

EDITORIAL

Role Models, Not 'Spokesmodels': March 2010

I DON'T GET IT

When did you first hear the expression 'spokesmodel'? Where did that come from?

I know a number of beautiful women with knowledge and experience, and a lot to say - but I don't listen to them because of how they look. The idea that we should listen to someone because they are famous for their physical appearance, and make a living out of it, is quite bizarre. "She's a supermodel, she must know about environmental science" – really? I don't get it.

Perhaps this phenomenon gives a voice to a few beautiful women who are more accustomed to being looked at than heard, but how does it empower the rest of us? What message does it send about who is 'entitled' to be heard?

It seems a great leap backwards in the struggle to be faithful to the Gospel vision of the equal dignity of women and men.

But is it only the shallow world of fashion and PR that holds up 'spokesmodels' rather than role models? Do we have our own more subtle version of this dynamic in the Church?

It is worth reflecting on whether or not we are endorsing only a certain limited range of experiences and attributes in our choices of women for leadership and public roles. Is there a model, whether conscious or not, of a 'proper' Catholic woman at play here?

WOMEN OF SUBSTANCE

As we prepare to celebrate International Women's Day on 8 March, we mourn the loss of a great and good Australian Catholic woman, and celebrate the recognition of another female intellectual within the Church. These women are real role models.

Rosemary Goldie was an independent woman, one of the most significant Australian Catholic intellectuals of her generation, and a pioneer in lay participation in the teaching and action of the Church at the highest levels.

Because she spent so much of her life living and working abroad, not many young Australian women would know her story. I was lucky to meet her on a number of occasions and to benefit as a student in Rome from her encouragement. This brilliant, determined 'little old lady' was no 'spokesmodel'. She was the Mary MacKillop of her generation.

I was also lucky to meet Dr Flaminia Giovanelli during my studies in Rome. In those days she was in charge of the library of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. She was wise, welcoming and helpful to students. It is pleasing to see her contribution valued and recognised through her appointment as Under Secretary (third in charge) to the Council. That the Council sees gender as an issue of justice in the Church, rather than simply a pastoral matter, is reflected in the composition of its workforce with a nearly 50 / 50 ratio of men and women.

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