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# Your One Wild and Precious Life: Women on the Road of Ministry

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## **Introduction**

The title of this lecture is taken from a poem entitled “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver. For most of the poem she meanders through open fields on that gorgeous day, observing details of grasses, bugs, and birds. At the end she muses:

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it **you** plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

The poet here poses the question of vocation. You have only one life, and it is a treasure. It is also finite: some day you will die. How will you spend your hours and your energies? What will you do “with your one wild and precious life?”

I chose this title to highlight the astonishing fact that in our day women in remarkable numbers are answering this question by choosing to engage in ministry. Let us be clear that women have always been ministering in the church, in unofficial and undervalued, though irreplaceable, ways. Think of the millions of women named “anonymous” through the centuries who have handed on the faith and enacted God’s love in the world. The better-known story of the ministries of

women's religious orders is another magnificent case in point. But now a surging wave of lay women are becoming educated with theological and pastoral skills in order to take initiatives and serve in ministerial positions. The women students and alumnae of the Graduate Program in Pastoral Ministry here at Santa Clara are a good case in point; your ranks are swelled around this country and around the world. What makes this phenomenon so striking is that it is a free choice. No woman has to do this; our culture applies no social pressure on a woman to become active in ministry; women today have multiple career options, and this surely is a path that will make no one rich! What is behind this? It is a matter of vocation. You may know the lovely line by Frederick Buechner: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Women with deep gladness are responding to a call from the Holy Spirit of God, heard deep in their hearts, to take the giftedness of their "one wild and precious life" and meet the world's deep hunger for meaning and healing, liberation and redemption.

I hasten to add that laymen, too, are responding to this call and giving their lives in service to the world through pastoral ministry, and not one of these dedicated lives should be overlooked. But given the history of women's subordination in the church and exclusion from many ministries, a situation that continues even as we speak, the phenomenon of growing numbers of women in

pastoral ministry deserves a special look. There are now more qualified women in ministry than ever before in the history of the church. Something new is afoot.

In this lecture I invite you to consider this subject in three points [the proverbial 3] roughly organized in terms of past, present, and future. First, we will place this development in an historical framework. Second, we will move .to the spiritual heart of the matter, the vocational call to ministry rooted in women's baptism. And third, in view of the conflicts and ambiguities that continue to plague much of women's experience in the field, we will draw encouragement from the dangerous memory of biblical women to accompany us into the future.

## **I. PAST: Historical Framework**

Let me start with reference to my own experience in the ministry of theology. When I was a graduate student in the 1970's I loved learning about the great theologians of the Christian tradition, from Augustine in the 4th century, to Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure in the 13th, to Karl Rahner and Gustavo Gutierrez in the 20th century. But one day a question struck me: where are the women? It's not as if women were not actually *there* in the church, believing and contributing. But in the midst of all these men's great insights, I became appalled by the silence of women's voices and the absence of their spiritual wisdom. Then I realized I had no women professors; and not one assigned reading in any course or

comprehensive exam list was by a woman author. Upon reflection I realized that it is no accident that until recently women have not been theologians. Barred from schools where theology was taught, and from priesthood with its office to teach, women were excluded because of our so-called feminine nature, which, men taught, was less rational, less strong, and less Christ-like than their own. The same thinking barred women from pastoral ministry.

Two events changed this picture, one in the church and one in civil society.

Church: One cannot underestimate the transforming effects of the Second Vatican Council. It retrieved the ancient but forgotten idea that the church is not just an institution but a holy community, the whole People of God, everyone together. While respecting the office of priest and bishop, it taught that there is a universal call to holiness for all the baptized, one and the same holiness given by the Holy Spirit, whether one is lay or ordained. It also taught that every baptized person shares in Christ's ministry of prophet, priest, and king - or in more contemporary language - speaker of the word of God, mediator of grace, and leader in the community. Consequently, it encouraged lay participation in ministry within the church and to the wider world.

To appreciate the startling quality of the Council's teaching, consider what had preceded it for centuries. Christianity took shape in a culture where elite men

held power over women, other men, children, and slaves. As the church grew and became more established, its leaders adopted this pattern, called *patriarchy*, for its own internal life. Patriarchy refers to a structure where power is always in the hands of dominant man or men. Let me be very clear that we are talking about a structural system here, a pattern of relationship that pre-determines the roles men and women play. Within this system, some men are humanly mature and spiritually advanced; they may be very respectful of women and even love them. This analysis does not critique men as individuals. But it names the system whereby the church organizes its members. And that structure, designed by men, places men and women in unequal roles. The church's sacred texts, symbols (especially image of God), doctrines, laws, rituals, and governing offices are all created and led by men, with women meant to listen and obey. It is no accident that in that framework major male thinkers defined women in derogatory terms, as second Eves who lead men into sin, according to Tertullian, or a "defective male," according to Thomas Aquinas, and on & on.

What a contrast was posed by conciliar teaching about the universal call to holiness coupled with the call of lay persons to active discipleship in ministry. It is pretty clear that when the bishops at the Council taught about the laity, they were thinking mainly of men, not women. But we were there, listening and ready to step

up.

Society: Meanwhile, something was also happening in society. The twentieth century saw rise of the women's movement which swiftly became a matter of global urgency. What made it start at this time? Education that increased female literacy; medical technology that allowed women control of their own fertility; access to the workplace that allowed women a measure of economic independence; and the growth of other liberation movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that sought dignity for different oppressed groups. Women took the lead in consciousness-raising about their own situation, lifting up their voices to have their equality as citizens written into law. Women of color, of diverse racial and ethnic identity, of different sexual orientation, of poorer economic status, of colonized nations, insisted that in addition to gender, all aspects of women's concrete lives must be accorded respect.

Place this development against what preceded. According to UN statistics: women who form  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the world's population, work  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the world's working hours, receive  $\frac{1}{10}$  of the world's salary, own  $\frac{1}{100}$  of the world's land, form  $\frac{2}{3}$  of illiterate adults, and with their dependent children form  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the world's starving people. To make a bleak picture worse, women are harassed, raped, battered at home, prostituted, trafficked into sexual slavery, and murdered by men

to a degree that is not reciprocal. This is not to make women into a class of victims nor to deny women's agency, both sinful and graced, which is abundant. But it is to underscore statistics that make clear the inequity women face in society because of their gender. In no country on earth are women and men yet equal.

Catholic women found that undergirding their engagement in this movement was another teaching of the Council on the dignity of **all** human persons. Hear one powerful text from *Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World 29)*, which declares that while people do differ in their physical and intellectual abilities, “Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent.” *Contrary to God's intent* means sinful; discrimination based on sex is a sin. In ethical terms the movement for women's equality in society is a call to conversion and a drive for social justice on a global scale.

You cannot understand the significance of women in ministry today without watching how in the 1960's these two rivers, the church reforms started by the Second Vatican Council and the women's movement in civil society, joined to form a torrent that changed the landscape of thought and practice. Women analyzed the bias against their humanity that plagued religious and civil traditions,

and rejected it. Reclaiming the goodness of being female, they experienced that being a woman is a blessing, not a defect. A spiritual reformation took place in women's psyches. Silent and invisible for centuries, they started speaking out, and struggling to take their rightful place. Today every woman who chooses to commit herself to ministry is participating in an historic moment; her personal decision is growing the church and society toward a more graced future.

## **II. Baptismal identity**

If such be the historic, external forces that have created opportunities for women in ministry, what is the internal reality, source of the call to which women are responding so generously? Spiritualities differ and each woman has a different story to tell. But theologically, there is one common empowering source, namely, the Holy Spirit of God. This is the same Spirit present throughout all creation empowering nature's evolution; the same Spirit present to peoples of all religious persuasions or none, empowering good lives lived according to their conscience; the same Spirit present like a tiny flame that cannot be snuffed out even in the midst of horrific sinful situations. In baptism, the rite of Christian initiation, this same Holy Spirit forges a personal relationship between the baptized and Jesus Christ that makes them one with his spirit and part of his ongoing body in history, the church. The liturgical theologian Aidan Kavanagh points out that sealed with

the Spirit as members of the community, the baptized are constituted *Christos*, a Christ in the fullest post-paschal sense. All are then called to share in Jesus' way of loving, his life and mission, thereby making Christ present in the world today. It is a truism that baptism does not discriminate. The way it is administered and its effects are the same for all. Consider what this means for the religious identity of women.

The earliest interpretations of Christian baptism are found in the New Testament letters of Paul. He and others were trying to figure out how not to keep Jesus locked away in his own historical period, or how not to confine him to the glory of heaven, but to understand how his saving presence was alive and active in the world. As Paul saw it, the Holy Spirit of God accomplished this through baptism, which made persons participate in Jesus' life in an ongoing way. To the community in Rome, he wrote: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:3-5). Driving the point home, this letter teaches that by sharing in this pivotal event, we become "conformed to his image" (Rom 8:29). The original Greek of this phrase is instructive: baptism makes us *sym-morphos* to the *eikon*, that is, sharing the form of the

likeness, or being configured to the image. The baptized become christomorphic, in other words, other Christs. The effect on the community is startling. In a world riven by hierarchies of power based on gender, race, and economic class, belonging to Christ this way lays down a new principle of relationship. Writing to people in Galatia, Paul declared, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no more Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, but you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28). Early Christians sang this hymn as the newly baptized came up out of the water bath and were putting on white robes. Visually they could *see* that all were one in Christ. As Paul rephrased it for the people in Corinth, “For by the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit”<sup>1</sup>Cor 12:13. It is the same for women as for men.

The baptismal rite makes this clear. Female infants, young girls, adult women: all drip with water poured in the name of the Trinity; all are anointed with fragrant oil, seal of the Spirit’s grace; all are told by the church when they are robed with a white garment: “you have become a new creation and have clothed yourselves in Christ;” all receive the lighted candle, symbol of Christ risen and of their own vocation to be light in the world.

This sacrament consecrates a female human being profoundly to God. Her

whole being, body and soul, is blessed and made holy with God's own loving life. Created in the image and likeness of God to begin with, by baptism a woman is liberated from whatever evil and sin and demons held her bound, and is empowered to become a bearer of the presence of Christ in her world. This takes place as she joins the community of disciples following Jesus, sharing the mission of healing, redeeming, and liberating the world.

The Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx has made this evocative point: "the church is the only real reliquary of Jesus Christ in the world today." Take away the church, and it's not just the sacraments and the Christian scriptures that disappear, but the living witnesses who make Christ present in the world today. It is mainly through this witness, through committed believers, that other people encounter the Jesus Christ who preached mercy, healed and bound up wounds, created open table-sharing, criticized hypocrisy, and sought out those who were lost or abandoned. The poet Marge Piercy put it this way: "We must shine with hope, stained glass windows that shape light into icons, glow like lanterns borne before a procession. Who can bear hope back into the world but us." To bear Christ to the world is to en flesh the life of the one who celebrated life in all its fullness and exercised mercy even in the midst of his own dying. With their diverse gifts, baptized women are capable of doing this, without qualification.

I have been emphasizing the christic identity of baptized women at some length here first, to fathom the religious depth of their call to ministry. But also, to be honest about the fact that current ecclesial structures prevent women from full participation in the ministries of the church, and hence block them from living out their baptismal calling. Among the reasons given in the 1976 decree *Inter Insigniores* for why women could not be ordained to the priesthood, was the need for a “natural resemblance” between Christ and the priest who represents him. When the priest pronounces the words of consecration at the Eucharist, he acts *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ, “taking the role of Christ to the point of being his very image.” The faithful must be able to recognize this. “There would not be this ‘natural resemblance’ which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man” (#5). Focused on Jesus’ masculine gender to the exclusion of his race, age, and other human characteristics, and more importantly, focused on his biology to the exclusion of the Spirit of the risen Christ, this is a terrible teaching. Its logic takes the theological identity of the baptized person as image of Christ in the world and reduces it to physical similarity to a male body. Such naive physicalism stands in stark contradiction to scripture, theology, and the liturgy of the sacrament of

baptism. Let us be clear: bearing the image of Christ lies not in sexual similarity to the human man Jesus but in coherence with the narrative shape of his compassionate, liberating life in the world, through the power of the Spirit. It does not mean looking like Jesus, but participating in his way of loving. Hence, the image of Christ is enfleshed in all embodied women who tell the story of Jesus with their own lives, women in ministry being a prime case in point.

Sandra Schneiders has mused that in the present situation of exclusion it is not surprising that women, as a group, have had far less difficulty practicing their ministries as service rather than as exercises of power-over. As a corollary, they have also been quicker to respond to new needs, identifying with those who suffer and promoting social justice in unconventional ways. Without denying the need for change, it turns out that at this moment, because their ministries have been undervalued and denied their rightful place in the society of the church, women in ministry are singularly well equipped to make present the great pastoral minister Jesus, who was himself not a priest but a lay person persecuted and disowned by the religious authorities of his day; a layperson who found in his solidarity with the poor the basis for a ministry of personal service and creative kindness that was singularly revelatory of the true God.

And so, in our day, baptized and anointed by the Spirit, women in ministry

move forward spending their “one wild and precious life” bringing about the reign of God, in gospel terms, or in other words making present the infinite love of the living God who is beyond imagining. At this time they do not have the authority of church office, but they do have the authority of their baptism, with their deep experience of God’s call in the relationships of their lives and the circumstances of need that surround them. Together, women in ministry are creating new facts on the ground. It is a challenging and exciting time, captured by the prophet Isaiah in an oracle where God speaks: “Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” (Isa 43:19)

### **III. On the road with biblical women**

Having looked at two major historical factors that opened the door to women in ministry (past), and considered theology that undergirds it (present), let us turn attention to the future. The reality of women in ministry is a work in progress. There is no crystal ball that reveals how it will develop. Along with amazing breakthroughs and ways carved out in the wilderness, there are also dead-ends; rather than rivers in the desert, just drought. Discouragement, which is part of every life, can become severe. Ways forward are found in multiple ways: deep, contemplative prayer; mutual support groups; humor (often ironic) that lets off

anger and sparks resistance; and so on. Add to these strengths one more: the stories of biblical women. You might be thinking that these people, too, belong to the past. But remembering them can be a dangerous spur to hope.

The German theologian Johannes Baptist Metz has developed the engaging idea of the dangerous memory. Not all, but some memories have the seed of the future in them. They break through into the present with the news that something more is possible. In times of satisfied complacency, the memory of suffering shocks us into awareness of the unfinished agenda of the victims. In times of despair, the memory of past freedoms or little breakthroughs stirs resistance and fires up hope. Metz situates the dangerous memory of the passion of Jesus in this dynamic; the memory of his unjust death spurs believers to solidarity with other victims of crosses set up in history, just as the memory of his resurrection galvanizes disruptive hope in the face of death. Memories can be dangerous, because they unsettle the present order.

Remembering women of the New Testament has this effect. Let us summon up the women disciples who followed Jesus during his ministry. To cite Luke: “Afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women.” Luke gives their names as Mary Magdalene, Joanna wife of Herod’s

steward, Suzanna, “and many others.” Being women of means, some of them bankrolled his ministry. Having followed Jesus throughout Galilee, they accompanied him up to Jerusalem. As his terrible death unfolded and the men went into hiding, they were there, standing by the cross, as attested in all four gospels. They accompanied his body to the tomb, and so knew where to go to complete the funeral anointing at dawn on Sunday. First to encounter the risen Christ, by his choice (!), they received from him the apostolic mandate to “go and tell” the others, which they did, even in the face of ridicule and disbelief. It was the women who stayed; their witness is the bedrock of the early church’s knowledge of the paschal mystery.

At Pentecost they received the fire of the Spirit, being there in the upper room; and then functioned in the early church as apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, preachers, deacons, missionaries, and leaders of house churches. A good example can be found in the last chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans where he greets outstanding people in the community there. Among the women he salutes are Phoebe, a deacon, who has done good for many; Prisca, who risked her neck for Paul’s life, whose work deserved thanks from the churches of the Gentiles, and who with her husband led “the church in their house;” Junia the apostle, a fellow-prisoner with Paul; Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis who “worked hard” in

the Lord (a code for apostolic work), and others. The leadership of the early church in Rome was shared by women and men. To put it simply, women participated in founding the church.

One apocryphal gospel, not in the New Testament but receiving attention from biblical scholars today, is the Gospel of Mary (as in Magdalene). In this book, Mary has seen the risen Lord, who has conveyed deep understanding to her. She tries to share this with the men apostles, who are terrified and discouraged. She teaches them assiduously until Peter interrupts in anger, asking, “Did he really speak privately with a woman and not openly to us? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?” Troubled at his disparagement of her witness and her relationship to Christ, Mary responds, “My brother Peter, what do you think? Do you think that I thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?” At this point Levi breaks in to mediate the dispute: “Peter, you have always been hot-tempered. Now I see you contending against this woman as if you were Satan himself. But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you, indeed, to reject her? Surely the Lord knew her very well. And he loved her more than us.” The result of this intervention is that the others agree to accept Mary Magdalene’s teaching and, encouraged by her words, they go out to preach.

No scholar thinks this ever really happened. But the book was written in the

second century when the struggle over women's leadership in ministry was raging. As feminist scholars explain, the writer used the figure of Mary Magdalene as a symbol for women's leadership in ministry which men leaders, symbolized by Peter, were trying to suppress. The argument persisted into the third and fourth centuries. As we know, Peter won that round. But we know, too, that church structures developed historically and came about by human decisions in particular political situations. History is not over, and new decisions are possible, more in line with the gospels and Christian origins. Regarding women in ministry, the dangerous memory of New Testament women acts as a spur to both critique and hope. The poet Irene Zimmerman caught this in a work entitled "On the Way to Easter." Summoning up Mary Magdalen, Joanna, Salome, and others on their way to the tomb, she converses with them this way:

Bible in hand, I slip behind a wall of time

to walk with the women on their way to the tomb.

"Are you afraid?" I ask, panting to keep up with them -

strong from three years of walking.

"Of course," they answer, "but his body must be anointed!" They keep walking.

"There's no one to roll away the stone," I object.

Are they courageous, or just naive?

“There’s no one else to anoint him,” they counter firmly, and keep walking.

Ahead I see sunlight glinting off Roman steel.

“There’s no one to protect you!” I protest.

They nod and keep walking, their jars balanced and full. (Courageous, I decide).

“Godspeed, then,” I say, as I shift my life on my shoulders

and retreat to my safe, familiar world.

But the road on which I find myself is crowded with people

in need of every kind of anointing.

“Godspeed,” I hear the women call across the wall of centuries

as I start walking.

~ ~ ~

In this very troubled world, the church (the community of disciples) is called to live out the good news of the love of God made known through Jesus in the Spirit, with an eye to those most in need of anointing. At the same time, women are pressing forward with the hunger for equality befitting their human and baptismal dignity, a claim being resisted by the patriarchal culture in which the church is sedimented. To say that these are perilous times is an understatement. But the tensions of the present moment are filled with possibility. Multitudes of women are

picking up their jars and giving their “one wild and precious life” to creative and compassionate service in ministry. Thanks to them, and to the men who stand with them, there is reason for hope. The Spirit of God is clearly at work in the church and the world. And She will not be quenched. Godspeed.

Thank you!