

Catholic Feminist Newsletter for Women and Men in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Area **MISSION** - 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.

SAINT MARY MAGDALENE MASS & CELEBRATION

Sunday, July 16 at 9 am

**Drexel Hill United Methodist Church, McBurney Chapel,
600 Burmont Road
Drexel Hill, PA 19026**

Refreshments following service!

Questions or for Zoom access, email kschuck55@gmail.com

SAINT MARY MAGDALENE DAY MASS AND CELEBRATION

Mary Magdalene.

In so many ways she is us. On our good days, even a bit of the sainthood part of her is ours, too.

She listened, as we do, to the messages of Jesus. She followed, as we do, his ministry and example. She served and she led.

She also witnessed horrific violence directed against him. She witnessed this as we witness now the relentless gun violence directed against so many individuals, family members, friends, and communities today.

Can her witness and her story can help us effect the change in the world we need?
Yes, if we also remember

Mary Magdalene was the one to first encounter the Risen Christ. She was the one first charged to proclaim a renewed message of hope to all around her. Isn't she asking us today, as she asked the apostles and disciples so long ago, to join her as bearers of the Good News in a world so desperate for it today?

Let's celebrate that message with the Mary Magdalene Community:

St. Mary Magdalene Mass

Sunday, July 16 at 9 am

Drexel Hill United Methodist Church

600 Burmont Road • Drexel Hill, PA 19026



CRACK OPEN THE STAINED-GLASS CEILING - FOR "GOOD"

By Ellie Harty

We will join together and speak out – in Rome – and at sites all over the United States and Europe as the “Synod on Synodality” meets during the month of October at the Vatican.

Our witnessing, wherever it is located, will be critical. As WOC executive director, Kate McElwee, so beautifully puts it:

We see our presence as an extension of the synodal tent, where we can model synodality authentically, amplify the voices most silenced by the institutional church, and creatively and boldly ensure that there is no synod about us without us.

Here is a preview of the plans so far:

October 3: Women will join their voices worldwide in a prayer vigil on the eve of the Synod’s opening day.

October 6: WOC will lead a “Walk with Women,” processing through the city of Rome to the synod hall. This witness will say to the Church: *You must walk alongside women as equals throughout the synodal path.*

Both events will be offered in “virtual” as well as in person formats so all of us can walk together as a united community. Then, throughout the month, WOC leaders will send daily video updates as events unfold.

Why we’re there and why we’re encouraged:

In April of this year, Pope Francis announced he was extending voting privileges to laypeople, *including women*, at the 2021-24 synod on synodality. He is now in the process of selecting 70 lay members from a list of 140 names submitted by seven international groupings of bishops. *50% of these will be women – women who will have a vote.* Another five women and five men voting members will come from religious orders, bringing *the total number of female members to at least 40.* (Francis could appoint even more voting members, including women, himself).

Make no mistake: *We* are a major reason this all happened. The Pope’s decision to include women as full members in the Synod is the result of years of lobbying, demonstrating, petitioning, witnessing, and praying by church reform groups.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

Dear SEPAWOC Friends,

We write to thank you ‘officially’ for giving us the 2023 Mary Magdalene Award. We were touched by this honor and received it with deep gratitude. It is not every day that the kind of work we do is lifted up so it means a great deal to us. Our award certificates are now in the WATER office where we show them off proudly.

We were so grateful to Roberta and Judy for bringing our dear Catherine Fei Min to the city. It allowed us to have a nice family time together. Min said, “I like your friends” which is high praise from a college person. We could have told her!

Every good wish to you, a faithful sibling organization in the struggles for justice and equity. We always say that it has to be fun or we wouldn’t do this work. It was fun to be with you, to enjoy the witness and lunch, to meet new people, and to celebrate the depth of the Easter Promise.

Gratefully,

Mary E. Hunt and Diann Neu

In her letter, Maria Marlowe challenges parts of an article published in our last issue. The points of view she expresses are not necessarily the views of the editors or the SEPAWOC Core Committee. The main focus of EqualwRites is advocacy for the ordination of women but also Catholic feminism which this letter addresses. Content has been edited for length and relevance to our focus.

As a former member of WOC, a registered Democrat, a feminist—but mainly as a pro-life activist of 45 years—I am responding to the article “Ordained into Pain” in the March—June 2023 issue of *EqualwRites*. I agree with most of what is written, but the paragraph on the anti-abortion movement is inaccurate and unfair.

“The language of suffering has been written into the anti-abortion movement with the help of churchmen.”:

While it is true that many churchmen are part of the anti-abortion movement, it is equally true that this movement is also fueled by church women, feminists, atheists, and the gay community. The way abortion is shaped by the mainstream media would have you believing that the pro-life community consists solely of right-wing zealots. But this is simply not the case. Democrats for Life, Feminists for Life, the Pro-Life Alliance of Gays and Lesbians, Secular Pro Life, and Rehumanize International are all thriving parts of the overall pro-life movement: People who believe in the truth of science that the unborn are in fact human, voiceless, and entitled to the fullest protection of the law.

“Women are expected to bear the results of rape, incest, bad health, and lifelong care of children with life threatening abnormalities because that is what God expects and demands of them.”:

Results? Seriously? Results? Those results are human, innocent, voiceless, vulnerable, and trapped. They have no say in determining who or where they are on the human wheel of life. Yet we are forcing them to pay the highest price possible for circumstances they cannot control. Our God has allowed us to have a tremendous amount of freedom because love without freedom is not love at all. But She also retains ownership of Her own territory, that territory

being life and death. I believe that She expects and demands that we honor Her boundaries—from womb to tomb. Furthermore, I’ve seen those life-threatening abnormalities while I was in the chaplaincy seminar at Nemours hospital in Wilmington. I am in awe of people who tend to them without judging their “quality of life” because quality of life is a foreign language to our Loving Parent who embraces all of Her wondrous creation—planned and unplanned, wealthy and poor, normal and abnormal—fiercely, unconditionally, with no exceptions. Do we think She made a mistake?

“No health, social, economic, or social problem is too great for women and girl children to bear.”:

This one I agree with. There is no problem—economic or otherwise—too great for a woman or girl living in a justice-driven, peace-seeking society to bear because that society will always find non-violent ways to respond to a crisis. Furthermore—and this is more important—one of the tenets of my faith is that nothing is impossible with God. I believe that if God expects and demands that we protect and defend all life—that we honor the boundaries surrounding Her territory—then God will provide the means to do so, no matter how daunting it may seem.

“Suffering is sanctifying, holy, even desirable to those who would regard pregnant women as victim souls, condemned by God “himself” to a life of suffering.”

Most often the woman is not financially independent. She lacks resources—the financial and emotional resources that are vital when carrying a child to term. There is an abundance of (free) assistance available to this woman. There are also approximately a million people waiting to adopt. This is hardly a life of suffering. She is surrounded by people supporting her in a nonviolent way.

“Few dare to call this out for what it is and what it remains—abuse.”:

The greatest abuse is of the unborn child who is ripped from his mother’s womb simply because he had the audacity to be conceived.

But mainly—MAINLY—I am tired of—in fact, I am weary of—being told that I am not a true feminist because a true feminist will always protect and defend body autonomy. A true feminist would NEVER protect and defend body autonomy when it endangers the life of another human being.

Maria Marlowe

Editorial Staff of *EqualwRites*

A Publication of SEPAWOC

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“Love is Not a Victory March”

Title comes from Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.”

By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco

In April, my husband and I visited Budapest, Vienna, a host of German cities, finishing up our vacation in Amsterdam. No visit to these cities is complete without visiting the gilded, colossal cathedrals, the castles along the Rhine, and the grand palaces of the nobility including those of the princely bishops of the Roman Catholic Church who ruled large cities like Cologne and many other imperial cities in what was euphemistically called the “Holy” Roman Empire.

I had read about these prince-bishops while doing research for my up-coming book, *Taking Out the Saints*. What I saw in Europe corroborated what I read in books and articles. The laying on of hands that allegedly came from Peter and the apostles conferred little that was holy or even Christian upon their princely successors. The bishops, like their fellow nobles, were more concerned with wealth and power than they ever were with God or the People of God.

The ecclesiastical fixation with power and wealth did not go unnoticed. Critics regularly arose from the ranks of both ordained and lay people. Their loudest critics, people like Arnold of Brescia, Jan Hus, William Tyndale, and Marguerite Porete lost their lives for being honest about the hypocritical lives of the churchmen.

Arnold (1090-1155), for instance, called the College of Cardinal a “den of thieves,” and the pope, “a man of blood who maintained his order by fire and sword, a tormentor of churches and oppressor of the innocent who did nothing in the world save gratify his lust and empty other men’s coffers to fill his own.” For stating the obvious truth, Arnold was burned at the stake and his ashes thrown into the Tiber. Bernard of Clairvaux, the sanctimonious persecutor of those with whom he disagreed and preacher of bloody crusades, called Arnold “an incorrigible schismatic, the sower of discord, the disturber of peace and the destroyer of unity.” Bernard was chosen by Pope Urban to fill the crusaders wearing the cross of Christ on their armor with the necessary blood lust to kill those the churchmen labeled the “infidel.” The saintly Bernard’s preaching was chilling. “Cursed be he whose sword is not dripping in blood.” There was actually a Catholic cleric who said, “There is no crime for those who have Christ.”

There have been many who have told me that “everyone” at the time behaved in this violent fashion, as if “everyone does it” is an excuse for evil. They are incorrect. There were always critics in every age, loud ones like Arnold. Catholics don’t often hear about them because the churchmen labeled them heretics, making their words and opinions verboten. They and their books were burned by the religious authorities with the backing of the political powers of the time.

Of course, Arnold, et. al. were correct. Hypocrisy writ large does not go unnoticed. It’s the reason why the large palaces are now museums, the great cathedrals of Europe are largely empty on Sunday, and a statue of Arnold now stands proudly in Brescia’s center square.

Although Pope Francis has put a kinder face on the Catholic Church, his hands remain tied by a long tradition of absolute power and the church’s useless and ultimately unloving quest for unity. The

Church, however, has never been unified, and there is not an unbroken tradition stretching back to the apostolic era. In fact, the churchmen’s idea of unity could only be enforced by institutional persecution and violence aided and abetted by the power of the secular authorities. For instance, the sainted Augustine not only waged his war against those he regarded as heretics with his pen. He also appealed to imperial power to strike down heretics, demolish temples, and smash idols. Augustine was not alone. Other churchmen like Ambrose of Milan, Martin of Tours, and Cyril and Athanasius of Alexandria advocated and supported acts of vandalism against indigenous people, aka barbarians, conducted by imperial forces and rogue monks.

Christian missionaries in Europe, sometimes with the backing of the emperor, bamboozled local kings and strong men into converting. The kings then brought their often unwilling subjects into the Church. Christian missionaries and bishops tore down local temples or repurposed them as churches despite the protests of the populace. Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor, executed four hundred Saxon knights for refusing to repudiate their culture and their religious faith and adopt Christianity.

Violent and zealous representatives of the most Catholic monarchs of Spain, Portugal, and France forced the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas into accepting the Catholic faith. Native people were executed for refusing to convert, some buried alive in the walls of the great cathedrals in Mexico and South America. Millions were enslaved and forced to work on plantations or in mines, their unpaid labor making nations, their nobility and merchants, and their bishops rich beyond imagination. Fifty-three million indigenous Americans died between 1492 and 1600 as a result of the Christian invasion and colonization of North, Central, and South America, and the West Indies.

Many Twenty-First Century inhabitants actually mourn the passing of Christian hegemony, painting it as an idyllic time when wise and holy churchmen ruled and obedient parishioners bowed their heads in acquiescence, offering up their hard-earned money willingly to build gold-encrusted cathedrals and palaces. Instead, far too much of Christianity has been a victory march not to spread God’s love, but rather to convert

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St. Mary Magdalene Community

Drexel Hill – Sunday at 9
Drexel Hill UMC-McBurney Chapel
600 Burmont Rd.
Drexel Hill, PA 19026

Wilmington DE
New Jerusalem Community
Sunday Liturgy:

For updated information and zoom links,
contact Eileen at 267-258-6966

“Love is Not a Victory March” *Continued from page 3*

people by force, subterfuge, and economic sanctions.

God, of course, does not put the divine imprimatur upon victory marches even if they are conducted in the name of the Holy One. Instead of nostalgia for a past steeped in institutional violence and make-believe unity, we should take heart in the fact that God always writes new stories that are life-giving, respectful, and tolerant if we have eyes to see them and ears to hear them. God also raises up people like Arnold of Brescia as signposts pointing to something different from coercion. The Holy One constantly renews the face of the earth despite those who would bury new ideas under a millstone, ways that arise from the mistakes of the past and point to a new and better future. Those with faith and hope know that God always leaves the gate to possibility open and sets a banquet with overflowing cups before us. We should never settle for less. We should not rename the sins of the past as the will of God or give the architects and perpetrators of ecclesiastical violence a bye. The way back is the road to perdition, not abundant life.

This newsletter is dedicated to women’s ordination, something too many churchmen still steeped in an imperial worldview continue to regard with disdain and fear. Men seeking ordination must first throw their equally qualified sisters under the bus in order to gratify their own desire for the priesthood. Few to no seminarians or churchmen will publicly voice open support for women priests lest they lose their job, forgetting that Jesus did not lose his job for speaking the truth. He lost his life.

The fact is, however, that women have been ordained in a new and different version of the Catholic Church since the 80’s when Judith Heffernan was ordained in Philadelphia. Mary Rammerman and Denise Donato were ordained in the late 90’s in Rochester, N.Y. and Roman Catholic Women Priests followed in 2002. Thus, Catholics need no longer advocate for the churchmen to ordain women into their authoritarian, inherently violent, anti-woman, and anti-LGBTQ version of church. God has thrown open all of the windows and all of the doors and set the table for people to eat and drink of the Divine’s bountiful and abundant life. The plates and cups are brimming with boundless divine love and the army of God - where there was once “no crime for those who have Christ” - has been disbanded.

Eileen McCafferty DiFranco is a Roman Catholic Woman Priest, author, and member of the Mary Magdalene Community.

CRACK OPEN THE STAINED-GLASS CEILING - FOR “GOOD” *Continued from page 1*

As Kate McElwee recently told *NCR*: “This is the result of sustained advocacy, activism and collaboration and witness from the grassroots.”

So far, however, it’s only a “crack” in the stained-glass ceiling:

Some are concerned about how little light may be showing through that crack:

- The new lay membership may be stacked with only conservative, “safe” choices.
- Synod decisions require a two-thirds majority to pass and lay representatives will make up only 22% of eligible voters.
- The Pope still has the final say on all decisions.

Yet we remain undaunted:

We do still have a great deal of work to do, but the trajectory is pointing forward.

In an article for *NCR* on May 9, 2023, Christine Schenk refused to be anything but optimistic by reminding us: “A female lens can bring new information to church deliberations and begin to catalyze necessary change.” Then she continued:

“Change doesn’t happen because of a two-thirds favorable vote. A two-thirds vote only ratifies a change that has already occurred. Change begins when something — often a small something — catalyzes the larger body and moves it to consensus. Jesus’ example of the kingdom of heaven being like the woman adding yeast to leaven the flour comes to mind (Matthew 13:33).

I’m betting that more than a little leaven will be found among the synod’s 22% of lay voices.”

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

Editors’ Note: We loved how these poems reflected our struggles with erasure and exclusion – and our triumphs!

MY SPIRIT – SORE AFFRONTED

By Mary Tarantini

My spirit – sore affronted

The day I saw your altar armed

With theology poorly vetted

A smokescreen for your disregard

Left to our own devices – we

(Eternity being too long a wait)

Hitched a ride on the coattails of

A timely dove passing through the narrow gate

Far above the official din

A chorus of Hallelujahs rises

Exclusion – the only “mortal” sin

Love partakes and love surprises.

... and from her book *Pilgrim – Poems for the Journey*:

RAPUNZEL

Rapunzel, let down your hair

Your patience is wearing thin

The longer you stare out the window

Rehearsing “Oh, where have you been?”

The louder the chorus will chant

And play on their tiny violins

Gather your skirt, run down the stairs

There is a door, you know

The key was fashioned long ago

(And to you we duly bestow)

By those who well know their own worth

In Heaven and here down on earth.

Mary Tarantini is a poet and English teacher. *Pilgrim – Poems for the Journey* is her first published poetry collection.

Book Reviews

***The Church of the Dead: The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas.* By Jennifer Scheper Hughes. New York University Press, 2021. 264 pp. \$35.00.**

Reviewed by Marian Ronan

The recent global epidemic that caused incalculable numbers of deaths might be enough in itself to make a book about another epidemic interesting, albeit one that happened almost five hundred years ago. But recent indictments of the Catholic Church for its role in the colonization and destruction of indigenous people here in the Americas make Jennifer Scheper Hughes's book, *The Church of the Dead: The Epidemic of 1576 and the Birth of Christianity in the Americas* even more worthy of our attention.

Perhaps the most shocking effect of the Spanish/Catholic colonization of the Americas is the incomprehensible loss of the indigenous lives caused by the importation of germs to which the colonizers were immune, but the Amerindians were not. That population, between 5 and 6 million when the Spanish arrived in 1492, had sunk to approximately 600,000 by the early 1800s. It is difficult to describe the effects of such a development as anything but horrific.

Scheper Hughes argues compellingly, however, that one phase of this massive indigenous decline, the epidemic of hemorrhagic fever in Mexico between 1571 and 1581 which took 2 million lives, was also the founding event of Christianity in the Americas. The devastation it brought actually enabled the indigenous to play a significant role in the shaping of that Christianity.

Scheper Hughes divides her analysis into two parts. In the first, she details the attempts by the clergy to revive the church during the *mortandad*, or "deathness", through new forms of ministerial language and ritual practice. Calling upon the medieval notion of *cura corporis/cura animae* (cure of body/cure of soul), they took care of the sick with medicine and bloodletting, even as they administered the sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction to them. They also engaged in flagellation of themselves in processions. The imaginative coming together of their blood with that of the sick and dying figured the oneness of the *mystici corporis*, the Mystical Body of Christ.

An amazing paradox, or contradiction, underpins this symbolic oneness, however. Even as the missionaries "cured" the indigenous, the Spanish colonizers brutally exploited their labor, increasing their susceptibility to disease. Some of the friars, like Bartolome de las Casas, denounced this exploitation. But even the ostensibly compassionate missionaries never treated the Indians as equals, limiting their reception of the Eucharist, for example.

The second section of the book details the jurisdictional conflict which emerged from this contradiction that underpinned the *mortandad*. One side of the conflict is illustrated by a two-thousand-mile walking survey undertaken by Pedro Moyas de Contreras, the archbishop of Mexico. The purpose of the survey was to assess the devastation caused by the epidemic and lay out a plan for new *congregaciones* (parishes) under the authority and control of the institutional church. The plan was never accomplished.

Scheper Hughes then draws on indigenously drawn maps of the same territories, commissioned, oddly enough, by the king of Spain, that present a "rival Christian cartography." In contrast to the archbishop's plan for the future, these *relaciones* document the revitalization of stricken towns through the construction of churches and hospitals. One such map depicts fourteen churches and a monastery complex whose central power derives from ascending portraits of indigenous sacred rulers of preconquest times. The *mortandad* enabled indigenous Christians to weave their ancient identities into their Christian faith.

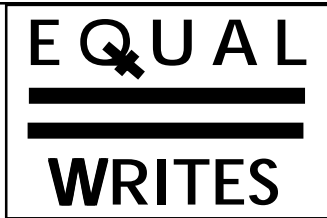
Ultimately, in *The Church of the Dead*, Jennifer Scheper Hughes argues compellingly that the indigenous Mexican Christians of the late 16th century were more able than the Spanish missionaries to rebound from the *mortandad*. As they did so, they reshaped the Mexican Church as a community of wounded yet diverse members which would grow eventually into the Christianity of the Americas.

Marian Ronan has been writing for EqualwRites for decades. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

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Scripture Reflections