

## Rite and Reason Column: Irish Times

### Mary Condren

Let's face it: at first sight, the theme of the Annunciation is an unlikely one for contemporary women. *The handmaid of the Lord*, or *Be it done unto me*, suggest a subservience most women would prefer to forget.

But let's look again. A woman betrothed to an older man, 2000 years ago, hears the voice of the Spirit, deliberates in her heart, and then—a single mother—assents to become pregnant with divinity. Even in those times, the pressures of family, religion, social structures, must have been immense. How did she know the voice was true? How did she know she was not being duped?

Mary certainly was unique: throughout Christian history, little evidence exists—especially in affairs of religion—that women who hear voices will be given much credence.

Joan of Arc, the burning pyres of the Middle Ages, contemporary women answering the call to ordination all testify to one indomitable reality. The voices women hear are suspect. The speech to which they give rise is silenced. The world they might bring to birth is stillborn.

From the very moment of the Resurrection, when the women who witnessed the empty tomb *were not believed*, women's witness has been mediated; her words, conjugated; her presence, negated.

Even those women who manage to hold onto the still small voice within are constantly assailed by voices crying out: *Who do you think you are? We all know where you came from! I'm not the only one who thinks/feels this/that/or the other, about you.*

And that's only from the women.

From men she is equally likely to hear any variation on the theme that she is *sick, crazy, stupid, or evil*. When her inner voices urge her toward liberation the outer voices change: *why talk about women's liberation, why not **human** liberation? You've no sense of humour! You're aggressive, castrating, man-hating.*

When you really think about it, only a woman born free of what Anne Wilson Schaef calls *the Original Sin of Being Female* could have heard a voice, known it wasn't hallucination, and given birth to a whole new world. And not surprisingly, given the monopoly of interpretation enjoyed by clerical authority, the enormity of her courage is submerged and forgotten. Clerical pre-occupation with female reproductive purity, and theological literalism has, in the words of Julia Kristeva, transformed Mary's creativity and her female organ *into an innocent shell which serves only to receive sound*.

What are these original sins of women? How can we identify and deconstruct our damaged mindsets? How can we protect the still small voice within from the forces of death?

These are the questions facing women today, especially those who struggle, hungry and thirsty for a better world. Where can we find hope? Enlightenment?

We Irishwomen might find clues in the *Lives of Brigit*, a potent source of the old pre-Celtic wisdom traditions.

Brigit's virgins went every day to collect the *seed of the fire* from the local blacksmith and carried it home in their aprons. Like the Vestal Virgins of ancient Rome, the integrity of the state depended on women holding the seed of the fire, never letting it go out. Given their purity of intention, their single mindedness, their focus on the collective vision, the seed of the fire could be carried intact and would never burn through their aprons. .

Inevitably, it did. In the stories surrounding Brigit, the flattery of a blacksmith, a distracted look at a soldier, a fear of being alone weakened a virgin's resolve. She dropped her eyes, lost sight of her vision, and the fire burned through. Flattery, distraction, and fear: perhaps these are perhaps some of the original sins of women. The fire in our bellies goes out; the vision is lost. And here lies the dilemma.

Our bodies, souls, and psyches—our aprons—must be strong enough to hold the spark. Grace—the only gift that, like life itself, cannot be bought, or earned—lights the divine spark. Grace comes with no strings attached: our only obligation is to remember that we are mere *containers*, not the *source* of life or grace. Such awareness carries enormous responsibility.

Weak egos are useless; the fire burns through, and the fire goes to waste in an orgy of excruciating self-doubt, fear, or moral cowardice.

Strong egos are flattered into thinking the fire comes from themselves. They alone capture the flame, hold onto it, until overwork, or precious individualism leads to burn-out.

Caught between competing weak and strong egos, some women become immersed in distractions, addictions, appearances—anything to keep the fire at bay. Their creative fervour dissipates in the steam of pretension.

How can contemporary women mediate between weak and strong egos? How can we hold the fire? What resources might be available to us? Let's think about Mary.

We are told that as soon as she received the divine gift, she set out to visit her cousin Elizabeth, a woman blessed with new life in her old age. Together they deliberated. How

best might they learn to love? How best might they call one another to integrity? How best might the divine spark within them both, bear fruit?

Holding the divine spark in themselves, recognising the awesome responsibility that was theirs, together, in the words of Nelle Morton, a foremother of contemporary women theologians, *they heard one another into speech.*

Here lies the key: that women's voices and visions, often born in excruciating loneliness, can only bear fruit through the midwifery of female friendship.

True friendship among women is born, not of flattery, idealisation, or commitment to perpetual distraction, but of collective vision: planning toward the transcendent horizon wherein lies life and hope for ourselves, our children, and for all the children of the earth.

The grace of such friendship is rare. The power of such friendship is unique. But the struggle toward such friendship is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing women today.

*Hail Mary, full of grace.*