

Women and Religion

By S. JUDITH METZ

On September 15, 1853, Antoinette Brown achieved a milestone when she became the first American woman formally ordained to ministry for the First Congregational Church in Butler, N.Y. But she had few immediate followers in main-line Protestant churches until the twentieth century. For evangelical Protestant women, their right to preach was a more pressing concern in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Evangelical groups that grew out of the Second Great Awakening had initially welcomed women preachers and more than 100 had taken up the call claiming female equality based on Scriptural revelation. But their

right to preach did not go unchallenged. As their churches became more established and sought respectability, they moved away from women preachers. The few women who persevered became

During the 150th anniversary year each issue of Intercom will focus on a particular ministry or cultural area, highlighting Sisters who were pioneers in the field, and some who continue their rich history of caring and excellence.

increasingly isolated, one referring to herself as a "pilgrim stranger."

In most Protestant churches women's activities centered around involvement in foreign mission societies, which they controlled; in women's groups; and being guardians of their homes and pillars of morality. In the Jewish religion women's main role was in the home rather than in the synagogue. In 1838, however, Rebecca Gratz established a Hebrew Sunday school, establishing a successful movement that

was nationwide by the 1880s.

Catholic lay women's roles were also confined to their homes, where they oversaw the early religious training of their children and in most cases set the tone for religious practice. It was Catholic women religious who assumed a public role in the church but theirs, like the Protestant deaconesses, was a ministry of service, not an official teaching role.

Of course the Sisters of Charity played a prominent role in Catholic Church ministry in the early nineteenth century and by mid-century increasing numbers of Sisters of other congregations were joining them. These women dealt with the Catholic population on a daily basis in schools, hospitals and orphanages. They taught religion to the children, served as surrogate mothers in the orphanages, and comforted the sick and dying in their homes and in hospitals. In these ways Sisters had a profound religious influence on those they served.

The Pioneers

Mother Josephine Harvey
For many years through the early decades of the Community's existence Mother Josephine Harvey served as novice director. Even after she no longer held the title, she continued to give instructions to the new members. In this role she taught them religion, formed them in the spiritual life, and prepared them to teach the thousands of children and adults they



reached in classrooms, orphanages and hospitals. By teaching the teachers, she had an influence far beyond the halls of Cedar Grove or Mount St. Joseph.

Mother Josephine corresponded with "her novices" long after they were on mission and offered them both spiritual and practical direction. To one she wrote, "I hope you are trying to become a good and faithful sister. ... It is by such fidelity you honor God and prove to Him your love. ... Let not

the vexations of the classroom chill that love for God that should always shine brightly in your heart."

To another she offered this advice, "Be careful and watchful over the young souls entrusted to your care. Children learn more by the eyes than by the ears, that is, they practice what they see done rather than what they are told to do. Remember, my darling child, that all your words, all your acts, all your conduct, have not only the pupils for witness, but also the public. See then the great responsibility resting on you."

S. Sebastian Shea

While S. Sebastian Shea served at Good Samaritan Hospital in the late 19th

century she wore many hats. She was administrator, Sister servant, and founder of the school of nursing. But more significant



than the roles she played, is the person she was. She brought Christ to others. The following excerpts from an article by Rev. Francis Finn, S.J., hospital chaplain, describe her influence. "She was the strong woman of Scripture. ... She loved the poor, the sick, the helpless. ... How kind she was to the student nurses! ... She visited the patients to encourage and cheer them. ... She had a gift for consoling, for cheering, for inspiring. It may be said of her as was said of her Divine Master that those who listen to her words and gaze upon her kind face feel their hearts burn within them."

S. Camilla Smith

When S. Camilla Smith was appointed novice director in 1933 it was a surprise

to everyone, especially to her. Yet, she believed that God's "power and wisdom can manifest themselves through weak instruments."



After one day of preparation and study on the vows, she gave her first instruction to a group of 40 young Sisters. She remained in this important position for more than 20 years, forming hundreds of new members.

Like Mother Josephine, she provided religious instruction as well as lessons in the spiritual life for her charges. Always devoted to her novices, S. Camilla wrote to them after they left the novitiate. In one letter she encouraged them, "I feel sure that you have tried to be the true Sister of Charity that I want you to be. I hope you have grown closer to God this year, and have sown the seeds of holiness in your little ones. What a blessed vocation we have. Thank Him daily for it."

S. Anne Hermine Gerver

Long before many Sisters began to receive spiritual direction on a regular basis in the post-Vatican II church, S. Anne Hermine counseled many

who sought her out. In her positions as teacher, administrator and major superior, many Sisters knew and loved her.



Perhaps what so many found attractive about her was not only her kindness, but also that she was down-to-earth. Understanding human nature and its foibles, Sister was able to accept herself and others. When they needed a willing listener who could point them in the right direction or help them

navigate a difficult situation, she was one many chose.

S. Ann Hermine's speech, her demeanor, and her presence communicated to others that she lived with Jesus. They perceived her as a peace-filled, holy woman always striving for greater intimacy with God. She was seen as a Sister of Charity visibly living the Community virtues of humility, charity and simplicity.

The Followers

S. Carol Brenner

Ministry in our Spirituality Center is exciting and very life giving. Each day holds opportunities and challenges to companion others on their faith journey.



Planning and giving

retreats calls forth creativity in presenting themes and prayer experiences that will enable others to deepen their relationship with God and grow in self-knowledge.

Offering prayer experiences, book sharing, scripture prayer and study provide an ongoing process for others to share and deepen faith.

Individual spiritual direction is a most enriching part of my ministry. It is such an honor to be trusted with the inner workings of another's soul. Listening to another's story and walking with them and their God through joys and sorrows is a very privileged ministry.

Ministering in a way that enables me to integrate my faith tradition,

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passion for social justice, reverence for Mother Earth, and my newest call to Reiki healing allows me to hold God at the center of my inner and outer life, and that is what I share in countless ways each day.

S. Joan Elizabeth Cook

Elizabeth Seton challenged us from her deathbed, "Be daughters of the Church!" I

respond to that call at Washington Theological Union in my teaching, mentoring

of students and study. Here students from all over the world come together to prepare for various Church ministries. Theology students from several religious orders are preparing for ordained ministry. They are about one half of our students. The other half are lay people and religious women preparing to serve as pastoral associates, DREs, chaplains or administrators in many different settings throughout the world.

Our course of study offers students the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be effective ministers and agents of conversion and transformation. My specific area is Old Testament. I appreciate the opportunities this field offers me to challenge my students to let God's word energize and transform them, so they can serve as prophetic ministers in their own settings. The challenges are many, especially at this time of disillusionment in the Church. For me, this situation calls for renewed commitment to my call

in the words of Isaiah, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God."

S. Rita Hawk

As Sisters of Charity, we "dare to risk a caring response." This part of our charism was my motivation for moving from teaching in Catholic school to ministry as a religious educator in the parish. I have a

passion for helping develop high quality parish religious education programs.

The passion first led S. Mary Gallagher and me to be the first Sisters of Charity to minister in my home parish, St. Luke's,

Danville, Ohio. Danville had given eight women, including myself, to the Sisters of Charity, and it was time to give back!

I believe that for parish religious education programs to be effective, catechists must have the best training possible. Not only do they receive the "how to's," but their own faith life grows and deepens. Through eight years and three cars, I traveled nine to 11 counties in the northern rim of the Columbus diocese, where I trained catechists, encouraged volunteer and full-time catechetical leaders, assisted parents in sacramental preparation, and fostered adult faith development. Most of all, I have been personally enriched by the strong hunger for faith growth and the generous response of hundreds

of adult Catholics.

In July 2002 I began what has been my lifelong dream — to be a DRE in a farming area where there is no Catholic school! I now serve the parishes in Fayetteville, Blanchester and St. Martin, Ohio, helping to build on and unify what is already present there as they continue the process of merging into one parish, St. Angela Merici, in July 2003.

S. Carol Leveque

The "official" job summary for a pastoral administrator (PA) in the Covington, Ky., diocese says that she/he is "responsible for administration of the parish in all its varied aspects, spiritual and temporal; may delegate some elements to others, but remains ultimately responsible to the Bishop for them."

That about sums up the administrator part. The pastoral part is all about presence. The PA is the pastoral presence without the title of pastor. She/he is the listener, counselor, facilitator, enabler, teacher, liturgist, funeral director and shepherd of the flock. In a small parish, such as the ones I have worked in for the past 15 years, the pastoral administrator ends up being all things to all people. The biggest part of the ministry is finding ways to share the ministry with those in the pews





who all have the talent and are called by their own baptism to be ministers to one another. That has always been for me the biggest challenge and a rewarding one — when I see people taking their rightful place and really living out of their own giftedness.

I'd like to say that is the biggest part of what I do. Unfortunately, the "things of Caesar" often take a bigger chunk of me than I would like. Right now, the parish I serve is in the process of raising funds and building a new church with all of the attendant joys and headaches. That seems to be taking more than a fair share of my time and energy. However, once the actual building is finished, we will have a facility that allows for greater flexibility in worship and that makes it all worthwhile.

S. Betty Jane Lillie

It was in 1829, the year that the Sisters of Charity came to Cincinnati, that Bishop Edward D. Fenwick opened the diocesan seminary. Through the years the seminary experienced growth and changes of location, until now it is joined with other educational divisions under the title of the Athenaeum of Ohio and is located in Mt. Washington. Presently the Athenaeum includes Mount St. Mary's Seminary of the West, the Lay Pastoral Ministry Program, the Special Studies Division, and the Deacon Formation Program. I teach at the Athenaeum.



When I began my professional theological and biblical education with the Dominicans at Providence College, it was not yet common for Catholic women to pursue such degrees. For me it was an expansive and liberating experience I shall always cherish. After that I was fortunate to be accepted at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. That school is unique in its mission to include Christian scholars in its degree programs. My previous training at PC and my studies at HUC were among the finest things I have ever done.

At the Athenaeum I teach courses in Biblical Studies, including Old Testament, Intertestamental Literature and History, and New Testament. On occasion I have given courses in Religious Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Those are ways of bringing sound Biblical teaching into the public domain. In some ways any place in the world can be my classroom. The picture rounds out with traveling in Israel and with doing archaeology there one summer. The many aspects of the science contribute insight and historical balance to the faith traditions of salvation history. That is the rich heritage we have received through Jesus. That is what I attempt to communicate to the faithful, at the Athenaeum and elsewhere.

S. Laetitia Slusser

In the spring of 1962 I received a letter from the Motherhouse saying

I should attend Catholic University and enroll in the master's program in religious education. I did not know what religious education was, but I found out soon!

In 1968 I became full-time director of religious education (DRE) at St. Pius X Parish in Aurora, Colo. It was a fulfilling ministry for me as the parish was very "into" implementing the renewal of Vatican II. In 1975 I moved to Holy Trinity in Westminster, Colo., again to serve as a DRE for the next six years.

The year 1982 found me studying for a year at Toronto School of Theology, where I received a master's in Sacred Theology (MST). Then I went back to being a DRE for four years at a new parish in Colorado Springs, Colo. In 1986 I took a job at St. Thomas Seminary in Denver as assistant professor of catechetics and director of continuing education. I loved this ministry of preparing people (mostly women) to become DREs. It was a ministry that I knew from experience and education. After 10 years there the seminary closed.

At present I am coordinator of catechesis and formation for the Pueblo diocese. Much of my time is spent ministering with catechetical leadership in the 50,000 square miles of territory that make up the southern Colorado diocese that is rural, poor and mostly Hispanic. I love the people here — as I have everywhere I've ministered. ☩

