

Introduction

I am a Catholic feminist.

This causes a lot of confused looks and raised eyebrows, whispers and Instagram comments of “I don’t think she knows what those words mean.” It leads to a whole lot of not fitting in: Bible studies that want to focus on modesty and lipstick shades and social justice groups that want to pat my hand and remind me that my Church is backward and stupid.

But when I was in fifth grade and most kids were being brought to Disney World, my mom took my sister and me to Seneca Falls, New York, to see where the first women’s rights convention had taken place. I remember standing there, learning about Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott, and feeling their spirit as strong as any Church sermon. Because of *course* everyone knows women should get paid as much as men, and of *course* we should end rape culture, and of *course* women can be strong, smart, and self-sufficient! My life as a starry-eyed feminist was born.

Then I went back to the real world and was slapped in the face with people saying *feminist* is a swear word.

Throughout my life I’ve met people from different parts of the country who act as though saying you’re a feminist is equal to saying you want to swing naked on a wrecking ball Miley Cyrus–style. Being a feminist surely means you’re a bra-burning, pro-choice crazy lady who believes cats are superior to humans and thinks men are simply sperm donors. Feminists are socialists, vegans, and Democrats, for heaven’s sake! *And lo, she declared*

herself a feminist and there was a great clutching of pearls! Hide the children!

But I'm a feminist for the same reason I'm honest, bold, and sometimes ragey.

Because Jesus was all of those things.

In a time when women were some of the lowest of the low, Jesus embraced them with open arms. He reached out and touched them, bringing them into his inner fold, trusting them with his wisdom and words. Think of Mary, the sister of Martha, sitting patiently at his feet while he taught instead of running around the house making dinner (see Luke 10:39). At the time, women learning from men was pure and utter insanity. By allowing women to sit and be educated he was radically breaking rules.

Or think of the moment when Jesus healed the crippled woman; he referred to her as “daughter of Abraham” (Lk 13:10–13, 16). This would have shocked those around him—never before had those words been spoken, only “son of Abraham.” But Jesus says “daughter,” reminding us that the arms of salvation are wide and welcoming of women. In effect, he's saying, *There's room for you here.*

Jesus reaches out to women many times throughout his ministry. When he saved the woman caught in adultery, he looked society's norms in the face and told them no (see John 8:1–11). He saw inherent value and dignity in this woman—in spite of her past, her sin, the mistakes she'd made and any mistakes thrust upon her. When he conversed with the Samaritan woman, an out-cast getting water in the middle of the day, he gave her the greatest lesson of salvation history the world had ever seen (see John 4:7–26). When Jesus was resurrected, he chose Mary Magdalene to reveal himself to. Not Peter, or James, or John—a woman.

Catholic and *feminist* don't tend to go together, but I truly believe the Catholic Church is the most feminist institution in the world. To be a feminist is to believe that women are beautiful,

unique, and equal in dignity to men. What other group believes women are made in the image of God? That we were commissioned by God himself? That women are capable of raising children in the direst of circumstances, no matter our income or relationship status?

Oh, yeah, and Pope John Paul II called us all geniuses.¹ Doesn't sound like woman-hating to me.

The Church is absolutely filled to the brim with examples of believing in the importance of womanhood. The world needs so much more than your impeccable cookie-baking skills or your ability to quote scripture from memory. It needs more than your hashtags. It needs the resilience, strength, and true beauty given to you by God.

Listen, y'all: I'm not meek and mild. I don't wait until I'm called on. I move fast and break things; I live with a fierce impatience and a spirit of *go, go, go*. I've never once in my life been called *ladylike*.

And I'm tired. I'm so, so tired of talking about whether leggings count as pants or if chapel veils are necessary. I'm tired of women's talks that remind me about the dangers of "the media" and the necessity of "guarding my heart." I'm tired of being reduced to a handful of physical attributes.

Oh, Catholic women. You sweet things. Come here. Let's shut our rule books; there will be time for all of that later. Put down that granola bar that tastes like sawdust. Let's go outside and get some fresh air, breathing in the Word of God and a spirit of truth. Let's stop finger-pointing and whispering about bathing suit choices. And please, for the love of all that is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, let's stop saying that modest is hottest.

I want to sit across from you, hand you a steaming mug of coffee, look you in the eye, and tell you something:

It's up to us.

To quote the Venerable Fulton J. Sheen: "To a great extent the level of any civilization is the level of its womanhood. When a

man loves a woman, he has to become worthy of her. The higher her virtue, the more noble her character, the more devoted she is to truth, justice, and goodness, the more a man has to aspire to be worthy of her. The history of civilization could actually be written in terms of the level of its women.”²

If we spend our days discussing the perils of Facebook and that mean thing that political leader said, so will the rest of the world. If we spend our days racing toward holiness, helping our neighbors, and fighting for justice, *so will the rest of the world*. To be a Catholic feminist is to love the Church and to love our sisters, those next to us in the pew and those on the other side of the world.

I once eavesdropped on a men’s talk. (I’m nosy. Let’s establish that now.) The speaker referred to women as “teacups.”

Oh, for the *love*.

I know what he was trying to say because he is a good man I know, love, and trust. He meant that men should be protectors, and that women’s natural tendency toward being more relational leaves us greatly affected by our emotions. These are true sentiments! But can you imagine telling Mary, who stood by the Cross as her son perished, that she was a teacup? Or Joan of Arc, as she led men into battle? Or St. Teresa of Avila, as she became a Doctor of the Church? Teacups break when they’re dropped. They crack easily. They have *floral patterns*. The women are the ones who remained at the Cross, witnessing tragedy. Women are crafted with fortitude and strength; the Holy Spirit has given us, too, a spirit of power and love and a sound mind.

Throughout my life I’ve had the chance to speak with amazing Catholic women who believe in their hearts and souls in the equal dignity of men and women. These women are founding nonprofit health centers, creating beautiful art, and healing from unspeakable wounds. They’re fighting for peace, hope, and love, being bearers of the fruits of the Spirit. This—*this*—is what it means to be ladylike.

They're not teacups, and neither are you.

I see you, wondering why we get so lost in the trappings of what we look like and what we're supposed to be. I see you, sitting in women's talks, wondering why we're joking about shoes and reality TV when people are literally dying in the streets. (I love me some Kardashians, but come on now, there's *so much more* to talk about.) I see you wondering where the other Catholic women are when it comes time to protest racial injustices, hold the hands of post-abortive women, or care for the homeless. I see you listening as feminists tell you that you can't march, you can't write, you can't stand next to them in solidarity. They mock your beliefs in witty think pieces and memes, and both groups—the Catholic women and the feminists—shove you into boxes in which you don't belong. Bless 'em. I'm six feet two, y'all. I don't fit in many boxes.

There's room for you at this table. I'm scooting over. With this book, I want us to come together and discover the deeply rooted truth about Catholic womanhood. What does it mean to be a feminist? How can we support women in ways more meaningful than hot pink signs and hashtags? Is there a way to love margaritas and Mary and not be ashamed of either? Who are the biblical mothers we can look to when we need strength? How can we fully embrace the teachings of the Church while joining arms with our feminist sisters? By the time you're done reading, I want you to feel affirmed, confident, and encouraged in your journey as a Catholic woman.

It's time to embrace the *Catholic* and the *feminist*, blending them together to find God's true calling for you. It's time to find your own purpose and stop chasing that standard the world has so rudely dropped in your lap. There's room for you in this Church, sister, and there's room for you in this world. Promise.

Talitha koum.

Little girl, arise.



Claiming Room at the Table

What do you think of when you think of a “real Catholic woman”?

Let me paint you a picture of what I used to see.

I saw a woman who went to Mass every single day while raising her six impeccably groomed children. Her husband was a mechanical engineer, traffic control specialist, or one of those other jobs you can't really explain. She was quiet and submissive, letting her husband decide where the family lived and what they did on the weekends. She wore fashionable-yet-*modest* skirts and cooked organic, gluten-free dinners, all before leading her family in a Rosary—probably in Latin.

This idea of a “real Catholic woman” kind of haunted me because not only was I *not* that but I also didn't want to be. Six kids sounded like a lot. I don't wear many skirts. And the last time I was described as quiet was . . . never. I've literally never in my life been described as that.

So what's a girl to do? I sat through women's talk after women's talk that reminded me over and over again that the big problems facing me as a young Catholic woman were what I wore and how to treat men. These were the two doozies I was supposedly struggling with—according to speakers. But I really don't care how many inches long your skirt is, and I think how you treat a

man can't be summed up in an eight-slide PowerPoint presentation. Was there not a place for me in the Church? Was I not one of "us"?

I found myself feeling a touch isolated. More than once I've sat through presentations where I spent the whole time thinking, Seriously? The guys get to talk about being righteous warriors of justice while I have to have an hour-long conversation about whether leggings are pants? Are the guys getting lectured on how not to look at butts or . . . ?

As a bold woman who isn't afraid to raise her hand, I felt ignored by the Church in favor of girls who were quieter, more seen than heard. I wanted to dig my teeth in and talk about equal pay. Or refugees. Or systemic racism. Women could talk about abortion, sure, but not rape culture, subsidized child-care, or maternity leave laws. To me, those were "real Catholic women" issues. But everyone around me seemed to only want to talk about which brand of granola bar we should buy for the upcoming retreat snack. These experiences left me yearning to learn what a real Catholic woman was—and if I could ever hope to be one.

So what is a *real* Catholic woman? I could turn to other women, the media, or my priest of choice to investigate, but I went (almost) all the way to the top: the saints—one of my favorites, in fact.

According to Pope John Paul II, "The Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement."¹

Let's unpack that. Pope John Paul II essentially offers four hallmarks of womanhood:

1. *Self-offering*. Women are meant to offer ourselves as gifts to the world. This could look like a thousand different things. God has different directions for each of us; we can't all follow the same road map. To cloistered nuns, a self-offering means giving up things such as NPR, football games, and outlet malls to spend their lives praying for others. To activists, a self-offering means spending long hours campaigning for justice. To stay-at-home moms, a self-offering means bypassing a career that could bless them in many ways in order to raise little saints. Many of us are somewhere in between.

2. *Strength in sorrow*. When tragedies occur, women often bring strength and steadiness to the situation. It's easy for us to paint women as emotional. I mean, who didn't cry during that rainy scene in *The Notebook*? Curse you, Ryan Gosling! But through the fresh soil of emotions, strength is planted like a seed and grows and grows. We're powered by our empathy and deep connection to others. If we were unaffected by events, we'd feel no desire to change them. Instead, we hear statistics about campus rape and feel compelled to try to make a difference. We see mass shootings on the news and feel a tug toward prayer and letter writing. We have a friend who has a miscarriage and we organize meal trains and spiritual bouquets.

3. *Tireless devotion to work*. The book of Proverbs tells us that a good woman "sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks" (31:17). Catholic women aren't afraid of work. We dig in our hands and get them dirty. Catholic women don't believe in sitting idle, waiting for the world to fix itself. We know that by raising children, starting businesses, voting, participating in the sacraments, and washing the dishes, we're serving the Lord.

4. *Penetrating intuition*. Ask a woman about her intuition and she'll most likely tell you a story about a time she knew not to go on a date with the guy who ended up being a jerk, or a time she felt compelled to show up to Mass ten minutes early

and encountered a friend sobbing and in need of consolation. According to a 2013 study, the neural connections in women's brains are more efficient than men's.² That means women are often good at interpreting social cues. Our "penetrating intuition" is a gift from the Lord; it allows us to see past what's on the surface and deep into the hearts of others. To quote the philosopher Edith Stein, "[Women] comprehend not merely with the intellect but also with the heart."³

Once I learned these markers of Catholic womanhood, my view of a "real Catholic woman" was greatly expanded beyond homeschooling and skirt length.

It suddenly included moxie.

For two years after college I was a campus missionary. I was every inch of the starry-eyed idealistic millennial you're envisioning. I'm *still* that, in many ways, but my time as a missionary challenged me in ways I could never imagine. One of those challenges? Meeting girls who were in that sticky in-between place of daily Mass and Gloria Steinem. Girls who showed up to large-group events and actually asked the speaker challenging questions? Girls who came to Bible study with confusion about why Jesus scolded Martha for getting crap *done*? Girls who listened to singer-songwriter Audrey Assad through their headphones while writing papers on feminist theory? Girls who organized trips to the soup kitchen on Monday, said their Rosary on Tuesday, and went to campus protests on Wednesday? Those were my *people*.

They had moxie.

What is *moxie*? According to good ol' Merriam-Webster, it's "energy, pep, courage, determination." It's hard to be a girl full of moxie in a world that pushes you toward being "meek and mild." Women ask for raises at work much less often than men.⁴ Gender prejudices are instilled in us when we're only preschoolers.⁵ The Bible itself has some confusing verses that can easily be misinterpreted as instructing women to zip their lips. The girls I

met as a missionary were in the middle of the struggle between moxie and meekness.

But if you look up the word *meek*, it has two definitions. The first is “deficient in spirit and courage,” which sounds, well, not ideal. But the second is “enduring injury with patience and without resentment.”

What the heck, dictionary people! To me, those are complete opposites! To endure injury with patience brings to mind Jesus on the Cross, enduring the horror of horrors, all with patience and trust in the Lord. That takes an immense amount of spirit and courage. That second definition of meek—that’s what I choose to identify with. A meekness that withstands. When Peter instructs us to have a “quiet and meek spirit” (1 Pt 3:4), I believe he’s asking us to withstand enormous amounts of pain and suffering for the good of the Church, to not just sit idly while injustices take place around us and bite our tongues when we have something to say. To endure injury with determination is to live your life with a spirit of moxie. To have endless patience while discovering truth, picking up ideas and holding them up to the light? That, sister, is moxie. In that sense, meekness and moxie work perfectly twined together.

Think of the woman at the well. Jesus stands with her—an insane action at the time, by the way—and basically gives her a salvation history lesson. Instead of nodding and going, “Mmm hmm,” what does she do? She questions him. She wrestles with what he’s saying. After realizing that he’s the Messiah, she returns to her village and tells everyone about him. On one hand, she was meek—she endured a lesson she didn’t understand with great patience. On the other, she had moxie—she went out afterward and spread the Good News, no matter what it might cost her.

So who has moxie? Loud girls who lead marches and start petitions? Women at wells with whom Jesus decides to speak?

What if I told you that *all* Catholic women have moxie?