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Towards the liberation of men

by Nicole Sotelo

During this week in 1848, five women in Seneca Falls, N.Y., decided to call a convention "to discuss the social, civil and religious condition and rights of women." Days later on July 19 and 20, approximately 300 people gathered at a Methodist church having seen a small notice announcing the gathering in regional newspapers. It does not surprise me that these early feminists already recognized the need for women's religious equality. What does strike me is that at this women's rights event, 40 of the gathered supporters were men.

Also notable is that it was a man, not a woman, who persuaded the convention participants to keep the resolution for women's suffrage as part of the concluding declaration. That man was Frederick Douglass. Douglass, known for working across causes, knew that women's struggle for suffrage and liberation was linked with his own.

I wish the Catholic clergy of our day could understand that, as well.

Much has been said in recent months about the inequities between men and women in the church. Columnists in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and other media outlets have pondered whether greater women's leadership in the church would have prompted fewer sexual abuse cases and a better response. I think it would have, but not because women are essentially better. That is a false and dangerous notion. Rather, it is because women and men bring variegated gifts and that diversity actually promotes a better functioning and better performing organization.

In fact, research shows that shared leadership is good for business. A 2008 study reported in the *McKinsey Quarterly*, a business journal, shows that companies with three or more women in high-level management score higher on organizational effectiveness. Additionally, more women in leadership have been shown to result in better organizational performance and higher operating margins.

But beyond increased profit margins or better management, gender justice is needed for women's -- and men's -- liberation. With only one gender building the kin-dom of God, we have only half the kin-dom. Or, as the Chinese proverb goes, "Women hold up half the sky." But one cannot forget that men hold up the other half. And both genders are crushed when one gender is unable to stand tall.

A case in point: Sophia Auld, a white woman, taught Frederick Douglass to read. Later, it was Frederick Douglass, a black man, who championed the right for Sophia and other women to vote. Similarly, it was Harry T. Burn, the young Tennessee legislator who sided with his mother and cast the winning vote to ratify the 19th Amendment that gave women the elective franchise. In turn, his constituents elected him for another term.

Our church and our world need the full contributions of both genders. The women and men who gathered at Seneca Falls knew this, too. The second to last resolution from the convention reads:

"? the speedy success of our cause depends upon the zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women, for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to women an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions, and commerce."

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the other women who drafted that resolution 162 years ago this month knew that the responsibility for the "overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit," and the entire community's liberation, rested not only in women's hands, but in men's, too.

It still does.

I would like to dedicate this column in honor of Bill Callahan, whose death we mourn this week. He worked with "zealous and untiring efforts" for gender justice in church and society so that both men and women would one day know true liberation.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates www.WomenHealing.com. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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