

PREFACE

“According to current folklore, a young boy was once told about the many conquests of hunters over the lion. This story intrigued the little boy; he was puzzled and inquired, ‘If the lion is supposed to be the king of the jungle, why is it that the hunter always wins?’ The father responded, ‘The hunter will always win until the lion writes his own story!’” (Shannon 1991:98).

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Professor David Shannon tells this story in an essay published in 1991. Its wisdom is unmistakable. The victors, the oppressors, and the dominators always find a way to tell their own tales, to look good in them, and to be remembered. The ‘lions’ of the world, however, have no voices. Their opinions, their lives, and their struggles are unrecorded; their histories unwritten. Therefore, they will always lose.

This is the story of one lion – or, in my case, a lioness. In my 40+ years, I’ve maintained a conflicted relationship with the

Catholic Church. A part of me loves it, is devoted to it. In some ways, I owe my education, my profession, my position in my community, even my marriage, to the Church that helped form my ideals and shape my conscience. In a real and tangible sense, I owe my life to the Church.

But another part of me feels distanced, unwanted, and excluded. The Church that helped educate me throughout my elementary, secondary, and post-secondary school years also taught me that men are superior to women, that women are unworthy of holding an ordained position in the holy Church, and that Blacks are inferior to Whites. It showed me the damage that racism and sexism can do to a person's self image. It had no patience for uncertainty, made no effort to help young minds resolve doubts. It compelled me to accept doctrine, tradition, and praxis unquestioningly. It discouraged me from seeking the truth. Finally, one day, the very Church that I so loved showed me the door.

Why I Left the Church tells of my formative years in the Church. My relationships with the nuns, priests, and my mother are remembered here as I reflect on incidents that sometimes brought me closer to God, sometimes confused me, and sometimes just plain frightened me. The image I have of myself as an adult, a woman, a parent, an African American, a teacher, a wife, and a scholar was shaped by the Church. The relationships I've developed with friends, colleagues, and fellow parishioners were molded by the many role models in the Church that I had as a child. In short, I am what I am today, in no small part, because of the Church.

So I struggle with this paradox: the same Church that has done great good for my family and me has also done harm in the

name of God and Holy Scripture. Many priests and nuns found themselves caught in the evil web of racism. My own mother became both victim and victimizer as she tried to teach us that the racism we experienced at the hands of various priests and nuns was right and just. She was trapped, and tried unwittingly to hold us in the same trap. Lucky for us, time and persistence weakened the bonds of ignorance and we were able to escape.

Not everyone was so lucky.