

Theresa A. Yugar, PhD
Pax Christi, Southern California
“Forward through Darkness, Forward into Light”

Introduction

Women Suffragists in the United States, 19th & 20th Centuries

August 26th, 1920, 144 years after the U.S. Constitution granted this privilege to white men in 1776, the 19th Amendment affirmed women's status as full citizens by giving them the right to vote. This year, we celebrate the 100th anniversary of this amendment which states that women “shall not be denied” the right to vote “on account of sex.” Historically, white and black women suffragists labored for over 100 years to secure this privilege. Like women suffragists today, they lectured, wrote, marched, lobbied and practiced acts of civil disobedience. And their shared persistence made this possible.

Today, women are indebted to white women suffragists Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina Grimké (1805–1879),¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793-1880), Martha Coffin Wright (1806-1875), Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), and Alice Paul (1887-1977). We also need to be grateful for black women suffragists Maria Stewart (1803-1879), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), Frances Harper (1862–1908), Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), Adella Hunt Logan (1863-1915),² Fannie Lou Hamer (1917-1977),³ and Constance Baker Motley (1921-2005).⁴

The priorities of the Movement, similar to today, differed for white and black women. The priority for white women was uniquely the right to vote. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “argued that white women deserved the right to vote more than men who were black, or Asian American[s], or immigrants, or who couldn't read.”⁵ Her prophetic words in the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments in Seneca Falls, New York, 1848, need to be understood in this context. She states:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁶

Sadly, Stanton, like the founding fathers of our nation did not include Black women in her democratic vision of equality for all.

¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 185.

² Ama Ansa and Morgan Angel, “Votes for Women means Votes for Black Women,” <https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/votes-women-means-votes-black-women>, August 16, 2018, accessed September 12, 2020.

³ Martha Jones, *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All* (New York: Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2020).

⁴ Kamala Harris’ full speech at the 2020 Democratic National Convention speech.

⁵ Laura Free, Episode 1, “Myths and Sentiments,” Humanities, New York, 2.20 minutes, <https://humanitiesny.org/amended-episode-1-myths-and-sentiments/>, accessed September 1, 2020.

⁶ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Declaration of Sentiments and Women’s Right to Vote,” at the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, 1848.

Unlike their white sisters who were “white, wealthy, and free,”⁷ Black women suffragists in this era were subjected to physical and sexual violence by their white masters, male and female,⁸ and endured oppression because of their “race, citizenship status, and class.”⁹ Subsequently, their focus was “bodily integrity” for all women.¹⁰

Frances Harper, an antislavery activist, lecturer, writer, and supporter of the underground railroad, stated at a Women's Rights Convention, in New York, in front of Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, “that justice is not fulfilled so long as woman is unequal before the law.”¹¹ In Harper's lecture, she addressed structural racism in America where black women feared daily for their safety.¹² Her hope was that white women would check their privilege, as we should today. At the time, the 14th amendment declared that “Black Americans were not citizens.” Moreover, though the 15th amendment prohibited the government from denying a “citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's “race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” unfortunately, racist laws continued in the form voter suppression tactics. Harper's critique was that voting had nothing to do with racism. And that Black voters, men and women, ultimately had no political power. Harper's lecture demonstrates how Black women “defied both racism and sexism to fight for the ballot, and how they wielded political power to secure the equality and dignity of all persons.”¹³ She prophetically stated:

I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dewdrops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The good would vote according to their convictions and principles; the bad as dictated by preju[d]ice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the strongest side of the question, with the winning party.¹⁴

In her era, like black women in our era, Harper invites her white suffragist sisters to work for the full equality of ALL women.

Women Suffragists in the 21st century¹⁵

Like women suffragists in the past, Catholic and non-Catholic women are also leveraging their power through lecturing, writing, and engaging in civil disobedience. Under the leadership of Sr. Simone Campbell, lawyer, lobbyist and executive director of NETWORK, they are advocating the position that Catholics have a more nuanced perspective of human rights and the dignity of all people. NETWORK's concern is that a single-issue election focused on abortion will

⁷ Laura Free, Episode 2, “Any Woman,” Humanities, New York, <https://humanitiesny.org/amended-episode-2-any-woman/>, accessed September 1, 2020.

⁸ Laura Free, Episode 2, “Any Woman,” in a conversation with Martha S. Jones, author of *Vanguard: How Black Women Broke Barriers, Won the Vote, and Insisted on Equality for All*.

⁹ Laura Free, “Introducing: Amended,” Episode 1, 1.50 minutes, https://humanitiesny.org/our-work/amended/?gclid=CjwKCAjwnef6BRAgEiwAgv8mQYJ-EW9XTPZIYdzmCs-dNxsHDOI7OL-hoF_zMqSluJMRFqksKfscHRoCbAoQAvD_BwE, accessed September 9, 2020.

¹⁰ Laura Free, Episode 2, “Any Woman,” Ibid.

¹¹ Laura Free, Episode 3, “Of Rights and Wrongs,” Humanities New York, accessed September 11, 2020, 10 minutes.

¹² Ibid., 18-18:30 minutes.

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ Frances Harper, National Women's Rights Convention, New York, 1866.

¹⁵ Madeleine Davidson, “Progressive Groups Urge Catholics to Vote Their Conscience,” <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/progressive-groups-urge-catholics-vote-their-conscience>, August 18, 2020.

result in another four years of Trumpian policies that have a complete disregard, for women, their bodies, individuals of color, and the environment.¹⁶ To assist voters they created an “Equally Sacred Scorecard,” which “compares President Trump's and Vice President’s Biden’s positions on the issues that Pope Francis names as “equally sacred.”¹⁷ NETWORK’s score card privileges policies that reflect gospel values, “I came so that everyone would have life and have it in its fullest.”¹⁸

Among Biden's values, in contrast to President Trump, are:

1. Healthcare and nutrition for pregnant women
2. Research for Black women, and maternal mortality numbers
3. Family-friendly workplace policies
4. Advocates for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors
5. Policies that address systemic racism and xenophobia
6. Financial support for Native American Tribes
7. Policies that oppose discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and disabled people
8. Opposes the death penalty
9. Believes housing is a human right
10. Supports the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
11. Protects people from predatory financial practices
12. Protects the Affordable Care Act
13. Opposes cuts to and restrictions on Medicaid
14. Supports the priorities of the disability community
15. Supports the health and wellbeing of older individuals
16. Upholds the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act
17. Supports raising the minimum wage
18. Protects workers' right to organize
19. Seeks to accurately measure and address poverty
20. Supports a just tax code
21. Opposes expanding the U.S.-Mexico border wall.
22. Supported DACA protections
23. Bases immigration policy on family unity
24. Ensured humane treatment at the border and by interior enforcement
25. Extends support to immigrant families in the U.S. and treats them with respect
26. Respects and observes international laws on asylum.

NETWORK’s research demonstrates that Vice President Joe Biden most reflects the Catholic social teaching of a Consistent Ethic of Life. Thus far, President Trump’s legislative measures undermines life-giving policies. And, his decision to be “pro-life” is a strategic decision to win the Catholic vote on the single issue of abortion.

¹⁶ NETWORK: Advocates for Justice, Inspired by Catholic Sisters, “Equally Sacred Priorities for the 2020 Election,” <https://networkadvocates.org/2020election/scorecard?fbclid=IwAR3KK17QF-H0VZZ4s55wDcJ7b8BFcu0Y1Ph22P1zImLxhH-QFAb934HFCIA>, accessed September 8, 2020.

¹⁷ NETWORK, “Equally Sacred Priorities for 2020 Voters,” <https://networkadvocates.org/2020election/scorecard/>, accessed September 11, 2020.

¹⁸ *The Gospel of John*, 10:10.

Mary Hunt, a Catholic feminist theologian, has a similar critique about this election year not having a singular issue focus on abortion. She criticizes the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops adopted preamble to a Catholic voter guide stating that the “threat of abortion” remains the “preeminent priority” for Catholic bishops.”¹⁹ She continues this “anti-choice rhetoric . . . baptized and confirmed by U.S. Catholic Bishops . . . passes over Trump's egregious immigration policies, economic injustice to people made poor, and racial rhetoric simply because the President professes to be anti-abortion.”²⁰ Hunt states this is a “theological mistake in the making,”²¹ given the concrete economic, physical, and social challenges, mentioned above, that God’s peoples are experiencing now.

Interestingly, Pope Francis concurs with Sr. Simone and Mary Hunt when he cautions Catholics that it is a “harmful ideological error” to singularly focus on “one particular ethical issue or cause that they themselves defend.” In his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, “On the Call to Holiness in Today's World,” Pope Francis states:

Our defence of the innocent unborn, for example, needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection. Thus, the call to holiness in living out a Catholic lifestyle is to equally value all lives, of which the unborn child is one.²²

Catholic Women/Feminist Theologians

Catholic women, both lay and religious, are advocating for a holistic agenda for the 2020 election, one rooted in the Catholic teaching of a Consistent Ethic of Life. These women theologians and professed religious women are our suffragists today, continuing the work of their foremothers. They are Sr. Simone Campbell, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, Hilary Clinton, Sr. Joan Chittister, House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi; Sr. Theresa Kane, Sr. Beatrice Garcia, Sandy Balonado, Sr. Mary Sean Hodges, Mary Hunt, Sr. Barbara Hagel, Sr. Jane Rudolph, Cathleen Crayton, Sr. Helen Prejean, Sr. Ivone Gebara, Sr. Yolanda Tarango, Sr. Walter Maher, and more. I also want to honor the lives of important suffragists we have lost including the late Sr. Patricia Reif, Sr. Ada María Isasi Díaz, Sr. Patricia Krommer, Sr. Marjorie Truitt, Grace Moore, Sr. Anita Caspary, and Peg Linnehan.

¹⁹ Ibid. Michael J. O’Loughlin, “U.S. bishops: ‘The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority,’” November 12, 2019,

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/11/12/us-bishops-threat-abortion-remains-our-preeminent-priority>, accessed September 11, 2020.

²⁰ Mary Hunt, “Catholic Bishops’ Theological Mistakes on Abortion Come at a High Price,” Religion Dispatches, <https://religiondispatches.org/catholic-bishops-theological-mistakes-on-abortion-come-at-a-high-price/>, accessed September 3, 2020.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Pope Francis, *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, Apostolic Exhortation, “On the Call to Holiness in Today's World,” March 19, 2018.

Women Religious Communities

Catholic sisters model for us a collective collaborative approach as they share resources, and partnerships, to address human rights issues from the Muslim ban, immigration, asylum, census and citizenship issues, health care, education, voting, and a “Right to Life” and a “Right to Birth,” meaning that considerations for the child after birth are just as important as the fetus itself. Maria Elena, a lay woman affiliated with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange comments that Catholic sisters are justice promoters as they understand that to address social justice issues is to work together. In this work, NETWORK and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious are important allies.

Bee-democracy

Catholic women are building the Kingdom of God as they live out new leadership paradigms that reflect their commitments to the poor, the vulnerable and the exploited earth. Their communities model radical communal paradigms. Sr. Barbara Hagel, MSJ Dominican of Mission San Jose, understands her religious community and the Church as a bee-democracy. Her metaphor of leadership is like a beehive that has one queen bee whom they choose and follow, as they work together for a more sustainable world. Like the Church, these women worker bees are collaborating together for a more sustainable world. They work in collective colonies which form makes the organism. Moreover, they organize and communicate with each other as they need each other, like us, to coexist. Thus, carrying out their ministry is dependent on the efforts of all.

Conclusion

NETWORK states:

“[W]e are called to think and act for the common good through our democratic systems.”²³

We are [also] called to “live out of these beliefs to restore faith, dignity, and morality in our nation.”²⁴

Former First Lady Michelle Obama in her Democratic Convention speech said that for this election we need to win in large numbers so the election cannot be contested.²⁵ At this moment in U.S. history and politics, what we need is an intersectional lens as modeled for us by black women suffragists nuanced with a Catholic consistent ethic of life which will give us hope for the 46th president of the United States. Having said this, the fact that Kamala Harris has been selected as the vice-presidential candidate for the Democrats offers us a great deal of hope as she brings the voices and experiences of both white and black women suffragists.

In the 1920’s, the women suffragists’ slogan was “Forward through Darkness, Forward into Light.” At this moment in history we need ALL Catholics, men and women, to live out and reclaim our values and MORAL COMPASS in a world that is very Dark.

Loving God, Creator of all that holds your Sacred Being, we place our country before you.
We pray that all Americans take seriously our responsibility to vote for the leadership

²³ “Becoming Spirit-Filled Voters: Our Faith & Election Day,” Ibid.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ Michelle Obama's full speech at the Democratic National Convention | 2020 DNC Night 1
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKy3iiWjhVI&feature=share>, accessed September 11, 2020.

needed in our time to heal, support, and reverence all people, that we might live in freedom, justice, and peace upon this blessed land. Forgive our past failures as we pledge anew to embrace the sacredness of our fragile planet, live in harmony with all of creation, and bow in humble gratitude for this precious gift of life, so abundantly lavished upon us and freely given for ALL to receive. Amen.²⁶

²⁶ Sr. Jane Rudolph, of the MSJ Dominicans of Mission San Jose community shared with me this Prayer for the 2020 Presidential elections an email communication.