

Wanted: women of spirit in our own time

Joan Chittister | Aug. 11, 2010



Sr. Joan Chittister

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious is meeting in Dallas this week under scrutiny from Rome and with a cloud hanging over its head.

What shall we think about such a time as this when the women religious who have built, carried, led and staffed every work of the church from the earliest days of this nation to this present time of turbulence and transition are being accused of being unorthodox, unfaithful, and unfit to make adult decisions about what they need to hear and who they want to have say it?

The problem is that in the face of opposition they have also been unafraid.

What shall we think about that? Think David, maybe, who confronted the giant Goliath; think Moses, perhaps, who faced the Red Sea with an Egyptian army at his back; think Judith and her handmaiden, certainly, who routed Holofernes and saved the city; think Shifra and Puah, without doubt, who refused the order to murder Jewish newborns and so saved the nation. Think Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala who stood as independent women alone and unblinking. Think moment of decision.

Then think of the foundresses of every religious order you have ever known who came to the United States without money, without professional resources, often without the language, and commonly without support ? even from the church ? to deal head on with the social justice questions of their time and so saved the church in the process.

"Women & Spirit," the traveling museum exhibit mounted by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious that reviews the story of women's religious communities in the United States, bears witness to the role of religious life in church and society. It is the visual history of women who made astounding choices at all the crossroads in national history and made them when women were allowed to make few, if any, choices at all.

It is a story too often forgotten and too easily domesticated. "That's just what sisters were supposed to be doing," people say. Oh, please.

These were women who opened schools for girls in a world that considered the education of women a useless and uppity waste.

These were women who nursed soldiers on both battlefields of the Civil War, North and South, in an age when sisters didn't work with men at all, let alone nurse them.

These were women who worked with what was left of a Native American society that had been stripped of its dignity, robbed of its lands and denied its civil rights in a culture that defined both the American Indian and the women who served them as less than fully human.

These were women who taught blacks for centuries and then walked with them in Selma, Ala., to claim their full humanity ? attack dogs at their heels, fire hoses in front of them -- and met disdain everywhere from Christians who used religion to justify first slavery and, after it, segregation.

These were women who gave their lives to insert Catholic children into a Protestant society as equal participants in the democratic dream all the way to a Catholic presidency.

Indeed, for hundreds of years, over and over again, women religious have found themselves at the junction between past and future. For hundreds of years they have consistently, persistently, confidently and courageously chosen for a necessary future ? whatever difficulties the doing of it meant for them in the present. Over and over again, they chose for tomorrow rather than settle for a more convenient past.

The entire history of religious life in this nation has been a history of crisis and response, of need and resistance, of response and reaction.

It was not an easy time.

At a time when the sick died uncared for, and the uneducated died illiterate and the poor or addicted died destitute and minorities died invisible to the rest of society, women religious chose to challenge any and every system for the sake of the coming of the reign of God.

And in the end, they succeeded. But don't be fooled: They did not succeed because their numbers were large or their influence was great or their social support was either broad-based or obvious. They succeeded because they refused to allow the ideas of the past to become the cement of the future. They succeeded because of the courage of women who went where they were told not to go.

Now we are at another crossroads moment in time. This is a time, too, of deep crisis and great needs, of the rejection of those who raise new questions and a reaction against those who raise new ideas in a system trying to preserve the old ones in order to preserve itself.

It is a time, as it has always been, for leadership.

But leadership and authority are not the same thing. It can take a long time to learn the difference between the two but there is nothing in life that demonstrates the difference between the two better than a crossroad.

At the crossroads in life, authority goes one direction: back. Authority goes in the direction that's already in the book; the path that has been clearly trod before now, the way that is safe and sure, clear and certain, obedient and approved, applauded and rewarded.

Leadership, on the other hand, rewrites the book. It takes the direction that leads only to the promise of a better tomorrow for everyone however difficult it may be to achieve it now. "The seed," the Zen master teaches,

"never sees the flower."

The times are clear. The needs are now. The time for new decisions is upon us. Authority is not enough for times such as these. We need leaders now.

As women religious meet in Dallas these days as a "Leadership Conference" rather than as a conference of "Major Superiors," may God raise up women among them who will lead.

It is a new period of crisis. We must determine to meet this challenge to spiritual maturity, to human adulthood now as did our foremothers before us meet theirs. We, too, must move beyond fear to the real, real faith that can, we have seen, move mountains.

It is another period in which public and even ecclesiastical approval must be second again to the needs of those who look to us for both vision and voice.

It is a period in which we must not forego reaching for what is necessary because others tell us it is not acceptable.

For the sake of religious life, for the sake of women everywhere, and, in the end, for the sake of the very integrity of the church itself, we are looking to you now to be "Women of Spirit." May we be to our age what our ancestors were to theirs. Whatever the cost to ourselves.

For that, we are depending now on you.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent NCR contributor.]

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Coverage Note: NCR editor Tom Fox is in Dallas for the LCWR meeting. Read his dispatches from Dallas on the [NCR Today blog](#) [1] and follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/ncrtomfox [2] and twitter.com/NCRonline [3]. If you are tweeting from the meeting include #LCWR in your tweets.

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