

“Every Catholic woman has been abused by her church.”

This was what I read to the SEPA WOC Core Committee. As a white, straight, middle-class, well-educated, elderly person, I was having incredible trouble equating my experience to what others have suffered. Fortunately, the group would not let that stand.

For almost forty years, we have done witnesses outside the Philadelphia cathedral on Holy Thursday and Ordination Day.

- Since our first Holy Thursday, the doors have been closed when the priests process in the vestibule. They cannot see our banners or hear our songs. Unintended consequence: people are left standing on the steps outside these doors— for a few minutes, they see and hear us!
- We are not able to have meetings or programs at archdiocesan or parish buildings. Anything arranged is cancelled at the last minute by a phone call from the archdiocese, forcing emergency arrangements at secular institutions. Fortunately, this generates publicity and builds attendance.
- Laity who do not support us feel free to condemn us. “You will burn in hell” at the kiss of peace in the cathedral is the worst example, though pro-life sentiments have been yelled at us and a teacher led a group of girls – about eighth-grade – chanting “We love our priests” next to us.
- In 1992, when we decided to publish our newsletter, *Equal wRites*, the archdiocesan officials we had informally been meeting with cancelled. Somehow, putting it in writing was really threatening. We didn’t do it to provoke them or endanger their jobs, but, as a historian, if history is written by the winners, we have done our part for twenty-six years.

I could go on in this rather triumphalist vein, but our discussion went to a different level. We’re marginalized by

- Always hearing about God as a man, a father, when you believe in a loving, inspiring, ungendered spirit.
- Wondering what your vocation means when it’s impossible.
- Having to organize your life around being marginalized.
- Not being fully in the life of the church in liturgy, in decision-making.
- Self-censoring your expectations.
- Being denied space in places you have contributed to.
- Cumulatively, wondering why you should feel lesser, knowing that you are thought of that way. All the pedestals in the world do not change that.

I have always said of myself that I am not actually courageous – I do not do things in spite of fear. I just do them, without thinking of the consequences. I have a high tolerance for risk. I don’t imagine what might happen. I just know what I must do.

I was lucky to have come of age when I did. My first big public liturgy was at the College of St. Elizabeth; I was part of the “litnicks” planning a prayer service on the night John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. My first service project was with the Grail in Lafayette, Louisiana, teaching religion and registering voters in the summer of 1964. My first vigils were silently standing around a flagpole at Brown by 1966 to mourn the Vietnam War. The first time I went to a demonstration was after the death of Martin Luther King in 1968, organized by the black community in Providence. My first teach-in was at Trinity College in Vermont after the shootings at Kent State University in 1970. All these experiences taught me to witness publicly to injustice and tragedy. I became an activist, a confluence of personality and history.

When did feminism come in? One sleepless night in 1970, I got up and started reading the cover story in the *Saturday Review* by Lucy Komisar, “The New Feminism.” (God bless the Internet – I found it online!) I was wide awake – or woke! These ideas were already in the air – after all, it was five years after *The Feminine Mystique* – but I had not really confronted them in my own life, except to know how unsatisfying my first year of marriage had been, wandering to follow my husband’s job, before I got a job of my own.

And what did I do? I organized a panel of other faculty members – including Madeline Kunin, the Jewish mother of four who eventually became governor of Vermont, who had decided that she was “finished making pickles.” I don’t remember what all we said, except that, in my inimitable fashion, I invited the *Burlington Free Press* to cover it. And it appalled my husband, working at IBM, to see in the paper how unjust I felt marriage was.

I use this rather conventional Betty Friedan experience to illustrate not only my inherent, perhaps unwise, not exactly courageous, tendency to share publicly, but also to reflect on the kind of intellectual control sixteen years of Catholic education had exercised on me. Long before John Paul II’s theology of the body and all the attention to complementarity, I had absorbed the essence of that worldview. I was going to move to Vermont and have babies, I said to the Jesuit priest who married us, a fellow graduate student at Brown. He looked at me as if he didn’t believe me. And he shouldn’t have. One article confirmed a year’s experience and convinced me of the truth about gender roles in marriage.

I did not come to the women’s ordination movement quickly. We moved to Philadelphia and found an intentional Eucharistic community, the Community of the Christian Spirit, among the desert of traditional parishes. Weekly liturgies were developed by community members. A leadership team ran this underground church and hired the priests, by then some married ones. A welcoming community, with great music.

Judy Heffernan was a member. She had always felt called to be a priest, and our community ordained her in 1980. We studied the prohibitions for about one session

of our educational process and reached the conclusion that the objections were indeed man-made.

When I learned there was an organization advocating women's ordination, I joined up. We started witnesses and programs and a local newsletter and sessions with priests and meetings with diocesan officials and appearances on radio and tv and in the paper and in college classrooms – some of these continue to this day, almost forty years later. I was not the most courageous or outrageous member of Southeastern Pennsylvania WOC. That honor still belongs to the late Karen Lenz, who succeeded me as editor of *Equal wRites*. But together all of us are very strong.

If you read my posts on the WOC blog, *The Table*, you know I am very concerned about church structures of accountability and decision-making. I would like women to be ordained but even more, I want WOC's original slogan to be achieved: "a renewed priestly ministry in a renewed church." We are modeling that as we ordain women ourselves and we must help others imagine the future that can be true for them as well. I am an institutional person. I believe it is important to preserve WOC as a separate and dedicated voice for women, promoting all means to ordination, because ordination is a powerful symbol of women's equality.

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