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Liberating nuns of India

Paul Wilkes | Jul. 9, 2010

Sisters gather for afternoon tea at the Institute Mater Dei in Old Goa, India. (Photos by Paul Wilkes)

OLD GOA, INDIA -- It was once a place where pious and obedient nuns came to escape the world, vowing that their silence would speak beyond any words they could utter.

Today, the convent of St. Monica is a hotbed of feminist theology and one of South Asia?s foremost centers of graduate education for religious women. The young sisters who attend classes here are encouraged -- even prodded -- to speak up forcefully and act boldly to not only to serve God?s people in their various ministries, but to redress India?s endemic male-dominated culture, both in secular society and the church itself.

The Institute Mater Dei, housed in St. Monica?s, a 450-year-old former Augustinian cloistered convent, is the bold statement by the women?s section of the Conference of Religious India that not only priests and brothers should undertake advanced studies in theology, philosophy and leadership, but that nuns, who outnumber male religious 4-to-1 in this nation, not only can but will forge a new role for women, both lay and religious.

And if Sr. Gretta D?Souza?s class studying the Gospel of St. John is any indication, this Ursuline Franciscan is speaking to a group of women ready and eager for a larger, more significant role in the Catholic church of India. The subject on this crystalline clear morning in tropical Goa, in a high vaulted classroom with 20-foot ceilings that was once a dormitory for sisters who willingly accepted their place in the church?s structure, is the familiar story of the Samaritan woman at the well.

?Why would Jesus choose a woman, this woman of a -- if you will -- a caste that Jews had nothing to do with? Why would he choose her to the bearer of the news of a Messiah to her community? Why would he talk high theology with a person who had no standing, no worth whatsoever??

D?Souza?s fist punctuates the end of each sentence, her eyes moving from student to student, asking not for an answer just yet, her voice subtly building in volume to heighten the moment. Her class of 32 sisters, their eyes fixed on her, have temporarily forsaken completing their neatly written thoughts in the notebooks before them.

?*Because* she was a woman. Because she was open. Because she was thirsty for more than water. Because she would go back to her Samaritan community and share with the other women that she had met -- no, she had

experienced -- someone the likes of whom she had never seen before. Because she would tell the man she was living with that Jesus knew he was not her husband, but that it didn?t matter that she, this dishonored woman with serial marriages and now no marriage, still had worth.?

Her class -- nuns of olive skin and Asian features from the far north of India, to those with the many-hued variations and features of east, west and south of this sprawling land of over a billion people -- is a mosaic of India. The students represent 26 communities of religious women, and if conversations with a good number of them during a recent two-day visit are at all representative, they are anything but the obeisant sisters of India?s past (See story [1]).

In their late 20s and 30s, these sisters who never knew a church before the Second Vatican Council are being formed to carry out the council?s mandate to bring the church into the world, and not to serve as handmaids to priests or ?decorators,? a role one religious leader in India warned them they must cast off. ?The Second Vatican Council challenged the religious to enter into a dialogue with the postmodern, globalized world,? the institute?s informational booklet reads. ?The radical interpretation of religious life demands from us entirely new and courageous initiatives.?

Theirs is not so much the rage that fired the women?s movement in the West, but a steely determination to not only stand with poor and oppressed women to redress the dominant role of men in the society, but also to break through the top-down governance they see in their own congregations, so that younger sisters will have a voice.

?Jesus is not only the Messiah, he is a very canny social worker,? D?Souza continues. ?He knows the woman is the heart of the family, the first educator of the young. He knows women talk,? she hesitates for emphasis, ?and talk about real things that matter.?

After a break for midmorning tea, D?Souza asks the class for examples of how this passage plays out in their ministries, and hands shoot up. ?We work to include everyone; when students from different castes come into our school, they tend to keep in their own group,? says one sister. ?We make them sit alphabetically and we do everything we can to force them to reach across caste lines.?

?We have centers for prostitutes and that is good, but it isn?t enough,? says another. ?We can?t wait for them to come to us. We have to be more active, to prevent them from taking up this life in the first place. So we sisters go right to the hotel managers. We go to the places where people exchange money, places where we can confront the men in charge to stop this practice. Yes, at first they tell us we are sisters, we are out of place. But we look at them straight on and say: ?This is our place, you don?t have to think anymore about it.? ?

This class on John?s Gospel is one of 35 in the yearlong theological curriculum for this year?s class of 63 sisters. Other courses range from eco-philosophy to the theology of social analysis.

There is also a yearlong curriculum for future formation directors, which has 31 sisters this year, taking such classes as ?Holistic Health: Mind, Body, Spirit and Personality Assessment.? Another curriculum in philosophy, with 17 sisters, has classes ranging from ?Hunger and Violence,? to the history of philosophy, ancient to the present.

But the excitement this term at Institute Mater Dei centers on the approval to begin a full three-year course in theology. The Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion, Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, in Pune, the degree-granting school under which Mater Dei functions, has acknowledged both the school?s excellent faculty -- some of India?s most accomplished religious academics -- as well as the need, making this the only advanced graduate school of theology for women in India.

?Also, there is a great gap in significant research and writing about women?s issues,? says Sr. Jyoti Fernandes,

an Ursuline Franciscan who is the director of the institute. ?We have a lot of practical knowledge, but with the founding of the Mater Dei Academy we will employ good scholarship, concentrating specifically on women, all aspects of their lives, culture and heritage. We will create an online journal so that we can quickly disseminate what we learn.?

A rich history

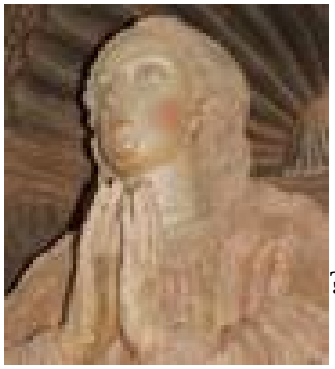
Mater Dei?s home here in the provincial capital of this former Portuguese colony is but a chapter in the rich history of this stunning building with its broad walls, high arches and flying buttresses. Ornately painted chapels and exquisitely carved wooden statuary are still radiant after four centuries. Resting high above the floor of its main church is what is considered a miraculous crucifix. In the 17th century, so it is told, the eyes of the crucified Christ were seen to open and shut, his mouth moved as if ready to speak, and blood was seen to flow from his wounds.

When the Portuguese arrived in the early 16th century to create trading routes and exploit the rich mineral

resources of this part of India, they were intent on not only bringing Christianity, but blotting out all traces of the Hindu religion, considered no more than pagan worship. All Hindu temples were destroyed and magnificent churches rose from the richly fertile soil. One is the magnificent Basilica of Bom Jesus, just down the hill from St. Monica. The basilica is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where relics of St. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit contemporary of St. Ignatius Loyola, are displayed.

Portuguese Augustinian nuns sailed to Goa to provide spiritual sustenance for the colony, to perpetuate a cloistered life of prayer, silence and bodily mortification. At one time, some 100 sisters -- and 100 laywomen who assisted with the household -- walked these hallways. With waves of the black plague and other epidemics, Old Goa was virtually abandoned as the capital in the later 17th century. St. Monica would remain empty for over two centuries until it was used as a Portuguese military barracks. Goa finally won independence from Portugal in 1962 and soon after St. Monica was returned to the church. Mater Dei held its first classes in 1964 and has since graduated some 4,900 sisters.

?Women?s ordination and all the hot-button issues of the West are not what we are focused on here, ? says D?Souza as we sit on a bench in the sun-drenched east arcade where sisters before her once walked in silence, their bare feet a cry to heaven to bring Christ?s message to the heathen people outside these walls.

 ?We simply want to bring women into their rightful place in the church, so that they return to their ministries not only with new knowledge, but with the self-confidence, the assurance that they are competent to speak out against injustice, in the society, in the church, even within their own congregations. Yes,? she smiles, ?sometimes it is even a case of women keeping other women down. They are afraid to challenge the way things have always been done.?

That is exactly what Fr. John Snehanand addresses in his ?Leadership in Formation? class for sisters who will be shaping the lives of young postulants in their various congregations. He is a priest of the Indian Mission Society. ?You will be speaking before groups and today, let us look at some of the blocks that you will face -- all of us face -- as we become leaders. What goes through our minds? ?I will fail. People will not like me if I tell them something they don?t want to hear. I will seem like I am going against the leadership. I may even seem to be going against the constitutions of my order. I am not up to this task.?

?Fear is paralyzing and it will keep you from truly becoming a leader of your sisters. What to do?? He pauses. ?Face it head on; that?s what to do.

?You see, we all want to be in control of every situation and when we begin to innovate, it is uncomfortable. But know this, as well as anything I will say: the less your self confidence, the less freedom you feel to proclaim Gospel values, the less love you will bring to your work.

?Did Jesus not express fear? Of course he did. And he proclaimed, ?The Lord is at my side.? That is scripture and it is so, but now,? he smiles slightly, ?let?s get some help from the psychological side.?

Snehanand quickly goes through a list of positive motivation prompts. ? ?People are not against me, they are for me.? When you prepare to give a talk, imagine people nodding their heads, applauding. Don?t use the language of powerlessness, like ?I can?t, it won?t.? Instead, say: ?I will, I can, I choose not to.?

?When you feel this power rising up within you, you will find you can do anything, anything.? Was it just imagination or did members of the class, already seated with perfect posture, rise up just a bit higher in their places?

Islam in context

Looking more like an imam than a Catholic priest, with silken vest and wearing a *taqiyah*, the traditional Muslim cap, Fr. G. Lazar begins this afternoon session on Islam by stating that everything he said in the morning on the status of women in the Quran was false. Given to frequent chuckles and even outright guffaws at his own idiosyncratic comments, Lazar, a Salvatorian, carefully weaves Middle Eastern history and even the Prophet Muhammad?s state of mind into his talk.

?In 4:34 of the Quran you see it quoted that man has authority over woman. Let us look at Muhammad when this is written. Here was one of his wives, Aisha, henpecking him at Mecca. He was responding to that. He had to put her in her place; she was driving him crazy. I have authority over you, that?s it.

?And here is his favorite wife, Hafsa, at the battle of Medina. His troops were wondering who was in charge, and the Quran reads male is not female, there is no equality, man is superior. Muhammad stakes his claim. He is superior; he is in charge, no one else. And then Hafsa was spending too much time talking to another man. So the prophet is jealous and he must declare that women must wear veils so no man but their husband will see them.?

He pauses. ?And Muhammad had 75 wives, why can?t I just have 15 or so? But my superiors say no, alas, I must go on with my life as it is.?

Lazar chuckles. The sisters smile kindly. The lecture goes on.

?Sisters, as with all the positive things I said this morning -- which of course are not untrue -- you have to take into account when the various parts of the Quran were written, what the conditions were, what the culture was like.

?The same today. In Egypt, Muslim women wear Western clothes. In Turkey, women may wear a burqa, but it is not mandatory. In Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, women are completely under the control of their husbands and must cover everything. In India, Muslim actresses wear what they want and in a village the women are in full purdah. So to say, ?This is Islam,? makes no sense.

?It is not only the religion -- in fact often it is not primarily the religion, it is the culture, anthropology of the people, their history, this is what makes Islam unique in each place.

?But here, here, my beloved sisters? -- Lazar?s face brightens still further -- ?you, and you and you? -- he points to random members of the class -- ?here is the most important point. Each of you has access to Muslim women and families in ways men will never have. They respect you. They will trust you, as woman to woman. That is our mission among the Muslims, to bring the women together, to let them talk, to listen to their problems, to offer whatever help you can.?

Classes over, and after pairing off for an hour of robust badminton, the sisters, their perspiring young faces flushed, gather for afternoon tea, exchanging comments on St. John, Muhammad, hermeneutics, and Sister Valsa?s deft backhand return.

Reflecting on the transformation of this year?s Mater Dei students, nuns in their late 20s and 30s who will be the future leaders of their congregations, Sr. Jyoti Pinto, superior of the Bethany Sisters, who has been active in Mater Dei?s development, offers this assessment: ?What I see are women who have become critical thinkers, for whom feminist theology is a sort of liberation theology. They will address the patriarchy both in the church and society. They are not tied to the past; they look to the future and they want things to change. Will it be easy for them? For some, they will meet resistance and they will go back to their original state.

?But for others, they will transform unjust structures with the inner freedom and courage that truth and conviction gives them. Knowledge is power. They are given both here.?

[Paul Wilkes is a freelance writer and author of In Due Season: A Catholic Life.]

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