

CONTINUED...

Women

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just be together and discuss spirituality and get to know each other better."

Further, she said, "It helped me let go of a lot of issues inside myself that kept me away from the church. The patriarchal attitude, I had a real problem with. ... It took my focus off that. I realized all the positive things I got out of church and will continue to get."

Women's groups are a way — the only way, for some women — to hear about the women in the Bible, Sister Treichel and others noted.

For example, the crowds that gather in church on Easter have traditionally heard, via the U.S. lectionary, the story of the empty tomb as told in John 1-9. But the part that has been dropped, immediately following, is "an incredibly beautiful story of Mary Magdalene encountering Jesus," said Gloria Ulterino, director of the diocesan Office of Women in Church and Society, which furthers Synod Goal 3. Mary doesn't recognize him until he calls her by name, and sends her as the first person to tell the others that he lives.

The Song of Solomon is the only biblical book written in the male and female voice according to Ulterino. The rest of the Bible is told by men; women, such as Lot's wife, are often nameless.

Even Matthew's account of the feeding with loaves and fishes, ends: "Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children."

"We know there were not just males in the world and yet it is the story of a community of males at that time," said Roni Antenucci, pastoral associate at Our Lady of Mercy. She teamed with Ulterino, Sister Treichel, Curtis and Sister Mary Louise Heffernan, SSJ, to teach ways of creating women's spirituality groups this fall. The programs were presented at St. John on Humboldt, and at Sacred Heart Church in Auburn, through St. Bernard's Institute.

Imagining early leaders

Antenucci also teamed with Fran Otis from St. Helen's Church and Ulterino to present an imagined encounter among Phoebe, Prisca and Junia, church leaders from the New Testament, at the diocesan Keuka Days for parish staff, at St. Helen's and most recently, at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Mendon.

Such imagining is done hand-in-hand with scholarship, Ulterino said.

"It's not like 'Let's pretend,'" Ulterino said. "You learn as much about the stories as you possibly can, and realize women were there as active subjects as much as the



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Roni Antenucci speaks during the Conversation with Women of the Early Church Dec. 2.

men. It is to respect and honor what's here."

Such imagining is a type of midrash, she and others say, similar to methods begun by early Jewish sages used to interpret Scriptures.

And, Sister Heffernan noted, St. Ignatius of Loyola offered "a great, great wealth" in his spiritual exercises that encourage imagination in praying with Scripture.

While critics sometimes complain women want to rewrite the Bible, Ulterino responded, "No, no, no, no. I have a deep and abiding love of Scripture. That isn't what this is about at all. It's not replacing the Scripture. It is helping us appreciate that women were there, too, as active subjects ... and active partners in ministry, with men."

Such an interest dates back years. More than 100 years ago, Frances E. Willard, a Churchville native and president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, wrote, "We need women commentators to bring out the women's side of the book; we need the stereoscopic view of truth in general, which can only be had when woman's eye and man's eye together shall discern the perspective of the Bible's full-orbed revelation."

And Elizabeth Cady Stanton produced *The Woman's Bible* in 1895. The work was not biblical scholarship, however, noted Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe in their 1992 *The Women's Bible Commentary*, to which more than 40 Catholic and Protestant scholars contributed.

"As long as women were excluded from both religious offices and educational opportunities, it was difficult for them to enter into the interpretation of the Bible in an authoritative way," they wrote.

More recently, Ulterino's studies of such scholars as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza showed that although women were leaders in the early church, by the time the Gospels were written, accounts of these women lead-

ers were ignored or played down in order, perhaps, for Christianity to blend in better with the society and culture of those times.

Ulterino offers a detailed look at Romans 16 in resource materials provided through her office and the Women's Commission. The information largely comes from a paper she wrote in 1995, "Women in the Pauline Literature," for her master's degree from St. Bernard's Institute.

Paul greeted several women in Romans whom he apparently held in high regard and who were active in ministry. He also singled out for recognition such people as Prisca and her husband Aquila, who founded a church in their house wherever they moved.

He also used the term "deacon" when speaking of Phoebe, though she would have been unordained at that time, and Junia, mentioned only in Romans 16. Junia and her husband Andronicus were the only people, outside the 12 Apostles, Paul called apostles. In Bibles since the Middle Ages, Junia had been written as "Junias," because a commentator "realized" that only men could have been apostles, Ulterino said.

"Nothing much was made of it until Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza came along," she said, noting Fiorenza's landmark 1983 book *In Memory of Her*. That title comes from the story in Mark 14:9, of the woman who, recognizing Jesus as Christ, walked into the house where Jesus was staying and anointed Jesus' head for his burial with perfumed oil, over the protests of Jesus' companions.

After studying women leaders in Pauline literature, Ulterino said, "I felt these women are my ancestors in faith, and I was going to do my utmost to bring their stories to life. Men and women need to know that in the church's early years women were leaders. Women were able to use their gifts, women were missionaries and experienced many of the same hardships men did."

Searching for true picture

How to talk of women in the church's early days, however, is far from settled.

In their *Commentary*, Newsom and Ringe wrote, "Many have struggled with the issues of how women in communities of faith can and should read the Bible in the light of what feminist inquiry has discovered. Contemporary feminist study of the Bible has not set out either to bring the Bible into judgment or to rescue it from its critics. But to read the Bible self-consciously as a woman is a complex experience, alternately painful and exhilarating. There is a great sense of empowerment, however, that comes from reading the Bible as a woman in the company of other women."

Father Sebastian Falcone, president emeritus and a Scripture scholar at St. Bernard's Institute, cautioned that there are plenty of possible interpretations for many Bible stories and differing views on everything from why Phoebe was called a deacon, to whether Junia was male (Junias) or female. Also, he is no fan of role playing. "A more basic question is, 'Why do we need to role play?'" he commented. "We should keep the facts in the foreground, at the very center of discussion."

"To make these people part of a dramatic production or dramatic situation, even prayerful imagery, doesn't guarantee you're closer to the truth of what those greetings (by Paul) meant," he said.

"I've sat in enough so-called seminars with people saying, 'This is what struck me,'" he added. "Well, what strikes you is psychologically interesting but is it historically true?"

He was concerned whether people — not just the leaders — do the necessary study before imagining, by reading the Scriptures and multiple well-researched commentaries from various points of view.

Despite the necessity of such research and study, however, Ulterino said she doesn't believe parish staffs and parishioners should be intimidated in starting up women's study/spirituality groups.

And she maintained that while it is important for women to be telling Bible stories from their own perspectives and that they share experiences among themselves, the whole church needs to hear women's stories.

But she added, "My ideal is that men and women at some point would come together and spend time with stories of women, and men will find it helpful too, as women have learned from men. We learn from each other."

"My hope would be that men and women alike see ourselves as being made in God's image, partners, as having gifts to offer."

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