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Silence about the global treatment of women is disquieting

Joan Chittister | May. 3, 2012 From Where I Stand

"Actions speak louder than words." We love to repeat this old saying. I believed it once. But recently I've begun to question the value of that position as never before. I've come to understand that what I really want is to hear people commit to something. I want to hear people say what they want me to think they believe. I want them to say it in public, say it in legal documents, say it in catechisms, say it in Encyclicals. Say it ...

About a month ago under a tent meant to protect us from the hot African sun, I began to think differently about a lot of things, and that was key among them.

We were all religious types from every major tradition around the world. We were professed monastics and swamis and pastors and ministers and rabbis and lay catechists and church officers. Our type travel the world, talking of peace and righteousness and Truth -- with a capital T-- and holiness. But by the end of the week, I had a very clear intuition we were leaving something very important out of our preachings. Something that gave the lie to everything else we were talking about, perhaps.

That particular day, the topic was forgiveness. The plan was to hear from various traditions, particular regions, specific representatives about issues peculiar to the work they were each trying to do around the world to bring peace and justice between people of opposite persuasions, between people who saw the same world together, but differently. The storytellers were all people who were living in the midst of the experience of which they spoke.

We heard, for instance, about the progress of the revolution in Egypt from Egyptian philosophers, the ongoing social upheaval in Cambodia from international peace workers, the delicate situation of Christians in the Middle East. It was a very interesting session. Until, suddenly, it became more horrifying than interesting.

The speakers now were Congolese women. They were dressed in long gowns splashed with bright reds and greens and yellows and blues in assorted and eye-catching proportions. Their turbans of the same colors gave them a kind of regal impact. To look at them was to have a vision of real African queens up close and personal.

The first speaker talked hesitantly and in broad terms about the difficulty of forgiveness after a civil war in which neighbors who had lived side by side for years had suddenly turned on one another. There was, they said, no forgetting either the personal pain or the faces of the perpetrators.

Frankly, it was hard to explain how so much angst could linger with such energy on such personal levels over such mundane emotions -- like mistrust, for instance, or an ongoing sense of betrayal, or even as a result of the loss of faith generated by standard-brand political disagreements. After all, civil unrest is everywhere these days.

Then, the speaker stopped for a moment. She had clearly sensed the lack of understanding in us. "Let me tell you plainly," she said. "Seventy thousand women and girls were raped in the Congo during the war. They are homeless yet. Many have starved to death. Many became pregnant and now the children they bore are orphans. I

am one of those women. I am a Christian, but I could not forgive." She sighed and her voice rose.

"I will give you an example: One night, robbers came to a house and demanded that the man hand over his wife and daughters or die. He refused. So they began to cut him. They cut off his fingers and blinded his eyes. His wife couldn't stand it anymore. 'Take me and let him go,' she screamed. And they did. Then after they had gang-raped her and each daughter, they robbed the house and left."

She waited again -- for what felt like eternity -- before she went on, tight-voiced and loud. "Then the husband began to scream. He threw the wife and daughters out of the house. Those women had no place to go," she said. "No one, no one," she paused, "would take them in."

There was an audible gasp in the tent.

No one would take them in? I felt my arms get a little weak. No one? Where did they go?

The questions came from everywhere at once: "Why not? What are you talking about? Why, in God's name, did the husband put them out? Do you mean that the husband got angry at the wife?" The disbelief and incredulity in the group was palpable.

"Wait a minute," I called from the other side of the tent out of my own growing sense of agony. "What in that culture could possibly justify that kind of behavior -- from either the rapists or certainly of the husband?"

The woman raised herself up in the old plastic chair. "Men," she said, "must begin to believe that women are human beings. They must stop saying that women 'want it.' Because he believes that women want it; he threw them out. They all do. And the families that will accept the woman back refused to take the child that comes from the rape."

A dark silence hung heavily in a tent full of monks and ministers, catechists and keepers of ancient faiths for a long, long time.

The pain now had another dimension to it. These countries have been "converted" for centuries. You have to wonder, don't you? What have they been told about women by the religious men who catechized them? What snide jokes and demeaning theology are still being taught about women by patriarchal religions? By the actions of exclusion and control and invisibility and domination and subordination of women by church men and holy elders everywhere? Even here. Even now.

From where I stand, it seems to me that male "protection," paternalism and patriarchal theology are not to be trusted anymore because the actions it spawns in both men and women have limited the full humanity of women everywhere, and on purpose.

Isn't it time for us all to really be converted, to say the real Truth about women from our pulpits, from our preachers, from our patriarchs, until both they and we finally believe it ourselves? Then surely the actions that make it real will follow.

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