

MISSION STATEMENT - *As women and men rooted in faith, we call for justice, equality, and full partnership in ministry. We are committed to church renewal and to the transformation of a structure which uses gender rather than gifts as its criterion for ministry.*

***The St. Mary Magdalene Community celebrates Mary Magdalene’s Feast Day
Sunday July 15, 2018 at 9am, at Drexel Hill United Methodist Church, 600
Burmont Road, Drexel Hill, PA 19026***

**“CELEBRATING FEMINISM & FAITH
IN UNION”
MARY MAGDALENE FEAST DAY 2018**

We love the theme of this year’s Mary Magdalene Feast: “Celebrating Feminism & Faith in Union”. We join with other Catholic renewal groups in affirming, with this title, the national and international Women’s Marches, #MeToo and #CatholicToo, brave advocates for justice and rights of women, and those who participated in the March for Our Lives this past March. We are using this theme to highlight how critically our religious and other institutions need the focus and wisdom of feminist energy, and we proudly celebrate Mary Magdalene as a worthy inspiration for us all.

We also celebrate all the Catholic renewal groups, especially FutureChurch, Women’s Ordination Conference, and Call to Action, in being instrumental in their persistent advocacy of the correction of the historical errors and promotion of the historical truths that brought Mary Magdalene to the forefront as a saint worthy of not just a Memorial Day as in the past but her own special Feast Day. We were remiss in last year’s June/July issue in not emphasizing how huge this change really is.

If you were not properly infused with Catholic liturgical teachings - or just were not paying proper attention in all those years of Catholic schooling! - you may have missed that in a calendar full of feast days, some are ranked as more important than others. In fact, there is actually a “hierarchy” – hmmm – of feast days, in this case with three different ranks: In third place are the “Memorials” observances of which can be “obligatory” or “optional”. Saint Mary Magdalene’s Memorial Day had at least been an obligatory day - one up from optional! - but still in the lowest rank.

Feast Days are the second in the ranking and generally honor events in the life of Jesus and Mary and saints of major importance. Mary Magdalene, in June 2016, finally made it to this, as it turns out quite important, middle tier. (Very few make the highest rank, “Solemnities” reserved for the most important events, Christmas, Easter, etc. and very few saints:

Mary, Mother of Jesus, Joseph, John the Baptist, and Saints Peter and Paul.)

Who cares, you ask? For us and the Church, it may actually be a big deal. Of the thousands of saints, Mary Magdalene is one of the few honored with a Feast, and the only woman, other than Mary, Mother of Jesus. Since Feast Days are reserved for only the most significant saints, Mary Magdalene now stands with her equals, the other apostles and disciples of the Church. Her Feast now requires prayers and readings proper to her, and more “pomp and circumstance” in the Mass itself.

But most important is the new Preface the Church has sanctioned for the Masses celebrating Saint Mary Magdalene Feast because it proclaims the truth of her role both in the history and in the future of the Church:

In the garden He appeared to Mary Magdalene, who loved him in life, who witnessed his death on the cross, who sought him as he lay in the tomb, who was the first to adore him when he rose from the dead, and whose apostolic duty was honored by the apostles so that the good news of life might reach the ends of the earth.

This new Preface has the potential, not only to refute any leftover false impressions that Mary was a prostitute or public sinner, but to re-educate Catholics about who she really was. It accents her prominent and powerful place in the life of Jesus, her role as an apostle to the apostles, and her mission, ordained by none other than Jesus himself, to spread the Good News of Easter. She is a woman ordained, and more and more will see and hear this truth every year. Even the entrenched hierarchy perhaps?

And so, we invite you to join us on July 15 at 9:00am at the Mary Magdalene Community, 600 Burmont Road, Drexel Hill as we celebrate the Feast of Saint Mary of Magdala. In doing so, we will also celebrate the women who have gone before us, and we will stand in solidarity with women and men today to demand justice and inclusion. We invite you to join us in our prayers and hope for our Church that it might come more

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MARY MAGDALENE FEAST DAY 2018

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fully alive with the gifts, spirit, and potential of all its members.

To inspire you further, thanks to FutureChurch, here is just a short sampling of recommended readings for the day:

Diana Hayes in "Speaking the Future into Life: The Challenge of Black Women in the Church": *To be a Christian is to be about the salvation of the world, not through forced conversions, not through the oppression of those who differ in skin color, gender, religion, economic status, or sexual orientation, but through somehow loving a new world into life, a world in which all people can live free. We must live the life we sing about, challenging ourselves to never be reconciled to any doctrine or ideology that renders us less than human, silent and invisible. We must dismantle the master's house, if necessary, using new tools forged from our own discovery and recovery of our long lost and stolen pasts as women of every race and nation and build a house of God that has "plenty good room" for all to sit down.*

Emily Maynard in "How Feminism Saved My Faith.": *Feminism freed me from the idea that there is one correct universal way to experience womanhood. In turn, this gave me the ability to see faith beyond the rigid boxes I was given. I grew to celebrate Christianity as an incredibly complex, mysterious, and beautiful pursuit instead of a series of rules and recitations. Feminism opened up the door to complexity in my experience of myself and my faith. So I remain a Christian, in spite of all the pain that religion has poured out on women. I stay because other women are showing me how to live and pray and lead and build new pathways in faith traditions that have kept us boxed in for so long. I stay because feminism taught me to accept my life and personhood, both the doubting and the believing parts of myself. I stay because I've seen how Christianity can fuel justice, not just for women, but for all marginalized people. I stay because I believe in regeneration, resurrection, and redemption, even when they exist in abusive patriarchal religious structures. I stay because I know that women matter.*

Finally, please read Ann Zech's article in this issue, "A Homily in Celebration of Mary Madalene" which expresses all this Feast Day means to us.

PASSING THE LIGHT - HOLY THURSDAY 2018

We began our Holy Thursday Witness this year, each of us passing a lit candle to each other as we marked in word and song, the passing of the Light throughout the ages:

In the beginning, the universe was dark and cold –and the Spirit hovered and brooded and whispered, "Let there be life!"

In the beginning God said, "Let there be light"

In the beginning God looked at all that had been made and saw that it was good.

Soon after the beginning – God handed the light to human beings -

And they handed the light to their children

And their children handed the light to their children...

We then, one by one, noted how the light traveled from Abraham and Sarah to the men and women prophets of the Old Testament to Mary and her magnificent "Yes" and the apostles and disciples of the New Testament.

We passed the light in memory of how the light came to Paul and all the early women church leaders who sent it on to the saints and heroes of the Dark and Middle ages and Renaissance and then to our modern day saints and witnesses, Harriet Tubman and Dorothy Day and Rosa Parks and Mother Theresa and Father Roy, and so many others.

Then we asked:

***Who will keep the light burning in our day?
Who will take the light into the world?
Who will carry the light if we do not?***

All this we asked ourselves, and now we ask you the same.

CHARGED SILENCE - ORDINATION DAY 2018

Well, "It rained, Lord, Lord, didn't it rain!" on our Ordination Day witness this year...but not exactly on our parade, the internal one, that is.

Usually, prayerfully but very visibly, we stand across the street from the Basilica of Saints Peter & Paul in Philadelphia and celebrate outside our Mass led by a woman as (this year seven) men are ordained to the priesthood inside. The symbolism of the exclusion is always poignant but standing in cold and rain outside this year would have made it downright heart-rendering.

We did, however, take shelter. Under the overhang of the park's café, we celebrated our Mass. Only we could hear the wisdom in the words and the beauty of the singing. Those coming and going to the Basilica event could only glimpse us at a distance as a silent pantomime of a Mass. It was the silence they heard. And that, of course, made both the point and the poignancy.

We definitely want to speak up and make noise for justice and inclusion whenever we can, but perhaps we may also want to reclaim silence as an equally powerful tool for reform and renewal, one we might explore more closely as we create our necessary music everywhere.

A Little Catholic MeToo#

By Eileen DiFranco

Over the course of two thousand years, people were elevated to sainthood in a variety of ways for good reasons as well as bad. John Paul II, for instance, canonized a married couple for not having sex for forty years. That is one bad reason to make someone a saint. In spite of Catholic fascination with asceticism and all things sexual, not having sex should not be a criterion for sainthood any more than not eating should.

So what makes a human being holy enough to be declared a saint? To paraphrase a justice of the Supreme Court, people will know it when they see it. Or do they?

Actually, sainthood is difficult to define. I think it is equally difficult a title to bear. Saintliness just adds on another level to an already complex human being. In addition, human nature itself seems to preclude a seamless garment of lifelong individual holiness. Those of us who have been traveling along the road of life for some decades have come to realize that life is pretty much a mess and even the most sainted have to make deals in order to live in a complex world with other complicated human beings. Consequently, few to none of us emerge from the world unscathed.

Some deals we might make with life are, indeed, holy and life-giving even if they are difficult and perhaps life-altering. Terry Gross interviewed humorist writer John Hodgeman last fall. Hodgeman began his career as a book agent in a publishing company where he was quite successful. When he was 29, his mother began actively dying from lung cancer. He quit his job to be with her.

Stepping off the pathway to professional and financial success terrified Hodgeman. While not regretting his decision, he had no idea if he could find another satisfying job once his mother passed away. Some might call him a saint for quitting his job. Hodgeman insisted that he was nothing but a good son.

On the other hand, some deals we make with life prove to be ruinous. Refusing, for instance, to acknowledge evil in the ordained or covering up or minimizing mistakes by the powerful are recipes for disaster. It is always dangerous to put anyone up on a pedestal and cover him/her up with the popular acclaim of holiness. Thus, criticism, even when deserved, eventually becomes verboten and followed by something to the effect of, "How dare you even think such a thing?" We've been hearing a lot of that lately. The fact is that priests, police officers, generals, long suffering care givers, all are human beings who have fallen short of the glory of God in any variety of ways. We need to remember that.

Then, there is a second question. How does a revered person's fall from grace affect us?

There was an article in the *New York Times* last year about how we might regard the work of artists like Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, Roman Polanski, and Harvey Weinstein who have engaged in sexual abuse. Does the evil perpetrated by the artist seep into his/her artwork, damaging the art along with the artist? Do we continue to watch their movies, read their

books or do we boycott them? For sure, I don't know although I don't think I can ever watch "The Cosby Show" again without feeling a tad ill. I feel the same way about bishops and popes like John Paul II who covered up sexual abuse. Why would we ever believe anything they say or write when they refused to acknowledge the great evil of pedophilia that occurred under their watch? How can one be holy and so egregiously and willfully mistaken at the same time?

This *Times* article sent me on a theological trip back to the 5th century Donatist "heresy" which occurred during the time of Saint Augustine. The Donatists believed that the sacraments and religious rites administered by sinful clergy were not efficacious. In other words, they didn't "take" when sinful men performed them. Augustine, who had kept a sex slave for years and didn't marry her because she was of a lower caste than he, said no, the sacraments "took" regardless of the character of the clergy because they were a sign of God and not of human beings.

So-called heresies were often rational responses to irrational statements or practices made by those in charge. Donatism was one of these reactions. During the early 4th century persecution of Christians by Diocletian, the clergy were directed to hand over their holy books, that is, what they considered to be scripture, to the Roman authorities or face death. Some acquiesced to save their skin while others refused and were martyred.

None of us really knows what we would have done if we were faced with the same choice, so I'm not blaming those who chose to live. However, when the persecution was over, the members of the clergy who handed over the books to escape martyrdom fully expected to regain their pride of place, as if nothing had happened. The traumatized community regarded these clergy members as traitors, whose priestly powers were now defunct, their sacramental powers invalidated by their traitorous acts. Consequently, the sacraments these traitors had performed needed to be re-administered. Thanks to Augustine, the Donatists lost their cause and were declared heretical by what became the institutional church. When I think of the clerical abuse scandal, I think that the Donatists had a point.

When does holiness or saintliness surpass the evil that far too many of us human beings inflict upon others? Do redemption and transformation erase unworthy deeds? What about the people that the saints hurt? How do they figure into the equation of holiness?

As I was writing this, I thought again about Augustine. He lived with a woman for some thirteen years. She bore him a son. When his mother arranged a marriage with a wealthy Christian woman, Augustine had to send the woman, whom he purported to love, away. Augustine took their 13 year old son with him. So, his unnamed sex partner lost both her partner and her son simultaneously. Writers even in the modern age have said that ancient women "liked" to be concubines and that it improved their status in ancient society, thus dismissing and excusing Augustine's action and minimizing the woman's hurt.

Augustine seems genuinely upset by this turn of events, but it

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doesn't stop him from pursuing a promising future that could only happen without the woman he said he loved but who was, in the end good enough for sex, but not good enough to be his wife.

Then there is Thomas Merton. If you ever read Merton's books, they are brilliant and inspiring, just like Augustine's. I just loved every book of his that I read. There is a move afoot to canonize Merton who also bravely stood against war and racism when it was dangerous to do so.

Like Augustine, Merton was far from perfect. He had fathered a child prior to World War II in one of his many pre-conversion sexual liaisons. His guardian smoothed things over for Merton at least by paying off the woman and her family. There is, however, no mention of the future of the mother or the child, while Merton went on to great things, unencumbered by family obligations and responsibilities. Later at age 55 and as a priest and a monk, Merton had an affair with a young nurse, whom he also left behind because what would the world think of him if he left the abbey, married, and become a regular Joe? None of this has ever detracted from Merton's reputation even though from today's standpoint, it seems that Merton used his status and his age to have a sexual relationship with a 22 year old woman. This young woman is often described as a "les-son" in love that Merton had to learn in order to perfect his understanding of God.

Did Merton's untimely death and his publicizing of his relationship with the young woman "redeem" him? Did Augustine's later works redeem him? Does their treatment of women make them more human, and thus more admirable? Both apologized and felt badly and even wrote about what too many saw simply as a fall from grace. However, both could have taken a different action that would have left the person they used and abused in a better situation. And both chose not to, leaving broken lives in their aftermath. (To be fair, I don't think either man regarded himself as a saint and might be appalled by having that title bestowed upon them.)

I would be loath to dismiss the value and reality of transformation and repentance as part of the journey towards God. However, I fear that far too often both are used as a sop to wipe up incredibly bad behavior. The expectation that saintly men need to discard the women they have loved and who have loved them in return in order to follow God neglects the real harm inflicted upon vulnerable human beings-images of God- who come to be regarded as temptations to be conquered or as lessons to be learned while the great move on to bigger and better things. And the women, who quite obviously were left less than virginal and thus, less worthy? In modern parlance, the women got what they deserved for taking on a holy man.

So, what is sainthood? Who achieves it? Is it lifelong or reserved to a certain stage in life? When I look at our Catholic pantheon filled with complicated human beings, I think that sainthood is too heavy and dangerous a burden for any human being to bear. I think that most of the canonized saints would agree with me.

In the end, only God is and can be truly holy. Only God, though unexplainable, is uncomplicated in his/her love of creation without limits, without boundaries, without any questions asked about worthiness. Perhaps we should leave it at that.

Eileen McCafferty DiFranco is a Roman Catholic Woman Priest, a member of St. Mary Magdalene Community and the SEPAWOC Core Committee.

Thank you to Our Writers

We applaud all the talented writers who contribute to every issue we publish. We deeply appreciate the fresh perspective, inspiration and information they provide. We thank them for their persistence and wisdom and dedication to Catholic feminism, women's leadership and ordination.

Please consider joining them if you are inspired by them. Send submission to elliehart65@gmail.com.



St. Mary Magdalene Community
Drexel Hill – Sunday at 9
Drexel Hill UMC-McBurney Chapel
600 Burmont Rd.
Drexel Hill, PA 19026
Palmyra, NJ Saturday at 5 p.m.
Epworth UMC
501 Morgan Avenue,
Palmyra, NJ 08665
Wilmington DE
New Jerusalem Community
Sunday Liturgy:
For information contact Eileen at 267-258-6966

Revisiting Dorothy Day

By *Marian Ronan*

Because of my half-century of participation in the Grail movement, I have always felt related to Dorothy Day. The first recorded contact between the Grail and American Catholics was a 1936 letter to her from the co-founder of the US Grail, Lydwine van Kersbergen. In 1943, with the Grail planted in the Midwest, Day, on sabbatical from the Catholic Worker, participated in a three-week Grail program on rural living, liturgy, and the women's apostolate. Later she made a silent retreat at Super Flumina, the Grail's farm in Foster, Ohio.

My personal contacts with Day were limited. She spoke at a meeting of the Catholic Art Association—or maybe it was the Catholic Art Guild, since the Art Association shut down in 1970—during one of the summers that I spent at Grailville, the Grail's farm and conference center near Cincinnati, when I was still a fourth-grade teacher. Her talk followed the showing of a short art film, "Two Men and a Wardrobe." My recollection is that Day was quite dismissive of the film, something that led me to categorize her as a crabby, old-fashioned Church type; I was in my mid-twenties at the time and not very forgiving.

I also wrote to Day in 1975, after I had become a full-time member of the Grailville staff, asking if she would send me a copy of the Muslim "Ninety-Nine Names of God" that another Grail member, recently home from Egypt, had given her. She responded,

Sorry. Those 99 Names have disappeared from my treasure box, though the beads remain. My bedroom is always used in my peregrinations, so things disappear, are ripped off, liberated, to use the language of the young. My love to all there.

— In Christ—Dorothy.

The message came on a postcard bearing the kind of dramatic woodcut, this one by Antonio Frasconi, that appeared frequently in the *Catholic Worker*. Eventually I had the postcard framed archivally, to preserve it. When I show it to visitors I tell them that if Dorothy is canonized, it will become a second-class relic, a comment that baffles most of them.

All the rest of my "encounters" with Dorothy have taken place since her death in 1980. One was reading the letter from Cardinal John O'Connor to the Vatican nominating Day for canonization. It highlights, as a reason for her canonization, Day's repentance for the abortion she underwent before she became a Catholic. Later, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, at an event in Day's honor at St. Joseph's in Greenwich Village, the church where Day was baptized, described her as an "obedient daughter of the Church." I was well past my mid-twenties by then, but my responses to these statements were still not very forgiving. With regard to Day's obedience to the Church, for example, I thought: except for the cemetery workers' strike, where Day and her Catholic Worker colleagues picketed against the strikebreakers brought in by the Archdiocese.

Most recently, my encounters with Day include reading Jim Forest's biography, *All is Grace* (Orbis 2011). I have had it in my head for years to write a book about Joan of Arc, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Day, because of the strong but seemingly unlikely connections between them—Thérèse the as-

cetic having written a play about Joan the warrior, and Day, the pacifist, devoted to Joan as well, then writing a book about Thérèse. Forest's book is part of the material I've been accumulating for the project.

Forest is a terrific writer, and I learned a great deal from his biography that I had not known about Day. For one thing, I learned that she really was in many respects a traditional, if also utterly committed, Catholic. She was also a fairly judgmental individual, a sin she confessed again and again. So my evaluation of her in the 1970s was not entirely mistaken.

I also learned that Day really was an obedient daughter of the Church, frequently following the directions she received from bishops and priests—though she was by no means naïve about the sins of the institution.

I even learned that Day really did seriously regret—repent of—her abortion, though whether she would want to be remembered for that before anything else is another question. Indeed, she objected strongly to any suggestion that she was a saint, believing it undercut the Catholic Worker's fundamental commitment to egalitarianism and denial of self.

Perhaps the most important insight I took away from reading Forest's biography, however, is that precisely because of her high level of Christian commitment and the strength of her positions, Dorothy Day may well be exactly the kind of role model needed in this difficult time. In the midst of the environmental crisis that engulfs us, for example, I look around our apartment and wonder why in hell I ever bought all these clothes, these books, those items of kitchenware, and I find myself deeply inspired by Day's poverty and self-abnegation.

As I observe the chaos that paralyzes many of the groups I belong to, underpinned by the individualism and expectations of gratification by so many in my generation, I find myself profoundly challenged by Day's concern with and obedience to authority, however communal her understanding of it was.

And when I am too lazy to turn out for public demonstrations, or too afraid of being arrested, I remember Day's endless commitment to social action, and her many stays in jail.

Could it be, I find myself wondering, that the woman I once dismissed as too traditional a Catholic and too judgmental a person is exactly the model—the saint—we need as we face the crises that confront us?

Marian Ronan is *Research Professor of Catholic Studies at New York Theological Seminary, a Black, Latinx and Asian theological school in New York City, and co-author, most recently, of Women of Vision: Sixteen Founders of the International Grail Movement (Apocryphile, 2017).*

Upcoming Event

**Talk by Marian Ronan:
The Grail Movement: Women at the
Heart of Catholic Action
Sunday, September 23, at 2 PM
American Catholic Historical Society
263 S 4th St
Philadelphia, PA
No charge for admission.**

A HOMILY IN CELEBRATION OF MARY

MAGDALENE

By Ann Zech

In today's Gospel, Jesus, once again, uses stories - parables - to teach us how God sees each of us. All of our "life and faith" stories are linked together as we journey here on earth.

Who is part of your faith journey?
Who has been the yeast in your life – the leaven of your growth?
Who gave you not only human nourishment, but also taught you to see Jesus Christ as the "Bread of Life"?

As we heard in the today's Readings, for whom have you been called to be that "leaven" in their life, that "spark of the Spirit" who helps in times of weakness, struggle, doubt and fear?

For whom have you been called to reach out and touch with the love and peace that Jesus gave as gift to all?

For whom have you been challenged by your Faith to embrace as sister and brother in Christ?

Today we celebrate the Feast of St. Mary of Magdalene. Mary was a woman of independent means from the town of Magdala, in Galilee. She lived at the same time as Jesus. She had the freedom to travel around the countryside as part of the group following Jesus. All four gospel writers tell the story of Mary as she journeyed from follower and supporter of Jesus; to the Risen Christ sending her to announce the Good News of his Resurrection to the other disciples. Early related Christian writings portray whole faith communities growing up around Mary's ministry. Declared a Saint by the Catholic Church, her Feast Day is one of the Major Feast Days celebrated along with St. Peter and St. Paul.

Her journey is our journey – a person of Faith, Strength, Vision and Witness.

She was a woman of Faith. Her trust and love for Jesus never wavered. She was willing to use all her worldly possessions to support His mission on earth and believed that all He spoke was true.

She was a woman of Strength. All the Gospels declare that she stood at the Cross. She watched Jesus suffer, die and be buried. She never left His side. She never looked away.

She was a woman of Vision. In the Gospel story of the Resurrection, Mary asks "where have you taken Him?" – She does not ask where is the body? Where is it? To her, Jesus, in His Divinity, is "alive". He is Real. Jesus is still part of who she is called to be. She Knew. She Believed. She Trusted.

She was a woman of Witness. On that first Easter morning Jesus, in His fully Risen Body tells Mary "Go tell my disciples". She is declared apostle to the apostles. She is given the gift of proclaiming Jesus as truly Risen and with us for all eternity.

In a special way, we are also taking the time to call to mind women we know whose faith, strength, vision and witness has graced our faith journey. We all know so many women, like Mary Magdalene, who have lived and continue to live the lessons taught by Jesus Christ. Like Mary, these women embrace His final promise - Do not be afraid for I am with you always. Through our trust in the Wisdom and Strength of the God's Spirit, we will come to know and then live out the mission we have been given – like so many before us.

Ann Zech is a member of the SEPAWOC Core Committee.

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EXCITING NEW INITIATIVES FOR CHURCH RENEWAL AND FULL INCLUSION IN MINISTRY

Listening to Women

For many women, the parish has not been a safe space to express their needs, disappointments, and aspirations. For the Church to heal and move forward, we need to hear the *authentic voices of all its members*, including women. And in the case of *younger Catholic women, it is imperative that we listen anew*.

The goal of this project is to create *safe spaces where women can talk* about the celebrations and challenges they experience as women in the Catholic Church, and to share those reflections with our Bishops to help create opportunities for greater understanding and inclusion in Church life. You are invited to participate by downloading the Listening to Women resource at www.listeningtowomen.org and begin a conversation in your parish or community.

Catholic Women Preach

This exciting and innovative project seeks to address some of the most pressing challenges facing the Church today by responding to Pope Francis' call for broader and more active engagement of the baptized in the preaching mission of the Church. Theologically informed Catholic women, following the liturgical year, reflect each week on how the texts relate to all Catholics today with a *special emphasis on the lives of women, their apostolic call, and their roles in the Church and the world*. You can easily access their website, www.CatholicWomenPreach.org.

Catholic Women Called

We know that Catholic women are called by God and by their communities: called to priesthood, to equality, and to full participation in the life of the Church. We also know that too often, their call remains untold, dismissed, or rejected. That's why Women's Ordination Worldwide and Women's Ordination Conference are launching **Catholic Women Called** – a new video storytelling series of women who are called to priesthood. Whether ordained, on the path to ordination, or living with the tension of answering their call within the institutional Church, women long to share the truth of their vocation with the world. See their short video stories at www.womensordination.org.

By the way, if you are a women called to priesthood, please consider sharing your own short video with us by finishing this sentence: *What I want the world to know about my call to priesthood....*

Inclusive Catholic Resource

The Comprehensive Catholic Lectionary aims to include *every significant story about women in the Bible* not included

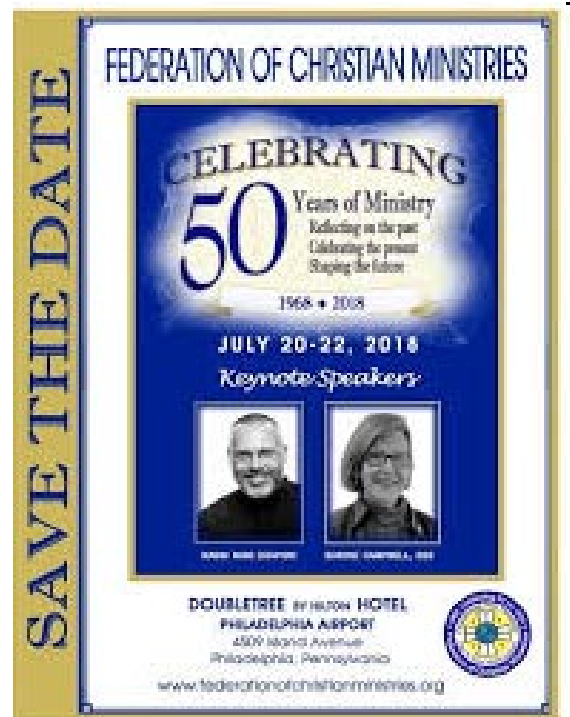
in the canonical Sunday lectionary and eliminate exclusive language for God and human beings. Download the resource today at www.womensordination.org for yourself or your community and receive subsequent sections throughout the year.

Call to Action Conference 2018

Call To Action's national conference, the largest annual gathering of progressive Catholics in the United States, will be held **November 9-11, 2018** in San Antonio, Texas. The theme is *Santuario, Resistencia, Sacramento (Sanctuary, Resistance, Sacrament)*. Check cta@cta-usa.org for questions and registration information. Hotel reservations now available at the Wyndham San Antonio Riverwalk in San Antonio, Texas. Book online or call 1-866-764-8536 and tell them that you're with Call To Action Conference.

Federation of Christian Ministries

Please join the celebration of 50 Years of Ministry 1968 - 2018 at the FCM Conference July 20-22 at the Doubletree Hotel near the Philadelphia Airport, 4509 Isalnd Avenue. Featured speakers are: Rabbi Rami Shapiro and Simone Campbell, SSS. See website www.federationofchristianministries.org for conference and hotel registration information.



Book Reviews

Crispina and Her Sisters. Christine Schenk, CSJ.

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017.) 392 pp Paperback: \$29

Reviewed by Eileen DiFranco

Crispina and Her Sisters by Christine Schenk is one beefy tome. It is also two separate books; both great books to be sure, but different books nevertheless. The beginning and the end of the book discuss the role of familiar and not so familiar Christian women in the early church, some of which might be repetitive, a fact Schenk acknowledges. The second story is an exhaustive exercise in art history where she leads the reader through a study of early funeral art backed up by very detailed statistical studies. Woven throughout the book are the parts of the book I liked the best- vignettes about women like Crispina, Domitilla, and Grapte- women, I must confess, about whom I knew virtually nothing.

The book is set amidst the herculean efforts endless generations of churchmen have used to write offending women out of history. Like many authors before her, Schenk documents the fact that the prohibitions against women preaching, leading, baptizing, and teaching in the early church were made because women were quite obviously doing just those things. While the churchmen could eventually erase the words of women by banning or their burning books and belittling them, the one thing the men could not erase was the artwork on the walls of the Roman catacombs and inscriptions on tombstones and sarcophagi. The ancient art work that Schenk presents in her book stands as a testament to women's leadership and authority in the early church.

The book, unfortunately, tries to cover far too much ground, jumping from the stories of particular women to the funeral art and then back again. Her scale is almost epic as she examines women's lives in Palestine and women's places in Greco-Roman culture, including early Christian and Roman views on marriage and the reasons why Christianity appealed to women. She then moves on to women's authority in the early church, including ordination and then returns to familiar names like Junia and Phoebe and unfamiliar ones like Grapte. The treatment of the funeral art does not begin until page 100.

This does not mean, however, that one should skip over the first hundred pages, for it is here that Schenk describes one group of powerful ordained women who actually had seats next to the bishop at the local basilica-the order of widows. Schenk writes that early church documents such as the *Testamentum Domini* actually included widows in the hierarchy of the church and cites that their ordination was actually the same as that of major clerics. (Gary Macy has written that the rite of ordination for male and female deacons was the same.) The term "widow" was actually inscribed on the women's tombstones as an honorific indicating that she was ordained to the Order of Widows and did not, according to Schenk, mean that the woman's husband had predeceased her. The widows exercised significant pastoral responsibility and remained as Schenk writes, "A disruptive force in the evolution of ministerial structures." I must confess that I had no idea.

The saddest part about the book is Schenk's comment that we don't learn about the status of many early Christian women in life, but only in death as she moves into her discussion about funeral art in the catacombs. Wealthy Christian women such as Domitilla,

Commodilla, Crispina, and Priscilla donated money to purchase burial grounds for their families who would include poor members of the Christian community. These women were also generous patrons and benefactors who cared for the poor and for orphans because there was as yet no real church organization that could do so.

In these catacombs are pictures of women standing alone, without husbands or children, holding scripture scrolls, arms stretched out in the orans, or praying position, and presiding at the Eucharist. While the churchmen were busy extolling husbands and children and family life as the lot of Christian women, significant numbers of early Christian women had very different ideas and were not afraid to express their ideas in art.

These pictures, according to Schenk, provide examples of how women viewed their role in the church. Not only that, they also indicated the manner in which others viewed them-as authoritative figures of significant influence. Even as the churchmen were beginning to list a prescribed list of largely male saints to venerate, pictures of women in the catacombs indicated that women had their own ideas of holiness and authority and stature.

Veneranda, a late fourth century woman, commissioned herself to be portrayed as a "Woman of the Word" on her tomb, following a line of succession of other holy women begun by Petronella, once believed to be the daughter of Peter the Apostle. Schenk supports her claim of female lineage by mentioning the possible existence of at least a three hundred year tradition of women following in the line of Phoebe, the deacon mentioned in Romans 16, based upon a tombstone inscription in Palestine indicating just this fact. Since the true origins of Christianity cannot be historically proven, much of Christian beginnings grew out of local beliefs, practice and prayer. We don't know if Schenk's assertion of the lines of succession associated with Petronella and Phoebe are correct. However, churchmen throughout the ages have made wide-reaching institutional claims of authority based on far scantier evidence.

Like the first part of the book, the second part is disjointed and tries to cover too much ground. Intermixed with discussions about pictures on catacomb walls in Rome are random stories of tombstones in Croatia. Again, plowing through the book rewards one with a significant nugget of information, the tombstone of *Presbytera Sancta Flavia Vitalia*, or the holy priest Flavia Vitalia. Since all of the case endings match, it seems that the holy priest in question is, indeed, Flavia Vitalia and not her husband. Schenk then goes into a discussion about the existence of female priests and increasing male opposition to women's ordination. As proof, she offers the existence of Canon 11 of the Council of Laodicea (ca. 342-81) which testifies to the existence of women who acted as presidents of their congregations. These women were called *presbytides*. Again, Schenk goes out on a limb. These women *presbytides*, she claims, could have dated back to Nympha, who was mentioned by the apostle Paul in Colossians 4:1 who lived in Laodicea. Again, I remind you of the extraordinary claims of the churchmen who in-

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sisted that the church grew intact from the establishment of the priesthood at the Last Supper and blossomed immediately into the three tiered system of clerical orders headed by the pope when all historical evidence points to a rather slow and uneven evolution of what eventually became the Catholic Church.

After studying ancient culture, sociology, theology, politics, and art, Schenk arrives at her conclusion- the artwork on the sarcophagi indicates that early Christian women possessed a higher status than early Christian men. To reach this conclusion, she studied 2119 images and sarcophagi and performed numbers of statistical analyses. She then sifted out 312 Christian funeral portraits of early Christian women and men. Within that sample, the 156 solo pictures of women-portrayed in positions of authority- vastly outnumbered the 47 solo pictures of men. In these pictures, women were presented holding scrolls of scripture, sitting amidst apostle figures that are turned toward the women in attentive positions, in the orans and speech position – all indications of authority. Here, the language of research seems to be cut and pasted into Schenk's enjoyable and readable prose, rendering it the second, separate book I mentioned at the beginning of the review.

When she returns to her story telling, Schenk makes it clear that the early church had no control over burial rites. It is also clear that it had little control over the women, in spite of the historical record, written almost exclusively by men, which she also examines in the last chapter of the book.

After 330 C.E., Schenk wrote, the Christian funeral portraits essentially disappeared. Although she gives no explanation, one suspects that the development of the Constantinian amalgam of church and state drove women's overt authority underground. It arose again in the records we have of those who were called the "Mothers of the Church" by Mary T. Malone and Rosemary Radford Ruether; Marcella, Sophronia, Asella, Principia, and Lea who lived as urban monastics in Rome. Paula, Macrina, Melania the Elder and Younger, Olympias, and Proba round out the roster of influential early Christian women. It is with these magnificent women; spiritual leaders, scholars, translators, and benefactors that Schenk concludes her book.

Unfortunately, these women have had little to no role in Christian piety, imagination, or liturgy, their faith, leadership, authority, and scholarship cast aside by the churchmen who chose instead to extol virgin martyrs. These great women are too often perceived mere appendages of men; Macrina, the sister of Basil and Gregory, Paula, Jerome's faithful translator, and Olympias, a financial backer of Nectarius, Archbishop of Constantinople. The truth is that Macrina *taught* theology to Basil and Gregory, the architects of Trinitarian theology, Paula was more expert in speaking and translating Hebrew than was Jerome, and Olympias inherited a fortune which she distributed to the poor, to churches, priests, ascetics, and virgins, to the point that Nectarius ordained her and her followers as deacons. We cannot hear enough about these women.

While Schenk's book is filled with rabbit holes that take the reader from one subject to another and back again without warning, her prose is readable, and her story telling, enjoyable, something that often cannot be said for too many theological tomes that drive away all but the most dedicated reader. As the eyes of 21st century

Christians are opened to a church past etched more in uncertainty than in stone, it is important for women-and men-who are not academics to learn that the company line handed down by the churchmen is not supported by the historical record or by the signs of the times- contemporary funeral art that depicts early Christian women as teachers, preachers, and celebrants of the Eucharist- from the very beginning.

It is obvious that Schenk did her research. She provides an extensive appendix with tables explaining her analysis of the artwork and provides an extensive bibliography. She also places her footnotes at the bottom of the page on which they appear rather than in the back of the book, making it much easier to access the information.

In spite of its length, its disorganization, and its repetition, I found *Crispina and Her Sisters* to be both enjoyable and informative. It is a must read for those who are beginning their journey into the murky past of church history as well as for those who have been on that trip for many years. I felt proud when I read Schenk's book; proud of her and her scholarship, and proud of our foremothers in faith who continued to perform the work they were called by God to do in spite of being vilified by powerful men like Tertullian, Clement, and Augustine.

Sometimes it is necessary to resurrect the past in order to right modern wrongs.

Eileen McCafferty DiFranco is a member of the SEPAWOC Core Committee.

State of the Treasury Mid-Year

As you know from reading the treasurer's report in the last issue of *EqualwRites*, the majority of our expenses go to the publication of this newsletter. As always we thank our faithful and generous patrons. However, donations have slowed and we are concerned about costs of printing and mailing future issues. We reach out to you, our readers, with our dilemma. Whatever you can give is appreciated. An envelope is attached to your issue.

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Scripture Reflections

Judith A. Heffernan, M.Div.

Gospel of Mary ...Peter asked, "Are we to listen to a woman?" ...Levi then said, "If the Savior accepted her, who are we to reject her? Let us preach the Gospel and not lay down any other law or rule beyond what the Savior said."

Chestnut Hill College recently honored the class of 1968 with a grand celebration on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of our graduation. The events of the six months of our final semester-January to June 1968-influenced the rest of our lives, indeed the life of the world.

In January, 1968, 87 year old Jeannette Rankin, retired Congressional Representative from Montana who was the first woman to hold federal office in the US, led a march of 5,000 women to end the Vietnam War. In February, an American military officer told the Associated Press that it was necessary to destroy Ben Tre, Vietnam in order to save it. In March, the My Lai Massacre occurred. In April, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered. In May, the Catonsville Nine were arrested. In June, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was murdered.

As we completed the college chapter of our life-long learning journey, we became aware that our vocations must have something to do with personally living out peace, justice and equality within a world community.

That same Spring, Rev. Bernard Haring, renowned Vatican II theologian, gave our Senior Retreat. I was moved to ask him, "Do you think women will be ordained in the Catholic Church?" He replied that a very important aspect of being a priest is to proclaim the Gospel, and Mary Magdalene was the first to proclaim that Good News! Father Haring had confirmed for me the road I would be traveling, and gratefully, I was never alone.

On this 50th anniversary of our loss of Bobby Kennedy, I am reminiscing about another journey. For nine hours on June 7, 1968, I was in a line that weaved through "the sidewalks of New York"—from the train station to St. Patrick's Cathedral- to pay my respects to Bobby Kennedy. My prayer for us today is what his brother later shared so poignantly about him...May we see wrong and try to right it, see suffering and try to heal it, see war and try to stop it.

In 2018 may we live what Daniel Berrigan wrote of the Catonsville Nine, "The time is past when good people may be silent."

Judith Heffernan is a member of the Community of the Christian Spirit and the SEPAWOC Core Committee.