

CATHOLIC WOMEN—A CASE OF OPPRESSION?

By Joanna Bogle

Are Catholic women oppressed by a patriarchal Church, which marginalizes them and their opinions, talents, and gifts? Has the Church denied women education, spiritual formation, and opportunities for service?

To be a Catholic woman today is to be on the receiving end of such questions with an assumption on the part of the questioner that the answer will be an automatic "Yes." Indeed, the questions are seen as rhetorical. Surely, it is implied, everyone knows that women may not be ordained as Catholic priests, that they are oppressed by a vision of marriage and family life that treats them as childbearing serfs within the home.

The reality, of course, is hugely different. Catholic women are *not* oppressed by the Church and are getting increasingly tired of being told that they are. It is important that we set the record straight and speak out for the reality of our lives and our history.

There were more women than men at the foot of the Cross. It was to a woman (at the well) that Christ first revealed himself as the Messiah. A woman, Mary Magdalene, was the first person to see and speak to our risen Savior on Easter Sunday.

In the early Church, women gave not only their time, energy, and talents to the Christian cause, but also their lives. There is no suggestion from anything we know about the early martyrs that women among them held a subservient place or were dying for a cause that kept them in subjection or that marginalized them. Quite the reverse. Christian women astonished the Roman authorities by firm adherence to principles: choosing a life of virginity and consecration to Christ, for instance, rather than marriage to an eligible pagan or opting for a cruel death rather than renounce adherence to a creed that they articulated well. Those women who gave their lives for Christ as martyrs in the early Church are still commemorated by Catholics today and we list their names lovingly at Mass: Agnes, Cecilia, Anastasia, Agatha, Lucy. . . .

This notion of a woman as responsible before God, knowing that she must take decisions affecting her own salvation and that of others, is central to the Catholic faith. There has never been any suggestion that a woman didn't need to *think*, that martyrdom was beyond her, that really important contact with God was the privilege of men alone.

In Britain, women played a central role in the spreading of the Christian faith—Brigid in Ireland (fifth century); Bertha, the Christian queen who saw her husband baptized by Augustine of Canterbury, launching evangelization of the English (sixth century); Hilda of Whitby, the great abbess (seventh century); Margaret of Scotland, a scholar who, in marrying King Malcolm Canmore, introduced learning, manners and culture to the kingdom, including Sunday rest and grace after meals (eleventh century). At the time of the Norman Conquest, women's religious houses were famous for their learning and poetry: Wilton, Shaftesbury, Romney, and Winchester produced women of talent and literature.

It is worth looking at the role and status of women in the medieval era, when the Catholic Church was the wellspring of culture, social ideas, and customs. This is a vast field of study—we can do no more than glimpse it here.

Women in a Catholic England owned property—it did not automatically become their husbands' when they married, as was the case with new property laws after the Reformation. They dominated certain trades, notably those of brewing and of stationery. (London's Fleet Street—until the 1980s the headquarters of Britain's newspaper industry—began with women's shops selling paper for clerks at nearby St. Paul's Cathedral.) The Christian understanding of marriage gave them status and dignity as partners with their husbands in building the community—and raising children for the future and for heaven.

Above all, medieval recognition of the central role played by the Virgin Mary in God's plan fostered a whole set of values. The pagan idea of fertility with women merely as useful tools vanished. Nor could women be seen as mere sexual objects. The most widely-pictured image of Christ was as an infant on his mother's knee or cradled in her arms. This image of the world's Redeemer as a helpless infant, requiring a mother's tender care, gave all motherhood a rich dignity and society a mystery to ponder. This affected every aspect of womanhood and femininity. The medieval Catholic woman was no plaything: She expected to be someone whose spiritual, moral, and intellectual formation *mattered*.

It is fashionable now to claim that for centuries women were not taught to read or write. Of course, until the advent of printing (William Caxton, fifteenth century) most people *couldn't* read and didn't have books, and for a long time after that reading was by no means universal. But all the evidence shows that those who could read were evenly divided between men and women. Woodcuts show both boys and girls studying their lessons. A favorite theme in the Middle Ages was that of Mary's childhood: Old stained glass shows her at lessons with her mother. We do not know whether or how St. Anne taught Mary to read; we do know that medieval people assumed it to be normal.

Catholics always have seen the home as a center of ideas, education, enterprise, and culture—and above all of spiritual formation. It was the mother who would do the instructing, having a central and even dominant role in forming minds and setting the ideological, academic, and spiritual agenda.

There was a calling for women, too, who wanted to give their whole lives to Christ. Catherine of Siena (fourteenth century) and Teresa of Avila (sixteenth) are examples of women, called to the religious life, whose influence on the Church and on history continues. We should never see such women as sentimental figures, plaster saints. They were women of intellect, strength, and spirit. Both have left us a robust image of the cheerful, dedicated Catholic woman: "God be praised," an abbess wrote of Teresa after a visit. "We have seen a saint we can all imitate. She eats and sleeps and talks like us and there is no affectation about her."

The Church also honored women who lived in the world, notably by hailing as saints those who, called to public life, used Christian influence for the common good. They served as what we might today call "role models" for others; they were honored for courage, faith, endurance, and a spirit of service. Bridget of Sweden, married to a prince and mother of eight children, had a profound influence on her nation, as did Jadwiga of Poland, Isabel of Portugal, and Elizabeth of Hungary. These women could have been merely decorative spouses of military men; instead they were leaders, initiators of charitable works on a serious scale, founders of religious communities.

At the Reformation, British women lost a great deal. The denigration of the role of Mary brought changed attitudes. The destruction of convents meant the end of a whole network of female-run centers of academic and cultural activity. Henceforth the role of the unmarried Christian woman was to be ambiguous. Too much interest in religion might offer an eccentric role as a preacher in some new denomination, but it was no longer seen as normal, noble, or excellent in itself. There was nowhere for such a woman to go where her life might with dignity be shared with others of similar calling; the various Protestant versions of Christianity had no such places.

Women were conspicuous among the Catholic martyrs. They ranged from Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury and mother of Cardinal Reginald Pole, to Anne Vaux, leading figure in the underground Church who provided places for Mass and hideouts for priests. Margaret Clitheroe—pressed to death for refusing to pass on information about priests she sheltered—is today patron of Britain's Catholic Women's League, and her York home is a shrine.

Like the women martyrs of more than a thousand years earlier, these—married or single—knew what they were dying for. They were not the marginalized, inarticulate tools of men but people who had worked out what was true and decided to stand by it, whatever the cost.

The Catholic Church had for centuries developed women's talents and skills and seen a sacramental meaning in the union of the two sexes. It took a more crude and rhetorical form of Christianity, the Protestant *sola scriptura* notion with its misunderstandings about Mary and abolition of the calendar of saints, to remake Christianity into something from which women could feel excluded. There had been more churches named after women than men, and the calendar had been crammed with female names. Now "Scripture alone" gave a bleaker message—and the rich Catholic understanding of the Church as Mother, and use of female imagery in referring to her, was gone too.

Florence Nightingale (nineteenth century) sums up the anguish of the results of this in correspondence pleading to be trained in useful Christian service—or just to be taken seriously as a woman seeking a life of dedication beyond her own immediate domestic needs. Significantly, her eventual nursing mission to the Crimea was made possible only after a war correspondent asked, in the columns of *The Times*, why Britain had no Sisters of Charity (Catholic nuns!) as the French had, to tend the wounded.

A Catholic contemporary of Nightingale was Caroline Chisholm, "The Emigrant's Friend." She worked on behalf of impoverished settlers in Australia: cleaning up the ships, leading teams along bush tracks in New South Wales, lobbying for fair emigration policies. Her Catholic faith nourished and encouraged her abilities, while Nightingale lamented that her own Anglicanism had merely suggested that she should remain quietly at home. One of Nightingale's letters mentions Chisholm as an example of a woman active in good work and asks why others may not do likewise. (Caroline Chisholm is commemorated widely in Australia where schools, welfare organizations, and even a suburb of the capital bear her name.)

Catholic women have not all been saints, but ever since Mary Magdalene's first report to the apostles, many have been lively witnesses of their faith and have known themselves a crucial part of Christ's ministry. Running to tell the apostles of the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene—who knew she was not a priest—chivvied the clergy into action, something many Catholic women have done since.

All the pagan religions of Christ's day had priestesses. If, as some claim, Christ was conditioned by social patterns, he would most certainly have ordained women. He had many women followers, any one of whom might have been a candidate. But he acted in sovereign freedom. In choosing only men he knew exactly what he was doing. God does not make mistakes. It is crude and absurd to suggest—as some campaigners do—that Christ somehow pines from heaven that he did not live in the 1990s with affirmative action programs and equal opportunity laws. Every possible aspect of the Incarnation was timed to the last split second: Christ's arrival in the womb of Mary, the start of his ministry at Cana when she told us, "Do whatever he tells you."

When God became man, when the word became flesh, it was as a male. And the Church was to be his bride. There is a mystery here concerning maleness and femaleness. Catholic women have benefited from a culture which recognizes the meaning of womanhood. In a remote convent where he was imprisoned during Stalin's time, Poland's primate Stephan Cardinal Wysinski, wrote in his diary:

"I must remember: Whenever a woman enters the room, always rise no matter how busy you are. Rise, whether it is the Mother Superior, or Sister Kleofasa, who tends the heater. Remember that she always reminds you of the Handmaid of the Lord, at the sound of whose name the Church also rises. Remember that in this way you pay a debt of respect to your Immaculate Mother, with whom this woman is more closely associated than you. In this way you pay a debt towards your own mother, who served you with her own flesh and blood. Rise without delay, and you will be the better for it."