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Feminist theology reflects cultural forces

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer



osemary Radford Ruether attributes her interest in feminist theology to a simple reason. "I was born female," she remarked flatly.

Born also into a Catholic family, Ruether said she therefore grew up in a patriarchal society and patriarchal church — neither of which allowed her and her fellow women to become full members.

That church is still repressing women, the professor of applied theology asserted during a phone interview from her office at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Illinois. Such repression has fueled the desire of many women — and some men as well — to explore Catholic theology from a feminist perspective.

Central to that perspective is reflection on the reality of sexism in the church, and how sexism has shaped both religion and the very ideas and images Christians use to represent God. As one feminist theologian observed, the patriarchal Christian hierarchy has created "God ... in the image of the white ruling class whose image we then fall down and worship as the living God."

Yet Ruether said women have always found a way to play a vital role in a church in spite of the church's historic exclusion of women from the altar as celebrants, servers, homilists and readers — an exclusion that only in recent years has begun to give way to a more inclusive stance.

Feminist theologians point out, for example, that Catholic history is filled with the names of such figures as Teresa of Avila, a doctor of the church and author of spiritual classics. In earlier times, observed Sister Joan Sobala, pastoral assistant at Rochester's St. Mary Church, women served as abbesses at monasteries, deacons in dioceses, and writers of universal rules of monastic order.



Some commentators even claim that historical evidence indicates women were ordained as priests of the early church. That argument is supported by a recent article in the newsletter *New Women, New Church* of the Women's Ordination Conference, an independent organization based in Virginia.

The article by Carolyn Moynihan Bradt cites an Italian historian's claim — based on the letters of early bishops — that Pope Gelasius I ordered Italian bishops to stop ordaining women priests during the fifth century.

As Ruether said, "the possibility of interesting roles for women keeps popping up on the edges."

Possibilities for women in the church were first opened by Jesus' treatment of his female followers, a subject addressed during a recent conference in Syracuse. Sponsored by the Syracuse diocese's Commission on Women, the conference celebrated the role of women in church and

society.

"In reflecting on Jesus' attitude toward women, we need first to look at the times in which Jesus lived," remarked the speaker, Sister Paula Jude Egan, CSJ. The parish minister and Bible-studies teacher reminded her audience that Jesus' world "was a world in which men were totally in charge."

She illustrated her point by citing various restrictions Jewish law imposed on women's lives 2,000 years ago. Women were subject to their fathers until married, and had no recourse if their fathers treated them unjustly. A father could sell his daughter, or force her into prostitution or an

arranged marriage — a marriage that profited him, Sister Egan said.

Once married, a Jewish woman's husband enjoyed the same powers her father previously had exercised over her. The husband could divorce her for any reason whatsoever, but she could not divorce him. Her husband was only guilty of adultery if he cheated with the wife or betrothed mate of another man because the relationship would reduce the value of the other man's property.



woman on the other hand could be considered to blame for things that were not of her doing. If she were raped, she could be accused of adultery, and if her husband abandoned her, she probably wound up destitute or doomed to a life of prostitution.

Then along came Jesus whose actions ran against the grain of his society's attitudes toward women. He cured a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years, without performing any rite of purification to rid himself of ritual impurity from contact with her.

"He spoke out against the divorce laws of the time ... and reminded (his listeners) of the dignity of marriage and God's intent of its permanency ... He also reminded his hearers that marriage implied fidelity on the part of both members," Sister Egan continued. "Jesus preached a message that was truly counter-cultural!"

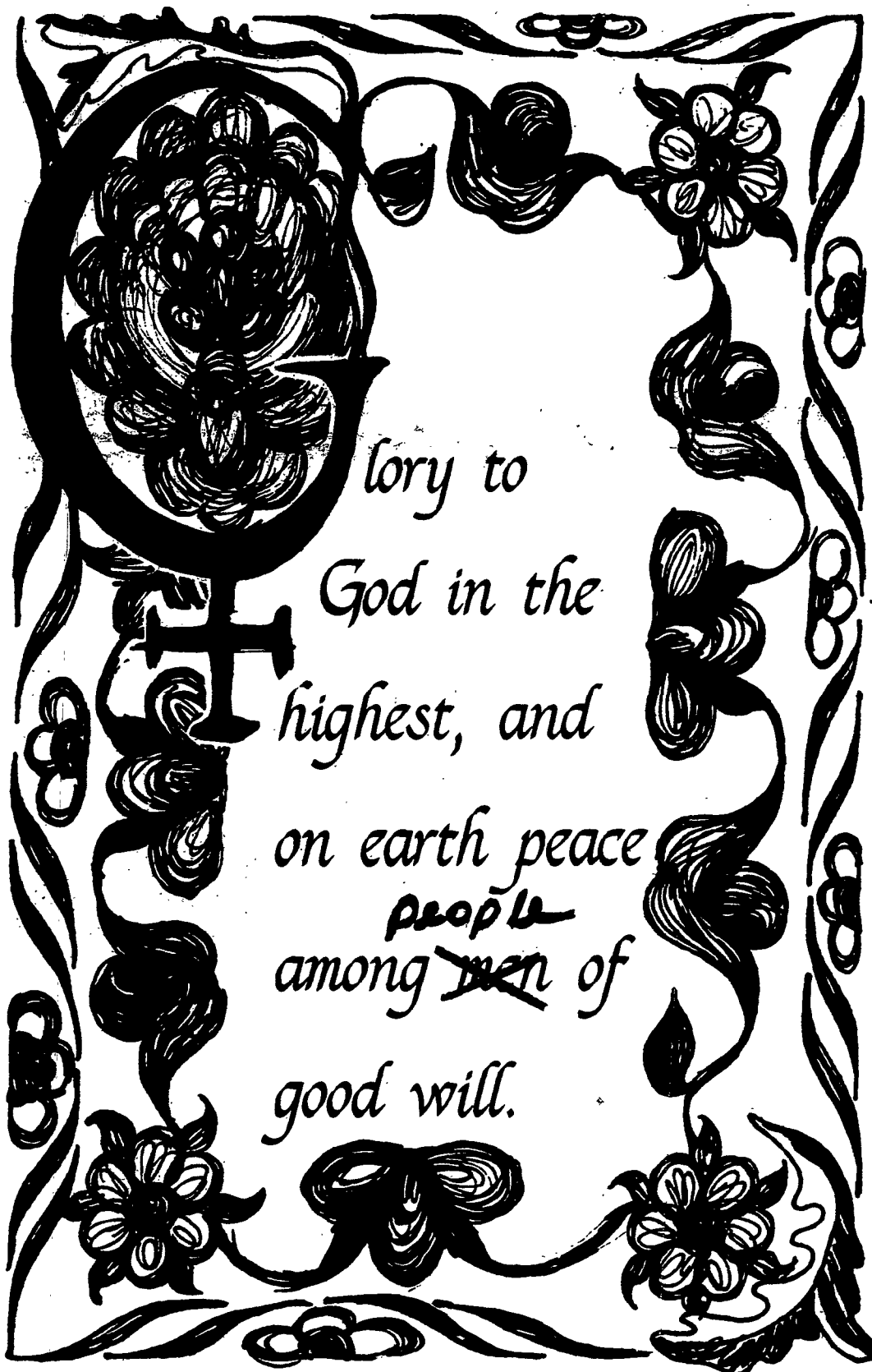
Feminist theologians will also point to the fact that women often were the heralds and catalysts of Jesus' ministry. For example, the New Testament records that:

•Mary's prompting brought about Jesus' first miracle of changing water into wine at the Wedding of Cana.

•The Samaritan woman Jesus spoke to at the well led many others to hear him preach.

•Except for St. John, it was Jesus' female disciples who stood at the foot of the cross and mourned his crucifixion on Calvary.

•And it was Mary Magdalene who first announced the Lord's resurrection.



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