

Three American Women in Ministry

*Robert Ellsberg, Elena Malits, C.S.C.,
and Patsy Crowley, O.S.B.*

The authors offer profiles of three contemporary American Catholic women who have contributed in a fresh way to our understanding of the Church's mission in the world: Dorothy Day, Sister Madeleva, and Patty Crowley.

Despite the marginalization of their voices and the trivialization of their importance, women have always been involved in the Church's ministry, and many of them have represented creative new ways of living out the gospel in their own time and their own context. In the history of the church, one can point to Mary Magdalene as the "apostle to the apostles," the many unnamed women of the first centuries who were among the church's most effective evangelizers, Hilda of Whitby, Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich in the Middle Ages, Catherine of Siena in the Renaissance, and Marie de l'Incarnation, Louise de Marillac and Elizabeth Seton in the modern period. To this list of faithful and innovative women in the church's history, we offer here reflections on the lives of three contemporary *American* women, all of whom have contributed fresh understandings of ministry, not only to the mission of the local church in the United States, but also to the mission of the church throughout the world.

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An Original Disciple: Dorothy Day

A recurring motif in the lives of the saints is their struggle to chart an original path of discipleship, appropriate to the needs of their time, and yet distinct from all the available options. This theme is particularly present in the lives of women, for whom the authorized forms of religious vocation have traditionally been limited. The case of Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, is a recent example. She was a radical not simply in her social stands but also in the spirit in which she invented a new form of lay apostolate.

Dorothy Day had a great gift for reconciling competing values, such as love for the Church and a deep dissatisfaction with its sins and failings. In particular she recognized the need to combine the practice of charity with the struggle for justice. In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, she describes her first childhood encounter with the lives of the saints. She recalls how her heart was stirred by the stories of their charity toward the sick, the maimed, the leper. “But there was another question in my mind. Why was so much done in remedying the evil instead of avoiding it in the first place? . . . Where were the saints who try to change the social order, not just to minister to the slaves, but to do away with slavery?”

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In effect, Day’s vocation took form around this challenge. Her conversion to Catholicism and her work in founding the Catholic Worker movement would come many years later. But the great underlying task of her life was to join what the poet Péguy called “the mystical and the political.” Before her fateful meeting in 1932 with Peter Maurin, the French philosopher-tramp with whom she started the movement, she prayed that “some way would open up for me to use what talents I possessed for my fellow workers, for the poor.” She longed, as she put it, “to make a synthesis reconciling body and soul, this world and the next.”

She was right to be confounded about which way to turn. None of the existing options reflected her particular sense of vocation. And so she invented her own way. She was not entirely alone. Dorothy Day always gave credit to Peter Maurin for supplying the ideas behind the Catholic Worker. He provided her with a “Catholic view of history” and a personalist philosophy to replace the class-struggle approach of her radical roots. But before meeting Dorothy Day, Maurin seems to have been singularly incapable of translating his ideas onto a scale larger than himself.

I think a major contribution of Peter Maurin was simply to give Day “permission” to launch her own movement. By drawing on the lives of the saints he showed that it was not necessary to wait for anyone to “authorize” or sponsor their work. The saints began immediately with whatever means were at hand. If their venture were blessed by God, the means would arrive.

For Day this meant starting a newspaper with no money; calling it *The Catholic Worker* without seeking any prior permission from the bishop or any other authority; daring to offer a “Catholic” perspective on social issues of the day that was far in advance of contemporary social teaching. At that time “Catholic Action” was defined as “participation of the laity in the apostolate of the bishops.” But the Catholic Worker was something completely new: a religious community of lay people, organized under no rule, with no formal accountability to religious authorities, determined to live out their faith in response to the urgent social needs of the day.

Certainly many people—conservatives and liberals alike—were confounded by Day’s ability to integrate a very traditional style of Catholic piety with a radical style of social engagement. She said the rosary and went to daily Mass while also marching on picket lines and going to jail to protest war and injustice. But there was no paradox in her eyes. Her life was rooted in a sense of the radical implications of the Incarnation—the fact that God had entered our flesh and our history, and so what we did for our neighbors we did directly for him. This strong incarnational faith was a thread that united the various aspects of her life: her embrace of voluntary poverty and a life in community among the poor; her practice of the works of mercy—feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless; her prayer and commitment to the sacramental life of the Church; her staunch commitment to social justice; and her “seamless garment” approach to the protection of life.

It was the incarnation, ultimately, that showed the way to that synthesis she always intuited: reconciliation between the spiritual and the historical, the love of God and the love of neighbor, “body and soul, this world and the next.” Dorothy Day sought and found this synthesis, and having done so she made it seem perfectly obvious. But it was not always so. She created her path by walking it. And she continues to pose that challenge to all people of faith. There is nothing to stop us today from attempting to live as if the Gospel were true. Like other holy men and women she opened a path that others might follow. But she challenged us also to find our own paths (Robert Ellsberg).

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***“The Most Renowned Nun in the World”:
Sister M. Madeleva, C.S.C.***

When she died on July 25, 1964, age seventy-seven, the *New York Times* identified Sister Madeleva as a poet, scholar, educator, and administrator. The *Providence Visitor* described her using a modified title from a well-known book anticipating Vatican II: *The Nun in the World*. Distinguished friends around the world, religious leaders, college presidents, literary critics, novelists, actors, and many correspondents might add numerous epithets. Some thought of Madeleva as a writer of magical words, while others experienced her as an accomplished conversationalist. Thinkers considered her a visionary, religious persons a mystic, scholars a remarkable woman in a man’s world. Madeleva felt at home in multiple fields of learning and the arts. As president of Saint Mary’s College from 1934 to 1961, she delighted in inviting notables from around the world to visit and talk with her, faculty, and students.

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To the students in her English class, those hearing the president address the student body on her literary favorites, or seniors seated at the head table in the dining room, Madeleva remained a paradox. She appeared overwhelmingly learned, yet chatted easily with them about families and summer plans. This nun who

embodied renunciation was a world traveler and numbered among her visiting friends Clare Booth Luce, Helen Hays, Jacques Maritain, and Frank and Maisie Sheed. While speaking of the endless riches of Catholicism to students, Madeleva nonetheless asserted that she disliked the phrase “a Catholic poet” because it was limiting.

Evaline (Eva) Wolff was born in 1887 of an immigrant Lutheran father and a Catholic mother in Cumberland, Wisconsin. Her simple parents valued education, sending her to the University of Wisconsin. Eva learned from a magazine about Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana, and promptly transferred. She loved everything there: the campus, her studies, classmates, and especially the Holy Cross Sisters. After her junior year she surprised everyone by entering the novitiate. Eventually Eva was given the name, Sister Mary Madeleva.

Her first assignment was to teach English at the Academy attached to the College. Not surprisingly, the young sister received an M.A. from the University of Notre Dame. She went on to earn a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 1925. That, indeed, was a first for both religious sisters and the university!

Madeleva founded Saint Mary's-of-the-Wasatch College in Utah, serving as president. Then she was assigned to teach English literature at Saint Mary's College, before being named president in 1934. The busy administrator managed to write nine books of poetry and essays, along with her autobiography, *My First Seventy Years*. She haunted the U.S. Bishops to allow her to start the School of Sacred Theology on Saint Mary's campus in 1944, the first place where Catholic women could get advanced degrees. She also was instrumental in starting the Sister Formation Movement to educate adequately young sisters.

Perhaps the idea best capturing Madeleva's vision is one she often expressed as her longing to create "another Whitby," the Northumbrian monastery that flourished under its Abbess, Saint Hilda. This seventh century abbey housed and educated both women and men and was a celebrated center of learning. Madeleva appreciated the religious name she had been given, but "Hilda" would have been just as appropriate (Elena Malits, C.S.C.).

Always More Room: Patty Caron Crowley

My mother, Patty Crowley, is a woman of action—*social* action. She believes that life is meant to be lived to the fullest and that other people and our world are meant to benefit from one's life and gifts. She believes that God sends people and opportunities to each of us and that we are called to welcome them to the "table of our own lives." Our ever-expanding dining room table symbolizes for me her basic attitude toward life. There was always room at it for one more; there so much of her life was lived.

Formed by a loving father of strict French-Canadian Catholicism, and by an ambitious mother who converted to Catholicism from a Baptist family, Patty grew up a faithful daughter of the Church. Even though she did not always embrace all that her family valued, it was these values nevertheless which later strengthened her in times of disagreement and disillusionment with the earthly leaders of that same church.

At Trinity College in Washington, D.C., as a student of the legendary John A. Ryan, she already had recognized the challenge of the gospel-based social teachings of the church. It was after meeting my father, however, the well-loved Patrick F. Crowley, that she was drawn into a new level of life and action, one that she could not even have imagined in her earlier years. The seeds of activism, planted in her early life, flourished in the blessed union of Pat and Patty Crowley. Together "their table" began to expand.

Four young children followed. In 1947 she and my father embarked on a serious commitment to develop a new "table." At this table married couples could come together to reflect on the gospel, discuss pertinent social topics, and decide on an action that all could accomplish before the next meeting. Adapting the

Young Christian Worker (YCW) approach of “Observe Judge and Act,” Pat and Patty, with other couples, founded an international movement called The Christian Family Movement (CFM), and led that movement for several decades in the mid-twentieth century. A marvelous rendition of this movement’s history can be found in *Disturbing the Peace* by Jeff Burns, a book commissioned by my mother and her good friends, Reggie Weissert and Rose Lucey.

The CFM central office, in fact, was our ever-adaptable dining room table. From that table each day, CFM mailings found their way around the world and plans were laid for new programs. Through CFM, couples challenged and encouraged one another to act for better family life, for racial justice, fair housing, liturgical reform, interfaith dialogue, political action to promote worker justice and family action to welcome foreign students and distribute food baskets to less fortunate families. Each evening, my mother transformed that same space, set the table, prepared a meal for an undetermined number, and, finally, rang the cowbell that called all to share a meal.

In the mid-1960s, she and my father responded with open minds and hearts to a call from Rome to participate in a consultative commission to advise the Pope on the morality of birth control. She wondered how she alone, of all the married Catholic women from the United States, found herself there. The commission was composed mostly of men; there were only four other women. On the commission my mother sought to hear the truth from people throughout the globe. She listened intently to the debates of the “experts” (mostly male theologians and scientists). She read the poignant letters received from CFM couples around the world. She prayed and, then, sincerely believed in the majority opinion of the commission, which, had it been adopted, would have significantly changed the previous teaching of the Church.

In 1974 my father died of cancer at the age of sixty-three and my mother became a widow at the young age of sixty-one. In that time of great loss, she “buried the pain” that she and my father had suffered together since the 1968 promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* and searched for new ways to be active within her Church and within society. In 1976 she participated in the first and only Call To Action meeting called by the U.S. bishops. The gathering was so powerful that a group of lay people formed a new movement entitled “Call To Action” (CTA). Here is where my mother found “church” anew. Even as a woman approaching her ninetieth year, she still attends CTA’s annual gatherings and initiated the Crowley Legacy Fund so that the movement might continue far into the future.

Gradually, a new “calling” became clear—a ministry to women, like herself, who were alone. Every month she opened her home and invited women from all backgrounds and perspectives to “sit at her table.” In addition, my mother opened her home to various groups of women (the National Assembly of Religious Women, Chicago Catholic Women, Women’s Ordination Conference, etc.)

who came together regularly in her living room. They prayed; they reflected; they sought ways to act for justice. One action that endured resulted in weekly visits to the women at Chicago's federal prison. With tremendous persistence and unbelievable stamina, she hardly ever misses a Sunday afternoon at the jail. She often tells me that this is what Jesus really told us to do!

In 1985, Patty determined that she was tired of sitting on boards and wanted to "do something" about what she observed every day. What she had been observing lately, in her neighborhood, was women who were homeless and who had no shelter available to them. And so she founded Deborah's Place, which began as an overnight shelter for women who are homeless and has since grown into the largest shelter/housing program for women in the city of Chicago.

In 1993, after twenty-five years of respectful and lonely silence about her birth-control commission experience, Patty began to speak out through tears and anguish over her sense of betrayal by church leaders. She felt that the integrity of her experience on the commission was at stake. She persuaded Robert McClory to record her experience and to develop it into a book (*Turning Point*, 1993) so that future generations could share this important part of church history and her life's journey.

As my mother entered her late eighties, she reluctantly embraced a new stage of diminishment and dependence. Today, you will find her, often alone, sitting in my father's chair, rolling yarn into balls to take to the women at the federal prison each Sunday. This is one of her ministries now. Another ministry is to educate visitors about that amazing piece of history that was Vatican II and her experience on the birth control commission captured so well in a BBC video entitled "Absolute Truth." She invites anyone who visits to view this video.

In her apartment, you will note immediately that the walls and tables are filled with photos and scrapbooks. She reminds visitors that all of these will go to the Gannon Center Archives of Loyola University. In this new phase of life, she finds new ways to let each of us know that she wants us to keep in touch with her, she needs us, and she loves us. Just as the dining room table, her living room, and the walls of her home seem always to have been ever-expansive, so too is my mother's heart's capacity to love and to be loved. She is remarkable! (Patsy Crowley, O.S.B.)

There are, of course, many other trail-blazing women in the U.S. church. We have confined ourselves here to *Catholic* women, but we could have reflected on women of other faith communities as well. Even among Catholic women we could single out many more: for example, Eileen Egan, the founder of *Pax Christi*, or pioneer thinkers like Mother Katherine Sullivan, R.S.C.J., Marjorie Tuite, O.P., Peggy Roach or Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A. It is said that some 82% of today's lay ecclesial ministers in the United States are women. Among them certainly are many women of exceptional vision and fortitude, comparable to the women on whom we have reflected here.