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Dear Friends,

Despite many WATAC members being in lockdown this has been a fruitful time! On the international scene, a group of English women organized a lay led synod called 'Root and Branch'. All the talks from the synod are [available online](#). Of particular interest is the 'statement of faith' that was developed. This is called the Bristol Text and I encourage you to review this statement. Dr Eleanor Flynn from Melbourne participated and led the concluding prayer. Thank you Eleanor!

I'm sure there were a few WATAC members at the Plenary Council. I know there were many WATAC members involved in Plenary Tracker (a daily review of the Plenary organized by Concerned Catholics Canberra and Goulburn). Congratulations to Tracy McEwan and Danielle Lynch for fine work in moderating these panels. You can access the [recordings](#).

[Australian Women Preach](#) continues to flourish! WATAC and The Grail have decided to continue to fund this dynamic and practical approach to being the Church we want to have. I'm proud of the work of the volunteer committee, led by Tracy McEwan during 2021. Members are Patricia Gemmell, Colleen Rowe, Angela Maquis, Bec Beisler and Elizabeth Lee. Suggestions for suitable women preachers are appreciated.

I'm delighted to include with this issue a copy of '*Be Patient, Ladies! Be Patient!*': *Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), 1982–2021* by Dr Patricia Madigan OP. WATAC commissioned Trish to write this 'herstory', originally published in the Australasian Catholic Record and reprinted with permission for WATAC members. Congratulations Trish! What a thrill to capture some of the WATAC story in this way. Feedback to Trish can be sent to pmadigan@opeast.org.au

WATAC Presents on 8 December will be facilitated by Dr Cristina Lledo-Gomez. Her guests

will be from the Muslim and Jewish faiths and the conversation will explore how Mary is understood and celebrated in the various traditions. Not to be missed! Please reach out to women who may not be confident with technology and invite them to join you for the session.

Please note the WATAC in Dialogue (November) and WATAC Presents (December) will be at 7.30 pm Sydney, 6.30 pm Brisbane, 7 pm Adelaide, 4.30 pm Perth. This later time is an effort to cater for women across Australia and is a trial for two months. What your preferred time for these Zoom sessions? Let me know.

Looking ahead, please think about who you will nominate for life membership of WATAC. Awards are announced at the AGM. The AGM will be held on Zoom and is scheduled for 12 March 2021 from 10.30 – 1.00 pm.

It's not too early to think too about who to nominate for the WATAC Committee for 2022.

Welcome to the **fifty plus** new members of WATAC who joined in the past month! Annual subscriptions are due January. Thank you to those who renewed early following my 'membership drive' email.

Some regional WATAC groups are looking for new coordinators. I'd love to see more groups established. Think about what you could do to help please. How a group operates is very flexible. Contact me if you are interested.

Blessings,



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PLENARY MEMBERS PRESENT FINAL REPORTS OF FIRST ASSEMBLY

An impassioned call for “a prayer for the future of our common home, a Gospel for the home of our future generations” was made during the final reporting back on small group discernment by Plenary Council members today.

The presenters’ comprehensive reports on the 16 agenda questions included proposals and requests for further investigation and research to create a more missionary, Christ-centred Church in Australia.

In presenting her group’s proposals, Catherine McAleer was emotional as she concluded her summary of the question on responding to the call to ecological conversion. She said the group sought acknowledgement of the “primacy of ecological conversion; personal and communal” and asked for the “explicit adoption” of the Pope Francis’ Laudato Si’ Action Plan as the vehicle for that conversion to a Church openly committed to God’s creation.

Shaun De Zylva said his group discussed ways of creating a culture of conversion for renewal and mission through truth-telling, story-telling and proclaiming the Gospel for renewal through personal and communal conversion. Specific proposals included parishes establishing small groups that meet for an annual synod and that each diocese should have a synod at least once every three years; studying and learning from the synodal journey that resulted in the Uluru Statement of the Heart; encouraging small ecclesial communities (home/family groups) with learnings from the early Church; and establishing forums for open dialogue and discernment especially with those groups who feel excluded in the Church.

Sabrina-Ann Stevens reiterated the need to determine an appropriate process to support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and said her group believed a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution was “important for our nation”. Her group also recommended that the gifts of First Nations Catholics be fully embraced through the inclusion of Indigenous leaders as partners in decision-making at every level of Church - parishes, dioceses, Catholic education, organisations and agencies. “There is a need to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities – and the parishes, schools and agencies that engage with them - with appropriate resources to enable their full participation in Church and society,” she added.

Fr Trevor Trotter told the assembly there was some discussion in his group about the full understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist as the Real Presence of Christ – Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity – being in a state of decline in Australia.

“We acknowledge that one of the challenges that we face is how we might better welcome God’s people to the Eucharist and assist them to understand what this sacrament offers, entails and asks of those who receive it,” he said.

“Recognising that fewer people today participate in the sacramental life of the Church than in previous times, the question of how best to provide formation on the sacraments arises. Such formation will need to focus on both deepening people’s faith and increasing their knowledge.”

Considering how to better embrace the diverse liturgical traditions of the Churches which make up the Catholic Church and the cultural gifts of immigrant communities, Theresa Simon stressed that her group did not support the use of the term “immigrant communities” because it did not capture the “fullness of what we are trying to describe”.

The group also recognised the need for a more organised and coordinated approach, at a national level, to the inclusion of the Eastern Churches, rites of the Latin Church and culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the Catholic Church in Australia.

“We must not do this simply for the satisfaction of those Churches and communities, but rather for the richness and gifts that diversity brings to the entire Church,” she said. “We must do more than acknowledge diversity. Rather, we must enshrine diversity in all we do, in particular when it comes to breathing with an Eastern and Western lung.”

Br Peter Carroll gave a detailed report on his group’s discernment on formation for mission leadership, with several specific ideas to achieve this. It started from an understanding that “the mission of the Church is the mission of Jesus, which is to make the Reign of God a reality; to incarnate it in our place and time”.

On ordained ministry, Brigid Cooney said her group suggested identifying elements in the current formation of seminarians that are positive and valuable, but also elements that are problematic and can produce ordained ministers that are not living in ways that draw people to Christ. One proposal was for a research project into international models of seminary pre-ordination formation programs and lifelong formation that have had proven and demonstrated successful outcomes that could be adapted for the Church in Australia.

“Of particular interest are formation programs that are grounded in the community, provide meaningful extended exposure to parish life, programs that support solid intellectual, human, pastoral and spiritual formation,” she said. Her group believed promoting vocations was a task for all members of the Church and that a renewed focus on vocations could be assisted by a Year of Prayer for Vocations.

Members also recognised a need for opportunities in ministry for single, lay Catholics, “a genuine lay apostolate that fosters community, which is different from young adult or family ministry”.

Dr Mark Copland spoke about his group’s discussion on governance leading to more effective proclamation of the Gospel, which led to two specific proposals. The first related to canons 127 and 129 in the Code of Canon Law, particularly regarding the inclusion of the concept of consensus in legislation. The second recommended that councils, for example finance and pastoral councils, particularly at the parish level, be given a deliberative vote rather than a consultative vote on all matters.

The group recognised that lay people already exercise this power in some contexts, but suggested this could be improved through legislation. “While civil society thinks of governance in terms of power, the root of governance, in the Catholic understanding, is service rather than power,” he said. “Christ washes the feet of his apostles before he gives us the ultimate gift of love. If we work in the spirit of synodality, love must come before power.”

Virginia Bourke said her group proposed using the governance report *The Light from the Southern Cross* and responses to this report from various groups to develop a governance framework that would be adopted by the Plenary Council in the second assembly.

Danielle Fairthorne said her group engaged in rich discussion about the convergences appearing throughout the week on the topic of Catholic education. The three themes emerging were mission, witness and encounter. “It is clear that the team believes a working group needs to be established to respond to the themes above through a clear roadmap,” she said. Similarly, Claire Victory said members of her group looking at Catholic agencies expressed an interest in continuing the process of developing concrete proposals over the next nine months.

Recommendations to date included ensuring leaders of key agencies connect more frequently with leaders within the dioceses, allowing for shared leadership for a shared mission, and listening to different voices, including those who feel excluded.

She said welfare agencies, underpinned by Catholic Social Teaching, are often the public face of the Church.

Written by a Guest Contributor, originally published in [mn.newstoday](https://www.mn.newstoday.com) and published on October 09, 2021. Reprinted with permission.

THE PLENARY COUNCIL - THE SPIRIT INSPIRES BUT WE MUST ACT ON THIS INSPIRATION

Dr Nimmi Candappa

When I was younger, I appeared to have a knack at finding things and would be asked by my family to help find a lost item. So, after a quick prayer to St Anthony, I would scoot around the house looking under this, or behind that, opening drawers, ruffling through papers. The family member with the lost item would often trail behind me, showing me likely places the item could be in but then dismissing the need to look there because “I’ve already looked there”. I would insist on re-looking anyway, and inevitably, the item would be in a place already searched. My thinking was that if I looked and it was not there, there was nothing lost.

We must do the same in this upcoming Plenary Council, open ourselves fully to the Spirit, even the areas we are sure we have ‘correct’, confident that no harm can come from opening up anything to the Spirit. Some 80 years since the last Plenary Council, with a backdrop of diminished congregational numbers, limited priestly numbers, and the Royal Commission into sexual abuse, it seems timely to formally ask the Spirit once again to help guide our Church in Australia in this next stage of our faith journey.

It is a humble yet enlightened move to revamp our God-focus. It is an initiative to help us as Church be more fully a Christ-centred Church, throbbing with love for our neighbour; and to identify obstacles to achieving this goal. So it makes no sense to put up, in some areas, barriers to the all-encompassing gaze of the Spirit, effectively saying to the Spirit - ‘look inside here but not there’, ‘come thus far but no further’, ‘don’t bother looking there Spirit, we’ve already looked there’.

In order to reap the bounteous fruits available to us from this Council, we need to be humble enough to hold up all aspects of our Church to the Spirit; be daring enough to truly hear what the Spirit has to say in all these aspects, no matter how challenging; and then be prepared to act on it all, with conviction, determination and staying power.

The agenda for the Plenary Council, as with any agenda, includes broad categories under which the details must be discussed. If however, the resulting discussion under this Agenda remains broad and safe, coy of any of the key issues raised in the first stage of discernment, we risk a perfunctory effort at discernment of the Spirit, likely to do more harm than good overall. Even during the initial discernment stages, when parishioners were asked what God is asking of us in Australia at this time, some cynicism of the possibility of tangible outcomes of this latest

discernment efforts had crept in, respondents asking in return ‘why would this time be any different?’.

Perhaps the respondents remembered the 1996 attempt of the *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* project that considered means of creating a greater involvement of women in the Church, extensive attempts that defined clear decisions and actions, actions which remain mostly undone 25 years later. Or perhaps the cynicism related to the roadblocks we can create for ourselves as Church, tying ourselves up in knots through many artificial mandates, insisting that we must do in the future, what and how we have done in the past, and then wondering why we find ourselves in the same ineffective situations.

When we seek the Spirit’s guidance in this Council, we must place complete trust in the Spirit and in the Plenary Council process and dare to raise to the scrutiny of the Spirit, everything identified in the initial discernment stages. It is after all the one Spirit that guides us, in all the areas, in the past and today.

Council members must also be daring and resolute in truly hearing it all. We know only too well that as humans, few if any of us, act as the perfect conduit for the Spirit’s voice, conscious and unconscious bias, along with our own opinions, at some level, playing a part in any discernment. Yet much effort has been made by the Plenary Team to enable members to more clearly hear the Spirit amidst these other influences. It is up to the members to be willing to listen without filters, knowing the role of the Council member is to offer a voice for the Spirit, not a voice for one’s opinion. Recognising that the Spirit guides but does not impose, an unwavering focus by each member is needed to hear the challenging, as clearly as the comfortable.

Then, we must act on the discerned guidance: imagining ourselves as those first Christians, awe-struck by the presence and recollections of Jesus, intoxicated by Love, emboldened by the Resurrection, open, supple of heart, generous to a fault and protective of other believers. With this attitude, in this light, obstacles melt away, fear of change converts to hopeful anticipation, current limitations are understood and embraced with tolerance; and discerned action is inevitable. When we are open and unresisting to the Spirit, we become willing collaborators with the Spirit, united and tenacious in creating the flourishing Christ-centred Church we so desire.

This article was written by Dr Nimmi Candappa first appeared in [The Swag](#), the quarterly journal of the National Council of Priests Australia. Reprinted with permission.

This is a hope-filled, Spirit-led flight of fancy which may just open your eyes to some realities that are so familiar they may well go unnoticed.

NOT MALE AND FEMALE, FOR YOU ARE ALL ONE IN CHRIST JESUS

My dear People of God

Having been elected to lead you at the recent conclave, the Holy Spirit has led me to write this message to each of you so that you will understand something of what matters to me.

My recent predecessors have often been asked challenging questions about the contribution of women to the Church. Invariably, these men have invoked Mary, *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer and the first disciple, as patron, inspiration, intercessor and mother of the church.

I wish to echo their sentiments strongly – and to take them a significant step further. I hope my decision, which has arisen out of much prayer and careful discernment, will resonate with each of you.

I am utterly confident that Mary of Nazareth, of whom God asked so much, and to whom God gave so much, has longed for this time – so long in coming – when the God-given gifts of women would truly be recognized. Indeed there have been many statements of affirmation of women. My predecessor Francis I wrote:

“I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.”

(Evangelii Gaudium 2013 n. 103)

Later, he wrote “...the ‘genius of woman’ is seen in feminine styles of holiness, which are an essential means of reflecting God’s holiness in this world. Indeed, in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints, whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church. We can mention Saint Hildegard of Bingen, Saint Bridget, Saint Catherine of Siena, Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. But I think too of all those unknown or forgotten women who, each in her own way, sustained and transformed families and communities by the power of their witness.”

(*Gaudete et Exsultate* 2018 n. 12)

Earlier, John Paul II reflecting on ‘the Gift of the Bride’, wrote, “This concerns everyone in the Church, women as well as men...” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 1988 n. 27)

It dismays me that gratuitous phrases like “women as well as men” were ever used, given how far this approach is from the approach of Jesus in the gospels. Jesus challenged the conventions of his time when they denigrated women, setting a clear and incontrovertible example to those around him, and to his disciples through the ages.

Consider Jesus’ compassion towards the woman caught in adultery – and the scribes and Pharisees’ instinctive protection of one of their own (John 8:1-11).

Recall Jesus’ refusal to dismiss the Samaritan woman, as the mores of the time demanded. He engaged with her, he challenged her, he listened to her and she became a disciple. (John 4:4-41).

Contemplate the story of the woman who anointed Jesus, when his Pharisee host had ignored all the usual courtesies. She is described as a sinner – like all of us – but her faith and kindness have saved her. She is an example to all present. (Luke 7:36-50)

Finally, in a society when the witness of women was not honoured, it is “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James...” who proclaim that Jesus is risen, but “their story seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them.” (Luke 24:1-12)

Our Church is yet to fully honour the witness, the faith, the gifts of women. As quoted above, Francis I listed many admirable and faith-filled women, and acknowledged those unnamed and unremembered women whose holiness – in the fullest sense of the word – has enriched so many lives. Yet the Church has consistently placed limits on these women, at the same time insisting that they, as well as men, are made “in the divine image” (Gen 1:27).

Some will see what follows as disloyalty to my predecessors, whose faith and dedication to truth, as they understood it, I have no wish to question. However, my first loyalty must be to our creator, our saviour and our sanctifier: the triune God, whom we come to know most truly through the Incarnation.

I wish the first action of my papacy to be a heartfelt apology to women, whom the Church has often not served as they deserved to be served.

I feel strongly that in so doing, I am honouring not only the gospel which I have preached for decades, and I hope, lived faithfully, but honouring also Mary, *Theotokos*, whom my

predecessors invoked regularly and whose strength I seek to emulate.

As the leader of the People of God, as a man of faith who is convinced that the future of the Church depends on redressing the Church's injustice to women, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the times when the Church's official statements could have been ground-breaking and history making, but instead were only about men, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the failure to admit women to leadership or to offer adequate scriptural and moral justification for that failure, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the liturgical occasions when women's experience has been tainted by the erroneous impression that God was male and that the People of God are all male, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the times when the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary was privileged above her strength, her fidelity, her resilience, her prayer, minimizing her solidarity with other women, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the persistent refusal to invite women to preach the gospel they are living, even when they are more highly qualified than the ordained man who is permitted to preach, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For designating women whose names appear in the calendar of saints as 'virgin' when no man is ever designated this way, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For squandering opportunities as a Church to boldly and insistently proclaim what the gospel proclaims – the equality of women – before being trumped by suffragettes, writers, artists, governments, people of other faiths and denominations, film makers, philosophers, musicians and lyricists, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the many sins of clericalism, which embedded the false notion of the inferiority of women even deeper, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the many years in which the stories of the women of the Second Testament – Mary Magdalene, Elizabeth, Martha and Mary of Bethany, Prisca, Phoebe, Lydia and so many more – were not told, or were not honoured as they deserve, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the many years in which opportunities for education and formation were seen as more appropriate for men who believed themselves called to ordination than women who were told that they were not worthy of ordination, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the times when women were expected to hear themselves in male pronouns and terms relating only to men, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

For the times when women were called to give up their identity, expressed in their baptismal names, to take on a new name, sometimes a male name, in answering their call to religious life, I apologise and beg forgiveness.

It is not enough to apologise for past sins without a firm commitment to move forward in ways that truly forge a new path.

So I am committing the Curia to begin – tomorrow – exploring ways to fulfil the hopes of Pope Francis I for “opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church”. The key word is “incisive”. I want all the God-given gifts of women to be utilized to the full. I do not want God’s constant call to women to continue to be stymied by the structures and hierarchy of the Church that preaches the gospel of Jesus.

St Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) It is time for women and men to be one in Christ Jesus.

I thank all faithful women, especially “those unknown or forgotten women”, most of whom have died before seeing the fullness of opportunity I am promising, and I ask all the People of God to rejoice with me as we take a significant step forward in bringing about the reign of God.

Given in Rome, at St Mary Major,
on 22 July, feast of St Mary Magdalene,
in the first week of my pontificate.

Franciscus

This original article was written by Tracey Edstein for WATAC News.

SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES ARE AMONG THOSE MOST EXCLUDED IN OUR CHURCH

Patty Fawkner

One thing for certain we can say about Jesus, and therefore about God, is that Jesus is very comfortable with diversity and hanging out with those on the margins. Where society and individuals exclude, Jesus goes out of his way to include, writes Congregational Leader Sister Patty Fawkner.

Jesus takes his disciples on a journey of ever-increasing inclusion. I believe that this is the journey that we in the Church must take regarding those who identify as LGBTIQ+ or ‘queer’, the somewhat vague umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual.

I became more mindful of this after attending an interactive webinar entitled *Working Towards a LGBTQ+ Affirming Church*, organised by [WATAC](#), Women and the Australian Church.

Teash Taylor, co-pastor of a Baptist Church, who identifies as a lesbian, and Anika ‘AJ’ Jensen, a member of the Uniting Church who identifies as non-binary, were the key presenters. Their warmth, insight from their lived experience, and their theological literacy made for an engaging experience.

I was particularly interested in Teash and AJ’s Affirming Church Scale. This five-part scale presents the journey that many people make from rejection to affirmation of LGBTIQ+ people. The Affirming Church Scale helped me understand aspects of my own journey in relation to sexual and gender minorities.

The first stage of the scale is called Repulsion/Hatred. Most if not all members of the LGBTIQ+ community have been excluded, condemned, mocked and insulted.

Insult can be hurled from court benches in jurisdictions where homosexuality is illegal and even punishable by death. Throughout the world there have been incidents where gay men have been jailed or executed, and lesbian women raped so to ‘cure’ them. Insult can be hurled from mosque and pulpit alike and, most painfully, insult can be hurled within the family.

Repulsion and hatred of queers is ‘alive and well’ within some sectors of the Catholic community, with some people justifying their stance on the Church’s teaching is that homosexual acts are “intrinsically disordered” and “contrary to the natural law.” ([CCC, #2357](#))

It is a short route from these statements to homophobia and the belief that any non-heterosexual person is a sexual deviant.

There are some who believe that homosexuality is ‘chosen’ as an orientation or that environmental circumstances have been the cause. If so, the orientation can be changed, and the individual ‘cured’. This leads to stage 2 of the Affirming Church Scale, Conversion is Possible.

Stage 2 is explored in the film, *Boy Erased*, the 2018 American movie based on the memoir of Garrard Conley and his experience in a gay conversion program. The protagonist, Jared, is the deeply loved only son of faith-filled parents, Marshall a Baptist pastor and his wife Nancy. The film probes the complex interaction between faith and homosexuality.

The tortuous path for many in the LGBTIQ+ community as they come out and grow in self-acceptance of who they are, and the equally fraught path that family members make as they reconcile previously unexamined beliefs with the experience of their gay loved-one, is handled sensitively.

Conversion therapy is put on trial and found, not only wanting, but potentially damaging. Licensed medical and mental healthcare professionals, educators and child welfare advocates throughout the world have roundly discredited such programs.

Stage 3 on the Affirming Church Scale has the clever and prescient title, Welcome – Terms and Conditions Apply.

Teash and AJ believe that some church communities, somewhat proudly and self-regardingly, lay out the welcome mat for LGBTIQ+ people, but engage in subtle, or not-so-subtle, conditional support. Tokenism is the hallmark of stage 3. You are welcome if ...

You are welcome if you are gay or lesbian but being transgender may be a step too far for the receiving community. You are welcome, but only if you are not in a relationship. You are welcome to take on a role within a community, but only if you are celibate.

There is an overlap between stage 3 and stage 4 which is called Accepting.

Here the individual is accepted as a person, rather than for their sexual orientation. Again, gay and lesbians may be accepted, but the community might struggle with what might be regarded as the more ‘radical’ identities of non-binary, transgender and intersex. Acceptance of the person does not extend to the person being in a leadership role within the community.

The fifth and final Affirming stage is characterised by deep respect for, and affirmation of LGBTIQ+ people, and the acceptance, even promotion, of diversity within the community. The community acknowledges the strength and courage it takes to claim one’s sexual identity

within church and society.

Paid and unpaid ministerial roles within the community are open to LGBTIQ+ people.

It occurs to me that many of us within the Church community are the ones in need of ‘conversion therapy’, a conversion from discrimination to inclusion, a conversion from judging non-heterosexual orientation as deviant to the acceptance of sexual diversity.

And the implications for me as I reflect on these stages and my own response to the LGBTIQ+ community, are two-fold. The first is simply to wonder at the mystery of the human person “made in God’s image and likeness” with such diversity. Over past decades, the human sciences have revealed much about the complexity of sexual orientation, both biologically and psychologically, as well as gender identity.

Franciscan priest, [Richard Rohr](#) claims that “Jesus, like the cosmos itself, constantly affirms two parallel drives *toward diversity and toward communion*. The whole of creation cannot be lying.” God, claims Rohr, seems to be more comfortable with diversity than we are.

I believe that sexuality and gender, in all their diversity, are God-given. “God made and celebrates me,” Teash proclaimed during the WATAC webinar.

My second response to the journey towards an LGBTIQ+ affirming Church is to resist naïve binary thinking. Simplistic binaries and divisive dualistic thinking such as good and bad, worthy and unworthy, clean and unclean, normative and deviant, limit my thinking and are the antithesis of a stance of wonder at the mystery of life within God’s creation.

It is encouraging to note that the draft Edition 2 of the National Safeguarding Standards of the Australian Catholic Church acknowledges the reality of “all the diversities of sex characteristics, sexual orientations and gender identities” and that each Catholic organisation must pay “particular attention to the needs of ... those of diverse sexuality.”

On the Affirming Church Scale, such statements are at either stage 3 or 4, and this is to be celebrated. However, we in the Church community still have work to do before we truly become an LGBTIQ+ Affirming Church. As followers of Jesus, we still have a journey to take in the service of diversity and communion

This article was written by Patty Fawkner SGS and first appeared in *The Good Oil*, September 2021. Reprinted with permission.

SHOULD WE BE CALLING PRIESTS 'FATHER'?

Anne Inman

It is perhaps time for the dangers inherent in the use of 'father' as a form of address to be taken seriously. According to Matthew's Gospel, there is a word which Jesus, told us, his followers, not to use to address anyone on earth: that word is 'father'. (Mt. 23.9) Yet in the English-speaking world we currently use 'father' as a form of address for all ordained priests and the pope is called 'Holy Father'.

While Jesus' warning regarding this form of address was never intended as a blanket prohibition, neither, surely, was it intended to be ignored. It is clear from Mt. 23.9 that Jesus' purpose was to warn his own disciples against three tendencies which he identified in some Jewish leaders of his own day: They should not give in to self-importance; they should not set themselves above other people; they should not place on others burdens that are too hard to bear.

As Pope Francis repeatedly warns against the dangers of clericalism, it is perhaps time for the dangers inherent in the use of 'father' as a form of address to be taken seriously. Since the later half of the nineteenth century, the use of 'father' as a term of respect for all ordained priests has served as one of the main planks of clericalism. At the same time as encouraging priestly self-importance, it has served to infantilise the laity, thus providing a perfect setting for certain depraved priests to molest children with impunity.

Thus when priests, under the cover of their exalted status, were able to commit the most unspeakable crimes against children, the children's own parents, their natural protectors, were unable to protect them, since they themselves, in their relation to the priest, had taken on the role, not of parent to their child, but of child in relation to the 'father' abuser.

Priests have not always been called 'father', though early on Christians did begin to call their spiritual mentors 'mother' or 'father'. The term 'father' continued to be used as a form of address for those men whom Christians sought out as a spiritual mentor, while the very presence of the early church 'mothers' was largely written out of history. We think primarily of the desert fathers; spiritual directors but not generally ordained priests. The male confessor was revered as a spiritual father, and addressed as such. He was sought out for his holiness.

As priests began to take on the role of confessor, so they came to be addressed as 'father' when they served in this capacity, yet 'father' was still not the formal title for the ordained priest. Throughout the Reformation Catholic priests in England were called 'Sir'. Thus for example

we have it from Eamon Duffy in 'The Voices of Morebath' that the priest who served the parish of Morebath at the time of the English Reformation was Sir Christopher Trychay.

It was not until the later half of the nineteenth century that 'father' became the form of address for all ordained priests, largely thanks to Cardinal Manning, archbishop of Westminster (1865-1892). In his book *The Eternal Priesthood* (1883) Manning describes the title of father as 'the first, the chief, the highest, the most potent, the most persuasive, the most honourable of all the titles of a priest.' (p.22) Manning's book was hugely influential in the English-speaking world. The restoration of the English hierarchy had taken place in 1850, and no doubt the use of the title 'father' for Roman Catholic priests helped to differentiate them from their Anglican counterparts. But for Manning it was much more than that. Manning had a highly exalted notion of the holiness that a priest should and could attain. The priest was to set himself up above others in terms of spiritual perfection. Manning says that the priest's role as teacher, guide and judge of men (sic) demands spiritual perfection.

In hindsight it is clear that Manning placed upon priests a burden that for most was too hard to bear. Striving for perfection they might be painfully aware that they fell short. Set up as models of holiness, it was almost as if they had hypocrisy forced upon them. The discrepancy between the light in which they were portrayed and the reality of their lives was a heavy burden placed upon them. And to keep up the illusion it was necessary to focus on the lives of very holy priests (of whom, of course, there were many), but to keep hidden the sins of others. In this atmosphere, when a century after Manning's book, bishops were becoming aware of the sexual abuse of children by priests, many succumbed to the temptation to have the abuse covered up.

Perhaps it is time for all adult Catholics to reflect on Mt. 23.9 and to think about the dangers of calling priests 'father', and for all Catholic priests to think about the dangers of accepting the title from other adults. In February this year, the Nigerian Sister Veronica Openibo, head of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, addressed the Vatican summit on the Protection of Minors. Towards the end of her presentation she addressed the pope directly, and she called him 'Brother Francis'. As a 'Sister' herself, and as someone concerned with the protection of minors, it seems to me that 'Brother' was an entirely appropriate form of address for her to use, in place of the usual 'Holy Father'. It is perhaps time for all of us to work towards forms of address for our priests which, while showing due respect, do not at the same time serve to undermine our own responsibilities as adult Christians.

This article written by Dr. Anne Inman was first published in [The Tablet](#) on 16 August 2019.

SYNOD HEARS CALLS FOR 'RADICAL REVISION' OF CANON LAW

Sarah Mac Donald

The Church needs a thorough revision of canon law and a commission to oversee this revision should include lay people, one of the country's top barristers, Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws has said.

Speaking as part of a panel on the theme, Insisting on Sharing Authority at this week's Root and Branch lay-led synod, the Scottish lawyer, broadcaster and Labour member of the House of Lords said a radical revision of canon law should be a "key call" from the synod.

She said a commission to oversee reform should "systematically go through the structures of the canon law and make them appropriate to the 21st century" and it should sit in public as it heard evidence. Describing herself as "a firm believer in reform", she said: "I really feel that we have to persuade the current leadership [in the Church] that they must cede power in order to survive."

Elsewhere in the discussion, Baroness Kennedy called for an end to mandatory clerical celibacy. "I feel very strongly that you have to have abandon the business of celibacy." She told the online discussion that clerical celibacy had been "one of the root problems in so many of the issues that we are talking about" and needed to be dealt with "first and foremost".

"People are sexual beings. Some might choose to be celibate, and so be it. But there should be a possibility to follow a vocation even if you are a married person, male or female." She also called on the Church to deal with its "hostility to homosexuality".

She said: "We have to stop being so preoccupied and fetishistic about sex within the Church and start concerning ourselves with the suffering of the world. "Our knowledge of humanity has developed, and science has helped us to understand sexuality so much better."

Recalling the passing of the same sex marriage referendum in Ireland in 2015, Baroness Kennedy said that despite the Church having had such a dominant role in terms of power and authority, the people of Ireland by a majority voted for gay marriage. "It was because Catholic grandmothers and Catholic mothers and fathers said why should our child not have the same right to be with the person they love as our other child."

She believed that there are "so many good things about the teachings of the church" which had given her a value system.

“The hierarchy has to be persuaded that this [reform] is about sustainability. The Catholic Church is not going to survive if it does not address these issues because the young are just not going to engage.”

Referring to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the need for a global template of values against which every legal system should be measured, including canon law, she asked: “Why has the Catholic Church not embraced it properly, particularly with regard to due process, the idea of access to justice – where was the access to justice for the many victims of sexual abuse within the Church?” She said Church failures on abuse and moving people on who had committed crimes was one of the reasons so many people are now alienated from the Church.

“They do not see the Catholic Church adhering to that whole framework of human rights, rule of law, and respect for due process, access to justice, and the treatment of people as being equal before the law.” She also hit out at the Church’s willingness to accommodate Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s desire to marry in a Catholic Church, which she had raised with Cardinal Nichols.

“People were very distressed, and I would say disappointed when they saw the ease with which the prime minister, who is not known for his sobriety when it comes to relationships with women, was able to have a marriage in the Catholic Church, despite the fact of being twice divorced.”

Recalling a conversation with a cab driver in Glasgow whose marriage had failed and who had remarried a catholic, he had told her of his pain at being unable to receive communion and feeling excommunicated. “These are the things that are such a scar on the Church, and on all the people who still think of themselves as being Catholics, and who want to be able to take up the sacraments, to be a participant, to belong to this family. And yet, they are not able to do so.”

She had told the Cardinal: “Your communications strategy on saying everybody is equal before canon law is not working. You need to do something about that.”

The discussion on Wednesday was chaired by Virginia Saldanha, executive secretary of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Women’s Desk. It heard contributions also from Dr Luca Badini Confalonieri, Executive Director at the Wijngaards Institute, and broadcaster, writer and public speaker, Christina Rees, a member of the general synod of the Church of England.

This article was written by Sarah Mac Donald and was originally published in [The Tablet](#) on 09 September 2021. Reprinted with permission.

TIME TO REASSESS MARY, THE FIRST CHRISTIAN

Greg Sheridan

Both those who think Mary gets too much attention, and those whose traditions have fostered devotion to Mary, have perhaps somewhat obscured just how active and decisive a human figure Mary was. The first person in the Gospels to proclaim Jesus was Mary, his mother. She remains, more than 2000 years later, the most popular Christian saint. She is the most influential woman in history, and the most loved.

Take one example. The title song of the Beatles' last album was Paul McCartney's Let It Be. McCartney wrote this about his own mother, Mary, who came to him, rather biblically, in a dream during a tough time in his life. But millions of people thought the song about Mary of the Gospels, or took comfort from that image anyway. McCartney was happy with this, saying once: "I think it's a great thing to have faith of any sort, particularly in the world we live in."

The words "let it be" are among the first Mary says to the Archangel Gabriel after he announces to her that she is to be the mother of Jesus. Another line in McCartney's song about a light that shines recalls John's Gospel: "The light shines in the darkness." McCartney, from a Liverpool Catholic family, surely had these verses rattling round in his head. Mary retains a hold on the popular imagination, an honoured place in the popular mind.

But of course, Mary doesn't depend on the Beatles. It's too easy to miss the vibrant humanity and historic agency of Mary, her leadership in some respects. Both those who think Mary gets too much attention, and those whose traditions have fostered devotion to Mary, have perhaps somewhat obscured just how active and decisive a human figure Mary was.

The best place to meet Mary in the New Testament is in Luke, the warmest of the Gospels, for there are more women there than in the others. There is an ancient tradition that Mary was Luke's chief source, just as there is a tradition that Peter was Mark's chief source.

Luke was a physician, and his Greek is the finest in the New Testament. I believe the Gospels are true and inspired. But they didn't float down from heaven in completed form. Luke tells us of his journalistic methods. He was not an eyewitness to Jesus' life. He got the story from primary sources.

The first thing a journalist sees in Luke is a scoop, an exclusive. He must have had a great source. Only Mary, directly or indirectly, could have provided Luke with the account of her learning of her miraculous pregnancy. That ought to be the first clue to Mary's agency, her

dynamism and activism. She knew part of the Jesus story that no one else could know. She gave that to us through Luke. By briefing Luke, she controlled the narrative for history

Mary's agency and dynamism run all through her personality. First of all, it is there in her accepting the gift of the Holy Spirit. Mary had to say yes for the rest of the story to proceed. Consider the unique, and uniquely vulnerable, position Mary is in when the Archangel Gabriel visits her. Mary is a teenage girl betrothed to Joseph. Under the customs of the time, betrothal means much more than being engaged today. It was an exclusive, locked-in deal.

When an angel had appeared to Zechariah, a priest at the temple and husband of Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, he was terrified, paralysed by fear. Mary was different, much calmer reacting to much greater dislocation. Gabriel's message to Mary is revolutionary. She will bear a child to be named Jesus, he will be called the Son of the Most High and his kingdom will have no end. Here is Mary's decisive reply, critical for her destiny and for all of human history: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

The first thing Mary does then is to travel alone to visit Elizabeth and stay with her for three months. Travelling alone in the ancient world for women and girls was not so easy, Mary has, as the military instructors say about promising young officers, "a bias for action".

Joseph, deeply troubled by Mary's pregnancy, planned to dismiss her quietly. We don't know whether Mary told Joseph about the visit from the angel, or whether she hadn't told him and was waiting for him to understand. Later an angel visited Joseph and reassured him.

But here is one lesson. Even the most magnificent faith, the deepest union with God, the most robust, deep-seated, genuine virtue, provides no magic pathway out of the intractable messiness of life. The outsidersness of Christianity is evident all through Mary's story. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the holy family, tell the story, at different stages, of an unmarried pregnant teenager; a foster father; an improvised birth away from home; refugees fleeing persecution across borders; and ultimately a mother who has to endure her worst nightmare in the arrest, vilification, torture and death of her son.

In telling Elizabeth her news, Mary delivers the most memorable and powerful speech by anyone other than Jesus in the entire New Testament. Known as the Magnificat, it is one of the most powerful statements in history. Mary declares: "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to

generation. He has shown strength from his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Sometimes Mary’s words are judged implausible because they bear some resemblance to various prayers in the Old Testament, especially Hannah’s prayer in Samuel. But this objection is absurd. It is extremely common for religious people to pray the words of their Scriptures, especially at critical moments. Observant Jews in Nazareth 2000 years ago knew the prayers of the Old Testament. There was no Kardashian reality TV to compete for space in their minds. Jesus prayed the Psalms all his life, even on the cross.

Mary’s personality is unmistakeable in her speech to Elizabeth. Four things strike us. First, Mary is grateful, grateful for life and the special role she will play, though from early on she knew its grandeur would be surrounded by suffering. Second, God is at the centre of this event and this prayer. God is at Mary’s centre.

Third, the ubiquitous Christian inversion of power. God has “filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty”. Scot McKnight, in his wise, graceful little book, *The Real Mary*, records that in the 1980s the Guatemalan government banned public recitation of the Magnificat. You can see why King Herod wouldn’t have liked it.

And fourth, the speech is bold, forthright, emphatic, confident. Mary’s sheer self-confidence is breathtaking. “My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices!” This is a woman of courage and conviction.

Not long after Jesus’ birth, a dark shadow is cast across Mary’s life. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to the temple. A man there, Simeon, recognises that Jesus is the saviour, but says to Mary “a sword will pierce your own soul too”. When he is 12, in the ancient world the cusp of adulthood, Jesus stays behind in the temple in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph are beside themselves looking for him. When they find him, Mary says: “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you with great anxiety.”

There is so much to like in Mary’s statement, not least the status she gives to Joseph. Jesus is the son of God, but in earthly matters his effective father is Joseph. This is an inspiration for stepfathers. Mary and Joseph don’t understand Jesus’ explanation for his actions. The next statement from Luke is fascinating: “Then he (Jesus) went down with them and came to

Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.” This phrase means that Mary committed these matters to memory. It’s as close as you could imagine to Luke telling us that Mary is his source, directly or indirectly.

Luke tells us that, living with Mary and Joseph, Jesus grew in “wisdom, age and grace”. This puts Mary very high as an educator. Mary figures repeatedly in the Gospels, sometimes concerned for Jesus’ welfare. At one point, at the wedding feast of Cana, she tells Jesus of a problem, the hosts have run out of wine. That’s nothing to do with me, Jesus replies.

Mary makes no further requests, but instructs the caterers to do whatever Jesus tells them. And so the wine flows, demonstrating Jesus’ immense regard for his mother. Mary figures in other episodes in the Gospels, always an activist, making her own decisions. She is there too after Jesus’ resurrection in the Acts of the Apostles, in a passage that otherwise mentions only the senior leaders.

The final involvement of Mary in Jesus’ life comes at the cross. Supporting Jesus publicly by then was dangerous. Only one of the men, John, was there, but there were several women, including Mary. It’s worth pausing for a second to note the strange feminine rhyme in the Gospels. The first person to know of Jesus, then to know Jesus, and to proclaim him, was a woman. The first person to see the risen Jesus, Mary Magdalene, was a woman. The majority of those who stood heroically with Jesus at the cross, in solidarity in his worst moments, were women. Something, surely, to remark.

Jesus looks down from the cross to where Mary and John are standing and, in the depths of his own exhaustion, and very near to death, says: “Woman, this is your son” and to John, “This is your mother.” Jesus has asked his mother and his best friend to look after each other. Forget the theology for a second, the human affection is overwhelming. When she lives with John, does Mary help inform John’s later striking, elevated, intensely poetic appreciation of Jesus, rendered in a Gospel of unique grandeur, and which incidentally contains the scoop of the wedding feast of Cana?

In *Dominion*, Tom Holland writes: “Mary could embody for even the humblest and most unlettered peasant all the numerous paradoxes that lay at the heart of the Christian faith.” Mary deserves to be defined by her own words: “My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.”

This is an edited extract from *Christians: The Urgent Case for Jesus in Our World* (Allen & Unwin), written by Greg Sheridan.

WE CANNOT SEPARATE THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S ORDINATION FROM THE CHURCH'S HISTORY OF SEXISM

Julia Brumbaugh

*Editor's note: In a lecture at Fordham University in New York in 1996, Avery Dulles, S.J., addressed what he saw as the major objections to the apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II in 1994, "Ordinatio Sacerdotalis," on the inadmissibility of women to the Catholic priesthood. The talk was published in *Origins* (Vol. 25, No. 45, dated May 2, 1996) as "Gender and Priesthood: Examining the Teaching" and was reprinted in *America* in 2001. To mark the 25th anniversary of this essay, *America* asked two scholars, [Lucetta Scaraffia](#) and Julia Brumbaugh, to respond. The full text of the Dulles essay can be found [here](#).*

This article is part of **The Conversation** with America Media, offering diverse perspectives on important issues in the life of the church.

In his defense of "[Ordinatio Sacerdotalis](#)," which declared that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful," Avery Dulles, S.J., enumerated arguments for accepting the prohibition of women's ordination as biblically, traditionally and theologically sound despite a range of [serious theological objections](#). These arguments warrant revisiting, because the matters at stake speak to things at the heart of the question: sacraments, tradition and salvation.

Reading Dulles's essay 25 years later, I am reminded of the reflection of the great Dominican ecclesiologist Cardinal Yves Congar: You can condemn a false answer, but not a real question. For Dulles, the question of women's ordination had been asked and answered many times, and it has been answered definitely in the negative by the magisterium. But have the questions about women's full participation in the life of the church really been answered? Has the question even been heard in all its dimensions?

The theological tension here is in the crux where the ancient practice of a male-only clergy—which existed in social and ecclesial contexts where women's subordination and inferiority were largely assumed—now exists in a context where the church clearly teaches that women are not inferior or naturally subordinate to men. While at the surface the question about women's ordination has been asked and answered, rarely has it been asked in this new context where women's full human dignity is unreservedly affirmed and defended.

Doctrine and authority

In his essay, Dulles treats the history of women in the church as one in which the prevailing historical view that women are to be subordinated to men has not problematically shaped the practice of church structures down the centuries. Though he rejects sexism as an evil that must be resisted, in accord with the 20th- and 21st-century pastoral magisterium, he does not accept arguments that sexism has been entangled in the practice of ordination in ways that may have distorted it. Catholic scholars asking questions about women in the church have frequently argued that the church's teaching about and treatment of women shows that the sin of sexism runs much deeper than Dulles acknowledges.

In Dulles's own theological legacy, there is ample evidence that questions like these, which interrogate the many contexts and motivations that shape our practices and teachings, are not only appropriate but proper to the theological task. For example, in 1976, in a talk titled "The Theologian and the Magisterium," Dulles said:

It has become evident that those in positions of ecclesiastical power are naturally predisposed to accept ideas favourable to their own class interests. Popes and bishops, therefore, are inclined to speak in a way that enhances the authority of their office. The alert reader will take this into account when he interprets and evaluates official documents.

In that address, Dulles critiqued an understanding of doctrine and authority that reduced the role of theologians to expounding upon the teaching received from the bishops. In line with the practice of theology that informed the Second Vatican Council, Dulles argued that theologians are not merely the mouthpiece of the bishops and that they have a proper sphere of competence based on their work as scholars; indeed, he explores the idea that they form a magisterium that, together with the magisterium of pastors, works in "complementary and mutually corrective ways" to serve the church.

To engage this dialogue between the magisterium of the church's pastors and that of the church's theologians is the work of the whole church, living in the power of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit is not received exclusively through the formal and institutional structures of the hierarchy but is given to the whole church and to each of the baptized. To affirm this reality requires an imagination that includes the Spirit working boldly within communities, arising in and transforming the hearts of ordinary people of faith and blowing throughout the whole world. This Spirit opens our hearts to ever greater and wider love, reveals our failures (past and present), makes possible true repentance and opens the way to a future yet to be realized. The

Spirit and the Word co-create the church.

We live within the mystery of the Trinitarian God's enfolding love and desire for our flourishing; and in every age we learn and grow, even as we stumble, fail, forget and learn again. Nourished by Scripture and the sacraments, by prayer and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but also by the abundance of created reality and by compassion and solidarity with and from our many neighbours, Christians are called again and again to be open to discerning the arrival of the reign of God, who is in our midst yesterday, today and forever.

If the church, living in the power of the Holy Spirit and the memory of Jesus, awaits its fullness, then it is never enough to argue only from what has been done in the past. The full pastoral and theological project must ask: What is Christ in the Spirit doing now? What is God calling us to be now and in the future?

We live in a historical moment where, led by the Holy Spirit, the recognition of the full equality of women is dawning. There is so much work to be done to untangle sexism from our ideas and ways of being human together. For this work, we need the memory of Jesus' friendship and intimacy with women, including his trust of Mary Magdalene to be the first to receive and bear witness to his resurrection. We need to listen deeply to each other for how sexism has harmed and limited everyone. And we need our imaginations to be open to the Holy Spirit so we can become, together, a church where sexism—and the corresponding reality of women's subordination—is unthinkable.

Equality, complementarity and subordination

Bringing this commitment to imagine a church healed of all sexism, I turn to the metaphor at the centre of the theological answer offered by Dulles (and others) for restricting ordination to men. Defenders of an all-male clergy insist that women and men stand together before God and that unjust discrimination against women must be fought and overcome. Women are not excluded from ordination because of sexism, they argue, but because of the nature of the Eucharist itself. The priest, Dulles argues, not only conveys the words of the Eucharist as a messenger but stands in persona Christi—an icon of Christ himself, the bridegroom, turned toward his bride, the church, in love. Only a male person, Dulles writes, can fittingly be this icon.

This explanation stumbles for two reasons. It takes a beautiful biblical metaphor and constrains it by making it literal. Further, it reinscribes the subordination of women and the superiority of men, even as the broader tradition has taught with increasing clarity the full equality of all

human beings before God.

Metaphorical language and God

In the famous phrase of St. Augustine of Hippo, “If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God” (“si comprehendis non est Deus”). The image Dulles and others use to demonstrate that the restriction of ordination to men is fitting is that of Christ the bridegroom turned toward the church, his bride, which is a metaphor. Jesus was never a bridegroom. He was no one’s lover. This is not a problem to be overcome, but the condition of humanity speaking of God. We reach, but we do not grasp. No image, icon or metaphor; no human word, even the most ancient and revered, bypasses this limitation.

The metaphor of the bridegroom and bride as an image of the divine-human encounter is ancient. The prophet Hosea uses it, and many interpretations of the Song of Songs cast God or Christ as the bridegroom and the church or human beloved as the bride. We find the image in Ephesians and across the medieval European monastic tradition. Pope John Paul II favoured it in his speaking and writing about women, marriage and the church. This metaphor powerfully illuminates the intimacy, passionate love and longing that characterizes God’s love for God’s people, Christ’s love for the church and the human need for God. But it is and remains a metaphor.

Metaphorical language works in the movement between similarity and difference for the purpose of seeing something in a new way. Christian tradition uses the metaphor of lovers to explore the longing the human soul has for God and the desire of God for us. Yet, as Susan Ross has argued in **America** (“[Can God Be a Bride?](#)”) and elsewhere, this metaphor relies on an image of male and female relations in which the female person is profoundly subordinated to the male; the bridegroom gives and the bride receives. In a theology of the divine-human relationship, it is right to imagine the creature as utterly dependent on the Creator for her life. For example, in his sermons on the Song of Songs, St. Bernard of Clairvaux explored this image of lover and beloved. He understood that Christ was the lover who called, and the human being was the beloved who responded.

The point here is that the rich metaphor of the bridegroom and bride resonates because it breaks open our imaginations in fresh ways. God is not far from us but disarmingly near. God seeks us, calling our names. The depth of our longing will be more than answered by our Creator. It does not mean that God is a man and human beings are all women, and it does not mean that women and men have separate natures (whereas God and human beings do).

illuminating a mystery

The argument that men can be an icon of Christ in the Eucharist and women cannot because of their different natures comes dangerously close to dividing men and women from each other and separating women from Christ, whose “male” nature women do not share. If we take this image literally—as prescribing reality concretely instead of illuminating, fragmentarily, a mystery—we might imagine that women and men are on different sides of some great divide. In a wider history that teaches women’s subordination and in a culture where women’s work and dignity is often undervalued or denied, this danger is real. Yet such a separation that would put women outside the saving embrace of the incarnation is, and has always been, contrary to the faith.

With St. Paul, and in faith, women can and do say: “I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal 2:19).

The bodies of women are part of the body of Christ. Christian history and tradition is full to bursting with women who are luminous with the light of Christ. The great company of saints bears witness to this.

Christ, through the Holy Spirit, is in this moment healing our broken hearts and accompanying us as we struggle to undo the legacies of sexism (among the many other evils we must resist).

For theology and practice of ordination and ministry to be credible, then the work Dulles endeavoured to do—to understand more deeply the mystery of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist—must continue. But that work must illustrate at every turn the full humanity of every person.

Arguments that fail to interrogate the ways the Christian tradition has been distorted by sin or that rely on images that reinforce women’s subordination are inadequate to the evangelical work to which we are all called.

This article was written by Julia Brumbaugh and was originally published in [America Magazine](#) on September 16, 2021. Reprinted with permission.

WOMEN ARE ESSENTIAL IN THE BIBLE. NOW THEY'RE IN THE SUNDAY READINGS

'What does it look like to tell the Good News through the stories of women who are often on the margins of scripture and often set up to represent bad news?' asks the Rev. Wilda Gafney.

Emily McFarlan Miller

On any given Sunday, many Christians the world over hear the same Scripture readings in church, which their pastor, priest, deacon or guest homilist then interprets or expounds upon. In the United States, 60% of those in the pews hear selections from a common cycle of readings, known as a lectionary.

These shared Scripture passages can be useful, allowing clergy to share resources about the

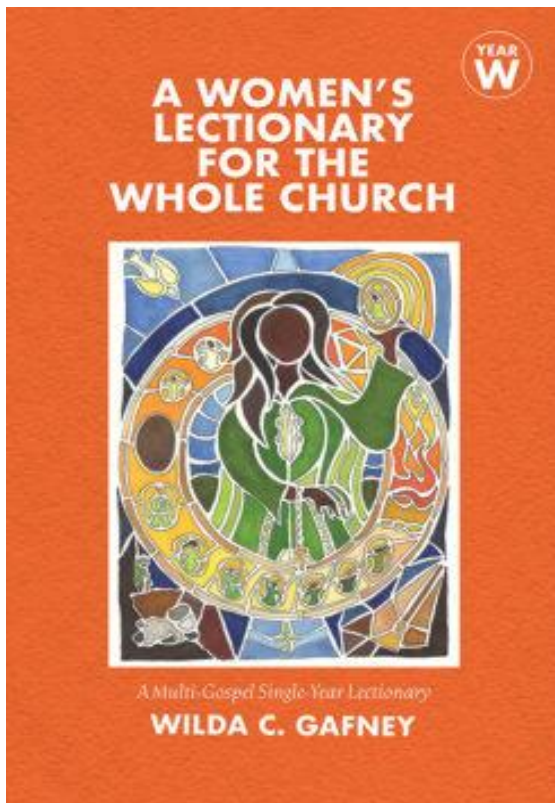


Figure 1 "A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church" by Wilda C. Gafney.

texts or simply commiserate about awkward lessons or weeks of biblical bread metaphors. But for many preachers, especially women, the traditional readings are too narrow, and represent lost opportunities to broach new topics using rarely heard passages of the Bible.

Which is why two preachers have published new lectionaries over the past month centering the stories of women and feminine imagery for God.

"A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church" by the Rev. Wilda Gafney, a Hebrew scholar and Episcopal priest who teaches at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas, begins with the question: "What does it look like to tell the Good News through the stories of women who are often on the margins of scripture and often set up to represent bad news?"

Gafney began working on "A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church" in 2018, collaborating with clergy and other Christians from across the country and the globe to produce four readings for each Sunday and holiday — usually from the Hebrew Bible, Psalms, New Testament and Gospels — using what she calls "gender-expansive language." It also includes brief commentaries on each set of readings.

Like the Revised Common Lectionary and other traditional lectionaries used by many Christian denominations, Gafney’s lectionary includes a three-year cycle of Scripture readings, divided into Years A, B and C. [Year A](#), as well as a stand-alone single-year lectionary — [Year W](#) — were released in early August by Church Publishing, the official publisher of the Episcopal Church. The other two volumes are expected in 2024.

Gafney, who previously authored the popular book “[Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne](#),” said friends and colleagues encouraged her to develop a female-focused lectionary after she posted on Facebook about a “set of particularly poor readings” she had been asked to preach on.

But her larger concern was that churchgoers were hearing only part of the Bible, framed in particular — and oftentimes patriarchal — ways. The complex stories of women and the questions they raise are underrepresented in the readings selected for each week in existing lectionaries and rarely preached upon, according to the author.

“This is a course in biblical literacy,” she said.

In Gafney’s lectionary, passages about biblical king

David’s misconduct are paired with New Testament readings such as Jesus’ words from the Gospel of Matthew, “As much as you all did for one of the least of these my kindred, you all did it to me.”

The stories of women in Scripture appear alongside Psalms — each using feminine pronouns for God — that express sentiments the women in those readings might have felt.

“The reality is there are so many women characters and girl characters that people simply do not know that we could have formative conversations around women and their interactions with God and each other,” she said.

It is not only the human characters who bring feminine viewpoints to Scripture, according to Ashley Wilcox, a Quaker minister, whose “[The Women’s Lectionary: Preaching the Women of the Bible Throughout the Year](#)” was also published this year. She points to feminine depictions of God in the Bible as a hen gathering her chicks under her wings or an angry mother bear.



Figure 2The Rev. Wilda Gafney.

A lectionary is an unusual undertaking for a Quaker, Wilcox admits, when traditional worship in the Religious Society of Friends eschews lectionaries and holiday celebrations.

But, she said, “I wanted to just tell as many of these stories about women as I could. It’s not every story about women in the Bible — there are more — but there’s a lot of them, and a lot that we don’t hear very often in church.”

Wilcox’s one-year lectionary was drawn from Scripture readings — one from the Hebrew Bible and one from the New Testament — that she used each Sunday and holiday of 2018 at the Atlanta church she co-founded, Church of Mary Magdalene, which has since closed.

A brief commentary based on her own sermons is included for each set of Scripture references, which overlap frequently with the Revised Common Lectionary, as Wilcox wanted its users to be able to access the community and resources already available around them. The book also outlines sermon series on topics such as “God as Mother” and “Women in the Early Church.”

As part of the queer community, Wilcox hopes the diversity of stories and feminine images in “The Women’s Lectionary” will illustrate the complexity of femininity and womanhood.

She also hopes that the lectionary will give Christians fresh metaphors for a deeper understanding of God and that some of the most troubling passages will encourage preachers to speak out about violence against women.

“I think it’s important to lift up the stories of women in Scripture because there are so many of them and because there are stories of God speaking to women, God calling women, God calling women to preach, and that has not been part of our tradition in Christianity, for a lot of our history,” she said.

And there’s room on bookshelves for more, according to Wilcox.

“I think there should be a whole shelf of these,” she said.

“We need so many resources like this, and so I hope that this will encourage other people to develop their own resources around women in the Bible and preaching.”

This article was written by Emily McFarlan Miller and originally published in the [Religion News Service](#) on 17 September 2021. Reprinted with permission.

BOOK REVIEW: THE DANCE OF THE DISSIDENT DAUGHTER

Tracey Edstein

Sue Monk Kidd invokes the suffragettes, the saints, the mystics and the scriptures in offering a richer, deeper, more satisfying theology than most of us have encountered, writes Tracey Edstein.

“Women who struggle for justice in religious structures, who dare to save the Divine from exclusive masculinity, who seek truth instead of defending dogma ...”: it is for these women that Sue Monk Kidd shares her story – of awakening, of enlightenment, of incontrovertible truth.

This spiritual memoir is by turns reassuring, confronting, challenging and hope filled. It shows a way forward for those whose faith is strong but who find the version of Christianity on offer critically lacking.

On the evening of the day I finished reading *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, I went to Mass. The reading from Paul to the Corinthians proclaimed:

“... an unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord’s affairs; all she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit. The married woman ... has to worry about the world’s affairs and devote herself to pleasing her husband.” (*1 Corinthians* 7:32-35)

I shook my head and said “Seriously?” Yes, the text is of its time; but it is not of our time or our place.

Sue Monk Kidd, acclaimed author of *The Secret Life of Bees* (2001), is however, about much more than woman-friendly scripture and liturgy. She shares her journey “to discover and relate to the Feminine Divine, to heal feminine wounds, to unearth courage, and to reclaim her power ...” In short, Monk Kidd devoted years of her life to revealing the lost Goddess.

She is not creating the Goddess – Sophia, the Divine Feminine – rather, she is bringing to light the stories, the poetry, the dreams, the art, the mythology that has always been there, but which has not been acknowledged or transmitted in the way that the canon has been.

Why is this so? Because it’s too demanding, too insistent, too provocative. To acknowledge that God is, as a Catholic sister tells Monk Kidd, “more than two men and a bird” is long overdue but not always a welcome insight. It requires an enormous degree of rethinking, reimagining, recasting, and letting go of what no longer sustains or enriches.

Monk Kidd's words are for anyone, female or male, who senses that there is more to the story. She invokes the suffragettes, the saints, the mystics and the scriptures in offering a richer, deeper, more satisfying theology than most of us have encountered.

At times I found *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* profoundly unsettling. And yet I was compelled to keep reading. One of the roles of religion is surely to unsettle and provoke. And it isn't as if the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are not unsettling.

I recalled the story of Jephthah's vow (*Judges* 11:29-40). Briefly, Jephthah promises God that if he defeats his enemy in battle, he will sacrifice "whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph ... I shall offer him up as a holocaust."

Jephthah is victorious, and on his return home he is greeted by his beloved only child, a daughter, "playing the tambourines and dancing". And yes, he sacrificed her although not before granting her wish for two months to mourn her virginity with her companions.

And that's just one example.

Monk Kidd's journey and insights brought much opposition, including, initially, from her husband. Even when she wasn't sure her marriage would survive, she *knew* she had to continue, to be true to herself, and in so doing, like Shakespeare's Polonius, she could "not then be false to any man" (or woman).

An important motivator for Monk Kidd was the legacy she would pass on to her own daughter, but it goes much further than that. She asks, "What will Divine Feminine symbols create among us when integrated into the symbology we now have? What new ways of thinking, living, and acting will emerge?"

An embrace of the Divine Feminine is not another layer of scaffolding on an existing framework, but rather a new creation: "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (*Isaiah* 43:19)

I urge you to read *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, with the caveat that it won't be a comfortable read. If you're open to a whole new dimension of faith and theology, one that resonates with, and honours, the distinctive feminine experience, Sue Monk Kidd has much to offer you.

The Dance of the Dissident Daughter is published by HarperOne. For more information about the author, click [here](#). This review was written by Tracey Edstein and was originally published in [The Good Oil](#) September 2021. Reprinted with permission.

BOOK REVIEW -JUST CATHOLIC: THE FUTURE IS NOW.

Michelle Eastwood

Phyllis Zagano's *Just Catholic: The Future is Now* a collection of columns previously published in a variety of settings. Each piece is between 600 and 800 words and suited to a general audience which means this is an eminently readable book. The book is divided into 8 sections that include a collection of columns on a specific topic. The smallest section – 'Can the Church turn away from sin?' - has just three columns, while the largest section – 'Hope for women's deacons' – has fourteen.

In fact, the issue of ordained women deacons is one that Zagano continually returns to throughout the whole book. Her argument is that historically there were both women and men ordained as deacons and that the current resistance is rooted in a suspicion that an ordained diaconate which includes women opens the door to women's ordination for the priesthood. Zagano notes that it was Pope Gregory VII (1073) who restricted diaconal ordination to men intending to be priests, and in this way, clericalism killed the diaconate (p.39-41). The Second Vatican Council restored the role of deacon for men, and by all accounts this is a thriving ministry. However, the resistance to women being ordained at deacons continues.

Across various columns, Zagano discusses the many councils and committees designed to clarify the issues of ordaining women as deacons. This includes the Pontifical Commission for the Study of the Diaconate of Women in 2016 to which Zagano was appointed. Because the columns were written over a number of years, these councils tend to blend and blur in the casual reader and the result seems to be always the same. An acknowledgement that there were historically female deacons, an observation that the barriers are in the law rather than doctrinal or theological, and no concrete action towards ordained female deacons. Zagano notes that this discussion has been going on for many years, and still there is no resolution.

Other topics covered are clerical corruption, synodality, and very briefly, poverty, euthanasia and assisted reproductive technology. It is in these latter columns that Zagano uses Asian and Arab people as tragic examples of sin in the world. This is unfortunate, given that there are many examples that could have been drawn from her US context which did not other people and groups who already face discrimination and othering.

Zagano also makes several references to right-wing political movements and the way they are represented within the church. She notes that, unlike the Pope, she was not 'astonished' to see

Christian symbols employed by individuals participating in the riots on the Capitol building in the wake of the 2020 US election. Zagano named and blamed some Catholic publications and news sites, as well as clergy for fomenting political anger and spreading misinformation. This has been allowed to continue without accountability from the Catholic hierarchy, and ‘too often supported by their bishops.’ (p. 90)

Zagano’s message throughout the book is perhaps encapsulated by the quote

Women are walking, some even running, away from the testosterone-fuelled liturgical symbolism of Catholicism, and so much more. By now it is a trope to blame it all on the sex crisis. It is that, but it is not only that. Women, with their husbands, children, other relatives and friends are gone. Their explanations are the same, no matter in what language: they are sick and tired of being, both symbolically and really, second-class citizens of the church the once loved.
(p.27)

In response to this, she urges readers to contact their bishops to make their opinion known, arming them with facts and words that can be used to plead the case for the full inclusion of women within the church. Earnestly she notes that ‘we can only hope for today. Tomorrow may be too late.’ (p.129)

Zagano, Phyllis. *Just Catholic: The Future is Now*. Mulgrave, Victoria: Garratt Publishing, 2021.

This original article was written by Michelle Eastwood for WATAC News.

For all WATAC members

Deep peace of the running wave be yours.

Deep peace of the flowing air be yours.

Deep peace of the quiet earth be yours.

Deep peace of the shining stars be yours.

The deep, deep peace of the Son of Peace be yours.

From a Celtic Benediction.

Margaret Keyes is on the WATAC Committee and is our pastoral care officer. Marg is keen to keep in touch with WATAC members who may be ill or need a chat.

You can call Marg

M: 0401 119 112

WATAC GROUPS

SOUTH EAST QUEENSLAND: For more information contact *Denise O'Shea*

Phone: 0423 207662 or email: 2shea@inet.net.au

NSW

EASTERN SUBURBS: This Group hasn't met since the Covid restrictions. Maureen Brian and Faye Lawrence are planning to share the hosting. Please let us know of your interest in our starting up again and share any ideas for the group. You can telephone Faye if you wish to enquire more or make any suggestions on 9665 2580 or email flawren@bigpond.net.au.

ENGADINE: Group meets on the third Monday of the month in a member's home at 7.30pm. For more information contact *Margaret Keyes* - Phone: 9520 4240 or email: keyes888@bigpond.com

INNER CITY: Group usually meets on the third Monday of each month. For more information contact *Margaret Cody* Phone: 9692 9384 Mob: 0419 426 174 or email: margaret.cody1@bigpond.com

LEURA: Group meets on the fourth Saturday morning of the month at 227 The Mall, Leura, at 10 am. All welcome. For more information contact *Monica Bright* Phone: 4757 3943 or email: mbright45@bigpond.com

MILTON/ULLADULLA: If you are interested in meeting in this region please contact *Andrea Dean* chair@watac.net.au

PARRAMATTA: If you are interested in meeting in this region please contact *Andrea Dean* chair@watac.net.au

CANBERRA: Group meets on second Sunday of the month, 3.30-5.30 pm at Narrabundah. For more information contact *Andrea Dean* Phone: 0487 388 873 or email andrea@futurematters.net.au

ONLINE BOOK GROUP

Meets monthly via Zoom. Contact *Tracy McEwan* events@watac.net.au

[WATAC Membership Form](#)

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*In nativity scenes, the figure of Mary stands alone as one who has given birth to Jesus and has been selected for great things in the unfolding of God's kingdom.
But imagine that at least one midwife was present at the birth of the Messiah.
But imagine that the arrival of God, of love come to meet us,
occurred in a climate of both intimacy and community.
But imagine that unknown women were active participants in the birthing anew of God's promise to "bring good news to the poor, set free the oppressed, and proclaim liberty to captives"
(Luke 4:18-19).*

Loving God, in this time of waiting, I give thanks for the "hidden figures" in my life – the many women who, through their wisdom, their selfless example, their generous encouragement, and their everyday challenges, are midwives and companions to me in my journey of faith.

Sustaining God, in this time of waiting, I ask your blessing on the women who continue to work collectively and bravely with those on the margins so that all women may rise:
to those who work against injustice; who comfort the distressed;
who challenge prejudice, violence and environmental destruction;
who every day attend to the birthing of the kingdom in their time and place.
Amen.

Prayer adapted from Hidden Figures at Bethlehem by Natalie Acton. Originally published in The Good Oil, November 2017.

