

The Open House of Divine Wisdom

Wisdom has built Her house,

She has set up Her seven pillars...

She also has set Her table.

She has sent out Her wo/men ministers

to call from the highest places in the town...

“Come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed.

Leave immaturity, and live,

And walk in the way of Wisdom (Proverbs 9:1-3.5-6)

We have gathered this weekend as the wo/men ministers of Divine Wisdom to celebrate our common struggles for a just society and church. We have been invited by Women Church Convergence to gather in the name of Divine Wisdom and to create a public forum for exploring feminist Catholic ministries.

Hence, it is appropriate that we first thank all the ministers of Women Church Convergence who have prepared this feast in Her name and have tirelessly worked to create this conference as a forum, a public square, for feminist discussion and celebration.. Please join me in a big round of applause to thank all of them, especially Donna Quinn, the wo/men of the local committee who have tirelessly worked and those sisters who greeted us at registration. I also want to thank all of you for being here, for living the call of Divine Wisdom to feminist ministry in the discipleship of equals.

We have gathered on this weekend to renew our vision of the ekklēsia of wo/men that is daily realized in practicing the discipleship of equals. What do I mean by the ekklēsia of wo/men? The Greek word ekklēsia does not primarily mean church but the democratic assembly of fully entitled and responsible citizens. Yet, ekklēsia needs to be qualified with wo/men written with a slash and used in an inclusive way. For neither church nor society have historically realized the radical democratic vision of ekklēsia, because their language, laws and traditions have excluded wo/men for centuries from full citizenship and in many cases still do so today. Historical memory, struggles for justice, critical debate and envisioned future are intrinsic dimensions of the ekklēsia of wo/men.

The recognition of wo/men as full citizens with all rights and responsibilities is central to the vision of the ekklēsia of wo/men embodied as a discipleship of equals. This vision demands a new theological articulation and self-understanding of ministry and leadership. It requires the deconstruction of hierarchical-monarchical structures and the redefinition of catholicity not in exclusivist hierarchal but in egalitarian terms. It asks for a feminist articulation of Catholic identity not as sameness but as rich diversity and variegated giftedness in the power of Divine Wisdom.

By the f-word feminist I mean a theoretical perspectives and world-wide radical democratic wo/men's movements that are inspired by the conviction that all wo/men without any exceptions are fully entitled and responsible citizens in society and religion. Yet, this feminist vision of a radical democratic Catholic

church which is inspired by Vatican II, seems at this point in time an illusion. It seems to function as “pie in the sky,” which keeps progressive people in a church that is run more like the Roman empire than the ekklēsia of Jesus Christ. Many of the clergy and hierarchy of the Roman church are intellectually and morally bankrupt, as the scandals and cover-ups of sexual abuse by priests and the Vatican’s prohibition of condoms in the AIDS crisis amply document. The U.S hierarchy has lost its last shred of religious-moral credibility in the 2004 election when bishops made candidates’ position against wo/men’s reproductive rights and same sex marriage the key issue of Roman Catholic identity while not caring for those on death row or the millions of children who are born daily into dehumanizing poverty and starvation or who are killed by American bombs and occupation.

We have assembled in this situation of continuing right-wing backlash and global violence because we have heard the call of Divine Wisdom to feminist ministry in the ekklēsia of wo/men . This is the call to realize a different society and church. It is the call to join hands with ministers of Divine Wisdom in all churches and religions for transforming imperial structures of domination. True, this vision of the ekklēsia of wo/men is u-topian, it is without a place in kyriarchal hierarchical structures. However it is not “pie in the sky” because this vision of the ekklēsia of wo/men has been partially realized throughout the centuries in ever new reform movements and new radical democratic articulations of church and society. In the past 40 years or more this call and vision has become a lived reality whenever and

wherever we have realized our call to feminist ministry and like Divine Wisdom have prepared the table and broken bread in the discipleship of equals.

Because we Catholic wo/men have been refused “holy orders” we have not been successfully “ordered” and hierarchically “disciplined.” Hence, like Jesus of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala we have been free to follow the call of Divine Wisdom and to envision and create variegated and exciting new ministries.

ministries of political and feminist grassroots-organizing, **ministries** of healing all that is violated, broken and weak, **ministries** of feminist education: teaching, mentoring, articulating and writing feminist theologies, **ministries** of the arts: dance, music, performance, liturgies, ritualizing and setting the table of Divine Wisdom, celebrating Eucharist; **ministries** of nurturing feminist communities in their struggles against violence in and outside the home; **ministries** of self-affirmation and spiritual strengthening, of caring for the earth and all of creation; **ministries** dedicated to enable sharing between different churches, religions, races, cultures, sexualities and nations, **ministries** of nurturing the discipleship of equals in local and cyber space communities, campus, prison, youth, hospital, political ministries in all areas of church and society; **ministries** of reconciliation and the overcoming of prejudice, **ministries** fostering recognition of the Divine Image in everyone. The call of Divine Wisdom has shaped these ministries and many more that seek to nurture the discipleship of equals here and now.

Divine Wisdom calls us today again to continue the struggles against a kyriarchal clerical tradition of ordained ministry and against sacramental

structures of domination that not only have excluded wo/men from ecclesiastical authority but increasingly speak again the language of silencing, control and violence. Hence, the struggle for a radical democratic church and ministry is the struggle for freedom of thought, intellectual independence and personal integrity, for the free and uncensored speech of citizens, for the life-giving power of Divine Wisdom.

Our struggles for egalitarian structures and justice for all have sought to embody the vision of the early church that has viewed all its members as called and elect, holy and gifted with the manifold talents of the Spirit. But as feminist and liberationist scholars have pointed out, segments of the early church as a Spirit filled community of equals have been gradually adapted to Roman imperial structures of domination and with Constantine Christianity became the religion of the Empire. Church ministries became part of the imperial bureaucracy, the clergy became a privileged class, and the official Roman church adopted imperial structures and violent measures. Like that of the Roman empire, the constitution of the Roman church is a combination of monarchic and aristocratic government. Like Roman imperialism, Roman Catholicism has used force, supported colonialism, promulgated Euro-centrism, and still goes on to eliminate or appropriate the cultural and religious resources of its “subordinates.” This Roman imperial form of Catholic church is divided into a two-class system that of the ordained and that of the laity. It does not only promulgate second class citizenship

for those who are not ordained but also sacramentalizes eternal metaphysical status difference between those ordained and those who are not.

In contrast, the Catholicity of the discipleship of equals seeks to foster social-religious plurality and global connectedness linking radically different local churches and variegated cultures. Such Catholicity is defined by the Shorter Oxford Dictionary as “the quality of having sympathies with or being all-embracing; broad-mindedness, tolerance.” Feminist Catholicity envisions an all-embracing inclusive ekklēsia in which all are truly equal but not the same; an ecclesial culture where differences are respected and people are truly free, where social-religious responsibility rather than individualistic self-absorption prevails; a society and church which is truly just and in which status and power inequalities, especially the vast gulf between the rich and the poor, white and black, First World and 2/3rd Worlds, is recognized as structural sin. Such a radical democratic feminist vision of Catholicity calls Divine Wisdom’s wo/men ministers to work towards a society and church in which G*d’s justice and love are realized in daily struggles for survival and change. It envisions church as a reciprocal community of support, a dynamic alliance of equals. It is the Catholicity of grace flourishing in the all-embracing sphere of Divine Wisdom in which we live and move.

We have gathered on this weekend, to renew our vision of feminist Catholic ministry, to explore the structures of a discipleship of equals, to discuss how to realize the call of Divine Wisdom to feminist rather than to hierarchical ordained ministry, to celebrate each other’s work and struggles, to find hope when

we are tempted to despair, to gather around. Divine Wisdom's table and to ask for Her grace of transformative imagination, for in the words of Toni Morrison "the only grace we can have is the grace we can imagine... If we can not see it, we can not have it."¹

¹ Toni Morrison, Beloved, 88.