

THE STRENGTH OF WOMEN'S FAITH

Reflections Offered During WUCWO Executive Board Meeting July 24, 2013

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During the Executive Board Meeting of WUCWO on July 24th I offered the following reflections to open our meeting. I remarked on the fact that for the two previous days the Church had been celebrating women saints. I shared that what struck me about both each of these saints is that they witness to the fact that, often, the faith of women is stronger than that of men. I suggested two points for reflection here for WUCWO members: first, not to take this for granted, but to work on building up our faith through a life of prayer and loving action; second, to recognize that the Church and society needs the testimony of women and that WUCWO has a mission of particular importance here.

St. Bridget of Sweden, July 23

The following is the official comment of the Weekday Missal on St. Bridget of Sweden:

Born in Sweden in 1303, married in 1316, and was a member of the high Swedish society. She had eight children. She and her husband lived devout lives. After her husband's death in 1344 she lived with even greater asceticism; she received revelations and appealed to the kings of Europe and the Pope for peace and the restoration of the papacy to Rome. She journeyed to Rome for the Holy Year in 1350, and lived there for the rest of her life in poverty. She asked the pope to approve the foundation of a religious community (now known as the Bridgetines), this was not approved until after her death, in 1370. In 1999, Pope John Paul II named St. Bridget one of the six patron saints of Europe.

In praising St. Bridget, Pope John Paul II was quite clear that the 1300's were embarrassing times for the Church and for the papacy. It was a century of war, plague, and social collapse in Europe. The Church was not immune from the social problems that surrounded it and showed numerous signs of corruption. One of these was the fact that many Popes at this time seemed to be more like politicians than men of God. This expressed itself in the decisions by a number of them—over a period of seventy years—to cease living in Rome and to live instead in the most powerful of kingdom of the time: France. Pope John Paul II stressed that during that century it was often only holy women (St. Catherine of Sienna was another one) who were able to put moral pressure on both kings and popes to return to the ways of God. I might add, on a personal note, that any of us priests who have worked in parishes (as I did in Nairobi 2000-2006) are constant witnesses to how it is often the wives and mothers of the area who are the backbone of pastoral activities.

St. Mary Magdalene

July 22 is the memorial of St. Mary Magdalene. The Weekday Missal has the following to say:

Mark 16:9 tells us that Mary was the first to whom the Risen Christ appeared. She was one of his disciples, accompanied him on his journeys through the villages preaching (Luke 8:3), and stood by the cross.

An important preliminary note about Mary Magdalene is that she is not to be confused with “the woman of ill repute” of Lk. 7:36-50. This confusion was taken up in Church in later centuries but is not true to the scriptures (unfortunately this theme becomes exaggerated in the film “The de Vinci Code”). Next, we can note that from the apostles onwards through the centuries, men have been astonished that the risen Christ should have chosen to appear to women first. This certainly went against social norms of the time—and for centuries afterwards—where men took first place in everything. Why did Jesus choose to do this? We can only guess at Jesus’ reasons, and a series come to my mind. First, Jesus regularly upset social conventions with his actions: preaching to the poor before the rich, healing on the Sabbath etc. He did this to show that God’s ways are not man’s ways and that in the Kingdom of God those who are excluded by man will often have a place that is more important than others.

Secondly, and perhaps this is my main point it would seem that women often have a stronger faith than men, and that it was in this context that Jesus to reveal himself first to these. We can remember, for example, that it was women who remained most faithful to Jesus during the crucifixion. Also in St. Luke’s Gospel (Lk. 20:1-2, 11-18) we note that it was the simple—womanly and affectionate—faith of Mary that drew her to arrive at the tomb of Jesus on the Sunday morning simply to grieve for him. In a sense then, it is natural for Jesus to appear first to such a faithful servant. However, we can also deepen this point. We can note that in most of resurrection appearances the disciples do not recognize Jesus immediately. This suggests that in his risen form, while fully human, he is somewhat different from the form he took during his earthly life. What most of the resurrection appearances have in common is that Jesus engages in dialogue with individuals and reminds them of the faith they had in him before the crucifixion. It is then, on the basis of this faith, that the disciples are able to recognize the risen Jesus. However, it seems that persuading the disciples in this manner was harder work for Jesus with the men than with the women! Look how long it took for Jesus to help the two disciples on the way to Emmaus to recognize him (Lk, 24: 13-35). And here we note that a personal and emotional encounter had to be delayed until after a long and intellectual discussion of the meaning of the scriptures. And then there is doubting Thomas! (Jn 20: 24-29).¹ By contrast, for many centuries the Church has recognized the simple beauty of the resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene as described in John’s Gospel:

¹ We can note an exception to this rule in St. John, the beloved disciple, who “saw and believed” [Jn 20:9], but then, later commentators would speak of him having a mystical and “feminine” spirit.

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said, "Sir if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him." Jesus said, "Mary!" She knew him then and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabuni!" which means Master (Jn 20:1-2, 11-18).

It seems that what we witness in Mary is that it is enough for a woman to hear her name pronounced by the man she loves for full recognition to occur. This insight was expressed by Pope Saint Gregory the Great in the sixth century:

First of all he called her by the title common to all her sex ("woman"), and she did not recognize him. So now he calls her by her own name, as if to say plainly: "Now recognize the one who recognizes you. For I know you, not in some general way along with other people but personally." Addressed by her own name, Mary recognizes her maker and straight away calls him "Rabboni", that is "Teacher". Outwardly it was he who was the object of her search, but inwardly it was he who was teaching her to search for him (Pope Gregory the Great, Office of Readings for feast of St. Mary Magdalene).

We can note an implication here that even for women possessing a lively faith is not to be taken for granted. It must be worked at by a life of "searching" and inward journeying, a life that insists on including prayer as well as consistent loving action.

WUCWO and Women Saints

In the examples of both St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Mary Magdalen we witness something of the special charism of women in the Church and in society: women can enjoy an affectionate and immediate relationship with the Lord that is sometimes harder for men to attain. Pope John Paul II never tired of speaking about the complementary gifts of both men and women and how these need to find full expression in both society and in the Church. Certainly this complementarity includes the role of women in the "domestic Church" as wives and mothers. However, the Pope's elevating St. Bridget to the role of Patroness of Europe emphasized the role she played in the public life of Church and state during her lifetime. He suggests that public life today is profoundly in need of the "genius of women" to find a balance that is expressive of the Kingdom of God in our culture and our society. Finally, we can recall that WUCWO, as a "public international association of the lay faithful," has a formalized position of importance within the Catholic Church and members should feel confident to make sure its voice is heard!