Blog
Social Justice



Theologian Cecilia González-Andrieu delivers her keynote address at the Women of the Church conference Oct. 19 (St. Mary's College/Christian Alonzo-Cuatepotzo)



by Sr. Michele Morek

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My mother stomped into the house, fuming. She had just heard from the pastor about her attempt to volunteer for a ministry in our small parish in a small town in northern New Mexico.

It was the early 1970's, the early days of lay empowerment after Vatican II, and the pastor had sent out a form to all the parishioners listing some parish ministries for which they could sign up. As a professional woman and former English teacher fluent in two languages, she was eager to use her gifts for the church and had signed up to be a lector — our readers were pretty terrible and could use an infusion of new blood.

The pastor very kindly explained that he was sorry, but women were not eligible for any task that would take them inside the sanctuary; "However," he assured her, "You can join the Ladies' Altar Society."

"Oh, yes," growled my mom, "we are good enough to go into the sanctuary to *clean* it but not to read?" She was hopping mad and took the occasion to explain to me a fact of life: i.e, "As long as there is one semi-literate male in this church, women won't be able to read."

Sure enough, when I was there for Holy Saturday a couple of years later, The Semi-Literate Male of the parish did the readings — all *nine* of them — slowly and excruciatingly, with many long pauses for pronunciation corrections.

I was thinking of my mom in late October this year, when I arrived at Saint Mary's College, Indiana, for the Catholic Leadership Conference, "Women of the Church." Picturing 150 women with her attitude, I was subconsciously expecting to hear angry chants and see signs like "If you won't ordain us, don't baptize us!" and "Bring back the female diaconate!"

But I couldn't have been more wrong. The goal of the conference was to "uplift women who are in leadership roles in the Catholic Church … to examine how women's leadership is a source of strength and knowledge … to examine new possibilities for women as leaders … to be inspired, challenged, and strengthened."

The significant words to me were "women who *are* in leadership roles." So looking at it from mom's perspective — in the words of the old "women's cigarette" ad — "we've come a long way, baby!"

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The "wise, wild, wonderful" women (and some men) who attended were scholars, teachers, students, seminary professors, editors, campus ministers, parish workers and professional lay ecclesial ministers. There were indeed heads of organizations like the Women's Ordination Conference, and advocates for the diaconate — but they were not carrying signs!

The best way to appreciate the variety and qualifications of the keynote speakers, panelists and the rich menu of breakout sessions is to check here. The problem was that I wanted to attend all of them! An article by NCR National Correspondent Heidi Schlumpf about the conference is here.

Now and then, I would look around in amazement, wondering how these women could be so hopeful and upbeat. What keeps them from becoming cynical? Kerry Robinson of Leadership Roundtable (an organization dedicated to promoting excellence, accountability and best managerial practices to strengthen the church), must have read my mind because in her talk she gave us the definition of a cynic: "a person who has given up but not shut up!"

We can't help but be aware that we have a long way to go: I still have a few angry "sign-carrying" genes in me that I inherited from my mother, and hope to see more progress *soon*! But these women — and a few men — are working to make what changes they can. They certainly have not given up on their church; indeed, there seemed to be a universal feeling of deep love for the church.

In the last plenary session, Robinson gave what I can only describe as a paean to the Catholic Church, describing all that she loves about it. She challenged us to make our own list. Here's just the beginning of my list: the largest global humanitarian network; the rich art, music, ritual and liturgy; and of course, The Sisters!

This one's for YOU, Mom!

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