

How Sisters fared

Petà Dunstan considers documentary evidence

Women of the Church: The religious experience of monastic women

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THIS book is not a history of the religious life for women. It is, rather, a chronicle of how women have been treated in religious communities throughout the history of the Church. The experience of these monastic women is explored through their varied stories.

The author takes us on a journey through the Desert Mothers, the aristocratic women of Rome who organised their families into communities, the medieval mystics, and the martyrs, to the modern debates about enclosure. The writing is detailed and scholarly, and yet fluent and moving. For

anyone interested in women religious, this is an eloquent account.

The book is a clear challenge to traditionalists in the Church. The documentary evidence (almost all written by men) shows that women were considered socially and spiritually inferior on account of their sex. Today, conservatives regularly lament that the modern Church is being infected with values from secular society. Yet attitudes to women in the Early Church were as much shaped by the contemporary society as by the witness of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. It is hard to see how modern liberal values are more of a threat to the integrity of the Church than the misogynistic attitudes of earlier centuries.

What this book does not address is what women religious should do today as a greater freedom beckons, at least in the Western world. Defining their monastic experience as an endurance test in surviving

patriarchal tyranny is one thing. But what if they are now given power and authority? It could be argued that men have treated women badly over the centuries not simply because they are men, but because they have power — just as the rich have always exploited the poor, imperialists dominated their colonies, and humans have abused animals and the natural world. Any human being given too much power tends to be corrupted by it, irrespective of race, gender, or religion.

The Gospels show us in the humility and generosity of Jesus how authority ought not to be about power, but about service. The challenge is how to shape the Church and its institutional structures to reflect this. Giving women equal access to power will not in itself solve the problem.

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