

*Sr. Joan Mitchell, CSJ, is a St. Kate's alumna and a member of the Board of Trustees of the university. A founding editor of Good Ground Press, Sr. Joan now blogs and edits Sunday by Sunday and Spirit for Teens, weekly faith sharing magazines.*

## **All Women Can Be: The Spirit of the Sisters of St. Joseph**

*Joan Mitchell, CSJ*

I feel a personal passion for St. Catherine's because I found my life here in my undergraduate years 1958–1962. My four years were a journey of empowerment. I came undereducated and afraid; I left able to write, think, and perform. I also found a community of women, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, with whom to invest my life in service.

Empowering is what Sisters of St. Joseph have been about from their beginning in 1650. Pre-revolutionary France had terrible social and economic inequalities. With wealth concentrated in the church and nobility the country suffered much the same chronic problems as Third World countries today. The desperate needs of the people at the bottom gave birth to *apostolic* orders, whose cloisters became the streets, whose prayer became the works of mercy.

Among their ministries the first sisters helped young women forced to support themselves through prostitution to learn lacemaking and become self-supporting. Many marriageable young men had gone to the New World, leaving many young women without the possibility of marriage. The sisters gave these women at the bottom of society a stepping stone to their own place in its economic life beyond the social norm of their day.

The College of St. Catherine has educated and empowered most of the present members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the St. Paul Province. Most sisters attended St. Catherine as beleaguered teachers coming on Saturday mornings or during the hot days of summer sessions, to finish degrees on the twenty-year plan. Many attended in the days before the Second Vatican Council, when we were forbidden to talk to the other students and cut off from the community life of the college. Many sisters have returned to St. Catherine's to do graduate work, for example, in the Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership, theology, and spirituality, and their work has nurtured the community.

However, norms for women also affected us. Our community educated many women to the doctoral level but never in medicine, nor did we train our own women in advanced theology degrees until after Vatican II. Sister Rosalie Ryan led that small revolution toward the college theology department of today. In her research and writing she is one of the pioneering women bible scholars who have recovered the importance of women among Jesus's disciples, those women who follow and serve him and are with him from the beginning in Galilee but whose presence was lost to us in the scant two and three verses the gospel gives to their presence.

The Sisters of St. Joseph College Consortium, which has twelve member colleges, funded a study of their mission and image, surveying 480 people, twenty-five on this campus, four of them sisters. Sister Karen Kennelly, formerly academic dean on the St. Paul Campus and now president of Mount St. Mary's in Los Angeles, chairs this consortium. Their study reports five distinctive characteristics of these colleges, which include St. Catherine:

- 1) Hospitality and caring community
- 2) Concern for all without distinction
- 3) Addressing the needs of the time
- 4) Striving for excellence in all endeavors
- 5) Making a difference in local and world community

These same characteristics reach back to our beginnings as a community. Our houses were to be hubs of hospitality, caring, and outreach to our neighbors. The first foundation of the Sisters of St. Joseph was a secret society. It lasted only two years. This was a small group of pious women who wanted to help others. The Jesuit Father Medaille, who articulated the spirituality of these women, describes the community as a "little design," called by the name of St. Joseph, a model of hidden service, like the self-emptying humility of Jesus hidden in the tabernacle among the people. What lasted of this first foundation is its identity with Joseph, of whom little is known but his care for Mary and Jesus. From this name we take an ethic of *charity to the dear neighbor without distinction*.

To address the needs of the time was why the community of St. Joseph began anew in 1650 in LePuy, France, with the support of Bishop de Mau-pas, in a hospital. The first sisters formed a hub from which the spokes of the wheel of ministry went out. Our first constitutions directed the sisters to "divide the city into various sections, and either by visiting the sick personally or through the lay associates of the congregation . . . make every effort to learn what disorders prevail in each quarter so that they may remedy them either by their own efforts or by the intermediary of those who have some power over the person engaged in these disorders."

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Striving for excellence is an ethic at the heart of St. Catherine. Seventeenth-century piety used the word *zeal* and the concept of *the more* to express this value that we know so well from the history of the St. Paul campus where Mother Antonia sent six young sisters to study in European universities. They became the living endowment of the college's early years. We know this quality well, too, from the history of the Minneapolis campus where the faculty practically had to teach in the stairwells as second and third year nursing students contended for space with the first class of the junior college Sister Ann Joachim founded.

The *more* is an ethic of liberation that envisioned the sisters being all women could be and envisioned people at the bottom of society empowered to be all they could be. At our general chapter as a congregation in 1993 we asked ourselves again, "What more is being asked of us now in our commitment to justice?" You see the clear common roots of the two campuses in these characteristics:

- Hospitality and caring
- Concern for the dear neighbor without distinction
- Addressing the needs of the time
- Striving for excellence

They add up to making a difference.

Sometimes when I hear people talk about *the sisters*, I sense they are not talking about me or sisters today but about women farther back, perhaps those who founded St. Catherine's or those who formed the academic community in the past. I share reverence for these sisters, but I suspect they seem wise and foresighted rather than dangerous and single-minded because they are safely dead. We laud Mother Antonia today but would we have sided with her when she put up Mendel Hall to stop Prior from going through the St. Paul Campus? Where beyond the status quo would her passion for excellence and education for women lead her today? Perhaps where it has led our 1989 general chapter, which declared, "We support the exercise of the gifts of all the baptized for ministry." And what more? Conflict, conversation, argument—these are creative processes.

George Arbuckle, a cultural anthropologist, Marist priest, and New Zealander, says the Catholic Church missed the modern era. At the Council of Trent, which met twenty-five times between 1546 and 1563, the Church responded to the Protestant Reformation by effectively freezing itself in a medieval time warp that lasted until the Second Vatican Council 402 years later.

In the Church's fixed self-understanding prior to Vatican II, sisters' permanent vowed commitment gave them a special, privileged place in the

structure of the Church, lower than the clergy but higher than the faithful laity. The Second Vatican Council radically flattened these hierarchical gradations by stressing the common call to holiness all Christians share, none more than others, by reason of the baptism.

Thirty years ago we sisters lived our higher spiritual vocation by being set apart from lay people. Today we are part of the ordinary life of the human community rather than apart from it. We understand ourselves not only as a community of vowed members but a vast inclusive network of relationships with colleagues in ministry, former members, families, and friends. We share life, prayer, ministry, and companionship with consociates who link themselves with us through interest and shared charism rather than vows.

There are positives in missing the modern era. Catholic consciousness remains very shaped by the communal experience that antedates the Enlightenment focus on individual subjectivity. Books such as *Habits of the Heart* call for churches to become the glue of fragmented postmodern society. Catholic tradition and sisters' experience in creating community together have something to offer the civic community toward this need, not in going backward to a community that buries the individual but forward to communities of mutuality and interdependence. In fact, in Latin America a base-community movement has arisen reinventing Christian community at the grassroots level. This movement is spreading here in the U.S., too.

The Second Vatican Council called Christians to serve the poor and make a difference in this world. "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or are in any way afflicted, those too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ," it said (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, #1). Our ministries as a community have radically broadened in response to this call. Our history in this century had been one of participating in the building of the Catholic school system in this country and the Catholic health care system. Things were gained in this national endeavor—immigrant Catholics were educated and assimilated into the American culture. This era also made us semi-cloistered in our convents and limited to staffing schools and hospitals. Since Vatican II we have rediscovered we are an order founded to serve on the streets and form partnerships with lay people. We were founded to "divide the city in various sections."

At first, this emphasis strained relations between people who moved out of their classroom to give direct service to the poor and those who stayed in institutions such as the college. Now, thirty years later, we see very clearly the importance of higher education in people's journey out of poverty, welfare, and hunger. I'll bet anyone who heard the student from

the Minneapolis campus with the six children and the disabled husband who spoke one year at our Student/Board of Trustees Dialog still remembers her and the difference her education was making for all of them. I remember Anita Pampusch remarking at the tenth anniversary of Weekend College that those who established educational policies in large corporations probably did not have in mind educating the numbers of women in secretarial work who took advantage of these programs to earn bachelors' degrees.

The Sisters of St. Joseph have profoundly changed in the last thirty years and we want you to know who we are today. We continue to have sisters on the college faculty and staff, but fewer than in the past. In the past thirty years sisters have developed new ministries that offer sites for volunteer work, internships, and mentoring programs. Sisters are actively involved with Peace House, where Rose Tillemans welcomes and shares lunch and prayer with street people in a community of respect right next to the Dairy Queen near Franklin and Portland. Down Portland is St. Joseph House, which Char Madigan helped start and so many keep going as a place that welcomes battered women and nurtures clients as staff members. HOPE, Homes on Portland Enterprises, has refurbished former crack houses on the same block. At Incarnation House sisters helped found and staff this place for women with young children; at Ascension Place, women are struggling out of addictions. Sisters are teaching in literacy programs in the Frogtown area and at the Administration Center and Carondelet Center next door. In these new ministries as in our earliest ministries we partner with lay people.

Few people in the Church have changed more than sisters as a group. We were readied to respond to the needs of the time by good educations. We have roared through modern consciousness into the postmodern. Today we pursue our own talents and gifts in ministry rather than getting educated to fill a waiting position. Today we are working out new forms of governance that build vision from the bottom up by hearing into words all our voices.

The Second Vatican Council was part of the social change and challenge of the 1960's that also revived the women's movement. This movement began in the last century among Quaker and Unitarian women who joined the cause for abolition and moved on to women's suffrage. In the last twenty years Catholic women have taken their place in the movement, especially in the theological fields.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has put feminist methodologies to work retrieving the importance of women in the bible, theorizing that the first Christian communities formed a discipleship of equals and aiming to make the scriptures no longer tablets of stone but bread to nourish women and men today.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, pioneer Catholic woman historian, god-mothers younger feminists. She insists women rape victims in her classes can relate to Jesus because of his experience of violence. He is Christ and Christa. Mary Daly's prodigious research chronicles violence to women in many cultures and creates new language for women's experience. Elizabeth Johnson is a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood and professor at Fordham who suggests, in her book *She Who Is* that we no longer neglect the feminine imagery of God as Spirit and recognize the imminent presence of God as Spirit cogiven with all life. Hispanic sisters have formed Las Hermanas to further the struggle for liberation among Hispanic women. The Black Sisters Conference has contributed its own voices—Toinette Eugene, Jamie Phelps, Thea Bowman.

Catholic women and men stand at a threshold today. People ask sisters, "How can you stay in the Catholic Church? It's so patriarchal. How can you let the pope tell you what to do?" How can one care about educating men and women for interdependency and community and stay in the church? I should point out that these are not only women's questions. St. Catherine honored Bishop Raymond Lucker for his support of women during the debates about the women's pastoral.

At the last board retreat I attended we had to draw an image of St. Catherine. I found myself drawing the stacks of books in the library and beside them the big doors of the chapel. I drew the shelves open but put a lock on the chapel. How does a Catholic college educate women to be all they can be when the church does not welcome their gifts for ministry?

Withdrawing from the church is the easiest answer. It's the answer of preference among Catholics in their twenties. It's not mine. It's not a lot of people's. As a Sister of St. Joseph I am a publicly committed woman of the church. I say, "We are the Church. This is our home. We won't be put out." More than that, women have always belonged here. Scripture gives us evidence of women disciples, apostles, deacons, prophets. Church history tells us Hilda of Whitby and Brigid of Ireland were abbesses of double monasteries of men and women. Shawn Madigan's research identifies women mystics in every age.

What do the Sisters of St. Joseph ask and offer this college toward the future? We are here today asking for dialog. We have to offer our struggle to change since Vatican II and a long history as an alternative Christian community within the Church. Feminist and other liberation theologies locate authority in the voices of the oppressed struggling for justice. These liberation theologies call us to speak the truth of our experience and to make room for others through listening them into speech.

A cultural anthropologist looks at the current movement to restore the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church and says that it's surprising the backlash

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isn't worse because the social upheaval and chaos have been so profound. This is the restoration church. On the other side, another kind of church is taking form in small Christian communities of lay men and women who break open the word together, do justice together, seek equality together. This is the emergent church.

The restoration church says the conversation is over. The emergent church says we must begin a conversation that includes everyone and invites all to speak for themselves as their most fundamental act of being human. We are asking for dialog and engagement in improvising a useful future.

Pope John Paul II's statement on Catholic education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, has renewed conversation about what Catholic means in the missions of institutions of higher learning. In *America*, for May 28, 1994, Father Joseph Feeney of St. Joseph University in Philadelphia asks familiar questions: "While Jesuit colleges do and should welcome students of all faiths and no faith, has a diverse student body clouded institutional vision? How is Jesuit education defined? As liberal-arts based? Humanistic? Christian humanistic? Faith and justice based? How to link campus ministry and classroom? How to cherish diversity and build community?"

The Sisters of St. Joseph who came to the United States in 1836 from France to New Orleans, up the Mississippi to St. Louis, to the town of Carondelet just south of St. Louis, came to do what had to be done in the New World. In 1851 sisters came upstream to St. Paul to teach Indians, but they wound up founding the first hospital in the state, St. Joseph's, because a cholera epidemic demanded their school become a hospital. They improvised a useful future.

Sister Rita Steinhagen is a legend among the sisters for all she has initiated as a result of Father Harry Bury taking her to the streets of Cedar Riverside, where she began hearing people's needs and started a Free Store, the West Bank Clinic, the Bridge for runaway kids, and with Char Madigan St. Joseph House for Battered Women. Rita and Char taught us to listen to the needs of the dear neighbor without distinction as the confraternities of mercy had done in France in the beginning.

At our last all-community gathering Sister Marian Louwaige brought to the eucharistic table a piece of Belgian lace. She saw in its airy pattern a symbol of room for all in the design of the community and its future. Sister Sharon Howell brought to the altar a piece of kinte cloth, a tightly woven African cloth. She saw in the weave a symbol of the solidarity in which we must stand together. What we really ask of you is to continue the lacemaking with us, to weave a future that continues to reintegrate those who have least with those who have most, that makes of the

**14 All Women Can Be: The Spirit of the Sisters of St. Joseph**

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threads of our lives a pattern of grace that is both open to all and tight enough not to come undone, or fray, but last as an intricacy where sisters cared and joined hands with lasting friends in entwining circles of learning and care, love and service.