

What it means to be Church and where the Holy Spirit is calling us.

Thank you for the opportunity to share at this important gathering of women from around the world on this critical conversation.

CONTEXT

I am a cradle Catholic who would have long ago left the Catholic church if it had not been for my finding a church home and faith community who has embraced me as first being Black and then Catholic and now being called to do full-time ministry as an Associate Minister (Black Church title) or Pastoral Associate (official Catholic Church title). I also am the Director and lead formator for the Augustus Tolton Scholarship Program at Catholic Theological Union and the convener of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium.

RESISTANCE FROM THE CHURCH

There has always been resistance to doing ministry in the church and especially in the Catholic Church. Women were relegated to positions of sacristans, catechetical instructors, or Eucharistic Ministers. And while that is all good, some of us women have had another calling as ministers in the church. If a women or men dared to say that women should be priests or deacons it was cause for excommunication if they pursued, pushed or even preached on the matter.

Even though the Church has known that it must address the role of women in the church it has failed to act for far too long using the tired reasoning that only men were the disciples. However, if they bothered to look beyond the 12 disciples and if they had been open to a wider lens, a more inclusive, interpretation of the Scriptures, they would have discovered that there were many women in leadership roles, in the church, when the church was started. Just one or two New Testament verses, that do not seem to allow women to have a ministry that involves public speaking (1 Cor. 14:34) or which involves teaching a man (1 Tim. 2:12), are also frequently cited as the reasons women cannot be leaders. There are, however, several women mentioned in the New Testament who did function as church leaders.

Scripture tells us in Ephesians 4:7, "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift." In the Roman's reading that could have been used on Pentecost Sunday, it states that "the Spirit bears witness with our

spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. ***Every woman receives God’s gifts to be used for God’s Glory.***

Paul lists women in several of the ministries which Jesus gave to the church. It tells us in Ephesians 4:11-12, “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

The church has been very slow to embrace the New Testament ideal of equality and mutuality among people regardless of race and gender. If the church would recognize that according to the New Testament, women did function as ministers and leaders – as prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers and that they were respected and valued in these roles by such people as the apostle Paul. ***In other words, to have women in these roles is biblical.***

If the church continues to deny gifted women the opportunity to exercise their ministries, the church is rejecting some of the very people Jesus appointed and given to His church and I believe that some denominations will eventually die. The Church’s mission can only be enhanced and made more effective when gifted people (men and women) are co-collaborators together using their skills and abilities.

WOMEN’S RESISTANCE

Resistance

1. the refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something by action or argument:
synonyms: opposition to · hostility to · aversion to · refusal to accept ·
2. the ability not to be affected by something, especially adversely:

As women we must not let the resistance from others (mostly men but also other women) keep us from doing what God has called us to do.

In Acts 2, when the disciple/apostle Peter interpreted current events according to the prophecy of the Hebrew prophet Joel: “Your sons *and* daughters will prophesy . . . on my servants, both men *and* women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18, Joel 2:28).

Prophesying is the “reception and declaration of a word from the Lord through a direct prompting of the Holy Spirit and the human instrument thereof” ⁵.

Throughout Paul’s letters, women prayed and prophesied publicly and in worship (Acts 21:8-9, 1 Corinthians 11:5) and demonstrated other gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, 14).

If you look at the number of women in the pews on Sunday, it is obvious, that if it were not for women, not only in Catholic churches but all churches, that there would be no church.

We are the prophetic witnesses of the Church. We have been infilled or filled with a great power. The Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit.

In the Catholic Women Preach segment on this past Sunday, theologian Dr. M. Shawn Copeland spoke about Ruah.

Ruah is the Hebrew word meaning breath, air, or wind, and it is used to indicate the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is represented by many images in the Bible such as: the tongues of fire, the pillar of cloud, the living water, anointing with oil, the finger of God, and the dove. “When God sends God’s Word, God always sends God’s Breath... To be sure, it is Christ who is seen, the visible image of the invisible God, but it is the Spirit who reveals God” in us and through us.

The Holy Spirit is the Breath of God. Or Ruah. The Holy Spirit is “the giver of life,” as professed in the Nicene Creed. Just as the Lord God breathed “the breath of life” into the nostrils of Adam creating the first man, the goal of our community is to breathe life into your faith.

Through the sacrament of Baptism, the Holy Spirit dwells within us. By being “born anew” we are given the gift of life, “for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Where there is darkness, let there be light; where there is death, let there be life. Ruah.

We, women, have the power by harnessing our faith and by coming together. We can be a force of nature to be reckoned with.

What does resistance look like? It looks like the women in the Bible who did not totally conform to the standards set by men of their day. We have more freedom, today than women did in biblical times. With the help and through the Holy Spirit, we can be courageous, bold and prophetic witnesses God has called us to be.

It would be great to be able to do this within our Church, but I am not sure when that will happen. In the meantime, we look for ways to utilize our God-given gifts.

When the COVID pandemic shut down the world in 2020, it taught us that we, the people, are the church and not the physical building. **THE CHURCH HAS LEFT THE BUILDING.** We must think outside of the box (church building) to do what God has called us to do. I believe there is an urgency for us to get to work on that mandate that God has put forth before the church (us).

In June 1989, Sr. Thea Bowman (now Servant of God), a Black Catholic Religious Theologian addressed the USCCB about being Black and Catholic and I am adding a woman. She said, **“I bring myself, my black self, all that I am, all that I have, all that I hope to become... as gift to the Church,”**

Women, we are a gift to the church. We should be cherished, honored, lifted-up. But if that does not happen within the confines of the church then we look for other avenues to live out our God-ordained purpose.

It is through venues like Future Church that we can experience the giftedness of our sisters through dialogue, preaching, teaching and webinars.

It is having women speak, preach, preside at our gatherings instead of always feeling like you have to have a priest or deacon to speak or for that matter to preside over a service.

HOPE

Pope Francis is filled with the Holy Spirit and is not afraid nor ashamed to act on what the Spirit gives him. He is trying to change the culture of the church so it will look more like the kingdom of God on Earth as it is in heaven. He is facing resistance. He is also facing the reality that his body can no longer keep up with his mind. We must continually keep him lifted up in prayer. He started the synodal process last year and going through next year. Will anything come of it as when Vatican II was instituted? Will the power that be listen? I have mixed emotions.

On the one hand I am doubtful, when we look at the pushback he receives from the very conservative Catholics.

On the other hand, as Christians, we know that there is nothing impossible for God. Women, we have a right to be full, active participants in the work that God has placed us here to do.

I am quoting from the Epilogue chapter in the book, *The Church Women Want*. We are gifted with the Spirit in three ways:

- Through our vocation as baptized persons that makes us into prophets, priests, and leaders as part of the body of Christ;
- Through our lived experience of living the Christian life that gives us a wisdom in discerning the truth in love by the power of the Holy Spirit;
- Through our negative contrast experiences of suffering, that makes us aware of the power of sin and impels us to raise our voices of resistance and hope in compassionate solidarity with those who weep.

The authority of vocation, of wisdom, of compassion – all three arise from women's full participation in the life of the crucified and risen Christ.

I want to end with a poem written by Marianne Williamson that Nelson Mandela used at his inauguration as President of South Africa.

Our Deepest Fear

By Marianne Williamson

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness
That most frightens us.

We ask ourselves
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you *not* to be?
You are a child of God.

Your playing small
Does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine,
As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us;
It's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.