

Catholic women navigate tensions and possibilities

EARLY IN MY VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT, my former college campus minister asked me, “If there were a vocation genie, what would you wish for?” Without a second thought, I responded: “I want sisters I can pray with.”

Over a dozen years later, finally professed, and studying for my master’s degree, I often posed this question to young women looking for direction in their lives and studies. No matter their response, one theme prevailed: They wanted to belong to a community *and* longed for a church that welcomed them.

This refrain rings true in *Creating Spaces for Women in the Catholic Church* (Paulist Press, 2023), a collection of essays edited by Sister Sarah Kohles, O.S.F. that features the voices of nine theologically educated women. Addressing a multitude of issues, ranging from diverse prayer experiences to women’s ordination, *Creating Spaces* offers an invitation into the joys and struggles of these women as they navigate a deep longing to belong within the Catholic Church.

From the outset, it is clear the book is not about why they stay in the church (or in some cases don’t) but rather about how they create space within it. Each author’s story, in its own way, illustrates the space-making capacity and call of Catholic women today.

Early chapters center around the process of self-discovery by which women seeking a spiritual life within the church are called to claim their voices and spiritual authority. This search leads some into and ultimately out of religious life, while for others it reveals lessons in how women in

Creating Spaces for Women in the Catholic Church



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the church are forced to balance self-actualization with self-censorship. Later essays explore this conundrum from the perspective of their insights into the liberating capability of liturgy, secular and ecclesial communities, and intercultural ministry to create life-giving spaces of welcome for all God's people.

Despite experiencing what Stephanie Boccuzzi aptly describes as "a double dismissal" based on their lay status and gender, women, subordinated to laymen and unable to be ordained, still strive to make space. As Sarah Fariash marvels, "My own continued existence within the church is this unexplainable, crazy, insane thing that shouldn't happen. It happens anyway. I remain. I exist as a conduit of God's love despite being told that this is impossible. So do many other women." Remaining in the loving call of God, the authors of *Creating Spaces* witness to the fact that to exist as a woman in the church—let alone to serve as a woman in the church—is an exercise in embracing one's God-given gifts with authenticity while also confronting what right relationship with the institutional church means.

This latter reality and the tension it exposes is of utmost importance to vocation ministers. While accompanying discerners on their vocational journey is a graced experience of offering support in the sacred space of self-discovery and spiritual searching, part of that discernment may be grappling with what exactly it means to be vocationally linked to the Catholic Church. With keen insight and honest assessment, the essayists in this collection confront this balancing act head-on. "My Catholicism is a faith that brings me deep and profound joy and consolation despite many moments of anger and frustration," Kristina Ortega writes. Working with those discerning religious life means acknowledging the human nature of the Catholic Church, as well as our religious institutes.

Part of engaging such tension as ministers in and of the church is the critical call to examine if and how the narratives and cultural norms we perpetuate in our ministry create space for all people. For vocation ministers, this means carefully considering the story of religious life we tell and how we create space for those we encounter. Here the essay by Mary Perez, "Challenging the FOCUS Narrative of Evangelization," is particularly helpful in promoting an expansive model for ministry that meets each person in their particular context. In vocation ministry, this means remaining mindful of the diversity of cultures, experiences, and identities in the Body of Christ and choosing to enter each encounter with curiosity and radical relationality that resists monolithic narratives of what it means to be a vowed religious.

Those seeking a "how-to" guide for creating spaces for women in the Catholic Church will ultimately be disappointed by this collection, finding that the book more readily offers candid, personal examples than explicit ideas or prompts for ministry. Furthermore, although the book's back cover implies that women religious are the intended audience, reference to them or a larger, unifying call to action remains lacking until the editor's final essay.

It should also be noted that although the authors of *Creating Spaces* come from diverse backgrounds, the majority were educated at the same graduate theological institution. While not inherently restrictive, this shared formative context raises the question of how a wider breadth of women (both educated elsewhere and without theological education) might speak to their experience of finding and creating space in the church.

Nevertheless, a prayerful reading of these powerful testimonies to faith, community, and call reveals that, in the words of Lisa Cathelyn, "Truth is easier to carry when held with others." Serving in vocation ministry offers a unique opportunity to join in this effort to carry the truth.

As editor, Kohles draws the collection to a close by issuing a call to action that finally focuses the attention of the larger work. "Support is precisely what these women are searching for," Kohles writes. While these gifted women have created spaces for themselves, she says essential questions remain: "Can sisters act with intentionality in enlivening laywomen's leadership? What are the barriers that prevent laywomen from fully exercising their gifts? Can women religious help overcome these barriers? What might this look like?"

As religious life undergoes a massive paradigm shift, Kohles presses religious communities to consider how they could share resources to support laywomen in developing creative, connective, grassroots structures. Presenting a network of support in the vein of *Giving Voice*, Kohles acknowledges that any number of pathways to empowerment are possible, if only vowed religious can surrender to the possibility and need before them.

As vocation ministers accompany those discerning God's call, perhaps the deep need of laywomen and the great desire of religious to work toward the reign of God is a clarion call to forge new pathways in vocation ministry and the church at large. It seems the call is to solidarity in the stories we share and a concrete commitment to actively be a church where belonging and welcome are more than just heartfelt wishes but rather are essential to the spaces we create for all God's people. ■