

What Women Clergy Have Taught Me

Colleagues,

The text for today's posting comes from Paul V. Marshall, Bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Paul and I crossed paths during my first years of teaching at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis 30 years ago. Yes—tell it not in Gath—his primal roots are in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. If I remember right, Paul completed his M.Div. degree requirements late in 1973 out of synch with normal commencement specs. Already then he was different. Consequently he possesses the last M.Div. degree document from Concordia Seminary ever signed by President John Tietjen. Whether it's cause and effect or not, “apres Paul le deluge.” For Tietjen was suspended from office in the next term. Seminex happened. The rest is history. Later on Paul too was purged from the LCMS in the ethnic cleansing of that era and “went Anglican,” as we said in those days. After parish-pastoring and then a professorship under Episcopal rubrics, he has now served for some years as the “Bishop of Bethlehem.” A catchy title. His words below come from the 2001 July/August issue of the diocesan newspaper.

The Episcopal Church USA has its problems too. In that same issue of “Episcopal Life” are several articles about the Sturm und Drang in today's ECUSA, much of it centered on the hot-button conflicts in many a mainline US denomination nowadays. One of theirs is women clergy and the “Here-I-stand” opposition found here and there in the ECUSA. Paul has become a bridge-builder between the contenders giving theological grounds for NOT hereticizing the folks on either side. His monthly message below is a segment of his on-going work as “pontifex,” which, as some of you know, literally means “bridge-builder.”

In moments of “old prof’s whimsy” I dream of a day when Paul of Bethlehem becomes presiding bishop of the ECUSA and a “Seminex” bishops in the ELCA (six of them in office now, all “ex-Missouri”) bears that same burden for our denomination. I’d love to eavesdrop their first tete-a-tete.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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Bishop Paul V. Marshall

Twenty-five years ago this summer, the Episcopal Church changed its canons to permit the ordination of women to all orders of ministry. In 97 of our 100 dioceses, women priests and deacons are a fact of church life. Several dioceses have women as their bishops.

I have spent considerable time and energy working to keep those who have not accepted this change aware that they are loved, respected, and fully a part of the Church. That concern was a part of last month’s column. This month let me balance that by telling you why I am so grateful for the presence of women as colleagues in the ordained ministry.

In my Long Island parish I had two women associates. Several more worked with me in my New Haven days. Since coming here I have had many women colleagues, and I have benefited from their presence and counsel in many ways. So I am not writing about theory: I am reflecting on what I have witnessed.

I am not about to review theological arguments yet again.

Rather, I aim to describe how I perceive that ordained women have enriched my experience of Christ.

The center of Christian faith is the "paschal mystery," the passage of Jesus through suffering and death to the life that gives us life. Each of us is called to live that mystery, offering ourselves for the sake of the creatures of God. Often that means prolonged, even daily, suffering. Always it means that through our participation in Christ's self-giving, God gives life to someone.

The women clergy who have touched me most deeply have done just that. In faithfulness to their vocation they have endured open hostility, casual snideness, and patronizing behavior that perhaps comes more from ignorance than ill will.

Like Peter cutting off Malchus' ear, I usually want to punch people who use the word "priestess," with all its demeaning psychosexual implications, but this would help nothing.

This is not to say that the women I admire have been wimps or victim types. Far from it. Along with bearing pain (many of them have already had a mother's experience of giving life through physical pain), endurance has meant pointing out injustice, educating the church, and remaining people of good will towards those who mistreat them.

Certainly there are many "angry women" as there are "angry" or even "threatened" men, but the theophany for me has been that the vast majority of women priests have taken on this extra ministry of self-giving with holy equanimity.

As one of the many who struggle with a tendency to reactivity and self-pity, I remember marveling at how the Reverends Allison Spencer and Marjorie Floor, my parish colleagues in Long Island, were too focused on caring for God's people, much too thankful

to God that their vocation had been realized, to spend a lot of time complaining. That got my attention.

Watching the reception of women clergy in the Episcopal Church USA has also deepened my belief in the Incarnation – not as a long-past event, but as God's everyday method for conversion.

People who, like most of us, are resistant to change, get hung up on arguing imponderables, bogged down in scriptural and theological debates where either point of view can be sustained with piles of data.

When the Sanhedrin wanted to do something about the Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah, it was Gamaliel who said they should watch awhile and check the results. People who could not get around the ordination debate but who found themselves effectively ministered to by women clergy also found their fears and suspicions vanish like vapors. They could not remember what the fuss was about.

The anthropologists' conclusion that men fear women is not arguable, although it is not always remembered. How much this cultural factor has influenced our theological discussion will be for future scholars to decide after the embers of debate have cooled.

In the meantime I can say that for many men the experience of women as leaders, pastors, and authorities has been redemptive of that fear that so cripples human community. I do not have to ask myself whether women CAN exercise spiritual authority in the church in a way that brings health: I have seen it.

Receiving the ministry of women clergy in sacramental celebrations has expanded my awareness of God's generosity.

All of what makes us human was taken up by God in Christ's

incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension.

We are only beginning to appropriate the riches of women's experience, only beginning to hear their report, yet the very sight of them presiding at the altar is the forceful reminder to me that attending to that other half of the history of salvation is vastly more delight than duty.