

Controversy energizes FutureChurch's annual Magdala celebration

Kate Oatis | Jul. 23, 2012



Julie Biroscak speaks at FutureChurch's 16th annual St. Mary of Magdala celebration Thursday in Cleveland. (Jim Metrisin)

"St. Mary of Magdala would have been proud. And I think Jesus is proud," said Sr. Christine Schenk, executive director of FutureChurch, before the organization's 16th annual St. Mary of Magdala celebration Thursday in Cleveland. "The women's movement in the church is alive."

Indeed, it would appear the decision recently undertaken by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to order the Leadership Conference for Women Religious to reform its statutes has inspired a new crop of Catholic women as well as Catholics in the pews. More than a third of all Magdala celebrations worldwide are scheduled to honor women religious in the United States, said Liz England, FutureChurch's program coordinator.

Such news pleases Schenk.

"From a community organizer's point of view, FutureChurch is much farther along than we were 20 years ago," she said. "When the suppression of the marginalized is so feverish, change can't be far behind. It is quite remarkable. We felt like a voice crying in the wilderness. Now more people in the pews are saying, 'Wait a

minute, this is wrong.' "

Dan and Joanne Shaughnessy, who attended the Magdala celebration in Cleveland, are among the people in the pews. The two have been members of FutureChurch since the group was founded in 1990.

"Women have been written out of church history," Dan Shaughnessy said. "Meetings like this shed light on the problem."

For Joanne Shaughnessy, hearing women in the pulpit is uplifting.

"I want to be more enlightened as to the truth about women in the history of the church because women have been treated unfairly for centuries," she said. "We are so encouraged by gatherings like this."

The Shaughnessys, who live in Cleveland, have seven children and 21 grandchildren.

"Our children appreciate what we are doing. They don't come [to Catholicism] with the baggage we have. To them, the church hierarchy is irrelevant," Joanne said.

The Cleveland FutureChurch members requested the focal point of their celebration to be unheard homilies. Three women, were asked to preach the homilies they have longed to preach at Mass: Julie Biroscak, who has been in ministry for more than 15 years, is a hospice chaplain and has served adults with intellectual disabilities in the L'Arche community; Debbie Dacone, a pastoral minister at a church in the Cleveland area, is in her third year at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis working toward her degree in preaching; and Megan T. Wilson-Reitz is part of the Cleveland Catholic Worker extended community, a mother of two and a lecturer in religious studies at John Carroll University.

Biroscak said being part of the Magdala celebration is an honor.



"I appreciate the work FutureChurch does," she said. "This is a

wonderful way to honor Mary of Magdala and her faithfulness. Even though she is not always named, she is there."

For Dacone, the invitation to present a homily gave her a chance to live out her vocation.

"It's exciting that FutureChurch offers laity the opportunity to preach," she said. "They have the definition of vocation down pat. It's about a calling to share the faith."

In her homily, Wilson-Reitz challenged the laity to challenge the hierarchy: "When ecclesiastical authorities demand that women religious set aside their urgent work for justice and mercy and human compassion as commanded by Jesus, and give their focus instead to orthodoxy of theological and dogmatic expression, we must ask, to whom do we owe our obedience?"

Schenk said the women were chosen because "they are so competent and witness the leadership of women for a new generation of Catholics. These younger women come from a long line of women witnesses who know that

while human beings and human structures are sexist, God is not."

Schenk said building awareness around the exclusion of women from church history, FutureChurch's mission, is paying off.

"When we went to the Synod on the Word in 2008, we gave packets of materials detailing all the women deleted from the lectionary to about 25 bishops," she said. "They were surprised and embarrassed. This led to two propositions: praising the ministry of women in the ministry of the word and asking the pope to consider revising the lectionary. So while the need for gender balance has not yet reached the inner sanctum of Vatican elites, a lot more bishops know about systematized exclusion of women than they did in the past."

Although it is rewarding to educate bishops, Schenk said, "It is incredibly gratifying to know that Mary of Magdala is now being celebrated as a pre-eminent women leader, the apostle to the apostles, rather than as a repentant sinner. This can only be a positive model for women in the world, especially for women whose cultures are more gender-biased than the United States'."

More than 200 people attended the Cleveland celebration, including many men. Among those men, about seven said they were there instead of at their weekly male spirit meeting.

"We think it's important that we support these programs because they give voice to what many of us are feeling," said Bill Appleton of Cleveland. "It's time for the idea of primacy of conscience to be lived out. At the end of the day, our consciences should drive our relationship with God and determine how we live out the Gospel."

Schenk said more than 300 Magdala celebrations will take place in July and August, including 42 outside the United States. She said she hopes people come away from the Magdala celebrations with the "good news that God's love in Jesus Christ makes a difference in our world and that the good news is beautifully proclaimed through the lens of female experience. What a tremendous loss it is to our faith communities that women such as these cannot ever preach at Sunday Mass."

[Kate Oatis is director of communications for the Sisters of St. Francis in Tiffin, Ohio.]

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