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Forum: Where Do We Stand?: We Were Pioneers

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DUSTING OFF A DOCUMENT

Mary Garvin, SNJM

On the top shelf of the bookcase lies a dust covered document, a paper full of potential now seemingly forgotten, “Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society.” Like many Church documents focused on justice, this decree shows strength of vision but weakness in practice and assessment.

“So what’s going on at Gonzaga, has the situation of women in church and society changed?” Yes, certainly! “As a result of this document?” I’m not so sure.

In 1995, two historic events occurred: the Jesuits’ 34th General Congregation in Rome produced a document on women and the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing produced a platform for action. Both documents share a fundamental assumption that gender justice is critical for development and peace of every nation.

For the last ten years at Gonzaga University we have engaged issues related to both documents with debates and dialogues, mobilizing resources and generous sharing for disaster relief and raising controversial issues: sexual ethics, Iraq war, politics, poverty, peace and power. Also our major administration has changed, building projects abound, growth enrollment stretches classroom space and our famous men’s basketball team draws Zag fans from the entire country. And we have celebrated 50 years of women at Gonzaga!

But relating local and global issues to women’s situation remains marginal except for a dedicated few. For example, our controversial performances of *The Vagina Monologues* illustrated the gap between the theory and the practice of the Jesuit document on women. Ironically if one considered this cultural drama an expression of women’s experience—violence against women and women’s hopes and desires—the play could provide a significant application of a key strategy of the Jesuit document, “to listen carefully and courageously to the experience of women”—all of it. Not sanitized experience—edited, controlled, conforming to church teaching, not pleasant, not comfortable. But the truth. Clarifying the conflict and building reconciling relationships takes courage, which may be the credibility test for this decree.

Though the Jesuit document has gathered dust, it is still preserved on the shelf. A growing grassroots consciousness of gender justice on our campus shows signs of life in the face of globalization and local neglect.

- We have incorporated a social justice requirement in our core curriculum.
- A student based initiative, “Take Back the Night” raises awareness of sexual assault and provides support and resources for victims.
- Our women’s studies concentration draws committed faculty members for creative inter-disciplinary classes.
- CCASL (Center for Community Action and Service Learning) currently emphasizes trafficking in women and children as its social justice focus, mobilizing resources for education and action.
- “Church in the 3rd Millennium,” a successful ongoing lecture series, initiated by a collaborative group of Jesuits, lay women and men from the university and Spokane has brought outstanding speakers to campus, including a number of women scholars and activists raising consciousness of women and culture, violence, sexuality, and church.

And the spirit of the *magis* hovers over us all, inspiring us to do better. We can develop more just and right relationships among Jesuits and laity, we can generate more reflection on our daily practices, more accountability, and more celebration of our accomplishments. ■

Mary Garvin, SNJM, is a member of the religious studies department and women’s studies faculty at Gonzaga University.

WE WERE PIONEERS

Patrick Howell, S. J.

We have a proud heritage at Seattle University since we were the first Jesuit university in the world to include women as a regular part of the student body. The exploits of Fr.

James B. McGoldrick S.J., dean, to accomplish this feat are legendary. In 1931 he admitted women to “night classes,” which started at noon. Jesuit superiors in Rome wrote back an *admonitum* or a warning forbidding the mixing of genders. Fr. McGoldrick responded, “Fine, I’ll send the men home since they have plenty of opportunities.”

You can probably still hear the gasps across the Tiber in Rome, but Jesuit superiors settled on a compromise: “You can admit the women to regular classes after lunch.” That was just fine for Fr. McGoldrick. He then moved the “lunch period” up to 9 a.m. in the morning and, thereafter, proceeded on his merry way with “inclusive” classes.

In addition to this colorful history, I was privileged to be on the subcommittee of GC34 that drafted the document on Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society. Other participants in the subcommittee included delegates from Ireland, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, and Australia. The document gradually gained universal acceptance by the Congregation was certainly one of the "surprise documents," as Fr. Kolvenbach noted afterwards.

In the Northwest we Jesuits take these collaborative efforts with women as normal and natural—no big deal. As GC 34 notes, "Many women have helped to reshape our theological tradition in a way that has liberated both men and women." And religious and lay women directors among us are crucial for the flourishing of the Spiritual Exercises.

The greatest inequities for women come within the Church itself, which is still closed to significant, influential women in major leadership roles. This issue remains an abiding wound in the Body of Christ. As GC 34 also notes, "We [Jesuits] are conscious of the damage to the People of God brought about in some cultures by the alienation of women who no longer feel at home in the Church."

The 70 plus years since the arrival of the first women on our Jesuit campuses are a short span in the life of the Church, but, in the life of individual women and men, 70 years is a life-time, and I hope that a more inclusive, robustly welcoming Church will not take another lifetime. But I also know that building "cathedrals of hope" calls for patience and considerable courage to speak the truth forcefully and with the will conviction of a Fr. McGoldrick. ■

Patrick J. Howell S.J. is dean of the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University.



A TALE OF TWO STORIES

Arthur Madigan, S.J.

One story about women in Jesuit higher education runs: "You (we, they) have come a long way. The battle for equality has been won. The playing field is level. Women can take care of themselves." Another story runs: "We (you, they) still have a long way to go. The gap between the rhetoric of equality and *de facto* inequalities is still too great."

I'm on the boards of LeMoyne and Scranton. The women executives, lawyers, and academics on those boards deserve and receive the full respect of their colleagues. At B.C. women are senior professors, department chairs, and recognized scholars. As employers go, the university is a good place for women who are trying to balance family and career. But the "border work" of women scholars who are subverting the boundaries between the disciplines is not always appreciated. And we have fewer women deans than we had five or ten years ago. (Why?)

We have gifted, high-performing women students. The word is that they are on average better qualified than our men. They come across as confident, expecting to be treated fairly and taken seriously. (Could that be a function of socio-economic class?) But some colleagues question how well B.C. builds the confidence