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Church must highlight women's vital role in ministry, says US speaker

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Dec. 11, 2012
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To counteract the widespread perception that women don't have a vital role in the church, Catholics need to learn more about the historical importance of women in ministry and retell those stories to younger generations, said a prominent U.S. Catholic speaker.

Catholics need "to take these young people, sometimes adults, under our wing and talk about these things and share our own life story of ministry," said Vicki Thorn.

Thorn, the founder of Project Rachel -- a Catholic post-abortion healing ministry -- and executive director of the National Office of Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing in Milwaukee, was attending a Dec. 9-12 international congress at the Vatican.

The congress marked the 15th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops for America, and Thorn addressed one of the assembly's working groups in a talk about the church's vision of the dignity of women.

She told Catholic News Service on Monday that the church needs to shine the spotlight back on the significant role women have played in the life of the church.

"If you look at scripture, there were the women who fed Jesus, supported him and traveled with the apostles," she said.

"Women have always been the pragmatic responders," she said. "If you look at the saints, women saw a need, they went and took care of it" and worked with other church authorities to get the necessary infrastructure and support to keep their services going, such as caring for the sick or neglected, and educating the young.

Many Catholics, especially young adults, are surprised when they hear stories of the saints' strength and gumption, she said. "We have to reclaim that; it's our tradition."

Part of the reason why women's contributions get overlooked, she said, is women are often too concerned with getting things done than tooting their own horns. Another problem is that the mass media interpret the fact that priestly ordination is open only to men as proof the church considers women to be inferior.

"But our role is different than the role of men, and that's not a problem," she said.

However, "in the media there's this mindset that we should be the same. No, we shouldn't. There's complementarity and that's what's important." Women "bring to the church perceptiveness; the way we view the world is different than the male way and that's not bad," she said.

So-called "gender neutrality" ends up erasing the two gender's unique gifts, she added.

"Women who are involved in the church have to tell the stories and take pride in what women have done

because we get caught up in the authority issue," she said.

Women have had different kinds of authority in the church, Thorn said, with women running religious communities, schools, hospitals and other institutions even long before they were allowed such positions in secular society.

Thorn said when she tells young women about the long history of women in the church, "their faces light up" and they want to know more.

"We, for centuries, have been a people of story," yet those days of passing on the faith in an informal family setting are now rare, she said.

Stories or experiences of faith had been handed down from grandmothers and other relatives to the younger generations, she said, giving life to the saying: "Faith is caught, not taught."

Stained glass windows, statues and other sacred artwork were all meant to offer an opportunity to tell the story of the event or holy person depicted, but now people just see them as beautiful artistic decorations, missing their true purpose.

"There is this vacuum" in a lack of well-catechized adults, including parents, who are knowledgeable about church history, she said.

Given the success, for example, of the "Veggie Tales" Christian video series for kids, Thorn said, Catholic media could create compelling videos for children that explain the lives of women saints and help kids apply those stories' lessons to real-life problems.

"There are great adventures in many of those lives," she said, like St. Teresa of Avila who, opposed to her father's wishes, sneaked away in the dead of night to a Carmelite convent to escape being married off.

The saint's story also helps kids become aware of the continued problem of forced marriage in some cultures and how, as a church, people can help those on the run, Thorn said.

Teaching and ministering need renewed attention as "I think in some respects over time we grew away from the practical work of the church and we became more bureaucratic."

"Feeding the people, walking with Jesus, making sure he had what was needed, that's what's important," she said.

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