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# A teacher and her students

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**Gretta D?Souza**

*Sr. Gretta D?Souza, an Ursuline Franciscan, is in her late 40s. She returns to Institute Mater Dei each year to teach a course on the Gospel of St. John. As she is teaching to young sisters, she specifically highlights passages that concern the plight of women.*

First of all, we women don?t want to be men and we want the future be better than our past where men have played the dominant role. When I am teaching this course, I am simply showing that Christ dignified the life of women, reached out to women to spread the word, talked to women, traveled with women. He gave dignity to women then that we must reclaim now.

We women of the church in India are not self-confident. We know the words that Christ spoke to women, but we haven?t yet taken them into our hearts and into action. Actually I think we are -- or can be -- more effective than men. We have access to women and children in their homes and schools, intimate access to their hearts and souls. Women are doers; we see that across all cultures.

I have often said women?s ordination is not the issue, the attitude of men is the issue and it must change. ?Sister, you shouldn?t worry about that,? we are told. This makes me angry, very angry. It?s as if we speak up, we are not for the church. Of course we are for the church; do you see the kind of young women who come to Mater Dei? Tell me they are not fired with the Gospel message. But it cannot be a Gospel message as only mandated by men, interpreted by men, legislated, controlled by men. That will no longer do; we will not take it anymore.

It is so interesting when what we do here comes up for discussion and the issue of women?s ordination often comes up with it, as if that is everything. One priest told me: ?Good sister, you will be ordained and I will be able to sleep later in the morning.? What does this say?

Our students will go out equipped to preach and teach a new way to women -- let me correct myself -- an old way, as this is the Gospel, that their place is not only stitching and cooking and keeping their heads down, but that they have dignity and worth in the eyes of God. Their husbands are not the Lord, the Lord is the Lord and he sets them free, He does not keep them fettered by our Indian traditions.

I firmly believe these sisters can be the role model for oppressed women. We already are oppressed women; we know this role very well. We are oppressed by our culture, the culture of our church and by ourselves. After all, who has made all these rules that keep women in their place? Men have fixed the rules, but we have countenanced them. So we say: I deserve to be treated this way. I am only a woman. The woman in the village who has been beaten by her husband will say this. And so a sister who is being held down from her full potential will say the same thing. We are defeating ourselves.

We religious women have been taught if I am proper, then I am good. But what is holiness, what is wholeness?

Is it only this? ?Be holy as your father is holy? says far more than that. Are we authentic and not just efficient? Can we show a compassion that then turns into an active mode to help the oppressed?

In women?s congregations, the tendency is always to go with the group; to dare to be different is considered a betrayal of our charisms. Some of us feel an inner tug between the constitutions of our orders and the inner person. We can look for inspiration to Jesus. How did he approach the Jewish culture and hierarchy of his day? Did he go along with that?

I make it no secret: I want to liberate women religious. For too long, the image of the ?good? sister has been the goody-goody, the holy-holy. The sister praying her rosary all day in the chapel -- but escaping the work of the community while people suffer is not my idea of holiness. It is a delicate balance, between properly understanding and living the vow of obedience and just being mindless. The freedom that I try to teach these young sisters is not the freedom to do anything they want to do. It is freedom to act on the demands of their conscience.

If women are held in bondage, I must speak out, regardless of how I am perceived. If my congregation is misusing my talents or the talents of others, I must speak out. It is very interesting. When the sisters first arrive, some are timid; they have been used to following orders. By the time they leave, they are ready to think for themselves.

**Valsa Thekkan**

*Sr. Valsa Thekkan is a member of the Franciscan Servants of Mary and a nurse at their hospital in Krishnagiri, Tamil Nadu. She is 40 years old and 20 years a nun. A tall, thin woman with a tentative smile that warms easily as she talks about her work and the impact of her Mater Dei experience, she mops her forehead after a badminton game.*

We do a lot of work with pregnant women, convincing them not to have an ultrasound just to find out the sex of their baby because we know that if it is found to be a girl, there is too great a likelihood of an abortion. There are signs in every ultrasound room that it is against the law for the technician or doctor to reveal the sex, but with a little bribe, it happens.

We tell women that a daughter is in no way less than a son, that you are a lady and that is a lady inside you. We let them know they are not alone, and regardless of any family support, we will accompany them, they can depend on us. If you need us to take the child, we will do it. If they are contemplating an abortion, I tell them of the aftereffects we have seen. Terrible infections, sepsis. Women having nightmares because they have murdered. I calmly tell them that their husband may not even know you have done this, but you will always know.

Although my time here at Mater Dei has nothing to do with medicine, it is a recharging for me. Sisters from 26 congregations, so many points of view, so many different works. I had never seen radical sisters or priests before I came, but this has opened my eyes.

I remember a talk by a Jesuit who used two sentences. ?I am only a woman? and ?I am a woman.? Just taking out one word completely changes my attitude. I look to Mary as a role model; when the others left the foot of the cross, she remained. She was unafraid.

Now I can go out with that same spirit. I will go the farthest villages where I do not have the cozy structure of the hospital or my community to support me. You never know what will happen; you are no longer safe. But that is where the Gospel is lived out. It is where liberation theology makes sense, not to back down when you are challenged or frightened, but to move ahead. My Jesus is not the plastic statue Jesus, my Jesus is the radical Jesus. He died for us -- yes, we hear that all the time -- but why did he have to die? Because he challenged the hierarchy. It is no different today when we threaten church structures or move into new areas. There may be resistance, but that does not mean we will stop.

**Shiji Abraham**

*Sr. Shiji Abraham is 28 and a Daughter of St. Paul, an order like the U.S. Paulists, who have social communication as their ministry. When other sisters volunteered answers about their work in D?Souza?s class, Abraham garnered a few snickers when she stated her work was not with the poor, but the middle class. She wore the mauve-colored sari of her order; there is a somewhat serious, no-nonsense look about her and she chooses her words carefully.*

Although mine was a religious family, I was actively discouraged from becoming a sister. Each time I would go home for a vacation, my father would try to persuade me not to return to the convent. When I silently agreed with him, I found I couldn?t sleep. Even though I was hurting my father I had to go back. He was heartbroken; I was the only girl.

I had this great love for Jesus in my heart; I had it from a very young age. I wanted to be of service to others and I saw a way with the Daughters of St. Paul. We produce videos and literature about the Catholic life, to help parents raise their children, to come closer to God. I must admit our materials are not right now widely viewed or read by Indian Catholics.

You see, there are many Indians now who are becoming richer and richer materially, but poorer and poorer spiritually. We have a Catholic bookstore and there I would listen to women who say they cannot communicate with their husbands or their children. They seem so lost, so poor, although they have everything they could ever want or need.

But before coming here, I have to admit mine was a very childlike faith. I didn?t really have the conviction of my beliefs. I simply accepted that every word in the Bible was true and that was enough. All I had to do was pray harder and everything would be all right.

I didn?t really feel that there was injustice done to women; that was just the way it was and would be. I didn?t see how they were oppressed. During my months here, I was shocked when I realized my own home was like

this; my own mother was oppressed by my father. He is the typical Indian man; his word is law. It is not that I love him any the less, but now I look at him in a different way.

I only thought I had to present the Catholic faith in the tradition of our founder, Blessed James Alberione, who in 1900 started the order to make use of not only the printing press but all inventions to come -- today we have television and radio and so many ways to reach people -- to counteract all the bad press about the church and teach people about the way of Christ.

I now have the tools to create better materials, to appeal to people today. I can help those sad women who come into the bookshop. I can tell them that the Red Sea may not have parted exactly as it is written in the Old Testament, but that there is a Jesus alive in their lives. As I listen to them, he listens to them. As a woman religious I am called to be a mother to all. It is a blessing. I have grown up.

And to be in the company of so many other sisters for this year. I could name great moments in scripture class, or when I had an insight, but what was wonderful, day after day, was to hear their peal of laughter. How healing and encouraging that is, as we worked to help each other. I am a different person from the person who arrived here eight months ago.

**Claret Lepcha**

*Sr. Claret Lepcha is wearing a lime-colored churida, a loose-fitting tunic and slacks. She is 28 years old and a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny. She works in Darjeeling on the Indian border near Nepal and Tibet, her features in keeping with the peoples in this area of Asia, many of them Buddhist.*

Our work is with HIV children for whom it is difficult to get admission to the local schools, and also with the child laborers who are exploited. We go to the tea plantations and hotels, to individual houses where these children are working for no more than 200 rupees (about $4) a month and confront the owners. Most often the children, aged 6 to 14 more or less, from troubled families, were lured from their villages by agents with the promise of clothes, food and schooling. But these are false promises.

I have done some work with these children, but now I go back with a different attitude. I now have the spiritual strength I needed. I have the power of the scriptures with me that I have learned. I will confront the agents who lure these children away. I will tell them about the dignity of each person and why they must not do this. I will take that child back to the village and sit with the mother, because so often she is a woman with a broken heart who is poor or has been abandoned and she is trying as best she can to care for her children.

Until this time I was a quiet, good sister, now that I look back. There may be resistance with my changed attitude when I return; I can face that. We need dialogue in our communities, not only what a person can contribute with prayer, but what else can I contribute? My thoughts? My feelings? My observations? I may not be correct, but I will offer what I have.

My grandparents are Buddhist and I respect their silence. So, sometimes I can be silent when it is needed. But Christianity [here she breaks into a fetching giggle] is the best. I can speak and I know I am not alone.

**Veronica Monterio**

*Sr. Veronica Monterio is 35, a Bethany sister who works in the Punjab. She has a quiet presence about her, never the first to speak in class, but when she does, others listen.*

When we go to the villages to see how we can be of help, oftentimes it is difficult to gather the parents together. So, we teach the children songs, and children love to sing, so they quickly come together. When the parents see this, we win their trust.

With the families, we try to show them how important education is, and not only for their sons. In the schools in the Punjab, you will see many more boys than girls because the girls do have any value. But we tell the mothers: Your daughter is a future mother; do you not want her educated? We started a school and the numbers of girls is going up. And the performance of the girls is higher than the boys!

I received no proper theological training as a novice, but now when I return I will be training novices myself. Their formation is not complete without theological training. I myself am confident. Some sisters are not confident. Sometimes we start to believe we are the person responsible for whatever we do and we forget that it is God working through us.

As we look deeply into the scriptures, the confidence comes more easily. It is not me telling the novice; Christ himself is showing with his life how they should be.

In the town of Gobindpura, one of the merchants obtained a liquor license. Fortunately we had the trust of the women and we helped them to organize a protest, because the selling of liquor would ruin the village. They stood in front of this shop. When the merchant wouldn?t listen, they went in and took the bottles of liquor and poured them in the street. He was forced to stop selling alcohol.

In this year, I have seen beautiful and liberative women such as Martha; Mary of Bethany; the intelligent Samaritan woman; the first evangelizer of the Resurrection, Mary of Magdala -- daringly committed women disciples who accompanied Jesus even to Calvary, unlike the coward men disciples.

Now I have these examples, I have the theological background to interpret the scriptures, not to just repeat them. I have learned, both in my classes and living together with these excellent women, that women are the embodiment of the feminine qualities of God -- life-bearing, life-giving, nurturing, self-sacrificing. I felt such a gap in my own formation. This year I have filled it. Next year, I will be a much better teacher of the candidates, postulants and novices. Also, just the happy interacting of the sisters; I hope to bring that to my community as well. We need to laugh more.

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