News
Spirituality



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by Sr. Christine Schenk

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December 15, 2017

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Dearest younger sisters,

It is Advent. The season of hope and of the prophet Isaiah who foretells justice and healing for all God's people.

As I write, #MeToo women of all ages are shining a brilliant light on the sexually abusive behavior of way too many men. Powerful men who ruled entertainment, politics, and the media are being called to account for treating women as sexual objects. Harvey Weinstein, Roger Ailes, Matt Lauer, Peter Levine, Al Franken, and scores of other men have been fired or resigned in disgrace.

For a woman like me — blessed with the "gift of years" — this is nearly unbelievable. Baby boomer girls were socialized that "boys will be boys" and then schooled in ways to protect ourselves. Don't walk alone at night, avoid dark streets and stairwells, carry mace, and avoid being alone with any man you don't know well. (Not that any of that always helped that much.) No one ever confronted "the boys" about their behavior. Among my female friends and relatives, there is not one who has never experienced unwanted advances from a man.

But times are changing. A mighty female voice is rising up to shout "ENOUGH!" We will no longer allow you to disrespect or abuse us. Millennia of nasty male behavior must change — and change RIGHT NOW.

And you, my younger sisters, you have done this. You are now an irreplaceable part of the infrastructure of nearly every industry and political system in the U.S. These systems cannot function without you. And you are making sure they no longer function by covering up male sexual harassment.

You are woman and you are roaring!

Your solidarity in outing the abuser is changing our culture. You are creating a better world for your own daughters and especially for your sons.

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Ok, now I want to talk about church. Yes, that Catholic Church that denies women full and equal participation in decision making. The one that never challenges men

from the pulpit to stop sexually harassing women. Worse, the one that has often blamed women for bad male behavior.

That church. The cracked and broken church through which the Word of God still inexplicably shines into a dark and broken world.

That church also has an infrastructure. An infrastructure that can barely function without the 32,000 female pastoral ministers unobtrusively serving the People of God in the U.S. Women ministers who — while they hate it — don't stress out much about inequality. All they care about is that God's people are ministered to. And they put up with invisibility, long hours, and bad wages because they love what they do.

It is also an infrastructure increasingly gifted with women theologians and biblical scholars who are turning a female lens on ancient patriarchal texts. They have discovered hidden treasures of female influence and authority buried within our sacred writings.

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You think I'm kidding? I challenge you to read Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's seminal work: *In Memory of Her* which uncovers the strong female leadership undergirding our Christian Scriptures and early church history. Or read St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's ground-breaking book, *She Who Is* and discover the mystery of God in feminine metaphor. And of course, Sacred Heart Sr. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald's *A Woman's Place* describes how prominent women in early patronage networks spread the Gospel throughout the Roman empire.

Since it is Advent, we must mention Wilda C. Gafney's *Daughters of Miriam*, a meticulous study of the women prophets in ancient Israel. The school of Isaiah — the pre-eminent prophet of Advent — had many female prophets.

Who knew?

Both Second and Third Isaiah are notable for their use of maternal imagery for God and for Jerusalem. The second Sunday of Advent has a reading from Isaiah wherein God tenderly comforts the people of Jerusalem, gently leads the ewes and carries the lambs close to [her] breast.

But I digress.

The plea I want to make, is to ask you to stay in the church — as messed up as it is — and be the change you wish to see. Change only happens because people like us make it happen.

Women are critical parts of the infrastructure now. Women are changing the church, slowly, sometimes invisibly, but I believe, inevitably. Women are the church.

It is Advent. The season of hope and of the prophet Isaiah who foretells justice and healing for all God's people.

Won't you stay and help us roar?

[St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years. She holds master's degrees in nursing and theology. This open letter is written in honor of the "A Church for Our Daughters" initiative sponsored by an array of Catholic reform groups.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.