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Pilgrimage to Rome shines light on early church's women leaders

Christine Schenk | Apr. 10, 2014 Simply Spirit

I just returned from a hopeful and energizing Rome pilgrimage to archeological sites of women leaders in the early church. This was the fourth such excursion sponsored by FutureChurch [1], a U.S. church renewal organization. The express intent of the trip was to bring to visibility the presence of female leadership in the church's early centuries. Evidence for that leadership is often absent in the literary record, unless you count the times women are told they are not permitted to lead! But the archeology tells a different story.

For example, one fourth-century fresco at the catacombs of Domitilla portrays two women, Veneranda and Petronilla, with a codex and scrolls, respectively, tell-tale signs of their leadership as "women of the Word." Not far away in the same catacomb, we found a fresco of Paul also pictured with scrolls signifying his authority.

At the Vatican's Pio Cristiano Museum, we studied intricately carved fourth-century sarcophagi friezes belonging to deceased Christian women. Each woman holds a codex and is portrayed preaching about Scripture stories that are carefully arrayed around her. One fragment shows a woman holding a scroll standing between two male apostles, who clearly show her deference. Such female leadership has recently come to the fore thanks to contemporary scholarship. In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI himself confirmed that in the growth of the early church, "the female presence was anything but secondary [2]."

These were heady visuals for our 30-plus group of women, three men and one charming 14-year-old boy. We had an unusually scholarly bunch this time: One enterprising wag counted 12 doctorates, three "reverends" and about 15 master's degrees in our midst.

Daily lectures from Dr. Carolyn Osiek of the Society of the Sacred Heart brought to life the social context of early Christianity and what daily life was like for Christian women in late antiquity. Osiek is a scholar's scholar. Her unassuming demeanor hides a monumental mastery of Roman history and archaeology, biblical scholarship (she is a past president of the Catholic Biblical Association), the writings of the church fathers and, of course, women's roles in the first five centuries of Christianity. Lyn, as she likes to be called, quickly became our newest "shero" as she skillfully unveiled the phenomena of female patronage in the early church.

Few realize that both female and male patrons underwrote the spread of Christianity throughout the Mediterranean world. In the first century, Paul's missionary journeys might not have happened without his many female benefactors, including Phoebe, Lydia and Prisca (see Romans 16 and Acts 16: 11-40). St. John Chrysostom benefited greatly from the patronage of the fourth-century female deacon Olympias. Her largesse supported his ministry and that of many other bishops in Asia Minor. Up until the early fourth century, female patrons most likely led eucharistic worship at the community meals held in their homes because it would have been unthinkable for anyone but the host/head of household to preside.

The presence of five female Protestant scholars greatly enriched our journey. Describing themselves as a "mutual support group," the women met through a visionary professor, Ann Graham Brock, at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. Brock's creative course, "Peter, Paul and Mary," opened their eyes to both the reality of women's ministerial leadership and its suppression by the early church. Her seminal work, *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority [3]*

, is among the most frequently requested doctoral dissertations from Harvard Divinity School.

A member of Brock's women's group, Sherry Walker, found out about the FutureChurch pilgrimage after Googling Osiek. "Dr. Osiek's work has had a big impact on me. Even though I'm not Catholic, I decided, 'I've got to do the tour,' " she said. Walker told her friends, including Brock, and they decided to join her.

One evening, I shared dinner with the Iliff women, curious to hear their reactions to the trip. Deborah Niederer Saxon, who was raised in a conservative Baptist tradition and recently completed a doctorate, told me Brock's book "crystallized my calling. There were early women ministers, and it is biblically founded."

The art and history on the pilgrimage were important reasons she wanted to come. "I knew we would be with all these Catholics," she said. "I felt a great solidarity with you, with these people who really love their church and want to stay and change it."

Lisa Schrader, an ordained Lutheran pastor, made a salient point: "Catholic history is my history, too, as this is the history of all Christian denominations, whether Catholic or Protestant. The catacombs and the history they hold belong to all Christians." After attending seminary, Schrader studied spiritual direction with the Benedictines and said the experience is extremely helpful in the pastoral care of the people she works with.

Brock's blithe spirit and hearty laugh made our pilgrimage pathways fun even as we benefited from her insight. One of her treasured experiences was "viewing the fresco at St. Praxedis ... seeing a female figure holding a cup with a host above it. It was just beautiful."

"Church ministry is all about service and action," Brock said. "We're all sisters and brothers together. When one half of humanity is affected, we're all affected."

Ally Kateusz studies artistic works that evoke the priesthood of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her recent article, " Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary's Liturgical Leadership [4]" for the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* was awarded a first prize from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Kateusz said she was happy to "meet Catholic women supportive of women's ordination. I'm glad to see what my artistic work on the priesthood of Mary means for real people."

Sherry Walker is writing about Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza (Luke 8:3): "Because of her position in Herod's court, I wondered if she might have come to Rome. I wanted to learn more about the context of women in the early church."

Walker brought her 14-year-old son, Tyler, with her. He is studying French, and the mother-son duo planned a trip to Paris immediately after the tour. Tyler, who is mature for his age, told me he loved the pilgrimage "mostly because of the religious context ... I got a lot more out of it than you would get on an ordinary tour. This tour isn't focused on tourism; it's much deeper than that."

Others echoed Tyler's sentiment by frequently expressing how much they loved the prayer experiences at the various sites. I will confess that these were among my favorite times, too. The agape ritual at the catacombs of Priscilla was especially moving. Here, we experienced the unity and love of all Christians as we broke bread together in the name of Jesus, in whom "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one" (Galatians 3:28).

It has often been said that the rising up of women is the rising of the race. After this grace-filled time in Rome, it occurs to me that if Christian unity ever actually succeeds, it will be because of the interdenominational solidarity of women.

Now that is some pretty fantastic Simply Spirit work, don't you think?

Listen to Sr. Chris Schenk's interview on Vatican radio [5].

Read a daily blog of the FutureChurch pilgrimage [6].

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk served urban families for 18 years as a nurse midwife before co-founding FutureChurch, where she served for 23 years.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Christine Schenk's column, Simply Spirit, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up [7].

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