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EQUAL

**Catholic Feminist Newsletter for Women
and Men in the Philadelphia Area**

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WRITES

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.*

A NUN'S STORY FOR TODAY Celebrating the Life and Work of Sister Margaret McKenna

By Mary Whelan and Ellie Harty

We have been heart broken by the recent action of the Vatican against the Leadership Conference of Women Religious which represents 57,000 religious sisters. We have read poignant articles, blogs, messages and statements in support of the sisters. We at EqualwRites decided to tell the story of one woman's dedication to the Gospel message for we consider her story to be representative of the many sisters we all know who inspire us. (In this same issue we also tell the story of Sister Theresa Kane, another brave and beloved sister).



We sought out the well known Sister Margaret McKenna who resides here in Philadelphia. Her enthusiastic manner, boundless energy and realistic, yet optimistic outlook was the antidote to the depressing news we had heard for the past months.

We first toured one of the several buildings which are part of New Jerusalem Now, a program for recovering men and women in North Philadelphia that Sister Margaret, a Medical Mission Sister, started in 1989. We met clients and staff and, on the way to see a mosaic mural and garden retreat New Jerusalem residents and neighbors created, we joined in with other residents and neighbors in an impromptu sidewalk hymn of rejoicing. We visited the lush vegetable garden and small orchard they had also created and then settled in Sister's comfortable trailer on a sunny June morning to hear her story.

Sister Margaret entered the Medical Missionary Sisters order in 1948 at the age of 18. She considers it a feminist community founded by women for women. The religious order was started by Austrian-born Anna Dengler, who sought to become a doctor in a world in which women were not welcome to study medicine. She provided healthcare to Muslim women who could not receive it from male doctors. Sister Anna had to negotiate with the Catholic Church for 10 years until it would allow religious women to serve as doctors, but in 1925 the Medical Missionary Sisters came to into being.

Sister Margaret obtained a BA from Chestnut Hill College and because of her artistic skills went to work in the art department at the motherhouse in the Fox Chase section of Philadelphia. Later, while studying for her graduate degree in liturgy at Notre Dame, and influenced by the changes com-

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ing out of Vatican II, she wrote her thesis about women of the church, the history, the role and spirit of ecclesial orders of women. After her book was published, she became more committed to women's issues. She spoke on the concerns of women, taught formation in her order, and eventually decided to teach Scripture. She studied in Jerusalem, learning French, Hebrew and German, (she already knew some Greek), and even had an archeological experience there. (Over the years she spent 8 years in Jerusalem.)

While teaching at LaSalle during the Vietnam era, she became involved in the peace and social justice movement. She took the Shakertown Pledge, a commitment to simplicity and the inner life. She began teaching workshops on living simply, healthy eating and, at the same time, was learning about torture in Latin America. We who know of the history of these years can follow her awareness of social justice issues through the final decades of the 20th century. Instead of just studying the issues, however, Sister Margaret took action.

She also became involved in the planning for the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia in 1976, a somewhat amazing event in which protests on issues of peace and justice were not only allowed, but her particular protest group given a reserved spot in the front as the Congress unfolded. At that time there were conversations about simplicity, women in the church and, yes, even discussion of women's ordination. How times have changed!

As part of her expanding interests, Sister Margaret wanted to work on alternatives to violence and follow the tenets of liberation theology while at the same time feeling called to a contemplative hermit vocation. It is hard to imagine Sister Margaret as a hermit because of her gregarious personality and social activism. However, throughout her life it seems she was able to hold those qualities in tension: activism balanced by contemplation and prayer. She realized her hermitage vocation, living in the basement of a barn, while doing workshops on non-violence and starting the Peacemakers' Reflection Center. She took the pledge of resistance, did civil disobedience, and joined in a Ploughshare action. She was arrested often and spent 3 months in jail.

Sister Margaret spoke of the desert monks of the early church. (Moving to the desert in the time of the early church was an act of resistance to the spirit of the Roman empire.) Her search for the modern 'desert' took her to the wilderness of the inner city, an area of North Philadelphia where she obtained an abandoned house at 20th and Norris. (She showed us a picture of the first property—a remarkable transforma-

tion from what we were seeing on our visit). While living in North Philadelphia she became aware of the modern day "plague" of addiction. Having little knowledge of it herself, she once again immersed herself in a new endeavor, becoming an eager student of Reverend Wells of ODAAT, One Day at a Time, learning, as she says, by participation. She started New Jerusalem Now, where recovering men and women live in community.

Sister believes we all have our addictions, and believes prayer, love, care for neighbor, and social justice will help us all. These qualities are embedded in the community life of New Jerusalem.

When asked to comment on the current Church crisis, she said, "I see the Spirit leading us and trying to release us from ancient attachments. We are all feeling a lack of air in this atmosphere, but in order to open the windows, we have to suffer a little difficulty breathing. There is much that is sad, like the fixation on abortion in an age of murder and war, like a seeming allergy to women and the fear of those of those who think God has ordained only men to be great leaders. Yet I also see great enthusiasm from those who have tasted Vatican II and its perspective that the future organization of the Church has to be grounded in the people. The Holy spirit has not abandoned us, but the human aspect of the Church has caused us to wander off course. By using 'divine disobedience', however, we can recognize we are free to create a Church that is more in accord with the teaching of Jesus and the Gospel."

Sister revealed that she is 82 years old, but is obviously not considering retirement any time soon. She is continuing her education, studying to become a spiritual guide, eagerly sharing the idea for her final thesis, incorporating ideas that she passionately explored throughout her life. Sister Margaret McKenna believes in work, study, prayer, contemplation, activism.

As we were preparing to leave Sister Margaret was already transitioning back to life at New Jerusalem, speaking with one staff member about the telephones, checking the food distribution activity out in back, showing us pictures of the area when she first arrived—bleak and desolate. We will always remember that we saw hope actualized in this particular neighborhood—in the people, the buildings, the beautiful outdoor mural, the greenery of the gardens—evidence that this woman has made a difference in the world.

Mary Whelan and Ellie Harty are co-editors of *EqualwRites*.

Community of the Christian Spirit

Committed to peace and social justice, CCS welcomes you to join in our Sunday morning celebrations, liturgies in the Roman Catholic tradition which explore Scripture and contemporary readings.

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A WOMAN OF COURAGE SPEAKS

Inspiring Words from Sister Theresa Kane, Mary Magdalene Award Winner 2011-12

By Ellie Harty

“Your Holiness,” she said, “I call upon you to listen with compassion and to hear women who comprise half of humankind... Our contemplation leads us to state that the Church in its struggle to be faithful to its call for reverence and dignity for all persons must respond by providing the possibility of women as persons being included in all ministries of our Church.”

This prophetic statement made to the Pope John Paul II in 1978 in front of hundreds of thousands of people, and reported, quoted, and repeated over and over to millions more throughout the world, earned Sister Theresa Kane true heroine status in the progressive Catholic world. To the *New York Times*, she had ushered in no less than a “Kane Mutiny,” challenging the absolute power and dominance of an imperious, oppressive ruler.

In her Mary Magdalene SEPAWOC award acceptance speech this June, over thirty years after the original statement, Sister Kane reflected that she has no regrets, except perhaps that she should have spoken even more emphatically and intensely. She gave a little back-story to the day: “The Pope was supposed to have a smooth, harmonious, six day visit to the U.S. with people constantly in awe in his presence. As a representative of the Sisters of the U.S., I was asked to offer a short greeting before the Pope spoke. I made sure that it was clear the last part of the statement was mine, not necessarily all of the Sisters, but its effect was immediately widespread. It brought us in solidarity with all Catholic and non-Catholic women working for the rights of women in all churches, including Sonia Johnson who was then facing excommunication from the Mormon Church for criticizing its stand on women’s equality. The next day I received a gift of bread and roses from Sonia and her group. We women were in this together.”

Sr. Theresa pointed out, “The 1977 resolution that women were to be included in all ministries of the Church came out of the LCWR’s (Leadership Conference of Women Religious) work in the 1970’s focusing almost exclusively on women in church and society.” Significantly, this resolution has never been rescinded, even to this day, which is a big concern of the Vatican. The LCWR, however, has always emphasized ‘feminist’ themes, for example, in 21st Century America we want gender equality in the Church.” Sr. Theresa sees this as “true spirituality while an all male priesthood is idolatry. ‘Hierarchy’, ‘infallibility’, ‘patriarchy’, these are the ‘strange gods before us’ today, and it is very courageous of LCWR to take them on. We will not be passive or compliant anymore.”

Despite what some may see as a radical stand, she is optimistic that LCWR will triumph in the face of this current attack. “The organization is member financed; not a cent comes from the Vatican; therefore, the members will decide whether or not to be canonical. (Maybe that is why) the Vatican gets very nervous at the word ‘leadership’ as part of the name of a women’s organization!”

Sr. Theresa is also gratified by the consequences of her 1978 statement and optimistic about the future. “What we have done in the last 30-35 years has been a great source of life, solidarity, and encouragement, and this now needs to be done even more urgently. We need to reach out throughout the world to where women are most exploited, abused, enslaved, and say, ‘Enough!’ We women have been colonized by imperialist forces; we were born into it, and it takes a lifetime to move out of it. And that produces crises in us and others. But we have to be the ministers, that is, the ‘mini-stirrers’, of the status quo; we need to keep on stirring and not let go. We have many organizations, like SEPAWOC, that are small but very influential and which are not going away. We will keep bringing these issues forward because this is who we are.” At age 76, Sr. Theresa said, she feels great energy for what is coming, “I feel we are moving out of imperialism as a religion and looking at God in an expansive new way.”

Sr. Theresa was especially gratified that the SEPAWOC award was named after Mary Magdalene, “a symbol for all women in patriarchal environments.” She reminded us that Mary’s formal title, Mary of Magdala, is particularly significant among women in the scriptures who not only had no titles but no names. “You know how the Gospels are -men begetting men, (Theresa added in an aside, ‘How is that even possible???’) while women are either demonized or canonized! Research has shown that Mary of Magdala was not a sinner, but a single, probably powerful and influential, entrepreneurial woman, and we need to keep bringing to light other influential and powerful women of faith.”

We are happy that, in honoring Theresa Kane this year, we proudly did just as she asked.

WHY WE KEEP “KEEPING ON” KEEP- ING ON Our Holy Thursday and Ordina- tion Day Witnesses at the Cathedral

By Ellie Harty

First of all, we have to proclaim, “We loved our new corner!”

On Holy Thursday, thanks to the construction going on at our usual spot across the street from the front of Philadelphia’s Cathedral of Saints Peter & Paul, we were relocated – banished? - to the southwest corner of the same side of the street as, and right beside, the cathedral. It was an amazing spot. Cars came past us from many, instead of just one lightly traveled, street, and so many people coming from the service had no choice but to see, hear – think about? – our message. If you’ve attended any of these witnesses in the past, you couldn’t help but be jarred – offended? – by the huge buses the Archdiocese parked between us and the Mass attendees (including all the parish priests receiving their holy oils) so they would not have to see and be disturbed – enlightened? – by our witness. This year, thanks to those same powers’ unwillingness – inability? - to actually pull a bus up onto the sidewalk to block the view of us, we were very visible. You’ve probably heard of the Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park and the Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey; we were the Justice for Women Corner in Philadelphia that day, speaking out and creating poetry of our own, and we were revitalized: A new corner, a new perspective, a new visibility, all reasons to keep on keeping on.

All did not go perfectly well, of course. Although we were heartened and gratified by the people who smiled, gave us thumbs up, honks, waves, or voices of approval, and even joined in with us after going to the Mass, we did have discouraging naysayers. Marguerite Groves described the encounters she and some others had: "It was indeed a lovely witness again this morning, but, unfortunately, I came away more than a little upset. After we finished our singing, two of us walked over in front of the steps as people were coming out of the cathedral. We had our 'Ordain Catholic Women' posters on, and one woman said loudly, 'Here they are again ... the women who want to be men!' We looked at one another and didn't say anything. The other woman wearing a big cross said, 'You better not be going to communion!' She told us to get out of the church, just leave it, among a lot of other things. We did answer her some, but rather lamely. As they walked away, I said to my fellow witness, 'I just saw pure Hatred'. Stuff like that should anger me but, instead, this time I found myself saddened by it. How can somebody be that mean-spirited and what does that say about our religion? These women are examples of what's coming from inside the church, and the beautiful people I stood with on the corner are outside trying to be a part of in there. Why? I've only missed a couple Holy Thursday witnesses in the past 30 years and over that time we've been called lesbians and baby-killers among other things. But, this one took the cake for viciousness."

Ordination Day Witness on May 19 was very different. A gentler, quieter spirit and Spirit prevailed. Initially, trouble seemed on the horizon as Sister Cities Park guards declared we were forbidden to hold a service there since the park was now privately managed. Bless the Philadelphia police who saw it differently. Not only did they contradict the guards' directive, but actually affirmed us for our unflinching peaceful presence for over 30 years. To their credit, the guards apologized and we gave the police a round of applause.

So why do we keep on holding these witnesses year after year? And why should you join us next year? Something about the kind of negativity Marguerite describes so poignantly as coming from "inside" the church as we stand "outside" calling for justice for all God's people actually helps make the witnesses worthwhile. No one wants to be in an atmosphere of hate and intolerance and injustice, not even the women she encountered. They are obviously faithful, maybe even faith-filled, but probably also scared. Justice, after all, can mean major change, change that lets what was once outside in and threatens all that is safely entrenched there. Somehow we need to assure those women, to make our case gently but forcefully, that we do want – hope, aspire, pray - to be "inside" some day but inside a transformed entity that is not frightening but dynamically and inspiringly renewed. We have to keep on, even though it's been such a long journey, thirty years, for heaven's sake! We have to keep on because we have already been blessed by what the journey itself has given us: a sense of our capacity for dedication, endurance, commitment, a connection to an unforgettable community of people, and a chance to question, challenge, and then proclaim what is truly important to us in our faith and in our lives. See you next year?

Ellie Hart is a co-editor of *EqualwRites*.

The "M" Word

By *Mary Whelan*

While attending an informational session about African women seeking to change their lives and those of their children by having a voice in family decisions, my mind suddenly reverted to the struggle of the women in the Catholic church who are seeking to have a voice in family decisions, no longer accepting the statement of the men in power who insist "This is not a democracy." This leads me to bring up the ugly "m" word: money. We want to continue the struggle for women to have a voice in this unsettling time in the Catholic Church, but we need your help.

SEPAWOC is a small group, yet we provide a voice for the voiceless in our area and (for some) an annoying but persistent presence. We are a busy group. Since April we have participated in, co-sponsored or sponsored the following events:

- the annual Holy Thursday witness in front of the Cathedral
- the Ordination Day witness
- Roy Bourgeois speaking in Philadelphia in May
- honoring the Mary Magdalene award winner, Sister Theresa Kane
- the NunJustice witness at 18th & Race

We appreciate the financial support we have been receiving from you. Our expenses include the publication of *EqualwRites*, maintaining our website, SEPAWOC.org, membership in COR (Catholic Organizations for Renewal), and programming, among other things. We continue to include envelopes in *EqualwRites* hoping you will send us a donation, no matter how small (or how big!). Remember that we offer full transparency of how your money is spent in our annual report in our spring issue.

Recently those of us who live in Philadelphia were astounded to learn that the archdiocese has spent \$11,000,000 in legal fees in the past several years in the defense of the priests in the sex abuse trial that we have all been following. (As of this time the jury has not reached a decision). Because of this expense Archbishop Chaput will be asking the "faithful" to donate to a fund to pay for the Pope's upcoming visit to Philadelphia in 2015. Who knows how much that will cost?

We believe SEPAWOC can provide much more for a lot less money. Unlike the Vatican we promise to provide dialogue on the issues which are important to today's church: all voices will be heard. We will encourage you to check out all the facts, make your own decisions following your conscience, in other words, to think. We will not tell you how to think or say that you must agree with us.

We have a multi-faceted agenda of topics—not just the "pervic issues." (Thank you to whoever said that—it's not my line). We will continue to speak the unspeakable: that women should be ordained.

We support the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in their struggle and applaud their statement which ends with

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The Death of Vatican II

By *Marian Ronan*

There's nothing original about arguing that many of the hopes generated by the Second Vatican Council have been dashed. Leonard Swidler speaks of the "devastating disappointment" of the Council. Rembert Weakland observes in his 2009 memoir that the decision not to ordain women meant "the loss of the future." Indeed, papers recently released by the Catholic moral philosopher Germaine Grisez reveal that even before the end of the Council, Paul VI indicated that he would do what he would do regardless of what the bishops had decided.

All this notwithstanding, recent developments suggest that the Vatican and the U.S. bishops are now intent upon bringing the Vatican II era definitively to a close. These efforts began, I would argue, with the 2002 command that the faithful return to the (literally) medieval practice of kneeling during the canon of the Mass. Even as I regret the sexism of Mark Massa's *The American Catholic Revolution*, I agree with his observation that for most U.S. Catholics, Vatican II began with the renewal of the liturgy. I can still see the nun who taught religion at my Catholic girls' high school during Vatican II, Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Marcella Marie Missar, explaining joyously that "we stand during the canon out of respect for the dignity of the human person." I wish I could believe that we have been ordered to fall to our knees once again to increase our respect for God rather than for the male leaders of the church.

If kneeling during the canon was one step in the Vatican's campaign to bring the Vatican II era to a close, the "new" translation of the Roman Missal is clearly another. That the translation is ugly, wordy, cumbersome and inaccurate is only part of the story. As the once-conservative Benedictine liturgist, Anthony Ruff, argues, another purpose of the Vatican veto of the translation the bishops had already approved was to show the entire community of English-speaking liturgists that their work didn't matter. Nor, apparently, do the beliefs of the English-speaking Catholic laity, who took from Vatican II the bizarre notion that they share some kind of equality with the clergy. "And with your Spirit" reminds us, however, that the ordained possess a sacred quality the rest of us do not.

Another discouraging effect of the "new" translation is that before it was promulgated, a number of main-line Protestant denominations shared with the English-speaking Catholic Church certain responses and other fixed parts of the liturgy, for example, "And also with you." Many of us considered these shared liturgical passages a foretaste of the eventual reunion of Christians—a foretaste now eradicated.

Recent doctrinal statements issued by the Vatican and the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) manifest another break with Vatican II. Unlike the previous twenty councils of the church, Vatican II defined no doctrines and issued no anathemas. It was a truly pastoral event. Documents like the recent Vatican assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the USCCB condemnation of Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God* show that the men in power are accelerating the new era of

anathema begun in 1968. "The joys and hopes, the griefs and sorrows" of the men and women of this age recede precipitously as doctrinal truth becomes, once again, the center of the Catholic faith.

In the face of these attempts to move the church back to the First Vatican Council, and especially the vile Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith attack on the Catholic sisters who embody the faith for many of us, it's tempting to give up on the whole sorry business. To decamp to the Unitarian Universalists, or the United Church of Christ, or the Episcopalians, whose stances on women and gays and peace and justice are vastly more inspiring than those of our own church seem to be.

As I argue in a recent post on Religion Dispatches*, however, it's likely that this is exactly what the Vatican and the USCCB have in mind—to drive out the "Vatican II Catholics" and cut back to what Pope Benedict XVI has called "the church of the little flock," the smaller, purer Catholic Church that tolerates no dissent, no theological development, no renewal.

In the face of this attempt to eradicate the most powerful manifestation of Vatican II—the people of God—I urge us all, myself included, not to take the bait and give up. Instead, let us continue to identify ourselves as Catholics in whatever ways our consciences allow—as members of parishes where the leadership clearly does not support Vatican repression; as members of small faith communities who ordain their own celebrants or celebrate the eucharist communally; as ordained or lay participants in Roman Catholic Women Priests congregation; as members of Independent Catholic churches; as leaders and activists in a wide range of Catholic reform groups like SEPAWOC and Call to Action and Dignity and Voice of the Faithful. And let us invite younger Catholics, gay and straight and Black and white and Latino and in between to join with us in these efforts. Let's collaborate and speak out and publish and resist the death of Vatican II to which Rome and the bishops seem committed. Let a billion Vatican II blossoms bloom.

*[http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/guest_bloggers/5956/only_5_million_\"real\"_catholics_in_the_u.s/](http://www.religiondispatches.org/dispatches/guest_bloggers/5956/only_5_million_\)

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AUTOBIOGRAPHIES BY CATHOLIC AUTHORS

By *Regina Bannan*

At Temple, I teach First Person America, a course whose texts are autobiographies. Can it be coincidence that in the last few years I have been lent, given, or directed to five books that feature life stories of Catholics? What are the issues that these books raise?

Peter Quinn, in *Looking for Jimmy: A Search for Irish America* (2007) returns to the church. He describes a conversion experience worthy of St. Paul, getting on a bus and just knowing with certainty that “Jesus is the living Christ, present in every moment of time, equally, always, and as real as the cold sensation in my hand of the metal handrail.” I cried. This is a powerful book, well-informed about history and somewhat less so about theology.

Most of the other authors have left Roman Catholicism. Two anthologies have formats like countless inspirational books, except that most of the stories describe a journey away from, rather than toward, the faith. Yet the authors cannot fully erase the impacts, positive and negative, of growing up in a Catholic culture.

Marilyn Sewell’s *Resurrecting Grace: Remembering Catholic Childhoods* (2001) collects excerpts from memoirs by baby boomers (or those born just slightly before, like me). Now a Unitarian Universalist minister, she looks below the surface of “once a Catholic, always a Catholic” for the inheritance that being raised in the faith provides. The selections are deep and perceptive.

In contrast, *Catholic Girls* (1992) is creative. Editors Amber Coverdale Sumrall and Patrice Vecchione find that “religion is at the heart of memory.” The selections include stories and poems as well as memoirs. Only about ten percent of the selections are previously published, so they are somewhat less polished. The authors selected voices of girls and women who, in their “strength and integrity,” are threatening to Pope and the U.S. Bishops who, in 1989, issued “dire warnings” about “radical feminists.” Sound familiar?

Popular author A. Manette Ansay writes *Limbo: A Memoir* (2001) in the year the church abandons limbo to the dustbin of old theologies. She finds it an exceptionally apt metaphor for her medical condition with no clear diagnosis, weakened to the point of often needing a wheelchair or crutches and unable to pursue the career as a pianist that she worked so hard for. Her Catholic girlhood in southern Wisconsin leads her to ask the questions that Catholics ask confronted by mystery and pain, afraid to remove her St. Benedict medal but not accepting any easy answers about the inevitability of suffering. She turns to writing and finds in Simone Weil’s “*Absolute attention is prayer*” a way to transcendence, a new spirituality.

His Catholic upbringing also affects John Grogan; perhaps that’s why I loved his *Inquirer* columns. After *Marley and Me*, he looks at his family of origin in *The Longest Road Home: A Memoir* (2008), and finds their lives warmly en-

twined with the life of the church. Now his father finds a substitute son in his current parish; Grogan knows that much as they love each other, he has chosen a different path.

You may notice that I have not focused a whole lot on the content of these autobiographies. When I first started reading them, I wondered how they dealt with sex abuse. It seems as if the whole world thinks that that was the defining experience of Catholic childhoods. Not so. Or do survivors not write memoirs? In the earliest book, *Girls*, there are only two references, both to the experiences of others, not of the authors. Ten years later in *Grace*, also only two. None in Mansay. And, since Grogan and Quinn are writing after the story broke, they have to acknowledge it. But they don’t find it in their lives. Grogan finds alcoholism among priests; Quinn not even that.

Rather, family and Catholic schools, nuns and priests who are sometimes cruel and sometimes nurturing, crises of conscience mostly about sex, friendships and betrayals: these are the contents of these remembered lives, all in the context of a Catholic world that seems like the whole world. It is a constant and strange reminder that this no longer exists for me. Can it for any adult? Did it for our parents? I think so. Do you? So much change in a generation.

Regina Bannan organized the *NunJustice* witness in Philadelphia, something she is sure she could not have imagined herself doing right after she finished her sixteen years of Catholic education.

The “M” Word *continued from p.4*

this sentence: “As the church and society face tumultuous times, the board believes it is imperative that these matters be addressed by the entire church community in an atmosphere of openness, honesty, and integrity.”

Marian Ronan in this issue urges us to “speak out and publish and resist the death of Vatican II...” Help us to continue this forum in a spirit of “openness, honesty and integrity”.

Whether you are part of our core committee, write articles, attend our witness, read our newsletter and/or spread the word that we are here, and not going away, you are part of the SEPAWOC community. We need each other.

We the Catholic People

We the Catholic people of the United States say enough is enough—the bishops do not speak for us or the millions who stand together in our shared belief that the use of contraception is a moral decision that should be made by individuals in accordance with their conscience.

For the full text to this statement and to sign the petition go to the website catholicsforchoice.org, click on “Action Center” and then “CFC Action alerts”.

Book Reviews

***Whose Torah? A Concise Guide to Progressive Judaism* by Rebecca T. Alpert. New York: The New Press, 2008. 164pp. Hardback, \$23.95. (But copies on Amazon for \$2!)**

Reviewed by Marian Ronan

I used to worry that the emergence of new Catholic worship groups—small faith communities, Roman Catholic WomenPriest congregations, independent Catholic churches—would undercut the unity of the church. I thought that without the Vatican, we would become like Protestants, dividing into two churches, then four, then eight, *ad infinitum*.

Lately, though, I realize that a greater obstacle to the unity of Catholicism is the Vatican and many of its bishops, busy as they are excommunicating, vilifying, or firing those who disagree with them. I also wonder if Catholicism isn't, in many respects, more like Judaism than Protestantism, with deep ethnic, cultural, and ritual traditions connecting us across a range of differences.

I read Rebecca Alpert's *Whose Torah?* with this question in mind. Alpert is a Reconstructionist rabbi who teaches in the Religion Department at Temple University, though you may know her better as a commentator on the PBS documentary, *Jews and Baseball*. *

Whose Torah? explores the ways in which progressive Jews address a range of contemporary justice issues, with chapters on sexuality, gender, race, war and peace, poverty, the environment, and a concluding one: "Where Do We Go From Here?" But Alpert lays the foundation of the discussion in an introduction in which she acknowledges up-front (and with some humor) the disagreements about who, in fact, is a Jew—"who belongs in the Jewish tent to begin with," as she puts it (4). Increasingly, there are similar disagreements about who's a "real Catholic"; maybe we need to acknowledge our differences as Alpert does.

Alpert's designation of a specific Torah text, "Justice, justice pursue" (Deut. 16:20) as the answer to how to live a good Jewish life could seem to contradict this acknowledgment of difference. But Alpert shows the many ways that text can be interpreted: historical, linguistic, legal, Midrashic (in stories), personal. Her argument that progressive Jews' actions and convictions qualify as one of the meanings of the text will be a source of encouragement to those of us struggling to have our commitments and actions recognized as part of the Catholic tradition "If we want the answer to 'Who does the Torah belong to?' to be 'It belongs to us,' " she writes, "then we must make our lives the text..." (16).

Alpert's emphasis on diversity resonates throughout *Whose Torah?* In the chapters on sexuality and gender, even as she acknowledges Jewish differences over questions like gay marriage, and marriage itself, she notes that Reconstructionist Jews pioneered the development and legitimation of gay commitment ceremonies. I was also moved to learn of Judaism's historic stress on the effects of pregnancy on the mother in the decision to have an abortion, and of the much-needed Jewish understanding of abortion as neither murder *nor* ethically insignificant.

Catholic readers may be tempted to skip the chapter on race, assuming that Jews, unlike Catholics, belong to only one ethnic group. But here too Alpert documents the extraordinary differences between Jewish ethnic groups all over the world. She likewise admits that though some Jews fought for civil rights, others did in fact own slaves or engage in racism, an ambiguity that marks American Catholic history as well. Chapters on economic and environmental justice also explore the striking diversity of Jewish social organization and action.

The part of *Whose Torah?* that gave me, as a Catholic reader, the most to think about, though, was Alpert's chapter on war and peace. I learned, for example, that American Jews became increasingly invested in Hanukkah not only as an antidote to Christmas, but also to provide themselves with a Jewish celebration of militarism after Israel became a nation. I was also moved by Alpert's narrative of her own conversion to advocating a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, and the heroic efforts of various Jewish and Israel peace groups in this regard.

But what struck me most forcibly about the chapter is how the problem of Israel is virtually the only peace issue it addresses. A reader might justifiably conclude that in 2008 there were no other wars or threats of war in the world. So Catholicism is not the only religion to be fixated on one issue. For the Jews, it's the state of Israel; for us, it's abortion and sex. Indeed, the name of one of the first groups to call into question Israeli militarism and hatred of Arabs was *Breira*—*choice* in Hebrew. *Breira* started a conversation many Jews considered forbidden, and successor Jewish peace groups have extended it. Similarly, progressive Catholics will continue to work for sexual equality in the church. But we must also attend carefully to a wide range of other justice issues, as Rebecca Alpert does in *Whose Torah?*

* <http://jewsandbaseball.com/players.html>

EqualwRites book review editor, **Marian Ronan**, blogs at: <http://marianronan.wordpress.com/>

Nuns on the Bus

On June 17th Sister Simone Campbell, NETWORK Executive Director, kicked off the nine-state "Nuns on the Bus" tour in Des Moines, Iowa. She spoke on the pressing need for solidarity in our society and the harm the House Republican budget would bring the vulnerable families. "As Catholic Sisters we are missioned to stand with people in need and to be witnesses for economic justice." The tour will be in the Philadelphia area on June 29th and 30th.

Go to nunsonthebus.com or call Mary Whelan at 215-464-1319 for times and places.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTIONS

“Ordinary Time”

Mk 3, Mk 7

By *Judith A. Heffernan, M.Div.*

During the next few months the Gospel of Mark will be proclaimed. Soon we will hear that some of the relatives of Jesus set out to seize Him, for they thought He was out of His mind; later, we'll hear the Pharisees questioning Jesus as to why His disciples don't always follow the tradition of the elders.

During the last few months, I had the joy of being with Roy Bourgeois, MM, Edwina Gateley, Theresa Kane, RSM and all of the wonderful people who came to hear them. This year we'll certainly be able to understand more fully how Jesus felt, because some think all of us are out of our minds, and some wonder why we just can't follow the tradition of our elders!

Roy's profound life journey has led him to complete dedication to the integration of peace and justice—including women's ordination and 'pink smoke over the Vatican'. Edwina reminds us that we are all called to be active contemplatives. She believes that God is outside the boxes the hierarchy sometimes uses and that God will keep moving further outside the boundaries until there is no outside and we are one family.

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Theresa celebrates all the women and men who want to renew the church and she rejoices that the women's ordination movement is not going away. She realizes that we may not see our vision fulfilled completely, but invites us to look at God in a more expansive way and know that with God nothing is impossible.

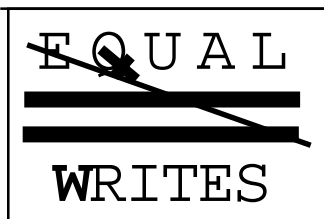
I was feeling tired and discouraged, but then I realized that Roy, Edwina and Theresa are older than I (not by much, but older!), and they are still moving, growing, believing, rejoicing and loving, and I understood quite clearly at our Holy Thursday, Ordination Day and NunJustice witnesses that we really are not alone! At the latter, we shared stories of Sisters who mattered in our lives while witnessing for them outside the Cathedral. In fifth grade, Sister Mary of Victory, SSJ read us a marvelous story, and the message I heard was "Keep On Keeping On!"

So I'll keep working on it, and later in this Liturgical Season when I hear that Jesus makes the deaf hear and the mute speak, I'll remember Anna Maria at Edwina's workshop proclaiming loudly and clearly, "When your heart is telling you to stand up for something—DO IT!"

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

MANUSCRIPTS AND CORRESPONDENCE: If you would like to contribute an article, letter, or anything else to *EqualwRites*, please send it double-spaced, with your name, phone number, and a short biographical note. The next issue will be October 2012. Final deadline for submissions is September 15. Send to eharty43@yahoo.com or mail to SEPAWOC P.O. Box 27195, Philadelphia, PA 19118.

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