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Great Women Never Die

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

I am so glad that Newsweek (‘Why are all the really old people women?’ Sept. 28, 2009, page 72) has finally answered a media literacy education question that I have had for years: why great women never die. In fact, if you read the four or five enhanced obituaries of daily newspapers in major US markets, women seldom die at all.

A few years ago I heard Sr. Helen Prejean speak at a Catholic Press Association meeting in pre-Katrina New Orleans. I paraphrase but the gist is, ‘When a white man is murdered in New Orleans it is front page news; when a black man is murdered it is on page 30.’

It is not news that the front pages of major market newspapers in the US are dominated by males, either as the subject of stories, as writers, and photographers. In any given week, the front pages of New York Times or Los Angeles Times will privilege stories about or by men.

At another Catholic Press Association meeting (pre the 2002 clergy abuse scandal and lawyers and in some cases PR firms taking over the diocesan papers), I was on a panel addressing issues about women editors of Catholic newspapers or magazines, like equal pay for equal work. To prepare I surveyed the front pages of 13 diocesan newspapers from a one week period, and all of them were dominated by male (i.e. clerics) images or stories, with one or two women showing. One paper didn’t even have a single woman on the front page. I asked: ‘If you are the editors of your papers, and it is not important enough for you to give equal space to female stories and images, why would you expect equal pay for equal work?’ It was a great conversation, but upsetting, to some to whom this had never occurred, or two or three who were, at that time, being paid appropriately.

What are interesting are the obituary pages.

Newsweek lists ?the Danger Years between 20-24 when males are more likely to be murdered or die in car accidents; ?Toxic Testosterone? that increases the levels of bad cholesterol, while estrogen lowers it; ?Gunplay?: men are five times more likely to die by guns than women; Drop Dead Diseases effect men more than women; Overwhelming Emotions that leads to depression ? ??between the ages of 75 and 79 men are nine times more likely to commit suicide.?

The article in Newsweek does not distinguish by race or country but I assume the article refers to the US or countries where firearms are legal (though the sources in the really tiny print may do so) , so we don?t know if African American women live the longest, but every once in a while, the death of a ?supercentenarian? non-white woman is mentioned in the news. You go, girls. But this is trivia.

I am more interested in why great women of any race or creed or social status never die ? and I contend that we are all great. Or are we not deemed important enough to be written up? What is the criteria?

Or, is it just that great women live forever?

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