

Pastoral Message, 21 March 2019

*As we go marching, marching, we bring the braver days;
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
(from Bread and Roses, by James Oppenheim)*

My Dear Friends in Christ,

The words to the above poem, later set to a stirring march tune (and recorded over the years by many artists) commemorates the successful 1912 textile workers strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The workers, predominantly female, struck and marched in protest demanding both fair wages and humane living conditions. Taken from a speech by one of the organizers, Helen Todd, the event itself became known as the Bread and Roses Strike. Harkening back to past generations in the struggle for justice and dignity, the song declares the purpose and aim of the current battle:

As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient calls for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew;
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too!

March is Women's History Month; a time set aside to remember and honor the achievements of American women and their contributions to the strength and richness of our national life. Yet what should impress us most about this history is not solely the achievements themselves, but that they were realized in the face of ages-old exclusion and discrimination, and under the given assumption, by men, that women had nothing significant to contribute in the public sphere. And for women of color, the barriers were even higher and the exclusion all but total.

The history of women has been, in fact, a history of struggle, a continuous history of battle waged against misogyny and ingrained prejudice. From the fight against black chattel slavery to the campaigns for universal suffrage, from efforts to curb domestic violence to labor marches like those in 1912 seeking a living wage and a fulfilling life, women have been in the forefront of social change, a moral force for progress in a country that has belittled their accomplishments while treating them as second-class citizens. Although change has gradually come, violence against women still continues unabated (with most crimes going unreported), inequity in salaries and chance for advancement in jobs still exist, the 1972 Equal Rights Amendment has yet to be ratified, and we still have not elected a woman as President (yet?).

But the voices will not be silenced, and the spirit will not be squelched. In mind of the now famous exchange between the Senate majority leader and the junior Senator from Massachusetts (as she tried to present a salient argument in a congressional hearing) women have been told 'no' again and again, but they have persisted! In areas of government and the arts, in science and technology, in medicine and research, and in the leadership of our churches, their persistence, their daring, their wisdom and courage

has inspired the lives both of women and men, and have made us together a braver and a better people. Indeed, the words of that 1912 marching song remain as true now as when they were first sung: 'The rising of the women means the rising of the race.'

Using the language of faith, our recognition of and gratitude for this legacy might also be expressed in the collect remembering four extraordinary women whose date in our Episcopal Church calendar is July 20 the women's rights activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Jenks Bloomer, the ex-slave and charismatic preacher Sojourner Truth, and the great liberator and 'Moses of her People' Harriet Tubman. Like all our prayers honoring the saints, it invites us to pattern our lives after their example. As citizens and as Christians, as women and men, by grace, we can do no less.

"O God, whose Spirit guides us into all truth and makes us free: Strengthen and sustain us as you did your servants [whom we remember today]. Give us vision and courage to stand against oppression and injustice and all that works against the glorious liberty to which you call all your children; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

(Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints, Church Publishing 2010, p. 477)

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +