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Zagano accepts social justice award

by NCR Staff

NCR Today

NCR columnist Phyllis Zagano received the 2014 Isaac Hecker Award for Social Justice from Boston's Paulist Center on Saturday. Zagano is an internationally acclaimed Catholic scholar and lecturer on contemporary spirituality and women's issues in the church.

The Paulist Center is a Catholic community that draws members from throughout metropolitan Boston as well as those for whom social justice, education, and evangelization are central to their faith. Since 1974, their annual Hecker Award for Social Justice has recognized a North American Catholic who has labored for a more just and peaceful world. Zagano joins former recipients, including Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, and last year's winner, LCWR's past-president, Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon.

Below is Zagano's speech after accepting the award.

Six years ago this weekend, on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, I sat in the great Church of St Paul the Apostle in New York City as the archbishop of New York opened Isaac Hecker's cause for sainthood. It was an impressive ceremony ?impressive for its dignity and for its simplicity. The archbishop and the chancellor of the archdiocese in their clerical attire, and the pastor and the president of the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle in their Paulist habits were there, seated or standing, at the main altar, essentially doing paperwork. I don't know how Isaac Hecker ? now Servant of God Isaac Hecker ? would react to the call for his sainthood. But I can tell you that sitting there with a

thousand other people, in that church, in that town, on that day, just feet from Hecker's tomb I think I learned from him little more of what life is all about.

Now I have an award named in his honor. My words mean nothing if they are not heard, and apparently you have heard some of what I have said. You count me among the followers of Isaac Hecker in the quest for social justice. Thank you. I accept this award on my own behalf and on your behalf as well.

I stand in gratitude before you. I stand in gratitude for the fact that you "pay it forward" as it were. I stand in gratitude because you live your lives in such a manner that this parish community regularly and routinely gives support to people and to organizations that carry the Gospel forward. I thank you for them, and for myself, and I thank you for your example and the instruction you give on how to live the message of Jesus.

We all "each of us" carry within us the sacred stories of our lives. To me, at least, the great challenge of the Gospel is to recognize that everybody's story is sacred: Isaac Hecker's, yours, mine. As we live our own sacred stories, we take advice from those before us and from those around us, on how to live the life God has created us to live. It is as easy as that. It is as difficult as that.

Today's Gospel (MT 4:12-23) tells part of my story, and I would venture to say it tells part of yours as well. How is it that we do what we do?

I grew up near the sea. Boats and fishing were part of everyday life.

I can assure you that if I was on the beach fishing with my friends, there is no way I would even look at some guy who wandered by and said "follow me." I mean, I'm from New York. I don't talk to strangers.

So what is Matthew's Gospel story all about?

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I am not the first to say it is about vocation. Nor am I the first to write about vocation.

Isaac Hecker wrote, in 1854: "The place of one's vocation is where one finds the divine will and the greatest ease for executing it."

It is as simple as that. It is as difficult as that. But it always involves hearing that voice, somehow somehow, saying: "follow me." It always involves knowing deep inside that it

means conversion. It always involves knowing there is nothing else that you can do.

I did not encounter Jesus on the beach, but I knew this story as Matthew tells it when, one winter day as I walked past my Jesuit boss' office to get my brown-bag lunch on the building balcony ? this was before office refrigerators were in vogue ? that winter day as I passed his office and saw him in there, I stood in his doorway and asked: ?What does ?Diakonia? mean??

??Diakonia?? means service.? he said. ?It is where we get the name of the church office ?deacon? ? the ministry of service, the ministry of Christ the Servant.? I stood there a long time and I listened, I stood there a long time and I thought. We spoke about the place of women in the church, and how there were no equivalencies with men's possible vocations. There had been of course, but now so many centuries ago, there had been women ordained as deacons. But that was then.

I do not know if that was my moment of conversion, or when I metaphorically dropped my net. But in my memory of that conversation I see my determination to speak and to write, not for myself, but for and on behalf of those who do not have access to any stage or soapbox. I can say here to you honestly: I never wanted to do anything but preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

You have given me an award, but you have given me much more: this is the first time I have ever spoken at a Sunday liturgy in a Catholic Church. I am a woman.

But it is not about me. It is about the thousands and thousands of women whose voices are not heard, whose voices cannot be heard, in this country or elsewhere. It is about those millions of women in two-thirds of the world who have no voices and no choices, those millions who cannot listen to the call of Jesus because they do not have the freedom to make any changes in their lives.

We here today are among the best educated, best fed, best clothed, best housed individuals in history. We have incredible access. From this church, in 12 minutes we can walk to a major rail line, in a few minutes more we can hop the ?T? and get to the Museum of Fine Arts, or to Symphony Hall. We are surrounded by places to eat, by hospitals, and by universities. There are many among us who suffer diminished access to food or shelter or clothing. But we here at least have, for the most part, a decent standard of living.

But, as we are gathered here, 900 million people do not have enough to eat. Nine hundred million people suffer hunger. There are poor in this city and elsewhere in this country. There are more poor people in the Sudan, in the Philippines, in Somalia, in African and Latin American villages, in rural China.

It is one thing to be poor. It is quite another thing to be poor and female in a country where you are not respected. And, if truth be told, women are not respected in most of the world.

You will note that in today's Gospel story, Jesus speaks only to men. He calls the brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. It is entirely possible these men knew who Jesus was. It is entirely possible that they had heard him speak in their synagogue, or that they were among the crowds when he shared the loaves and fishes. Whatever their previous knowledge or relationship with Jesus, they did not ask him for his business plan or who he had for backers. They dropped their nets. They followed him. They had the freedom to do so. They were men.

There is no coercion in Jesus' voice, in this story or ever. They heard what he said, they were not afraid, they dropped their nets and they followed him. The impetus came from within. The impetus came from who they were and how they were formed in God's image. They were not compelled. They were impelled to become more of who they were, by answering the call of Jesus.

Could that now be me? Could that now be you? Jesus is not just some guy wandering along the beach. Jesus, as he brings the voice of God to life within your heart, is the one who points ? but does not drag ? you along your way. Not ?The Way? ? as if there was some mapped out yellow-brick road to perfection. Jesus points you and me, gently, on our individual ways.

Hecker wrote, again in 1854, that as we are converted, as we understand our destiny, we understand that its accomplishment ?depends less upon our action than on the unconditional surrender to what God wishes of us.?

How very true. Like Hecker, like St. Paul, like Simon Peter and Andrew and James and John, what we need to do is listen. What we need to do is listen to the Word of God. What we need to do is listen to ourselves. There is no sense in trying to live someone else's life. Hecker is a candidate for sainthood not because he followed someone else's path. Hecker is a candidate for sainthood because he made his own way along the path Christ pointed out to him. That is how he found his vocation. That is how he found his peace.

The one implies the other, you know. Peace of heart allows us to see the path we must follow, and in following that path we gain even more peace of heart. Life is an ongoing sacred story. It is an unending conversion, Sometimes, it is difficult. Sometimes, it is confusing. But it is a really great ride. Enjoy it.

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