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Breaking Through Nine Catholic Women Speak for Themselves

In last week's column, I mentioned the above-named book which is edited by Helen Alvare.

This is a book I would love every woman in the parish to read!

So often, women who embrace their Catholic faith—especially the well-educated and successful ones—are frowned on by Catholic women who have left the Church and by secular society in general.

I don't expect that every Catholic woman who reads the book will love it or agree with all the sentiments expressed therein. But I do believe every woman with an open mind and heart will be hard-pressed to dismiss the voices of the women expressed in *Breaking Through*.

Chapter 1: Fear of Children. Helen Alvare, who once worked for the *United States Catholic Conference of Bishops* on pro-life issues, shares how she was, for a period of her life, one of those feminists who did not want to have children for various reasons. Slowly, she came around to seeing how children might be a good thing. After many difficult pregnancies, she had children and they became the best thing that ever happened to her and her marriage. Sure most couples who marry look forward to having children, but not all do and some decide against having children for various reasons—selfishness, for one.

Chapter 2: Contraception—Wrestling with Reality. Dr. Marie Anderson begins the chapter by writing: *I was raised as a Catholic, but for much of my life, including many years as an obstetrician-gynecologist, I looked at the Church's teachings on contraception and said: "That's impossible! In this day and age, with all the medical advances we have, why would anyone want to deny herself the best modern medicine has to offer? Why would anyone want to give up the right to decide whether and when to become a mother?" I freely prescribed contraceptives and even performed abortions on babies considered too damaged to survive*

outside the womb. This is the story of how I came to believe that what I once thought was impossible is not only possible, but essential."

Chapter 3: Sex, Mating and the Marriage Market. 28-year old Elise Italiano, who teaches at a college prep high school in the Washington, D.C., area, writes about the challenges facing a young woman who isn't married in her early twenties (like many of her parent's generation). Elise writes:

Though I do not fully subscribe to this idea of projecting an identity and seeking affirmation, I do find some merit in describing who I am, both as a member of the Church and as a modern woman in the world. I am a single, dating, practicing Roman Catholic woman in her late twenties who subscribes to Magnificat and Real Simple, who bookmarks instyle.com in addition to the Vatican news site. I listen to Bruce Springsteen and Gregorian chant. I like to do both cardio exercises and Ignatian exercises. In a nutshell, as a woman committed to her faith and one who believes that our culture is not yet a total moral dystopia, I often find that I belong to neither world—mine is an identity that the secular world and the Church seem unable to affirm at this point in history. In my view, the identity of the single, Catholic woman is misunderstood and misrepresented in both spheres. But the love of culture and the love of the Church impel me to describe the hopes, fears, and joys of this state of life in order to make clear to the editors of Glamour and my pastors alike what I need, who I am, and who I am not. I do not intend to speak on behalf of anyone else's experience, although I suspect that Catholic women share similar stories and that non-Catholic women might find something worthwhile here.

Chapter 4: Finding Joy—The Mystery of Religious Life. Sr. Mary Gabriel tells the story of how God ever so gently led her to join the Sisters of Life in New York in the late 1990's. Some excerpts:

I was fascinated with women's role in society and the Church. When the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women convened in Beijing in 1995, I watched intently and with curiosity, reading every article, and from every possible angle. I was impressed by the progress women had made over the last century; I

relished the emerging of women into greater prominence and respect in society. It seemed the true potential of women was beginning to be revealed to the world, and I loved it—so much so that I seriously considered pursuing a graduate degree in women's studies. But I didn't connect this interest with my faith.

This lack on my part became like a storm cloud on the horizon, a brewing conflict in my interior. At some point, I would need to address it, and, as with most things in my life, I didn't want to wait. If I was going to be Catholic for the rest of my life, I wanted to be able to sincerely say yes to everything the Church teaches and to know why I was saying yes to it. If I couldn't say yes, I didn't want to live as if I were—I desired integration and authenticity. When I mentioned this to friends, I found I wasn't alone. We decided to each take a topic, research, and then share both the whys of that Church teaching as well as opposing views.

As Sister grappled with issues, she said that she “parked” herself often before the Blessed Sacrament. As she struggled with how to spend the rest of her life, no one mentioned the possibility of religious life, and it never crossed her mind. She goes on:

I wanted to get married—and presumed I would—and raise a family, preferably of rambunctious boys. I presumed graduate school, followed by a life in academia or public policy and advocacy work. But like my total immersion in the delights of collegiate life, all these plans were on the surface. I knew somewhere underneath it all that my trajectory was off. I had a strange intuition that I wouldn't see the other side of my plans. I had no idea why that was, but I told my mother, to her horror, that I was convinced it was because I would die young.

Six months after graduating, I was living the dream in New York City, I spent my days working on the Upper East Side, my evenings reconnecting with old friends in Manhattan. It soon became evident that others were comfortable with the way their lives were unfolding. I, on the other hand was restless inside. I wanted to give more, love more, live for more. I began spending my Saturdays in the South Bronx with the Franciscans, a religious order, helping the poor. There I found a joy and freedom missing from the other parts of my life, however interesting and entertaining they were. It was cause for pause....

...I wasn't immune to the fact that religious life meant poignant sacrifices. I thought of living without marriage and a family of my own and wondered: Could I live happily? Would I be lonely? The not-so-poignant sacrifices became present to me, too. Every so often, I had an aching dread in the pit of my stomach when I

thought about the practicalities of convent life. I had to guess it was a far cry from what I was used to.

When I had free time, this possibility returned, ever stronger. One evening as I walked down Lexington Avenue during rush hour, people frantically pushing by on their way from work, I finally wanted an answer more than I wanted control over my own life. I entered the next church I passed and knelt before the Blessed Sacrament, ready to yield to whatever he wanted of me. Jesus answered as if he had been waiting at the gates. As I had experienced in college, there was no doubt in whose presence I was. But this time in prayer, I felt my heart align with another's, with his, and connect. It was a love unlike any other I had experienced before, and I knew what it meant. I wasn't thinking or speaking, but there was only one response—yes, from the depths of my soul....

Chapter 5: Something Old and Something Really New—Women as Professionals and Breadwinners, but Pilgrims Just the Same. Mary DevlinCapizzi, J.D., tells how she juggles her home life, professional life and Catholic faith. This is probably my favorite chapter in the book; hence, the following interesting excerpts:

While my immigrant grandmother (who was still baking Irish soda bread at 100), my mother, and I had dramatically different educational, social, and professional opportunities; our work ethic and Catholic faith have been constant across three generations. Braided together, these have enabled our accomplishments, whether as a housewife rearing three children (my grandmother), or as a mother devoted to rearing six children at home and at times working as a nurse (my mother), or as a partner in a large corporate law firm who also holds leadership roles in the community, while sharing with my husband the joys and demands of rearing six children (me). When viewed through the lens of our shared faith, the real differences between three generations of women seem less dramatic. Each of us has recognized faith as our touchstone, received as a gift and passed on. Just as for my grandmother and mother, my faith has never held me back nor limited me, but rather guided and strengthened me....

...My reality is this: I make more money than my husband, and our large family relies on my income. But tempering the disparity in our incomes is our recognition that the real work of our lives belongs to us both fully and jointly. There is a lot of talk in the popular (and even scholarly) press about women's need to insist that husbands take on at least 50 percent of the domestic work. We avoided that kind of “accounting,” and it's been one of the healthiest decisions we ever made. My husband and I understand and recognize that each of us

brings unique gifts and energy to our marriage, and each of us does what we're good at. (Interestingly, there is also a lot of current literature indicating that an "accounting" mentality is poison to a marriage, while a "gift" mentality sustains it). There was a certain amount of family disapproval of our arrangement. In the early years of our marriage, my mother-in-law would sometimes say that she thought her son was doing too much. Some years ago she came to me with beautiful humility and apologized; she acknowledged all we both did and said she had come to love how our family hummed along in its unique way....

...It would be hard—likely impossible in fact—to imagine that I would have attained my professional success or domestic happiness without it being deeply rooted in the stability of my faith. Faith, not my work, is the root that defines my life, and my work reflects and reveals my faith. This has been an evolution—a work in progress....

To my mind, there is no controversy in the diversity in which a woman or a man can live out one's vocation in the world. Far from it. Each of us, regardless of our unique experience and circumstances, is called by our faith to love and serve God. I have been stung by some women judging me by my situation—as if my work has made me a less faithful Catholic, a worse wife, or a neglectful mother. On several occasions I have been told that I am working only to satisfy myself and that I "really don't have to work." I have also experienced working women who are quick to judge mothers who stay at home to rear children or, God forbid, home-school. I recall an exchange in which someone started mocking home-schooling; it was delightful to me to move the conversation away from caricatures as I reported that a most admired and beloved sister (an Ivy League college graduate, All-American and All-Ivy athlete, and mother) home-schooled all of her children! We all miss something by categorizing each other without respecting that women can and do live vastly different yet good lives. There is not an a priori way every woman must live her faith, and Catholic teaching does not consider work outside the home a mere concession to financial realities or the result of a false vocation.

Women find themselves in many different situations. A woman who thought she would be married by thirty remains single for her entire life. A stay-at-home mother returns to full-time work, and her husband starts running the household after his job is eliminated and no viable work options are available to him. An elderly mother of a grown family finds herself caring both for a husband with Alzheimer's and a son who has returned from war severely wounded, while her middle-aged daughter returns to the family home after an unfaithful

husband squanders shared financial resources and abandons her. A mother of young children feels a strong tug to finish her long-neglected dissertation and adds her much-needed voice to Catholic social concerns. A clinical psychologist with an academic appointment at a prestigious university joins a new Catholic order of religious sisters. A mother of eight adult children assumes the role of mother to her grandson, an infant boy, after her own son's young immigrant wife dies a week after childbirth; she becomes the person to whom her grandson attributes his deep Catholic formation. A single mother converts to Catholicism and spends a lifetime serving the poor and homeless and advocating nonviolence. These are all real Catholic women. Life is unpredictable and at times gritty. Our lives don't fit neatly in pre-designed boxes—nor should we expect them to.

Guided by Faith

Notwithstanding our diverse paths or unique circumstances as Christian women we always have the possibility of giving our lives over to God and trusting him to lead us where he wills. The voices of doubt, the insecurities, the harsh aspects of a competitive world, and even the wounds we carry can be pacified and put into proper context by the reality of a God who knows us (in all our confusion and complexity) and desires our happiness. He has given us, too, remarkable role models among female Catholic saints, none of whom had a smooth, untroubled life, but all of whom came to trust wholly in a loving and merciful God regardless of their circumstances.

Two of my favorites include Teresa of Avila and Therese of Lisieux. St. Teresa is an obvious role model for a woman pursuing worldly impact. She was a figure of international consequence in sixteenth-century Spain! She reformed the Carmelite order and established thirty-two new convents, was strategic, intelligent, a correspondent of King Philip II, industrious, courageous, and all the while very, very funny. Her faith was not incompatible with her work; in fact, it was the most notable gift she brought to her work. . . .

The author of this chapter found Thérèse "Little Way" (doing everything with love) to be very helpful. Thérèse learned to rely on God explicitly for every step of her journey toward learning to love and learning to believe.

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah