

The Role of Women in Healing the Church

With an opening image of Jesus rescuing Peter from the waves and the scripture, “Lord save us. We are perishing”. “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” (Matt. 8:24-25) Sister Doctor Nuala Kenny set out the goals of her presentation: review lessons from COVID-19 pandemic; contemplate Jesus and women; reflect on women’s experience in the church and insights for renewal; and identify challenges and prognoses for conversion to the “mind of Christ”. Through beautiful pictures such as Mary at the foot of the cross, the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman with a hemorrhage, Mary Magdalene and Jesus at the resurrection, and Jesus surrounded by indigenous children, and her wonderful down to earth turns of phrase such as “Jesus’s somewhat smart aleck response to His Mother at Cana”, “the disciples were freaking out re. the Samaritan Woman”, “to know Jesus go to His Mama”, personal experience, scripture passages, references to Pope Francis, years of research and writing on the sex abuse scandal in the church, Sr. Kenny informed, taught, provoked and challenged us.

Referencing Pope Francis, “I see the church as a field hospital”, Sr. Kenny asked us to consider 100 years of serving the church. In 1920, the start of the Roaring Twenties, the world was post war and in the last year of the Spanish flu. In 2020, we entered a pandemic from a wounded state in church and world with an ecology crisis, economic inequity, political divisions and a “pandemic” of racism in which the church has a role. Also, the clergy sexual abuse is still with us (since 1988 Sr. Kenny has been involved) as a major issue in healing the church. Thus, the church did not enter 2020 from a position of strength and power but from a position of debility!

Lessons learned from COVID-19 are unprecedented vulnerability, dependence on powerful others (doctors, scientists, politicians), women as “hidden heroes” performing silent works of care, increase in domestic violence, closed churches resulting in a Eucharist fast, and loss of usual communal supports of church. She asked viewers to reflect, “What have been the challenges and blessings in your experience of the pandemic?”

Jesus learned from His Mother Mary. Mary, a woman of modest means and a faithful Jewish mother, with Joseph, educated and formed the man Jesus. Her foundational, “Let it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38) is a model of trust, a yes to God even in the face of the inexplicable and risk. Simeon’s words at the presentation, “a sword will pierce your own heart” (Luke 2:40), she already knew. Mary is both mother and disciple, at Cana, at the foot of the cross where Jesus ensures care for her after his death (John 19:27).

In Hebrew scripture and a highly patriarchal society woman’s place was at home. She could not study the Torah or enter the inner courtyard of the temple. In the New Testament, though written by male authors from Hebrew tradition, we see astoundingly countercultural interactions of Jesus with women and all marginalized. Jesus speaks with women in public openly and against social norms. He has a real discussion with the Samaritan woman, learns from the Syrophenician woman, who begs for her daughter, and recognizes the spiritual, emotional suffering and isolation of the hemorrhaging woman. He unfailingly treats even the most outcast and marginalized with respect and compassion cf. the woman taken in adultery. Jesus treats women as disciples including Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene. Sr. Kenny asked viewers, “What are your favourite stories of Jesus’ encounters with women?”

To introduce reflection on clergy sexual abuse, Sr. Kenny used a picture of Jesus with indigenous children. Sexual abuse in the church is not a new phenomenon (Council of Elvira 306) but only recently forced on our awareness. Public revelations beginning in the 70s were forced recognition by law and investigative reporting. Under Pope Francis comes recognition of systemic cultural issues – the temptations of the church and diseases of leadership. Perpetuation of clergy sexual abuse results from abuse of power, trust and conscience, harming the vulnerable, secrecy and denial to avoid scandal, bureaucratic responses of policies, failure to address systemic issues of power, lack of morality and sexuality. The church has policies and protocols but needs to address systemic issues.

Jesus assumes vulnerability for love. He uses power FOR others never over others. The early church gathered in house churches. From the 4th century, church became monarchical, hierarchical, patriarchal, clerical and Eurocentric with sharp distinctions between clergy and laity, men and women. The prognosis for healing is: to avoid tragedy fatigue, burnout and feelings of helplessness; break the ongoing silence and denial with courageous respectful dialogue; reject irreconcilable and polarizing responses; resist desire to go back because that is what has brought us to where we are now; PRAY for the grace of atonement; belief in the power of the Holy Spirit to make all things new; hope the pope's successor can respond to the power of the Spirit.

Sr. Kenny asked, “What are your biggest personal challenges in healing the Church today? What resources and assistance would be of the most help to you? What actions could you take in your parish to promote respectful dialogue? How could you act to encourage and support local clergy? Respond to negative clergy responses? What is the diocesan support for meaningful reform and transformation to the “mind of Christ”?”

The issue of women in the church is central. The challenge is remaining prayerful and engaged enough to stay the course. We must put together support, including men. We need to use our talents and gifts to witness to Jesus' power.

“Ask Mother Mary that gutsy Jewish woman who knew pain and sorrow to give words of support and courage” a closing recommendation that sums up Sr. Kenny's message and style.