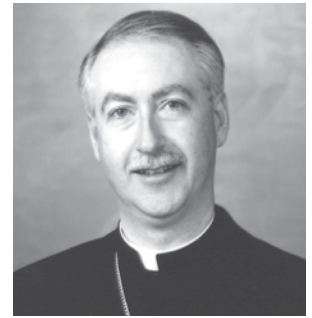


WOMEN AT THE SERVICE OF THE GOSPEL



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The title for this reflection is taken from the address given by His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, at his general audience of February 14, 2007. In this speech he brings to conclusion a series of reflections upon the principal Christian witnesses of the early church. He speaks of the many female witnesses who gave testimony to Christ and contributed to the spread of His gospel. Reflection about their example can deepen members' appreciation of what it means today to be a disciple in the church.

First of all, their witness testifies to the foundational importance of communion with the person of Jesus Christ. No one exemplifies this more clearly than the Virgin Mary, who carried Him in her womb, demonstrated at Cana her complete trust in Him, and collaborated perfectly and uniquely in His redemptive mission through her faith and obedience. There were other women who stayed close to Jesus. In a striking phrase, the Holy Father notes that the women who accompanied the Lord "gravitated in their different capacities around the figure of Jesus." Quite literally, Jesus was their centre of gravity. They were drawn irresistibly to Him and, in Him, they found the inescapable basis for their lives. So, too, must it be for any who wish to serve in the church. All ministry must be grounded upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the unshakeable conviction that He alone is the sure foundation of human life.

Especially eloquent and poignant is the testimony given by the female followers of Jesus at the hour of His passion and death. Unlike the 12 apostles, observes the Holy Father, these faithful women did not abandon the Lord as He suffered on the cross. Fidelity is at the heart of discipleship. Wherever Jesus is undergoing His passion today in the sufferings and struggles of our contemporaries, the example of the faithful women reminds us not to abandon Him but to stand with His suffering people in loving solidarity and effective assistance.

Among the women who were with Jesus, one stands out in particular: Mary Magdalene. In her regard, the Holy Father recalls a special title reserved to her by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The Angelic Doctor called her the "Apostle of the Apostles," because she was the first to announce to the 12 that the Lord had risen. Here, once

again, a woman of the gospel reveals a central dimension of discipleship and ecclesial service. Each League member, in her own circumstances and in accordance with her giftedness, must announce the astounding truth that Jesus is risen from the dead and remains with His people as the abiding source of their joy and hope.

His Holiness then turns to the women who exercised some responsibility in the primitive church. Among the many worthy of mention, he makes a quick, yet instructive, reference to four women, who are easily overlooked because of the lack of information about them. These are the four daughters of Philip the "Deacon" (cf. Acts 21:9). All we are told by Saint Luke, the author of Acts, is that they had been given "the gift of prophecy." Pope Benedict XVI makes clear the significance of the example of these women when he defines their prophetic gift as "the faculty of intervening publicly under the action of the Holy Spirit." We are keenly aware today of the importance in Canada of public intervention by the disciples of Jesus Christ. Many situations call members to make their voices heard clearly in the public square as issues are debated that shape Canadians' present and future common life: the dignity of human life; the nature of marriage; individual rights and the common good; the natural moral law; and, so on. These four women of the early church remind disciples of every age to infuse all dimensions of society with the values of the gospel.

The women remembered and celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI help all disciples in the church to understand something of what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. How does their witness speak to the members of today's League? Like their sisters in the early church, League members strive to be women at the service of the gospel. From the first witnesses we learn that discipleship necessarily involves communion with the Lord, solidarity with the suffering, proclamation of the good news, and public involvement inspired by the gospel. With the help of the intercession of Mary, the woman who is the first disciple and perfect model of discipleship, may we not fail to heed the example of our sister disciples of long ago and seek ever new ways to help one another, in our day, to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. †