Opinion

Guest Voices



Two women pray before a shrine dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe in this 2006 file photo. Contributor Catalina Morales Bahena always felt that her late paternal grandmother and Our Lady of Guadalupe "were so important to my formation as a Catholic woman. I know they both guide my path in my ministry work." (CNS/The Catholic Sun/Robert DeFrancesco)



by Catalina Morales Bahena

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Even as hundreds of thousands of young people were in Lisbon, Portugal, last week for World Youth Day, here in the United States and other parts of the world the reality is that many millennials don't attend church anymore. In some ways, I don't blame them, yet I have struggled without them. As a weaver, it's as if a piece of our fabric was torn off and the strings that are left hanging by themselves are those of us still in the pews — half there, half ripped apart.

As a young Latina, throughout my 20s I was talked down to a lot in church: by those older than me, by deacons, by priests — those who I had trusted to guide my faith journey. Yet, I understood that God still wanted me to stick around, perhaps not at that parish anymore but to hold firm in my faith, even in the church that had let me down.

This summer, while at a conference for Catholic women, I came to the realization that I have been lonely, lonely for so long that on the last day of the conference I just began to cry and I couldn't stop. In one of the closing sessions, we were asked to practice listening and being witness to other women. My table was immensely diverse in generation, and one by one we went around listening to each one of our experiences that brought hope and those experiences that have broken our hearts.

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I was second to last and by the time I went I just broke down in tears. I realized at that moment how lonely I had been for a decade. I had never, in my time in the church, been around so many Catholic women at once where we were just honest with each other about what we have been going through.

When my parish's director of formation and social justice first invited me to the Women of the Church conference that was held at St. John's campus in Collegeville, Minnesota, I didn't really know why I wanted to go but I said yes, right away. I thought, "Well, if I'm going, it's because the Spirit is working and I'm supposed to be

there. I'll find out the reason once I'm there."

I'm what the church still considers the "young people," and I figured that as a 32-year-old I would probably be one of three or four there around my age. To my surprise at the opening prayer service, I saw many young women!



Participants at the Women of the Church conference share at small table discussions during the July 19-21 event at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. (NCR photo/Heidi Schlumpf)

As the conference progressed, I immediately began to realize why I was supposed to be there. I began to feel happy, giddy even. I felt like I had known these women for a long time, as if we had always been convening as women of the church. I realized that I had not only been wanting a space like this but I had been hungry for it.

At the table discussions, to no one's surprise, the common theme that surfaced was that all of us didn't feel heard in our church, in different ways, in different parishes, at different times, in different states. We all felt that we weren't heard as Catholic

women in our own church.

I have tried to find ways to share my voice in the past. For example, when our bishop wasn't saying anything as immigrants were being demonized and attacked, I joined a group of others from the church to tell him what was happening, how it impacted me personally as an immigrant and how I felt doubly hurt by him, the priests and parishes' relative silence. After this meeting and many more, our bishop began to speak up and even show up!

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At the conference, it was also deeply healing to say how I had felt for 10-plus years and to hear other women — many of whom work for the church — who have similar experiences. It was disturbing to think that women have moved into so many roles of service and ministry, leadership and administration, yet we still are not listened to, not to mention the women who express a desire to discern a vocation to be an ordained deacon. We have to listen to these women who are feeling the Spirit call them to this ministry. If we don't, how are we being a church that follows God’s calling?

I think a lot about my late paternal grandmother and wonder what advice she would give me as a Catholic women leader if she were still alive. I struggle without her guidance, because I always felt that she and Our Lady of Guadalupe were so important to my formation as a Catholic woman. I know they both guide my path in my ministry work.

After the women's conference, I began to realize that I no longer have to wonder what my grandmother would say, because I can actually ask many of the women still in our pews because we are many. I can reach out and actually begin to find my people again and not be alone. Yet, I also left the space wishing that the church looked different, that I had friends in the pews that looked like me and like me, wanted a more spiritual life in the church. I don't know if that will happen, but at least now I know I'm not alone in my faith and struggle to be heard.

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 1-14, 2023** print issue under the headline: I am a young Latina and I'm lonely in the church.