

"Women Witnesses"  
Homily of July 20, 2003  
By Trish Brown

This week at Christ the King we are celebrating women witnesses. As I sat down to think about women witnesses in our church, Mary Magdalene immediately came to mind. We know that Mary Magdalene was present as one of Jesus' closest followers -- or disciples, some might say. We also know that she was there with Jesus at the foot of the cross when he was crucified. Can you IMAGINE the love that Mary must have had for Jesus to stand there with Him when so many others ran away? She was greatly loved by Jesus and loved Him in return. On the morning of the Resurrection, it was Mary who went to the tomb first to spend some private time saying goodbye to this friend whom she deeply loved. It was Mary to whom Jesus chose to appear to first, sending her to spread the good news. Why did Jesus choose Mary Magdalene? He KNEW that she could carry His message; He had great faith in her. And with great courage and conviction, Mary went forth to tell her friends what she had seen. For this reason, by many she is referred to as the "Apostle of the Apostles." Mary felt comfortable enough with the community of apostles with whom she had associated to go back and share this incredulous news. Mary Magdalene -- WITNESS or PROSTITUTE? I would say WITNESS. Mary was a witness, motivated by love -- not power, not prestige, not money. She had been nurtured by Jesus and her peers and felt affirmed, enough so that she had the courage to move forward. To me, there is something about being so loved by someone in your life, in your community of faith that gives one the power to see their true potential.

When I think of women witnesses -- Mary Magdalene, Catherine of Siena, Dorothy Day ... I see that all of these women did something

significant to lift oppression or bring about healing to move the message of Jesus forward. Yet, being a woman witness is risky. Often, it means setting aside her own needs and perhaps the needs of the family for the needs of the greater community. Sometimes it means rejection by one's own community. It's NOT about being the woman -of-the day and single-handedly bringing about change. A witness nurtures the gifts and talents of those around her. She is committed to and grounded in her community. To some, a woman witness appears to be radical, obstinate -- and yes, maybe she is those things, but she is not without VISION. There are those in our Church who may prefer women witnesses to be less visible because for a variety of reasons, they make them feel uncomfortable, but history has shown us that often alongside discomfort can come change. Now, we have to ask ourselves, "What is it that women witnesses want to change?" Let's go back and look for a moment at this VISION.

My experience with women witnesses is that they envision a Church where there is a shared partnership, a shared role in bringing about changing the face of our Church. She does not wish to place a women's authority over men; rather, she seeks balance. She works collaboratively with others to recognise gifts and to bring the community to its greatest potential. She acts out of courage, conviction, and selflessness. The vision that women witnesses have is timeless. It is the same vision that He shared with Mary Magdalene thousands of years ago. That vision calls both men and women to be symbols of Jesus in our world today.

I had the opportunity to spend some time with our teenagers at their

workcamp in Tijuana this week. Although they were working in difficult conditions, what I saw were young men and women working side by side, shoulder to shoulder with each other to get the job done. There was much to do, many different jobs, and I watched as the teens assessed the situation, matching need with gift, then working together to accomplish their mission. They were working in partnership with each other, not isolation. When the day's work was completed, all felt as though they had made a difference in a significant way. In doing this, they were all honoring the best in each other.

I'd suggest that these teens are excellent role models for us and our Church. They are reminders that the leadership of the church is changing -- not just out of necessity, but also out of a recognition of the gifts and talents of the entire community -- a recognition that women witnesses share. In turn, our women witnesses are reminders to our teens that the present and future of our Church is opening up to all. These women witnesses today are excellent role models for our teens. Approximately 70% of professional paid lay ministers in our church today are women. We only have to look as far as our own diocese and our bishop, John Cummins, who appointed Barbara Flannery, a woman, as Chancellor of the Diocese of Oakland. Bishop Cummins and Barbara Flannery are a FINE EXAMPLE of how men and women can work together for effective leadership in our Church. They have been very successful in creating a wonderful, supportive program of lay training and leadership throughout the diocese. Their courage to work together encourages not only lay leadership, but especially women in lay leadership for the diocese. Most importantly, they have also put in place some excellent role models for all of us. So what happens if we DON'T recognise and support the value of

women witnesses? We risk repeating mistakes of the past and moving back into a darker time. In confusing Mary Magdalene with a prostitute over the years, we have erased much of the authenticity of her witness and that of many other women witnesses who are not named significantly in the Scriptures. The Church has paid the price. Bible scholars believe that women played a significant role in spreading the word about Jesus, and in fact, travelled in the same circle as Him. Was this acceptable at this time? NO. Did it make others uncomfortable because it wasn't the convention of the day? CERTAINLY. But I have to say that I find myself looking at our Church and wondering what the future holds. Amidst the controversy of the headlines and decline in number of clergy and other religious, it is not hard to be skeptical. However, I'm optimistic that this will be the generation that seizes the moment and embraces the talents that women are offering. I think that it is time that we recognise these women witnesses and begin to affirm their contributions to the leadership of the Church. In so doing, we are also raising up excellent role models for our children.

My vision is this. As a woman and a witness, I envision that our future Church will be a church that will continue to seek ways to lift up and embrace the gifts and talents of women in all ways. As women in Jesus' time once did, I see women and men coming to the table together, sharing ideas --each bringing their own gifts and nurturing the gifts of the other. We are all witnesses. Jesus calls us all to be witnesses.