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Hierarchy's Mary is vastly different from ours

Joan Chittister | Aug. 30, 2013 From Where I Stand

One of the major scientific discoveries of the 20th century revolves around the role played by communication in stressful situations -- the notion that a person's communication style can soften or harden conflict depending on how it is used; the idea that simply the amount of information supplied in crucial situations affect the tone, the efficacy and the outcome of negotiations. As a result of those findings, whole corporations have changed their processes of decision-making and dissemination of information.

So with that in mind, people waited for information about the progress of the Vatican visitation of the LCWR from this year's gathering in Orlando, Fla. Given the fact that none was forthcoming, people drew their own conclusions.

I, on the other hand, went for the one piece of data the assembly managed to produce on the subject, the homily Sartain gave to the membership [1]. And a clear piece of communication it was.

In this homily, Mary is "quiet," "docile," submits herself over and has no "desire or a need to figure things out ... or resolve them to her own personal satisfaction." There was, we're told here, no "no" or "mine" in her. The Mary of this homily is a passive receptacle of what she understands to be the Word of God.

Well, maybe. But it might be good to think about all that a bit in the light of the other things we also know about Mary.

The purpose of this column is not to parse what the bishop said about Mary on the Feast of the Assumption. I prefer instead to look at what he did not say about her because, it seems to me, what he left out of that homily says much about what is expected of women in the Catholic church.

For instance, Mary answers the angel's declaration to her by questioning it. An angel! Someone of much higher rank, it would seem, than even apostolic delegates, and only then with a "Be-it-done-unto-me" response to a situation to which, apparently, "no" was a viable answer. Otherwise, why bother to have the conversation?

Even more important, perhaps, is the awareness that despite the seriousness -- even the danger -- of her situation, Mary did not go to any man -- to the high priests of the temple, the local rabbi, her father or even Joseph -- for directions about what to do next. She went to another woman for the wisdom she needed and followed that instead. No visitations here.

In another instance, at the wedding feast at Cana, Mary gives her own set of apostolic orders to no less than Jesus himself as well as to the wait staff, as in, "Go and do what he tells you."

Mary herself questioned the propriety of what Jesus was doing in the temple with the elders and later is part of a crowd of family and friends who are even concerned that Jesus may be, as the Irish would say, "losing the run of himself."

And finally, if anyone wants to know just how influential and important a figure Mary was to the development of the early church, the very idea of her being part of the gathering of apostles on Pentecost when each of them is anointed into discipleship by the Holy Spirit ought to be enough to dispel the notion that what we have here is a woman without a strong sense of self.

No, the Mary not mentioned in this homily on the Assumption was a woman not intimidated into the Incarnation, not beholden to male answers, not shy about giving directions about what should be done, not without a high sense of personal responsibility, and not one bit in doubt about her place in the hierarchy of the church.

Those, I think, are precisely the qualities we see in women in our own time that make for what some parts of the church are now calling "radical feminism."

From where I stand, that is a sad misuse of language and an even sadder case of spiritual blindness.

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