

## In praise of a hidden tradition of Catholic women's empowerment



As a practising Catholic and a feminist there are two refrains I have heard from friends over the years. One goes something like this, and tends to be a question asked by my Catholic convert friends: 'how on earth did you manage to keep your faith intact through the spiritually thin Catholicism of the 1970s and 80s? The second refrain is posed by my feminist friends: 'why on earth would you remain a Catholic?'

One answer to both questions lies in between the lines of Linda Woodhead's important Tablet article of two weeks ago (you can [read a shorter version](#) of her argument here). Linda, who is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University, presented the counter-intuitive argument that the Catholic Church remains a better place to be a woman than the Church of England. There is a surprising truth in this statement (yes, despite the various church politics we can all quote). She painted part of a picture of the Catholicism in which I, and other women in our 30s and 40s were raised.

While many of my convert friends see only forms of liturgy, hymnody and catechesis that leave them cold, this same period was one in which the Catholic Church in this country was quietly managing a quite extraordinary feat. The fruits of an ordinary, local Catholic set of practices are only now becoming apparent: the education and formation of a generation of women confident in their faith, who have now taken their place in the world of work as well as within their families.

Many of these women came from first and second generation migrant backgrounds, had little to lose and much to gain, and found themselves being nurtured through what my colleague Julie Clague, a lecturer at Glasgow, named an 'alternative civil society'. This alternative civil society was built around

the matrix of lay, apostolic women's religious orders, the provision of Catholic (state and private) schooling, a 'thick' practice of Catholic parish life (including wide social provision, the presence of Young Christian Workers, St Vincent de Paul, Cafod and other social justice formation groups) and perhaps, too, a determination amongst migrant families to educate their girls.

It is impossible to understate the importance of the work that comprehensive Catholic schools have performed in creating a context for developing the confidence and academic achievement of Catholic women. Here we encountered powerful, articulate women, confident in their faith with a passion for social justice as for Scripture and liturgy. For many their experience of Catholic schooling was their experience of Church - a remarkable kind of Church-in-the-world experience. And it was one protected to a degree from some of the more hostile winds. I have become increasingly convinced that without much fanfare this 'thick' community was nurturing something new in Catholic life in UK - the powerful, creative, public lay woman. This is a story that I think we have failed to celebrate or see for what it is - and must still be.

This hasn't happened (or perhaps better, has happened differently) for Anglican women for two reasons: the first is that Church of England schools operate differently from Catholic schools with a less overt formational and catechetical culture and their women are therefore also less overtly formed in a counter-culture than Catholic have been.

The second reason is an extension of Julie Clague's observations: Anglicanism hasn't felt the need to build an alternative civil society because it was already part of one, and it assumed that this was sufficient. I spent five years working in an Anglican theological college with extraordinarily gifted women ordinands, this context was perhaps the one context where I have seen a deliberate attempt to provide such an effective counter-cultural space of formation in an Anglican context. But to wait until women are in their 20s, 30s and 40s to provide this is not enough, and it leaves younger Anglican lay women without a parallel experience. This can't be just about women who present for ordination, or else this becomes a narrowly clericalised feminism.

To make this case for the power of the local Catholic Church's commitment to its women is not to express a kind of tasteless Catholic triumphalism in a moment of weakness and sadness for Anglicanism (and goodness knows we do have problems enough of our own). But it is to do two things: to note that we have had - and must protect and continue to develop for the future - a pearl of great price in our Catholic communities. This is especially important at a time when faith schooling is seen by a wider culture as problematic. What does it mean for a new generation of Catholic schools and parishes to continue to develop this legacy of the 1970s, 80s and 90s? Secondly, we can note that the Church of England is no longer coterminous with British civil society, which has become inflected with powerful and rich shades of different traditions. What kind of thick 'civil' practices might the

Church of England construct to enable the development of flourishing communities in which it nurtures and forms its women as well as re-forms its own structures of leadership? Reflection on these questions matters to the daughters of both Church communities.

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