

WATAC NEWS



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PRESIDENT'S FOREWORD

Dear Friends

Welcome to the February issue of WATAC News!

The Annual General Meeting for 2023 will be held on Saturday 4 March 2 pm – 4 pm. This will be a Zoom event but I encourage you to invite at least one friend to join you on the Zoom. Non WATAC participants are welcome though they cannot vote for the election of office bearers. You need to register on the website to participate.

Once again we will award life memberships to WATAC members who have made a notable contribution to the organisation and we will have a guest speaker.

Nominations for the 2023 committee are very welcome. Access a form [here](#). WATAC Committee meets once a month via Zoom for about one hour. Members of the committee coordinate WATAC projects, respond to the needs of members and support the proper management of WATAC as an incorporated association.

The WATAC Constitution needs to be updated because of changes to the model constitution for associations incorporated in NSW. No changes are proposed to the way WATAC operates. We will be distributing the revised constitution to you with a voting form, I would appreciate you (at least) skimming the document and voting please. A Special Meeting to consider the results of the vote, will be held via Zoom immediately before a scheduled WATAC in Dialogue session on June 14.

Save the date, 13-15 October! WATAC is in negotiation with Australian Collaborators in Feminist Theologies to hold a joint conference at Pilgrim College, University of Melbourne. Further details to come. It is 30 years since WATAC was incorporated (1993) and next year it will be 40 years since WATAC was formed (1984). We plan to mark both anniversaries.

The Australian Women Preach project continues to flourish and delight! The team will launch *In Her Voice*, a collection of reflections based on some of the homilies for International Women's Day. You are all invited to the Zoom Book Launch on March 9th at 7.30 pm AEDT. Further details will be emailed to you and available on the website.

Long time WATAC member Kath le Gras (née Mc Garry) 11.09.46 - 24.01.23 died peacefully surrounded by her loved ones, on Tuesday, January 24th, 2023, at her home in Engadine. Marg Keyes represented WATAC at her funeral and has taken flowers to her husband Adrian.

Blessings,



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WHAT IS THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH TODAY?

A Historical Perspective

Women in Early Christianity

The land in which Jesus was born, the Roman province of Judaea, was part of the Roman Empire ruled by the emperor Tiberius. It was in this historical setting that the first communities of Christians had to find their way.

In the society of Jesus's time to be born female was a disadvantage. Women, like children, did not count. Jesus stood out among the people of his time as someone who gave women exactly the same value and dignity as men. In the Gospels we see Jesus listening to and learning from the Syrophenician woman, being guided by his mother Mary at Cana, and after his resurrection, he chose Mary Magdalen to be the first believer entrusted with his mission. She is still called "the apostle to the apostles".

Jesus gathered around himself a group known as "The Twelve" (Mark 3: 14; Luke 9: 1). Although they were all male, biblical scholars today say this was simply a symbolic way of showing that Jesus had come to restore the twelve tribes of Israel, descended from the patriarch Jacob and his twelve sons (Genesis ch. 49). After Jesus departed, they went out on preaching missions and were not replaced.

We know from St Paul's letters that *all* members of the Christian community had received the gifts of the spirit; therefore, there was equality in and through the spirit in early Christian communities. We have an ancient formula, probably used in early baptisms, which says that all, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3: 28).

In the early Christian scriptures, there are found examples of women such as Prisca who is described as a missionary, teacher and co-founder of a house church (Acts 18: 26; 1 Cor 16: 19), Phoebe who is described as a "deacon" (Rom 16: 1), and Junia who is named as "apostle" (Rom 16: 7).

But we can already see the cultural pressures that were on the early Christian communities to conform to the world around them, for example in the letters to Timothy. Women were counselled to be submissive to their husbands, to remain silent and to cover their heads while praying. 1 Corinthians describes the husband as head of his wife and Christ as the head of every man. However, we know that apostles on missionary journeys included women colleagues who often served as fellow ministers to women.

There are also many examples in the scriptures and early Christian tradition which show that

feminine imagery for God was customary for the early followers of Jesus. In Genesis, for example, we are told that both women and men are created in the image of God.

The prophet Isaiah describes God as a woman in labour and a mother comforting her children. Clement, the bishop of Alexandria (150-215 A.D), states: “In God’s ineffable essence he is father; in his compassion to us God became mother. The father by loving becomes feminine.”¹ In other words, limiting God to masculine pronouns and imagery and excluding women from leadership positions limits our human religious experiences of God.

Women in the Church in the Middle Ages

The organisation of the Jesus movement changed dramatically when the Roman Emperor Constantine (272-337 AD), converted to Christianity in the fourth century and made Christianity the state religion. Bishops got political power and the church began to adapt to the hierarchical structures of Empire and to the patriarchal cultures of the surrounding Greco-Roman society. There was a growing emphasis on the power of the pope.

By the twelfth century the church had taken on a structure which placed many limitations on women’s role and participation. Although some women of the Middle Ages, such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), and some aristocratic women and abbesses, were able to go beyond the limitations placed on them by the society of the time, they were not in any way typical of women of their age.

During this time theological developments were also taking place which would support these changes in church structure. An important influence was the theology developed by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) who elaborated on ideas from the pre-Christian philosopher Aristotle (384-430 BCE) and was also influenced by the thinking of St Augustine (354-430 CE).

Augustine argued that only a male person is created in the image of God. Woman becomes an image of God when she is joined to her husband.

Aquinas builds on Augustine’s thought and asserts that the male possesses the image of God in a different and superior way to that of woman. He says that a woman’s essence is her sexuality and, using the mind-body dualism inherited from Greek philosophy, argues that she has a weaker and more imperfect body which then affects her mind and intelligence.

Following Aristotle, Aquinas describes the female as a defective human being since she is conceived because of an “accident” to the male sperm, possibly due to a south wind or the presence of a full moon.² This is the reason that Aquinas gives when he teaches that for a woman

¹ *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Vol. 2). Translated by William Wilson. Eds Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885).

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 92, a. 1, reply 1.

to be ordained or to preach would not only be illegitimate (against God's law), it would also be invalid (that is, it would not "work") on biological grounds. This theology has excluded women from roles of governance and maintained their subordination within the church community right up to the present time.

Although Thomas Aquinas was a brilliant thirteenth century theologian who contributed to the Church a huge body of wonderful theological insights, he was a man of his own time and these ancient philosophical theories are no longer sufficient to explain important modern understandings in biology, evolution and quantum physics that have taken place in human knowledge and experience since the Middle Ages.

In Aquinas's thought concerning women, there is a tension with Christian doctrine which affirms the full equality of all human beings as created by God as described in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. He tries to overcome this tension by affirming the 'complementary' roles of men and women in which women are 'naturally' subject to men in the 'order of creation' while at the same time women and men are said to be equal in the 'order of salvation'.

In 1879 Pope Leo XIII, (in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*), made Thomas Aquinas's theology and his Aristotelian framework the official theology of the Catholic Church.

Although the Church's understanding of many aspects of the world has developed along with the rest of society in the light of modern scientific knowledge – e.g. the Church no longer teaches that the earth is flat or that the sun revolves around the earth – it has not been willing to update its understanding of the human person in the light of modern sciences of psychology, biology and sociology.

This can lead to violence against women when women claim the same human rights and dignity which is given to male citizens. A Church which has adopted the hierarchical and patriarchal structures of its society is in a very poor position to challenge the human rights abuses and injustices of that society, especially as they affect women.

Women in the Church in Modern Times

It may appear that in just over 50 years women have come a long way in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. In our own time, we see women participating in Church ministries that would have been unimaginable at the beginning of the 1960s – as pastoral workers, as eucharistic ministers and readers (although not of the Gospel), as members of parish and diocesan pastoral councils, as chancellors of dioceses and in Curia positions in the Vatican. But although it is readily acknowledged that women perform more than half the work of the church in their local communities, there are still large gaps in some areas of church life where women are not present at all or are hugely under-represented.

The Second Vatican Council which took place in four sessions between 1962 and 1965 was attended by 2,500 bishops. No women took part in the first two sessions. But in the third and fourth sessions in 1964 and 1965, twenty-three women were invited as auditors which meant they could only listen, and not speak. However, by creating opportunities to mix socially with the bishops, they managed to have input into some of the later documents of Vatican II such as *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World - GS) and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People - AA).

Canadian theologian Catherine Clifford³ describes the approach of the Council as “inclusive” of women to the extent that it chose to define the “laity” not by gender roles but rather as equal participants sharing in the mystery of Christ through baptism. She draws attention to the fact that all the women at the Council wanted was to be recognised as full human persons, and so they understood themselves to be included each time the Council referred to members of the baptised faithful.

When women first arrived at the Council, some of the bishops addressed them as *pulcherrimae auditrices* (“most beautiful female auditors”) and referred to them as “flowers” in the Church. The women made it clear that they wanted to be treated as ordinary human beings on an equal basis.

Rosemary Goldie, an Australian auditor, is reported as saying:

*"You can omit all those gratuitous flowery adjectives, the pedestals and incense, from your sentence. All women ask for is that they be recognized as the full human persons they are, and treated accordingly."*⁴

The influence of the women who participated in the discussion and amendments of *Gaudium et Spes* can also be clearly seen in texts such as:

With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. (GS, n 29).

Goldie worked with bishops to get the following statement included:

"Since in our days women are taking an increasingly active share in the whole life of society, it is important that their participation in the various fields of the Church's apostolate should likewise develop" (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (AA, n 9).

However, in her book *From a Roman Window*, Rosemary Goldie expressed her shock when Pope Paul VI, in his 1972 Apostolic Letter *Ministeria Quaedam*, opened the ministries of

³ Catherine E. Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II: Interpretation and Ongoing Reception* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014), 73-74.

⁴ Mary Luke Tobin, "Women in the Church since Vatican II", *America*, November 1, 1986.

acolyte and lector to the laity – “but to laymen only”. She called it a “scandal”, lacking any theological basis.⁵ This has only been rectified recently by Pope Francis.

In August 1996 the Catholic Bishops of Australia commissioned a four-year research project known as *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia.⁶ When it was published in 1999 it listed nine Decisions and thirty-one Proposals for implementation at diocesan level, all of which were compatible with the current Code of Canon Law. However, very few of these have been effectively carried out.

During the long papacy of Pope John Paul II, a whole new vocabulary seems to have been constructed to protect a hierarchical and patriarchal power structure that reserves governing and teaching authority to men alone.

Terms such as “a new feminism”, “feminine genius”, the “Petrine” and “Marian” aspects of the Church, and the “Theology of the Body” with its particular application of the term “complementary”, became the new *lingua franca* of forums attended by young adults. They seemed aimed to obscure the continuing subordination of women in the Church.

Pope John Paul’s teachings as they affect women are problematic. He continued the papal tendency to idealise women and spoke constantly of the “dignity” of women. But issues such as rape and violence against women were not addressed. Nor did he address the contextual issues around women’s social and economic disadvantage, including women’s lack of voice and agency within the Church.

As a Catholic mother, Catherine Cavanagh⁷ alerts us to how people absorb what the Church teaches about women and men, how children internalise messages, reinforced and lived out in the very fabric of Church structures.

She considers a number of teachings of the Church and their consequences:

- *Only men can be priests, in persona Christi – In general God must think boys are more important than girls.*
- *Only men can read the Gospel at Mass – Men must be more worthy of being heard.*
- *In the parish, someone is ‘Father’. There is no corresponding ‘Mother’. There is no tangible role in the Church for women alongside that of the priest. Nor are the feminine traits of God given the weight of ‘God the Father’. Therefore, men are perceived as self-sufficient (independent of women) and fathers are more important than mothers. Men do not need women.*

⁵ Rosemary Goldie, *From a Roman Window. Five decades: The World, The Church and the Catholic Laity* (Blackburn, Victoria: HarperCollinsReligious, 1998), 116.

⁶ Research Management Group, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus, Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia* (HarperCollinsReligious, 1999).

⁷ Catherine Cavanagh, “On Elephants, Angels, and Trust: The Structure of the Church and Catholic Families” in *Catholic Women Speak*, ed. Catholic Women Speak Network (Paulist Press, 2015),180.

Conclusion

But perhaps there is some glimmer of recognition that change needs to occur in order to recognise the full Christian vocation of women in the Catholic Church.

Pope John Paul II, in his 1995 *Letter to Women* states:

Unfortunately, we are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women . . . And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision.

This was echoed by Cardinal Edward Clancy, at the launch of the *Woman and Man* project in 1996 when he said:

*We know that (women's) contribution over the centuries and today has been (and is) enormous, even if not fully recognised and valued . . . that the Church's history has often been characterised by mistaken attitudes and actions in this as in other areas; and that (this) is an appropriate time for us to acknowledge, repent for, and begin to remedy those mistakes of the past.*⁸

Let us pray for the work of the Continental Assemblies to be completed in March 2023 and, in particular, the Synod on Synodality which will occur in two parts from October 2023 to October 2024: that we might be given more profound faith, greater courage, deeper spirituality and the ability to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us in this historical journey.

This original article was written by Dr Patricia Madigan OP for WATAC News.



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John Paul II 1995



⁸ Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, *Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000*.

BEING CALLED BY GOD

Whenever Scripture tells a story of someone being called by God I tend to become both excited and yet a little - or a lot - apprehensive. (Second Sunday after Epiphany. John 1:29-42; Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9.) The topic of being called by God can be exciting and daunting, encouraging and discouraging, sometimes inviting but often excluding those of us who don't readily identify with those characters who clearly hear their names being called and respond with an immediate and resounding Yes!

When I was newly ordained I thought that at last this business of being called by God was resolved: I had eventually discerned, and others with me and about me, that I was called by God to serve in holy orders as an ordained priest. Surely that was it! But as time has gone by and I have had to discern being called into



parishes, and then out of them and on to other parishes, into retirement and then out of it, into writing for an invisible audience, and of continuing to grow even as I slow with age, I have to confess that this business of being called is as mysterious and perennial as ever.

I am comforted by a prayer that Thomas Merton wrote: "God, we have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing... Therefore, we will trust you always though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone."

At the heart of it all I suspect that God is always calling us home into loving union with God, into our truest and eternal selves, and the whole of creation. God's call is always, I believe, in the first instance and at the deepest level, to be creatures – beloved sons and daughters - who know their loving Creator. The call of God is therefore universal in this respect – all living creatures are called. The call of God throbs through all creation and is inbuilt into the nature of all things. As the mystics tell us we are restless for God until we rest in God. This makes the call of God intensely personal at an almost cellular level. In the language of Isaiah and the psalmist we have been called since before our birth, we have been named and formed in the womb by God. Being called is integral to simply being who we are. God knows our true name and our true nature and calls us by this.

Often those we read about in Scripture or hear witness also have a sense of what they are called to do. They seem to be called not only into relationship but also to specific tasks and job descriptions – into a particular vocation. Isaiah was called to be a prophet, to have a mouth like a sharp sword. Andrew and Simon Peter were called to be disciples of Jesus. But what about those who don't have that sense of being called to a particular vocation – or even when you do still find much about life that is a riddle, a maze of possibilities for both wondrous and deadening choices?

To recognise and respond to a sense of being called is to become a seeker and a follower, to risk becoming lost before – if ever – becoming found. Responding to a sense of call is to risk giving up everything before knowing what will be gained. To discern being called somewhere is not always a permanent destination but an initiation into journeying, growing and surrendering, entering into a process rather than arriving at any certainty.

In the account of the call of the first two disciples in John's gospel there is some delightful detail that suggests that even for those who knew Jesus in human person it was not straightforward. The first two disciples mentioned in this week's text were John the Baptist's disciples at the time they sighted Jesus! Did they wonder if they had got it wrong? They had seen and heard John the Baptist and decided that this is where God wanted them to be. And then along comes Jesus and they leave John and follow Jesus. What was that like for the disciples? And what was that like for John? Does their later decision make their first decision invalid? Not necessarily.

Like those two disciples of John, I have followed other spiritual paths and been deeply informed by the wisdom of other traditions only to see Jesus walk by, or to hear him speak, and to pick up and follow where I would not have expected to go. As individuals we should trust God's call as it unfolds in our lives. And as church we should be more trusting of those who have had different paths to this place than ourselves and have places to continue onto. As many these days find that sometimes following the call means following the call of Jesus out of the churches we were raised in. At the very least following Jesus has meant for many of us following his footsteps in directions that some of our fellow neighbours don't understand and don't approve of.

Even Isaiah who was sure of the call of God didn't find it easy or comfortable. He was called to be a prophet, one with a mouth as sharp as a sword which probably didn't win him a lot of popularity contests. Isaiah is led to say "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Do you ever feel like that? Do you look around the church and admit to feeling like all those years of fundraising, busy bees, personal giving, brass polishing, baking,

studying, praying have been in vain? That the commitment of a lifetime has earned nothing but irrelevance and struggle, for what? For a world that doesn't value your beliefs or practices! But Isaiah is able to say: "yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward is with my God?" And God answers him in the most surprising way: "It is too light, too easy, a thing to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore, the survivors of Israel" - this is after years of captivity and yearning and despair - it is too light a thing?? "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth!" You might think that a compassionate God would say "there, there, Isaiah, you have had a hard job, sit down and have a rest." No, God says I have something even more amazingly wonderful and demanding and impossible in store for you. Your weariness comes not from aiming too high but too small! The cure for your despair is not to give up but to desire more.

Is God a workaholic? Does God want us to work until we drop! I don't think so for after all God created Sabbath and rest and originally placed us in a garden of plenty and play rather than a field of work and achievement. The Old Testament is full of guidelines for the keeping of the Sabbath and Jubilee - cycles of rest and restoration.

God's antidote for our fear and malaise and weariness is to challenge our hearts and minds to catch on fire with what can be. The cure for despair and weariness is to desire more, to aim higher. The call of God to be ethical good citizens of the kingdom awakens our desire for a world of justice and mercy that will reign down on the least and the lost and on us all. The call of God to be generous awakens our desire to give until all are fed at the great feast of the divine and until our seemingly unquenchable thirst is sated with love and hope. The call of God to be faithful servants awakens our desire to be companions and lovers of the Beloved.

So, if you are uncertain, or bored, or weary, take heart and allow the call of God to awaken you and to guide you home. Hear your true name being uttered in the night. See your true vocation dance before your imagination. And know that there is room enough in God's heart for you, as you are and as you might yet be.

Even so, come Lord Jesus call us deeper into life and love.



This article was written by Rev. Susan Grace and first appeared [here](#) on 6th January 2023. Reprinted with permission.

WHAT SHOULD WE BE DOING?

In a late 2022 episode of Radio National's [The Minefield](#), presenters Waleed Aly and Scott Stephens and guest Hugh Breakey had a weighty and wide-ranging conversation about the moral limits of compromise. At one stage the following was said:

“Whatever God wanted for us, as we Protestants fight the Catholics, he [sic] didn't want this. [Enlightenment philosopher Locke on civil strife] Surely, look around you...we're tearing ourselves apart...it cannot be that this is what we should be doing.”

Thankfully, we Catholics are no longer fighting the Protestants – we have enough issues of our own to address. And I want to say we're not tearing ourselves apart but I believe in some ways we are. I find the question ‘what should we be doing?’ a helpful focus.

There are many areas that could be considered here and no reader of WATAC News will be surprised that I'm going to home in on the much vaunted but barely changing ‘role of women’. We (by which I mean the institutional or official Catholic church) will have made real progress when we no longer talk or write about ‘the role of women’ because it no longer differs significantly from the role of men. Alleluia!

I struggle to believe that I will see this in my lifetime, but if I do not have hope, I have nothing, so I struggle on.

If we, as a church, should not be in constant tension, even conflict, over essential matters, what should we be doing?

I believe we ought to acknowledge that the history of the institutional church, in sharp contrast to the gospels which we hear proclaimed and ‘broken open’ regularly, has rarely hesitated to draw a sharp distinction between women and men. Patricia Madigan OP provides a helpful survey of ‘the role of women in the church today’ in this edition (page 3). The distinctions, of course, were being drawn by men, mostly ordained men, whose educational opportunities were often greater than those afforded women.

The obvious rejoinder is that the church was merely mirroring the mores of the times.

What's the point of a church that merely mirrors the mores of the times?

Is not the church meant to be prophetic?

We can't be both; we have to choose!

St Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

“...among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.”

1 Cor 2: 6-7

Surely there is an injunction here to set a different course, to sail uncharted waters, to be good NEWs, not good OLDs!

St Paul seems to be suggesting that the “wisdom of this age” is to be distrusted, even condemned. However, in terms of recognising and honouring women, the wisdom of *this* age, at least in the western world, throws down the gauntlet to church teachings that place many limitations on the role of women.

Even if you accept that the ordained priesthood has its genesis at the Last Supper, it would logically follow that ordination would not be restricted to unmarried men, since Peter was clearly married. Also, there’s no reason to believe that only men were present at the disciples’ Passover celebration.

However, it seems to me that there’s an enormous chasm between the injunction to *discipleship* at the Last Supper – “Do this in memory of me” – and the current model of ordained priesthood. Genesis tells us that each of us, female and male, is made in the image and likeness of a loving, creative God – a God who is neither female nor male.

Yet the distinctions between female and male are almost as sharp now as they were in the early church – although not, I hasten to add, in the gospels.

Is this really what we should be doing?

Writing in the Summer 2022 edition of *The Swag*, the journal of the National Council of Priests, Fr Peter Maher (RIP) said,

Just like the woman at Simon’s house, the women at the [Plenary] Council became disrupting influences through their presence and tears. Their silent witness invited bishops in charge of the process to recognise that the Plenary was now at risk. The women’s tears were a *prophetic voice* [my emphasis] for a reset. They claimed their baptismal equality by calling for action. Standing was an act of brave nobility...

Much has been written and spoken about ‘*that* Wednesday’ at the second session of the Council. It seems to me that the issue is not about passing particular motions (with the votes of bishops, all of whom are male, carrying more weight than those of the non-ordained) but about the fact that *still*, the role of women is even ‘a thing’.

The church in many countries has lost much of its credibility, and rightly so, because of the scale of sexual abuse of children by clergy and church personnel. It is doubtful that it will ever recover.

Was that what we should have been doing?

Then there is the issue of the church’s attitude towards those people of God whom God chose to create homosexual. For young people particularly, this stance is scandalous and difficult to fathom.

Is this what we should be doing?

Added to these issues, the ubiquitous questions, demands, conversations, prayers and hopes regarding the ‘role of women’ are the cause of a lack of credibility in a western society that long ago acknowledged women’s equality – and legislated for it. They are also daily detracting from ‘what we should be doing’.

I long to hear a Pope say:

- Women and men are equal in the eyes of the church, as well as of God.
- Therefore, no privilege extended to a man with the requisite gifts and qualities is not extended to a woman with the requisite gifts and qualities.
- Men in positions of leadership who cannot accept this may not, in fact, possess the requisite gifts and qualities.
- Those amongst the People of God who struggle with this revelation may care to return to the scriptures, pray for enlightenment or discuss with those around them in hopes of new understanding.

Hope springs eternal.

As [Jan Richardson](#) writes in *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*,

Who wait
for the end
of waiting
who wait
for the fullness
of time
who wait
emptied and
open and
ready
who wait
for you,
O bless.

This original piece was written by Tracey Edstein for WATAC News, February 2023. Printed with permission.

ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER

a ground-breaking feminist theologian and global sister

Tributes and condolences light up the Internet as word of the peaceful passing of feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, who died on May 21, 2022 at age 85, makes its way around the globe.

Rosemary, as most people called her, was an internationally renowned Catholic scholar activist who leaves scores of books, countless articles, more than a dozen honorary degrees, and academic distinctions of every kind. Her contributions to feminist scholarship, Catholic theology, Palestinian rights, ecology, anti-racism, peace work and so much more will be the subject of dissertations for generations to come.

She served on various boards, notably Catholics for Choice, and on editorial groups and committees too numerous to catalogue. Yet her legacy lies not only in the heads, but also in the hearts of family, friends and students who mourn her while we count our lucky stars to have been in her orbit.

Many people have great 'Rosemary stories,' not simply of the incredible scholar, teacher and



activist, but more so of the sometimes shy but always kind, humorous person with an open mind and even more open heart.

My stories go back to the early 1970s at Harvard Divinity School, where Rosemary spent a year as a visiting professor. She would speak of those times saying, "You remember, Mary, when we were at HDS ..." Of course, it never occurred to her to mention that I was a first-year graduate student, all of 21, and she was auditioning for a chair that she proved too progressive, not to say too feminist, to hold.

Rosemary Radford Ruether in 2009 (Annie Wells)

Her collegial approach, encouraging other people and lifting as she climbed, taught her students to do the same. We saw up close what it took — endless hours in the library, syllabi an inch thick as she worked out a whole new schema for studying women left out of the history of religion; courageous intellectual forays; an ability to change one's mind with integrity; writing that included the best scholarship and the funniest parody; and a courteous, rapid response to every shred of correspondence long before email.

I still marvel at how she did it all and maintained what is now called life-work balance. Being



Rosemary in 1990 (Mev Puleo)

a woman in a man's world of religion and scholarship was beyond hard.

When the Harvard Divinity School residence Rockefeller Hall was dedicated in 1972, hungry students sat in our dorm rooms smelling the delicious meal being served to donors and dignitaries below. Rosemary was present at the dinner, where one Rockefeller son extolled the extensive virtues of his great father. Rosemary was reported to have uttered in a stage whisper, "Didn't that man have a mother?" Her brilliant sense of humour leavened more than one hard situation.

Rosie, as we sometimes called her, was a phenom. I hosted her once in Berkeley, California, in the 1970s, when she was invited to be on a doctoral committee at the Graduate Theological Union. She read the academic materials in a flash. Then she closeted herself in the study to write her comments in preparation for the defence.

All I could hear from the living room was the loud clanging of my electric typewriter being put through its paces. I feared the machine might catch fire because she was typing so fast. Rosemary emerged shortly with several single-spaced pages of erudite comments.

Her appreciative and critical reading on an obscure topic that only she could handle enhanced the defence. The student passed, and thus Rosemary launched one more colleague by partnering rather than obstructing, collaborating rather than gatekeeping. She showed the rest of us how feminist work is done.

We were in Jerusalem for a conference on liberation theology with Palestinians in 1990. Some high-ranking local clergy, including some patriarchs and those addressed as "Your Beatitude," invited our international group to a lovely reception in a mirrored room. One church leader of more than ample girth, robed in a black cassock with a brightly coloured cummerbund, delivered himself of an oration: "Jesus, the divine embryo, who from before the beginning of his life ..."

Our members eyed one another in the mirrors while this well-meaning gentleman rocked on the edge of a platform working himself into a theological lather. We had all we could do to stifle giggles and retain some semblance of composure lest we commit an international ecumenical faux pas. Rosemary was beyond amused with the rest of us. It was better that the gentleman did not know to whom he was addressing his remarks.

Rosemary's generosity to students is the stuff of legend. Many students mention her empathy as their different learning needs and styles emerged. She could pivot intellectually and was

nimble in her methods to accommodate various ways of learning.

One of her brightest graduate students suffered a deep depression and tried to take her own life. The student confided that Rosemary took her into her home and rocked her like a baby as she recovered. My generation learned from Rosemary that our work is not simply intellectual, but also personal and pastoral.

Other former students tell of living for stints with Rosemary, her husband and their three children in their home in Evanston, Illinois, during Rosemary's long tenure at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary and Northwestern University. Their hospitality, especially for international students, made the difference that allowed many to finish their studies and to do so with a sense of community in a unique American household.

Her husband, Herman Ruether, a political scientist by profession, is one of the few men of his generation who was smart and secure enough to love and share daily life with a phenomenal woman. He handled more of the home responsibilities than most men of his time. He encouraged Rosemary in her work, shared her interests with enthusiasm, and engaged in joint projects especially on the Middle East. Their children were at the centre of their lives.

Rosemary was a world-class theologian. She was one of the first feminists to travel extensively to lecture and learn, introducing concepts and strategies that helped other women find their own voices, histories and trajectories. She went where she was invited and needed all over the globe. She listened, and she enjoyed it. If a group wanted to study, she was there to teach. In each place, she learned about the local reality — the women's groups, ecological efforts and other liberation projects.

When she got home, she wrote about them in an effort to build networks and create global strength. She was well aware of the dangers of white American hegemony, always balancing that with ways to empower women who were finding their way. Scholarship for solidarity was Rosemary's brand, whether on ecology, Palestine, or Catholic women's ordination.



Rosemary Radford Ruether in conversation in 1974 (NCR file photo)

She taught the rest of us how to travel lightly on our theological excursions. She rivaled Maryknoll Sisters who are famous for their smart simplicity. When a host picked her up at the airport there was virtually never a stop at the baggage claim. She carried what she needed, often just a briefcase even for a few days.

I escorted her to her airport shuttle as she left a meeting that WATER hosted about how to counter the Vatican's active oppression of nuns. She had a small, light backpack on wheels so I offered to carry her suitcase. Silly me, there wasn't one, even for a four-day cross-country trip. There was not a "diva" bone in her body. It was another style lesson for those who followed her.

Rosemary was a complete theologian, a "[scholar activist](#)," as I have written about her. She was a painter (she considered an art major in college) who liked to garden and cook. She felt very at home at Grailville, the women's farm and conference center in Loveland, Ohio, long the headquarters of the U.S. Grail. She and her late Grail friend Janet Kalven (on whose birthday Rosemary died) would talk about herbs and enjoy the fruits of the garden. I once stayed in the turret room in Grailville's Main House where Rosemary wrote some of her most influential work. I hoped a little of her talent might rub off on me.

Rosemary loved her garden at Pilgrim Place, the progressive retirement community in Claremont, California, where she and Herman retired. When I was visiting, she arrived at a meeting about ecumenical global volunteer opportunities toting her lunch on a simple plate. She told me she had made it herself. By that she meant she had baked the bread, grown the basil, and harvested her own tomato. Ok, and probably written an article that morning.

An Irish friend recalls that Rosemary arrived in Dublin once and asked about a washing machine. She had travelled in her gardening dress straight from the "new sod," too busy to change and still catch her flight.

Women-church played a large part in Rosemary's theology and spirituality. She and feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza laid the groundwork for forms of feminist Christian faith that replace kyriarchal structures with egalitarian base communities, shared decision-making, and mutual ministry. Everything from architecture to exegesis, from finances to music can and must reflect the values of equality and justice if feminists are to participate.

Many feminists left Christianity, especially Catholicism, when it proved resistant to change and unhealthy for many people's spirituality. But for those who decided to struggle with and radically reshape the contours of patriarchal Christianity, Rosemary's and Elisabeth's work provided a useful foundation.

Rosemary belonged to a local women-church group in Claremont. She was also supportive of the Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community in San Diego, led by Roman Catholic Women Priests. She encouraged an inclusive approach that honours the varied ways Catholic women live out their vocations. I agree with her.

Ironically, I would guess that many people in both communities worshipped alongside

Rosemary without knowing much about her shaping influence on the women-church movement. She would never have mentioned it, but history will not forget.

Her sisterly affection was quiet and powerful, a word here, a gesture there, always present, never showy. Diann Neu, my partner, recounted being at a bucolic conference centre with Rosemary when Diann got word that her father had died. After I consoled her, Diann went outside to spend some time in nature reflecting on her loss. The next thing she knew, Rosemary was beside her, a strong, supportive but unobtrusive presence, offering sympathy and care.

Rosemary and I were paired once in a feminist liturgy for a brief moment of sharing. The instruction was to use a song lyric if we could to convey a wish for the partner. I was not surprised that Rosemary, who taught for a decade at Howard University Divinity School, chose a spiritual that she probably learned in her civil rights activism. She said, "Oh, Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn."

I won't weep over your passing, Rosemary. Instead, with deepest gratitude for your example, I will work as you did to end the many reasons for weeping in our world. Rest in peace, Rosemary, and rise in justice.

This article was written by Mary E Hunt and originally published in [the National Catholic Reporter](#) on May 22, 2022. Reprinted with permission.



CARDINAL GEORGE PELL'S SENDOFF

This week, on Thursday, George Pell's body was placed in a crypt below St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. On the fence outside, ribbons acknowledged the survivors of clergy abuse. Police had already gone to the Supreme Court to intervene in a planned protest. A Catholic prime minister and two Catholic premiers had each rejected appeals for a state funeral.

At the service, former prime minister Tony Abbott described Pell as one of the country's greatest sons. He said he was a soldier for truth. He said there should be schools and universities named after him. "As I heard the chant 'George Pell go to hell'," he said, referring to the protest outside, "I thought 'Aha!' at least they now believe in the afterlife. Perhaps this is St George Pell's first miracle."

George Pell was two years ahead of me in the Melbourne seminary. For several months he was my prefect. We maintained our friendship through the years, although we knew which areas of the ecclesiastical terrain to avoid.

Pell was born in 1941 in Ballarat, a provincial city built on the 1850s gold rush. In the period following World War II, in its various Catholic schools, boarding schools and orphanages, it became a hotbed for the clerical abuse of young boys by priests and Irish Christian Brothers. This extended across the whole diocese of Ballarat.

It has been suggested in many quarters, from the distorted perspective of our times, that George Pell was arguably Australia's greatest churchman. The various commentaries have focused particularly on Pell's intelligence, his "fine mind". Fellow seminarians know better. He was certainly bright, but he never topped his class at the Melbourne seminary, nor at the Pontifical Urban University in Rome.

He was often described as "God's ruckman" and it was noted that he would have played for Richmond. This isn't quite true, either. Because of his bulk, he dominated schoolboy football, but this advantage did not last into adulthood. When he played against men in the seminary, he was best described as slow and lumbering. He was not a draft pick.

There is one truth, however, in all the hagiography: he played the game of ecclesiastical politics with a deft hand, not least with his American right-wing Catholic mates, and he was a formidable cultural and religious warrior. His episcopal motto was "Be Not Afraid". He liked a fight.

Since Pell's death, the commentary in Sydney has been dominated by the likes of Anthony Fisher, archbishop of Sydney, and Abbott, former seminarian and former prime minister of Australia, who applauded Pell's life for its achievements and lauded the High Court for

“exonerating” Pell and having him released from jail after 404 days. Abbott foolishly described his jailing in terms of a state crucifixion.

Commentators such as Louise Milligan and Lucie Morris-Marr have been more circumspect. Both journalists have published studies based on interviews with victims and their families. They have acknowledged the complaints against Pell himself and the abuse cases that were never tried.

I worked on preparations for the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Of the 4444 claimants who alleged sexual abuse by priests and religious brothers, about 10 concerned George Pell. Whether these allegations were credible or not, it is impossible to say. Allegations made to the six commissioners by alleged victims in the so-called “private sessions” were not treated as “evidence” and so were not inquired into. Some would have concerned assaults in swimming pools and other places. The commission would have referred the Pell allegations to the police, along with all the others.

Subsequently, I also became aware of several psychotherapists and counsellors across Melbourne who worked with Pell’s alleged victims over the years. Not the Southwell inquiry in 2002, which examined incidents at a church summer camp in 1961, nor the royal commission, nor the High Court, has ever completely exonerated George Pell, saying only that the available evidence had not surmounted the legal hurdle of reasonable doubt.

Pell dismissed clerical sex abuse as being caused by “personal failures”. If he had seen it in structural terms, it would have implied that mother church was structurally faulty. Yet his “personal failures” explanation is hard to accept when the Australian figures for 1950 to 2010 show that 7.9 per cent of diocesan priests were offenders, as were 5.6 per cent of religious order priests. Similar figures, where available, are seen overseas.

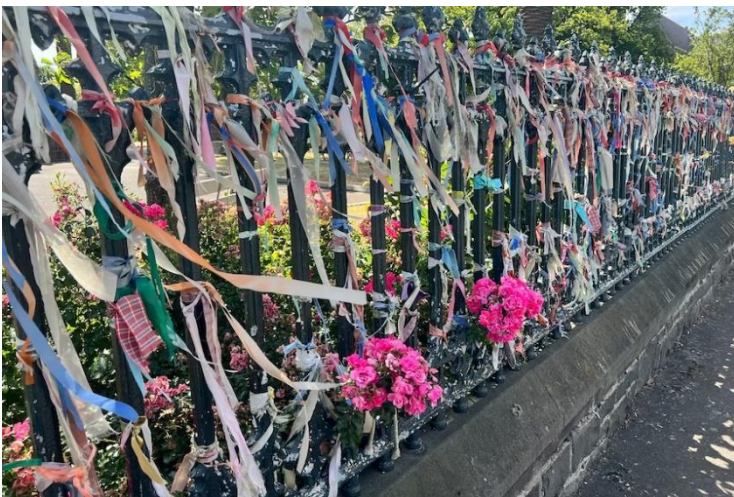
Pell was obsessed with authority and the apostolic tradition. His doctoral thesis at Oxford gives this away. Its title is “The Exercise of Authority in Early Christianity from about 170 to about 270.” It centred much on St Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage. Despite the fact Pell was pursuing his theological studies during the Second Vatican Council, he eventually resisted its new Church vision as the People of God.

Pell also showed an amazing ability not to read the signs of the times. This was particularly seen in his rejection of a priestly role for women, his strident opposition to gay people and same-sex marriage, and, lastly, in his rejection of the need for a revised theology of sex and sexuality. He played a key role in the dismissal of Bill Morris, Bishop of Toowoomba, for his outspoken views on women’s ordination.

His vision of sexuality was phallogentric and reproductive. He saw sexuality as binary, not on

a continuum, and had no idea of sexual communion between two partners as a deep, loving, playful and pleasurable encounter, reflecting the playfulness of God. He never understood the shift in Catholic thinking as Catholics in their immediate and extended families have gradually discovered some of their family members are gay. Pell saw it all as destructive deviancy and in his speeches he often made reference to low fertility rates, not least in Italy. He was an assertive climate change denier.

He was dismayed in the 1960s and 1970s when the Catholic priesthood went into revolt and many resigned, most to marry, as I did. The model of the married priest-professional provides the only viable future model for the Catholic priesthood. Seminaries will become relics of a bygone era as the future Third Church – a more democratic, most listening church – emerges. Pell's opposition to Pope Francis has become an open secret in the days since his death. His last years in Rome were spent as organiser for the conservative faction in the lead-up to the next papal election. He was dismayed that Francis had been stacking the College of Cardinals with pastoral cardinals from places such as Tonga and Timor-Leste. His fundamental failure was that his views were rooted in Greek, Thomist and Western thinking. In Rome in the 1960s he lived with and studied alongside students from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, although he never thought in terms of a global church, except in an elementary European and Roman-centric way.



The Australian Catholic Church now has the task of constructing a church with totally revamped and contemporary sacramental liturgies, one that incorporates Indigenous and Asian spiritualities. It is a monumental task, beyond the capabilities and imaginations of Big George's many acolyte archbishops and bishops in charge across the

Australian continent.

The victims of clerical sexual abuse and their families will continue to tie their protest ribbons to the gates of St Mary's. The church will continue to remove them. The hurt will continue, just as the adulation and whitewashing of George Pell's life will continue.

This article was written by Des Cahill and published in [the Saturday Paper](#) on February 4th 2023. Reprinted with permission.

THE WONDER OF OUTER SPACE

When I was 10 years old, my family embarked on a "pilgrimage" to a space launch. My sister and I piled into the back of the minivan, surrounded by books and cassette tapes to keep us entertained while we were awake. A flask of coffee and my mom as navigator assistant supported my dad on the seven-hour drive from Georgia to Cape Canaveral, Florida. It took us four attempts before we actually saw a rocket send five human beings into space.

Time has a way of reshaping memories. Truthfully, I remember very little of the space shuttle launch itself. Instead, I remember the time spent together with family — thanks in large part to photographs. For me, the trip was a catalyst in my love for outer space. Maybe it was also something we were studying in school. Perhaps it was because I was reading Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. The seeds were planted. The vast world of the cosmos captured my heart.

Fast-forward 15 years. I'm a novice sister — and a novice teacher — tasked with teaching third grade science. Having studied humanities during college (and generally avoiding anything beyond the required Biology 101), I surprised myself with how much I enjoyed teaching science, especially our unit on space. A few years later, when I found myself teaching science again, this time to fifth graders, I was elated. For our combined English language arts/science unit we read *George's Secret Key to the Universe* by Lucy and Stephen Hawking. This later turned into a biography unit on Hawking following his death in 2018. We watched YouTube interviews with astronauts on the International Space Station. Pluto as a planet or dwarf planet became a hot topic in our classroom.

On my own time, I listened to the "Naked Astronomy" podcast from The Naked Scientists. This went beyond preparation for my students, even if that had been my initial motivation. There was something simultaneously delightful and pleasantly frustrating when I challenged myself to learn about the Kuiper Belt, Mars rover, and the weather patterns on the surface of our sun. As an added bonus, my podcast listening gave me new topics to discuss and share with my family. Science, and space in particular, became a new, common interest and language for all of us.

Given my well-established pattern for liking all things galactical, it shouldn't come as a surprise that I immediately began drooling over the James Webb Space Telescope images when they arrived in my inbox earlier this summer as part of a family email chain. I found them so striking that they became a primary focus for me during my annual retreat. Echoes of the Psalms came

to mind when zooming in on the details of the images of cosmic cliffs.

*"By the LORD's word the heavens were made;
by the breath of his mouth all their host."*

—Psalm 33:6, New American Bible

*"When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and stars that you set in place. ..."*

—Psalm 8:4, New American Bible

*"I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous,
your handmade sky-jewelry,
Moon and stars mounted in their settings.
Then I look at my micro-self and wonder,
Why do you bother with us?
Why take a second look our way?"*

—Psalm 8:3-4, The Message

"He numbers the stars, and gives to all of them their names."

—Psalm 147:4, New American Bible

*"Where can I go from your spirit?
From your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there. ...
If I say, 'Surely darkness shall hide me, and night shall be my light' —
Darkness is not dark for you,
and night shines as the day.
Darkness and light are but one."*

—Psalm 139:7-12, New American Bible

Even our Christmas songs draw our focus to the heavens. We've only just now finished singing our secular "psalms" like: A star, a star, dancing in the night/ With a tail as big as a kite/ With a tail as big as a kite.

Perhaps it's the darkness of life in the Northern Hemisphere. Maybe it's my recent discovery of Dark Sky Parks (and that there are two near me!), but I've been turning my attention back to the night sky once again. For me, it's not about either science or faith. It's always been both. Science is a vehicle leading me to study and contemplation. Sometimes faith gives me the language to describe this experience. But more than that, my faith, especially the practice of lectio divina, provides a way for me to sit before an image of a deep field and pray.

The best word to describe this both/and practice is wonder. As Sofia Cavalletti described it: The particularity of wonder is that we find activity and contemplation inseparably blended within it. ... Wonder is a very serious thing that, rather than leading us away from reality, can arise only from an attentive observation of reality. An education to wonder is one that helps us go always deeper into reality.

Science and faith always have something new to teach us. God delights in us as we make such discoveries. Wonder waits around every corner. So, having arrived at the start of a new year, I ask: What are you wondering about? What new area of study can you dive deeper into? How will you dance with action and contemplation given the reality before you?

This article was written by Kathryn Press on 6th January 2023 for the [Global Sister's Report](#). Reprinted with permission.

“Doing synodality is not a matter of ‘I like it’ or ‘I don’t like it’, ‘I agree, or I disagree’,” said Sr Nathalie. “It’s normal that when you are in a process like this, it is a process of conversion, a process of change. Everywhere, in every human organisation, when you have change, you have all kinds of fears, and you have to listen to that. Some are afraid that the Church will change, some are afraid that the church will not change. I think it’s good that we can express our fears, and even our critics. When you want to listen to everybody, you must be open to listen to the diversity of voices.”

Nathalie Becquart 01/02/2023



Listen to the latest episode [here!](#)

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NSW

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

ACT

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

VIC

CASTLEMAINE REFLECTIONS: For details, please contact Trish Sharkey. Mob: 0414 937 357 Email: patricia.sharkey63@gmail.com

ONLINE BOOK GROUP: Meets monthly via Zoom. Contact Tracy McEwan events@watac.net.au

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