. St. Ignatius of Loyola and other spiritual teachers refer to

this complex process as “discernment.” These women engaged their bodies, intellect, will, and spirit to make choices. They listened for input from God about what they perceived to be God’s will for them. They did not simply make a cerebral decision about the direction they would pursue; instead, they listened deeply, and felt an inner tug, like a trout on a hook, that helped them find clarity about their next step. In their hearts, they deepened or renewed commitments to serve God and humanity through varied commitments in the Catholic Church. Ignatius describes such a moment like this:

SUSCIPE
Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, understanding, my entire will,
all that I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Do with it as you will.
Give me only your love and your grace:
that is enough for me.

Christian scriptures offer the story of an impasse Jesus faced in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he “fell on his face and prayed, ‘O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. Yet not what I want but what you want’” (Matthew 26:39).⁵ After a day of fruitless fishing, Jesus calls his disciples to “Push out into deep water, and lower your nets for a catch” (Luke 5:4). I found these women pushing into deeper water, in spite of fear and trepidation, trusting that the God who calls them there will see them through.

Sister Shiela, President of a congregation of religious women in the Northeastern United States that has a global network of affiliates, recalls such a pivotal moment in 1995, the second time she considered leaving religious life.

⁵International Standard Version (2008).

I had done the thirty-day Ignatian retreat at a Retreat House in the year of my 25th jubilee because . . . I was a very successful professional woman at the time. And I remember sitting in my office and wondering, “Why am I here [in religious life]?” And my spiritual life at that point was like a marriage. Before celebrating, I needed to go to a place where I could engage in a prayer for an extended length of time, and I would not be afraid of the answers.

Two scripture passages influenced my discernment when I thought I might leave religious life for the second time. . . . One was the Last Supper discourse in the gospel of John when Jesus knows that the end is coming. So, in my imaginative prayer with this passage, I am in this sense of dread about what is happening. But what he does is he teaches them right until the end, washes their feet. What a profound example of what we are called to do. Regardless of how ominous things might feel at times, we are called to wash the feet of the people of God. The other story that was very pivotal during my discernment was the story of the lamp and the bushel basket.⁶ I was always aware during my prayer that there was this ordinary lamp on the end table, and I was always taking this lamp, turning it off, and putting it away. I would come back, and God had the lamp back on the table. And you know, I often pray in images, and one time this lamp was there, and I go to take the lamp and realize that Jesus’ hands are across from me, and that He has the lamp also, and there is this kind of tension about where the lamp is going to go. And then in my prayer I realized that Jesus changed his position. He had been in front of me, and now he was at the back of me. And now both of us had our hands on the lamp, and I realized that if I let the lamp be where it was, I had a place to lean. I will never forget it because it was so pivotal for me.

Sister decided to remain in vowed religious life rather than pursue a single or married life. In hindsight, the implications of this choice have been profound.

These stories testify to the simple fact that while the Catholic Church can be a source of support and spiritual and social capital, it clearly has its challenges. What allows women to stay through these challenges? What sustains them? Shiela sees her navigating skills as a dance. “And the dance is never over, because you don’t have all the steps . . . the moment you feel you have found your place, you can be guaranteed that something else is going to come around the corner and catch you by surprise. So it is always a process of finding your

⁶And Jesus said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed, and not on a stand? For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. If any one has ears to hear, let him hear.” And he said to them, “Take heed what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to the one who has will more be given; and from the one who has not, even what he or she has will be taken away” (Mark 4:21-25).

equilibrium so that not only can you find your voice but also how it can be effectively registered.”

In spite of all kinds of limitations and dysfunction, faith based communities remain the greatest source of social capital in the United States. I aim to help maintain access to this capital for anyone who desires yet feels exiled from it. I believe the Catholic Church can once again be a strong force for social justice and moral guidance in an increasingly global society, if it practices justice within the institution, and remembers its roots and initial vision and purpose, and if God’s daughters continue to lead the way.

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breath of fresh air. Also found in: Dictionary, Thesaurus, Acronyms. (like) a breath of fresh air. Refreshingly new, different, and pleasing. After dating a series of boring men, Tom's adventurous nature was like a breath of fresh air to Sarah. The beautiful new paint color is a breath of fresh air for the house. See also: air, breath, fresh, of. Formerly expressed as (like) a breath of heaven or spring, this term became current in the mid-nineteenth century. "Her arrival on the scene was like a breath of fresh air," wrote W. Somerset Maugham (*Cakes and Ale*, 1930). See also: breath, fresh, of. The Dictionary of Clichés by Christine Ammer Copyright © 2013 by Christine Ammer. She is a prophetic breath of fresh air in the Catholic Church. Standing ready. (Letters). a breath of fresh air definition: 1. someone or something that is new and different and makes everything seem more exciting: 2. Learn more. You can also find related words, phrases, and synonyms in the topics: Different and difference. (Definition of a breath of fresh air from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus © Cambridge University Press). a breath of fresh air | American Dictionary. a breath of fresh air. someone or something that makes a situation feel new, different, and exciting: The last band was a breath of fresh air in an otherwise boring night of music. Translations of a breath of fresh air. in Chinese (Traditional). in Chinese (Traditional). Changes in the Catholic Church, Mass, And Sacraments & the One World Religion - MARIA DIVINE MERCY (PRINT VERSION). Sacred Servants (Messages to Maria Divine Mercy). Pope Francis Will Appear to Rise From the Dead. He will be seen as being innovative, dynamic a breath of fresh air. While he is driven and energetic, his powers will not come from God the Eternal Father. They come from Satan, the evil one. man A breath of fresh air Yea live life to the fullest my dude (live life). [Verse 1:] Living life to the fullest enjoying every moment Every second every breath till my death Wondering if I'll get anytime to repent before he lay me to rest It's that hard I'm slippin to put some hair on ya chest Sippin it with my family as we laugh and reminisce I ain't above you i. the real ones out 45s fo the ones that poke em dead in the mouth I done been down south hold up with scrooge Pushin house with the pinky nigga what we going do I'm everywhere baby i be full of me Feels good, when it's good around the family tree.