

1. Retrieving Women's Voices: Four Doctors Of The Church:

In the recent past, an awareness of the importance of women's theological voices has mushroomed. A mark for most of Christian history, theology has been conceived and written by men. Thankfully, the Catholic Church has named four women as Doctors of the Church: Hildegard of Bingen (2014), Catherine of Siena (1970), Teresa of Avila (1970), and Therese of Lisieux (1994). After a brief history of the origins of this official title, we will explore guidelines for the interpretation and appropriation of this material in an open, intelligent, and critical fashion.

1. Recognition of Women as Theologians: Because women were not seen as "fit" to teach, preach, or write about God in an official, public way, their theological ideas frequently never saw the light of day, were neglected, or even destroyed. Inclusion of their surviving works in the theological canon leads the community to a more inclusive, broader understanding of theology.

Women's theology challenges us to move from gender stereotypes to the realization that these four women Doctors of the Church were complex, full, profound, and courageous human beings. Their sure command of the theological tradition was expressed in creative, existential, and imaginative ways.

II. Course Goals: In this course we will explore various aspects of these four women theologians: Hildegard's theology of the Holy Spirit; Catherine's theology of Incarnation; Teresa's theology of the human person; Therese's theology of the cross

We will situate these theological works in their socio-historical context. We will broaden what we understand by the term "theology." This examination will hopefully enable us to do our own theology as "grassroots theologians."

III. "Doctors of the Church" Since the early church (400-600 C. E), select individuals (popes, bishops, and theologians) were acknowledged as having a notable, positive impact on the life of the Church. Early names included: Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Jerome from the West
Athanasius, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom from the East

Later, the title "Doctor of the Church" was formalized. Key requirements included a body of theological work; holiness of life; fidelity to the Gospel; and an enduring contribution to the life of the Church. The naming of women as "Doctors of the Church" raises the issue of ecclesial authority. For the first time in Catholic

history, this action acknowledges women as "official" teachers and preachers within the Body of Christ.

IV. Methodology: The Do's and Do Not's of Retrieving Women's Theology

We must be careful to chart a middle way between two extremes: History is irrelevant to the present and therefore not worth our time and effort. Everything in the past is sacrosanct - just because it is old.

Instead, a middle way involves detailed historical work. The cultivation of two complementary mindsets is helpful. An attitude of embrace approaches the material with openness, empathy, and a willingness to be surprised with unexpected insights. An attitude of suspicion asks hard questions and is alert to issues of privilege, power, and control.

With the help of these guidelines and careful attention to primary texts in their various historical contexts, we can arrive at a critical understanding of this theology. To be avoided are simplistic interpretations or projections of our own needs and agendas onto the past. The past is not accessible to us as an "open book" but it can be a rich storehouse that enhances and deepens contemporary faith.

A distinctive quality of these theologies is their embrace of emotion as well as reason. They often turn to symbolic, mystical language as a tool to speak about God. Metaphors and images provide space in which we can extend meaning as we work to find language for the incomprehensible God - a primary task of theology. Be curious. Be open. Be humble. Be willing to take risks.

Reflection Questions

1. What drew you to this course of study?
2. How might the theology of women contribute to the Church's most pressing needs in the twenty-first century?
3. What role does gender play in your understanding of Christian theology?