

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 3, 2009 at 9:58am

---

## Nuns: The civilizing force of the church

by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés

El Rio Debajo del Rio

*When women are silent, it does not mean they agree.*

In our Magyar family, in one of our make-story times when my aunts and grandmothers would make up stories about our lives and days and nights, we made this story:

It is a story about the old woman who became only a voice ... for you see, when people needed a hand, she gave them her hands.

When people needed her feet, she walked far for them, and thus gave them her feet.

Her sight, her hearing, her special touch ... when people needed these, she gave them willingly and with great love.

When people needed to save face, she gave them her face to shelter themselves behind.

When people needed guts, she gave them her guts, along with all her courage bones.

When people needed insight, hope, determination, she gave them hers.

She gave everything people asked ...

until like Echo in Greek mythos, the old woman became used up and there was nothing left of her

... . only a voice that repeated the same warmth over and over: "I love you, I love you, I love you ... "

You see, the venerable old woman had given all of herself away to serve others ...

Advertisement

others who took and took and took, and did not give back.

Others who plundered her gifts, demanded she do for them what they could well do for themselves ... but preferred not to.

Others who starved her of accommodation, recognition, and creature comforts of many kinds.

Others who gave her platitudes and barely noticed if she were ill, or lonely, or in need.

Barely noticed her intelligence and savvy, thinking her taking on of the veil meant she'd also taken on non-vigilance about the real world as well.

She hadn't. Quite the contrary. Her vision was eagle-sharp.

Yet she'd lived a lifetime of others insisting only that she be made -- not whole -- but able to labor again, in order to return her to serving them more, to return her to tending their own unending needs so they could concern themselves only with pomp and influence.

The only problem was ... at the end of the old woman's life, the greedy others could not figure out how to exploit all that was left of her: her radiant voice that continued to speak Love. And more Love.

And more and more.

Forever.

Amen.

### **So is it with the nuns of our days?**

The ones who give and give, in the name of The Poor Carpenter, and give until they have nothing left while yet deserving the best care, and far more recognition, far more being truly seen for their souls, than the higher ups -- who continue to embarrassingly parade around in parodies of crowns, thrones, king's robes with real golden jewels and watered silks and ermine trims ... that The Carpenter would not recognize as his legacy on earth, let alone in heaven.

**I am left with many images of disrespect for the civilizing force of the Church: nuns. Here are only three examples**, but there are many more of abject disregard for other human beings who happen to be nuns:

- the elderly sisters living in buildings that are literally falling down atop them, ceilings unrepaired, ancient leaking lead plumbing pipes. Not enough money comes from the diocese to make the last days of the

sisters clean and simply sanitary. Oh that must be someone else's issue to take care of. Certainly not the one who holds the draw-strings on the money bag. Or who squandered the money in ill-timed response to criminal priests ... about whom the nuns were often the first clarion call that something was seriously wrong with Fr. So and So.

- I think too of a retreat place where nuns and priests come to be educated in the dead heat of summer on sabbatical -- and the nuns are housed in an ancient multi-storied building with no air-conditioning in such hard to bear heat, and no elevator ... while the young seminarians and the priests are in the modern facility, one story, brick, with air conditioning and no stairs. There are times when offering up suffering to God, ought be trumped by simple triage and Christian courtesy to the elderly and the frail of health. What a wrong example to set for all laity and the public, to cosset one group and disallow those who often serve the hardest.
- I think of the short shrift I saw given to an entire group of nuns celebrating their 55th year of consecrated life, how instead of calling each by name, saying something inspiring and laudatory about each of these very old women, the archbishop spent less than 30 seconds on the entire group, and hurried on to bring up his blood about his true love ... his latest and greatest money-making scheme for the parish ... an entertainment at which the sisters would cook and clean for days on end to feed the multitudes on the mountain. While big mouth bass stood around smoking and thumping moneyed men on the back.

That's not the height of leadership. That's the height of churlishness. And an example set about how to treat the sisters, given to all other males wherever that archbishop goes, leaving in his ill-sighted wake, that women in general, and nuns in particular are only holy if humbly asking for nothing. That's wrong. Dead wrong.

You know I am not speaking of the countless priest, brothers, bishops, archbishops, some of the cardinals who have inestimable hearts via which we are all blessed.

**But, believe me were it not for nuns, hospitals would still be lean-tos on the salt flats,** and schools would be hovels where only war was taught and children recruited for Crusades, and priests of old would have worn cassocks for weeks until the cloth could stand and walk by itself, and the alb for Mass would have been torn from a bed sheet with no starch or women's hand embroidery of the Paschal flower, the lily.

The outposts, inner cities, towns and cities of the world have become centers of civilized thought instead of stentorian thought masquerading as "protecting the Faith." The world has changed for the far, far better, to centers of kindness and care for the needful, and guidance about ways to live that are both real and holy ... because a woman's hand -- and a woman's mind -- a nun's mind, in particular have been involved ... and not only involved as followers ... but as true notable leaders.

**Are nuns perfect?** No more than you. But are they blessings on us? Indeed most days and most often, extraordinary blessings. Remember, it's the medieval Father Coughlins of the world, the Dark Ages Bishop Williamsons of the world who say women ought not be educated, but rather women ought be kept in their place.

Right, women's place.

Where is that place?

Oh, I think I know: Everywhere.

How do I know?

It was the Sisters bearing lanterns through the dark who taught me so.

---

#### CODA

I'll be following this story re how nuns and communities evolve and are treated by Church. Any religious wishing to write to me personally about the issues faced in work, home, community, education or elsewhere, please write to [projectscreener@aol.com](mailto:projectscreener@aol.com).

People there will usually know my whereabouts, and I will be happy to receive your notes, and will hold your confidences utterly as you wish.

---

"Nuns: The civilizing force of the church," ©2009 by Dr. C.P. Estés. All Rights Reserved. Permissions: [projectscreener@aol.com](mailto:projectscreener@aol.com)

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 08/22/2017 - 10:39):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/el-rio-debajo-del-rio/nuns-civilizing-force-church>

#### **Links:**

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>