

No longer happy with clerical crumbs

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

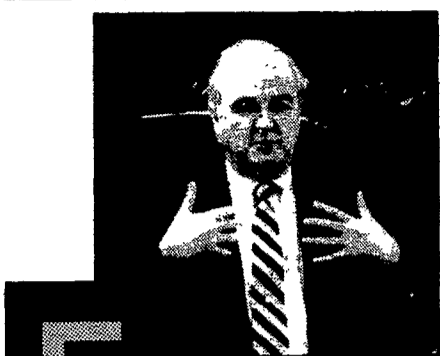
If you repeat a falsehood often enough without its ever being seriously challenged, others will begin to accept it as true. That is what seems to have occurred in the case of feminism, especially as it exists within the Catholic Church.

For several years now, it has simply been taken for granted by many of its opponents that feminism is an exclusively U.S. phenomenon, a national aberration dabbled in by some American women religious and a few academic women.

But those with a truly global experience of the Catholic Church know how false (and illusory) this assumption is. Sisters who have served on international bodies of women religious, for example, have been in dialogue with leaders of religious communities from all over the world. The concerns of Catholic women are the same everywhere.

A new book, published by Ave Maria Press at Notre Dame, makes this very point. Titled *Like Bread, Their Voices Rise! Global Women Challenge the Church* (paperback, \$9.95), the book has a companion videocassette called "Crumbs from the Table," which is also available from Ave Maria.

The book's author, Sister Francis Bernard O'Connor, CSC, spent 20 years working in Bangladesh prior to serving as regional superior for the overseas ministry of the Sisters of the



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Holy Cross (they serve on four continents) and then as her congregation's superior general. She currently serves as a research scholar at the Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Her powerful book refutes and shatters the assumption that Catholic women's desire for full participation in the church's life and mission is only "a North American problem."

On the basis of questionnaires and interviews with more than 1,260 women of various nations and cultures, Sister O'Connor uncovers striking similarities among the experiences and unfulfilled hopes of women in Asia, Africa, South America, and North America.

The author collected data from

women in Bangladesh, Brazil, Uganda, and the United States, spending one to three months in each country.

She chose these three developing countries, not only because they represent a spectrum of Catholic population ranging from 89 percent in Brazil, 50 percent in Uganda, to 2 percent in Bangladesh, but also because her own Holy Cross sisters have been ministering in each of these countries for decades.

In addition, the ecclesiology in each of the three countries ranges all the way from the liberation approach one finds in Brazil to the traditional and even ultra-traditional theology of Bangladesh and Uganda.

She compares the responses of women from the diverse cultures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, living in distinctly different Catholic environments, with those of U.S. women whose experiences of church are as dissimilar as their ethnic and racial backgrounds.

The survey's focus was to determine how women are awakening to their place in the church, what they are doing to challenge the church in order to live the Gospel's message, and what they claim for themselves as equal members of the church.

Sister O'Connor reports that, when she first met with the various groups of women, the initial reactions to her questionnaire were marked by skepticism and suspicion, at one end of the spectrum, and interest and excitement, at the other.

"No one has ever asked us what we think about the church before!" she said the universal comment was.

When she returned for more formal interviews, she met with women in tiny rooms in *favelas* (open-air slums), both on the periphery and in Brazil's interior, and in buildings constructed by base communities.

In Uganda the women gathered in church buildings or on the grass at the edge of the jungle, some walking five to 10 miles in order to join the group.

In Bangladesh she met with them in crowded villages and congested city homes. They sat together — mothers and children, old and young — on the ground in front of bamboo and mud school buildings.

"In every instance," Sister O'Connor writes, "the women testified to their rising awareness of the oppression they experience in the church."

The U.S. women were chosen on a different basis. They included a random sample from the Women's Ordination Conference, parish women identified by lay and religious pastoral ministers, and Catholic women identified through a Gallup poll.

But the results were remarkably similar.

"The crumbs that fall from the clerical table no longer suffice to mitigate the hunger of these women," Sister O'Connor concludes. "The bakers of bread are claiming their baptismal right to break open both the loaf and the word, in fulfillment of the gospel message of Jesus for them."

Visit to unfamiliar church was pleasing

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

One of the best things about the Catholic Church used to be that wherever you went in the world, the Mass was exactly the same. This is not a nostalgic call for a return to the Latin Mass. Rather, it is a starting place for a reflection on what people are looking for when they visit a church away from their home parishes.

During our vacation this summer, my family and I spent a weekend near the resort town of Douglas, Mich. It was easy to find the nearest Catholic Church, St. Peter's, and learn the schedule of Masses.

We chose the 5 p.m. Saturday Mass (one of the many post-Vatican II changes that have made the church so much more user-friendly) and trooped into the edifice — my wife, myself and our three pre-schoolers. We were wearing our vacation clothes, so we were much relieved to



FAITH AND WORK

see many of the regular parishioners in casual clothes (another post-Vatican II improvement).

St. Peter's is a simple, modern church with clean lines and wide pews arranged in a semicircle around

the altar. Like most visitors, we were a little self-conscious and chose a seat near the back, but still we were close to the altar and could see everything and everyone. The Mass started with an entrance procession and hymn, which everyone sang with gusto. (A popular book purports to tell *Why Catholics Can't Sing*, but my experience is that more people sing now than ever did in the "good old days" — especially when the songs are in a key normal people can reach).

We were pleasantly surprised when, right at the Mass' beginning, the celebrant asked everyone to turn and say hello to other members of the congregation. It was like moving the sign of peace up on the agenda, but it made a lot of sense in a resort town where so many people would be visitors. Our family, for sure, felt especially welcome after the greeting.

Although our kids were relatively well-behaved that day, like all pre-schoolers, they did generate some

extra noise and movement. But the people around us didn't seem to mind. The priest's homily was good. He spoke as one believer addressing others he assumed to be believers also. The homily illuminated the Scripture readings and challenged us to be more Christ-like in our daily lives.

So we felt pretty good about our visit to another church. We made sure to give a little something extra in the collection basket as our way of saying thanks for the hospitality.

And that was it. We may never go back to St. Peter's again (although we certainly would if we found ourselves in the area again), but we felt good about being part of a universal church that welcomes our participation at any of its local affiliates at any time. All that we asked were two things: to feel welcomed and to be among believers.

And *that's* what should be the same no matter where you go.

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Question: What Rising Sun co-star took the plane ride of his life in *Passenger 57*?

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