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Falling in love with women in ministry

Nicole Sotelo | Mar. 15, 2012 Young Voices

I have a confession. I don't just fall in love with people -- I also fall in love with ideas, often those that promote liberation. I see a woman in church leadership and I swoon.

As an undergraduate, I drooled over books by Carter Heyward, one of the first Episcopal women ordained in the 1970s. I would read a page and my heart would skip a beat.

During those college years, I took all but one of my religion courses with a beloved woman professor who wore a shirt adorned with the cosmos and talked of female images of God. In graduate school, Kwok Pui Lan lectured during a course and influenced my understanding of Christianity forever.

It was the same with the Anglican chaplain at the university in England where I was studying. She led morning prayer, preached on Sundays and coordinated a healing ministry.

This is what women in the Catholic church could be?

There was no denying it. I was smitten with the potential for women's liberation in the church.

One day, after morning prayer, the Anglican woman chaplain told me that while women in England were being ordained, many congregations in the country would not call women to lead them. Women were still second-class citizens within their denomination.

As it is with any budding love, eventually the crush ends and the hard reality of what it takes for the relationship to grow and flourish begins.

So it was with my growing understanding of how arduous the road to women's liberation in the church would be.

Methodist women are a case in point. A study undertaken by the Office of Continuing Formation for Ministry [1] found that after 50 years of having women clergy, women still struggled for parity with their male colleagues. Very few women serve the top third largest churches and their salaries are, on average, 27 percent lower than their male counterparts.

Additionally, while all lead pastors have multiple weekly services, 32 percent of women pastors were more likely to serve more than three services a week compared to only 16 percent of their male colleagues who did the same.

In a month when Catholic bishops are meeting behind closed doors to discuss the fate of women's health care at Catholic-affiliated institutions without engaging women in the discussion and when Cardinal Timothy Dolan still thinks a woman's qualification to work at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops includes *attractiveness* [2], I am reminded how far we are from liberation.

That being said, for the first time in centuries, we have significant numbers of women teaching at Catholic

universities, serving in diocesan centers and taking active part in parishes. This week, Call To Action is celebrating Church Worker Justice Week [3], not only to highlight the injustices that remain but to honor these and other strides made by women and men in ministry. It is easy to look at the injustices, but if we look around us, liberation has already begun.

I thank all the women whose example has led me to fall in love with the potential of women in ministry -- despite the obstacles faced -- because when young Catholic women like myself fall head over heels for the potential of women in ministry, we are falling in love with the promise of who God created us to be. We are falling in love with the potential for our own liberation.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates **www.WomenHealing.com** [4]. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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