
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.*

HOLY THURSDAY WITNESS

March 28 at 11:15 am

**Sister Cities Park across from the Basilica of
Saints Peter and Paul
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Please join us.****ORDINATION DAY
OUTDOOR MASS**

Saturday, May 18, 9:30 am

**Sister Cities Park across from
Saints Peter & Paul Basilica
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Led by a woman priest**

**INTRODUCING OUR 2024 MARY
MAGDALENE AWARD WINNER:****MARGUERITE SEXTON***By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco*

I first met Marguerite Sexton in 1994 when she boldly proclaimed and pledged her undying love for her second husband Tom from the altar after Mass. I recall thinking, "Wow!" this woman is something else!

My sentiment about her has not changed in thirty years. She is an amazing woman and deserves to be the recipient of SEPAWOC's 2024 annual Mary Magdalene Award.

Marguerite Herman Sexton has been a force of nature since childhood because of and despite a life filled with terrible tragedy. Marge was eight when her mother Molly died. Her father Al died when she was eighteen. Her older sister Mary, who helped raise her after her father's death, died at age thirty-six and her beloved son, Ron, died by suicide in 2015. A woman of strength, resolve, and above all, courage, Marge carried these tragedies deep within her heart even as she worked to improve the lives of the broken-hearted and those laboring under the unjust system of the patriarchy and the old-boy political network.

Throughout the eight decades of her life, Marguerite has always rejected injustice. Her father taught her to be a Roosevelt Democrat. The women's movement of the 60's and 70's helped to mold her feminism. The anti-woman, anti-birth control stance of the Catholic Church and her negative experiences in Catholic elementary school led her to question religious authority.

While other children in her Catholic school dutifully made plans to attend their local diocesan high school, Marguerite began wearing an Abington High School jacket to school in seventh grade, driving her teacher, a sister, into a tizzy of rage and personal recrimination. What kind of girl would turn her back on the grace of a Catholic education?

While running for district judge in Abington Township in 1993 (unfortunately, she lost), Marguerite realized that judges could

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**A Gathering of Blessing for Women Called to
Ordained Ministry
By Maureen Tate**

It is hard to have missed the focus on blessings that has captured attention in the news media as of late. As many are aware, a new ruling by the Vatican Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith has opened "the possibility of blessings for couples in irregular situations and for couples of the same sex" while making clear that such blessings are not to be permitted in the context of liturgical rites or ceremonies of marital commitment. While many have welcomed this announcement, we feel called to look deeper and respond from the perspective of our many years advocacy for a renewed and welcoming Church. Fundamentally, we hold that there is nothing "irregular" about love and commitment. What is "irregular" is the exclusion, condemnation and cruelty directed at those willing to form and celebrate loving partnerships within our faith community.

The Vatican ruling also holds that the decision to offer a blessing is to be left to the "the prudent and fatherly discernment of ordained ministers." We affirm that blessings recognize no barriers to God's unconditional love and are not subject to "fatherly discernment" that would deem some worthy and others not. We affirm the integrity of discernment of all those who recognize their need for healing, strength, and affirmation, as they invoke God's blessings on their commitment.

Likewise, women who are called to ordained ministry have been told that their calling is not valid and, is perhaps also, "irregular". However, we do not accept the highly "irregular" structures of clericalism and patriarchy that presume to limit the power of the Holy Spirit, who calls women and men alike to the priesthood, as well as other ministries of religious leadership and service. We affirm that their vocation is also an occasion for blessing and celebration.

When we gather for our Holy Thursday Witness, as we have done for over 35 years, we will call upon the blessings of our spiritual foremothers to strengthen and guide our efforts to advance a renewed priesthood, rooted in Gospel values. We will pray that the Spirit continues to move in and among Church leaders to open their eyes, minds and hearts to the beauty and

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A Gathering of Blessing for Women Called to Ordained Ministry *continued from page 1*

gifts of those who remain on the margins. We will extend blessings upon one another to continue to give faithful witness to the promise of a priesthood of all believers. And we look forward to honoring one among us, Marge Sexton, in presenting her with our Mary Magdalene Award. In founding Journeys of the Heart, Marge has provided a ministry of blessing to so many seeking God's grace as an integral part of their marriage commitments and in other significant occasions.

We welcome you to join us on **Holy Thursday, March 28, 11:15 at Sister Cities Park across from the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul.**

The Women's Ordination Conference has continued to advance the issue of women's full participation in the church and there is movement on many levels, from women's leadership of Vatican offices, women voting in the recent Synod, serious consideration of women deacons and the growth of alternative avenues for women already ordained such as with Roman Catholic Women Priests. You have been with us on this journey. Your voice and presence continue to make a difference.

MAGDALENE AWARD WINNER:

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perform weddings. A self-described romantic, Marge dreamed about the ceremonies she could create that could transform a dry, legal ceremony in a judge's chamber into a liturgy of love. She contacted the late Shane Creamer, a former Pennsylvania attorney general who had spent the bulk of his life in public service law, to figure how she could accomplish her goal as a non-ordained and non-elected person. Thus, Journeys of the Heart, an organization devoted to providing lovingly crafted, personalized liturgies for weddings, baby naming ceremonies, and funerals was officially born in 1995. The organization was so successful that Marguerite quit her day job. Since its inception, ministers with Journeys of the Heart have officiated at 9,848 weddings, 224 baby blessings, and 213 funerals.

In the beginning, Marguerite was a one-woman dynamo often performing five weddings in one weekend. It was her first wedding, however, that painfully highlighted the deep and abiding injustice perpetrated upon women by the male Catholic priesthood. The men of the church, she realized, knowingly and actively deprived women of participating in something she described as pure and holy because the women lacked male dangly body parts. Coming like a blast of rage while officiating at her first wedding ceremony, this knowledge left her breathless.

Marguerite would break the Catholic male monopoly on performing marriages in the Philadelphia area. As Marguerite attracted women (and men) to become officiants with Journeys of the Heart, she bequeathed the incalculable gift of presiding to a multitude of women, including me. From its inception, Journeys treated LGBTQ+ people and divorced Catholics with respect and married them with dignity.

Although Marguerite is now retired, the organization lives on with Diane Smith-Hoban at the helm. After a steep dip caused by Covid 19, Journeys officiants regularly preside at almost four hundred weddings every year. (Journeys is a non-denominational organization. Its ministers come from a variety of backgrounds and work with people of different faiths).

The terrible tragedy of her son Ron's suicide in 2015 moved Marguerite in a direction she never imagined. While going on with her life without Ron was the hardest thing she ever did, she was determined to remove shame and stigma from the hearts of mothers whose children died by suicide. After walking out on a poorly led grief group, Marguerite, with her largesse of spirit and always open heart, founded a grief group called Mom's Rising Together. Open to any mother whose child has died, the women find solace as they continue to mourn the deepest loss of their lives in a loving, supportive community.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, which is never read at Mass so the churchmen can maintain the fiction that the institutional church was all-male from the beginning, he identified Phoebe, the carrier of his letter, as a deacon, the same word he used to refer to himself. A deacon was one who ministered to the people. It was a position of service, not power. Like Paul and Phoebe, Marguerite Hermann Sexton is a *diakonos*, a minister, who has joined lives together in love and helped to patch together the pieces of a broken heart. Mary Magdalene would be proud of her.

Blessings for all

Ordination Day Witness 2024

Will You Be There?

We cordially invite you to attend our special Ordination Day Mass held in Sister Cities Park across from the Basilica of Saints Peter & Paul in Philadelphia on **Saturday, May 18 at 9:30am.**

Inside the basilica, only men will be ordained. **Outside**, a woman, already ordained by her community, will say Mass dedicated to all women called to priesthood and whose answer by the official Church is a persistent and resounding, No.

If you could come, if there could be a multitude there, those entering and leaving the basilica and those passing by would see those who are let in and those left out. It's about injustice and heartbreak and, yes, promise.

If you could come, if there could be a multitude there, we would rejoice and fill the park with song and prayer. We would receive communion together sharing nurture and nourishment. We could go forth together to change the world for the better.

We will hold our sacred service anyway, but, oh, if you could only come, if there could be a multitude there...

The Canonized and the Silenced

By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco

One of my favorite *New York Times* editorial writers is David French. While I always agree with columnists Jamelle Bouie and Nicholas Kristof and always disagree with Ross Douthat because I don't think he understands history, David French always makes me think, whether I agree with him or not.

Recently French wrote about the pitfalls with D.E.I. (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programs. While he acknowledged the terrible historical realities that made such programs necessary to ameliorate and eliminate the worst of the prejudices and exclusions of the past, he pointed out that implementers of D.E.I. should not mimic the behavior of those who practiced the original exclusion which is absolutely true. However, his solution was to do away with D.E.I. I disagree. We need to fix it, not eliminate it.

I think some of our recent gospel readings about Jesus' calling only males to be apostles are prime examples of why D.E.I. is not only needed but also required in the field of theology/religion where for too long authority has been restricted to the very narrow parameters of ordained male, usually white, authority. The exclusion of other voices has led to terrible abuses with disastrous consequences. Reading these gospels- chosen specifically by the churchmen to prove the company line -every year have made generations of people not only think but also firmly believe that only men are called to the priesthood. Only they have authority to speak for God, as if anyone can.

Two of these gospels serve as a counterpoint to Paul's letter to the Romans which is a primary source unlike the gospels which were written generations after Jesus died by people who did not know him. And Paul personally knew and clearly respected women apostles and heads of churches and mentioned them not only in Romans but in his other authentic letters. Junia, along with Andronicus, as our first reading says, were "outstanding" among the apostles, not Peter or any member of the esteemed twelve. The church in Rome would not exist without Prisca- and her husband, Aquila- who are mentioned six times in the New Testament. Paul refers to Phoebe as a deacon, the same term he uses to refer to himself. None of the readings with women apostles or deacons or heads of house churches are ever included in the Catholic lectionary so the church can maintain the fiction that Jesus called only men to be leaders. Consequently, the ideas, visions, and opinions of half of the population of the church, ideas that might have changed the course of history and made the world a better place, have been lost or suppressed.

Not just the voices of women have been silenced by the powers. So have the voices of peace.

One of the things I've learned in writing my book is that a lot of folks repeatedly tell me that I'm wrong to demote saints who behaved the way they did because "everyone" at the time behaved that way, as if I should have overlooked and excused the overtly bad behavior- recognized by people of the time- of those a very imperfect church declared redeemed and holy. The fact is, just like in modern times, not everyone bought into war and violence as a solution to prob-

lems. In fact, there were always those who raised their hands and voices in dissent and said, "Excuse me, but." Unfortunately, their "buts" were too often silenced.

In honoring violent men like Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria or Thomas More, or women like Joan of Arc with a saint's halo, those who lived exemplary lives outside of the institutional paradigm were excommunicated or ignored because their view did not mesh with, or even contradicted, the dominant one which supported the imposition of Christianity upon all the people of the world, usually through the use of physical or spiritual violence.

As the saints of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the invasion of the Americas received their halos, the voices of pacifists like John Wycliff, Erasmus, and John Hus got lost in the clamor of militant Christendom. Their words and behavior were exemplary, quite unlike Thomas More who as Lord Chancellor of England had four "heretics" executed. (While his conscience reigned supreme, the consciences of others who had different opinions were quite suspect and "infected" the Catholic faith).

Wycliff taught that rulers who engage in war lack grace, charity, and justice. As Hus knelt to pray before he was set afire by the churchmen who declared him a heretic without ever proving the veracity of their charge, he asked God to bless the men who issued his writ of execution. Unlike his fellow churchmen whose feet rushed to shed the innocent blood of heretics and unbelievers, Erasmus of Rotterdam tried mightily to foster goodwill and defuse potential conflicts. He repudiated the commonly trod pathways of desolation and destruction, insisting that even in a just war, terrible and unacceptable things happen to ordinary people on both sides of the battle. In *The Complaint of Peace*, Erasmus wrote, "If there is any human activity which should be approached with caution, or rather be avoided by all possible means, resisted, and shunned, that act is war. There is nothing more wicked, more disastrous, more destructive, more hateful, and more unworthy of a Christian."

Women prophets of peace also received short shrift. In a prevailing worldview that saw heretics and Jews as agents of destruction and God as a vengeful warrior demanding purity of belief, Julian of Norwich saw God as a mother giving birth to a good world where "things shall be well."

Hildegard of Bingen believed that the Earth was filled with a cosmic force of good that enfolded it in greenness and life rather than the realm of Satan. In this world, all natural things were sacred: animals, trees, plants, and grass. Nature did not need to be conquered but rather respected.

In her final theological work, Hildegard portrayed the personification of divine love as a strong woman wearing a gold band around her head announcing, "I am the supreme and fiery force who sets all living sparks. I have ordered the cosmos rightly. But I am also the fiery life and divine essence: I blaze above the beauty of the fields, I shine in the waters, I burn with the sun, the moon, and the stars."

Imagine what the world might look like had the church listened to the voices of Wycliff, Hus, Erasmus, Julian, and

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Hildegard and the many others who were just like them rather than to the canonized warmongers and the power-hungry popes? Imagine if all of the Christian denominations including Catholicism had followed the Quakers, the Mennonites, and the Church of the Brethren along the road to pacifism and justice instead of regarding them as heretics. Imagine if the churches declared war a grave sin.

What has the world lost by suppressing these voices?

The good news is God continually sends prophets of all kinds, some of whom challenge the powers that try to quash challenges to their authority. While they might never acquire a halo and might even lose their lives, these prophets insist that a diversity of opinion, the equality of all people before God, and the inclusion of contrary voices should be welcomed rather than condemned. Despite mistakes and missteps, prophets have always stood bravely upon the arc of the moral universe described by Dr. King and done their best to bend it towards justice, pointing out that there has always been and always will be other ways to exist in the world. Sociologists David Graeber and David Wengrow have written that historical progression from primitive to modern and barbarism to peace is a myth and that all sorts of egalitarian and peaceful societies have existed over the course of time listening to dissenting voices instead of engaging in violence to enforce unity.

And so, there are many voices we need to hear, even if they raise uncomfortable issues and perhaps seem strident and annoying at times because with so much at stake, there needs to be a better way to solve problems than the way than the way we have now.

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

When a Wise Woman Leads
(*excerpts from a poem by Jan Phillips*)

*When a wise woman leads, she calls a circle together
and makes a place for stories to be shared,
hopes to be uttered and revelation to unfold.*

...

*When a wise woman leads, she thinks with her head,
ponders with her heart, decides with her soul.*

...

*When a wise woman leads, she speaks with the intensity
of fire,
the freshness of air, the groundedness of earth, and the
depth of the sea.*

...

*She leads for the benefit of every sentient being,
that life will be sustained, that well-being will prevail,
that goodness will shine over all our days.*

UPCOMING EVENTS

Tuesday, March 19 at 8pm - Sharing Our Wisdom

The ongoing Synod on Synodality calls for the global church to continue deepening its understanding and practice of synodality, and to “listen more to those on the periphery.” In response Catholic Organizations for Renewal (COR) is hosting “Sharing Our Wisdom: Speaking to the Synod as a Community of Love” via zoom. COR will feature testimonies and wisdom from the theologians and advocates most excluded from the synodal process through sharing in a “town hall” format. **Register at catholic-organizations-for-renewal.org/sharing-our-wisdom.**

March 22, 7pm – 23, 7pm – Sabbath Rest (silent, directed overnight retreat)

Often life is so full, we cannot hear God. Or maybe we are busy, busy, busy and our spirits need some Sabbath rest, 24 four hours to enter into the quiet and stillness with God. Retreat is at Cranaleith Spiritual Center, 13475 Proctor Road, Philadelphia. Cost including lodging and meals is \$130 (financial aid is available). **Register at programs@cranaleith.org.**

March 26, 2024, 5-7pm - Angels on the Clothesline, A Memoir: A Reading and Reception with Ani Tuzman

Written in compelling vignettes, *Angels on the Clothesline* arouses awe for the human spirit-revealing how easily we can wound and be wounded and, through all this, choose to love. Ani’s story is an invitation to embrace ourselves and each other with the compassion that can free us. Program is held at Cranaleith Spiritual Center; contact: info@cranaleith.org.

April 2, 7pm - Mary Magdalene, Her Easter Proclamation, and Why it Matters

FutureChurch Program Associate, Olivia Hastie, will moderate an intergenerational panel of women in scholarship and ministry to explore how Mary Magdalene continues to inspire today, why it is important that we reclaim and tell her true story, and what difference it would make in the lives of people of faith to hear the full story on Easter Sunday. **Register at: futurechurch.org/civicism/event/register/?reset=1&id=359**

April 8 - World Day of Prayer for Women’s Ordination

On the Feast of the Annunciation, we celebrate the World Day of Prayer for Women’s Ordination, when we honor Mary’s “yes” to God to bear Christ for the world and celebrate the women and people of marginalized genders who courageously say “yes, I am called” to priestly ministry. Details at: womensordinationconference.org.

April 21 - Vocations Sunday

On Vocations Sunday, the institutional church prays for an increase in vocations to the priesthood. At our events, we lift up the priestly vocations of people of all genders and call the church to welcome, nurture, and celebrate them. If you want to plan a local Vocations Sunday event, fill out our interest form at womensordinationconference.org to be the first to receive our planning toolkit.

The Catholic Church and Nuclear Weapons

By *Marian Ronan*

In the years since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, there has been much less concern about nuclear war than there was for decades previously. A few recent events have reversed this trend a bit—the release of the *Oppenheimer* movie, Putin’s hints of possible nuclear attacks against Ukraine, and North Korea’s development of nuclear ICBMs, for example. And the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has, for the past two years, set the Doomsday Clock, its symbol of imminent nuclear and climate catastrophe, at ninety seconds to midnight, the closest it’s been since the clock’s inception in 1947.

Another institution that has been speaking out against nuclear weapons is the Catholic Church, though the odds that the average Catholic parish member has heard anything about this from the pulpit is low indeed. One galvanizing Catholic statement about the need for nuclear disarmament is the 2022 pastoral letter by John Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico, “Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace: A Conversation Toward Nuclear Disarmament.” The stimulus for Wester’s letter was his 2017 visit to the Japanese cities bombed with such weapons by the U.S. in 1945, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a visit he found devastating.

Wester’s experience of the impact on those cities of the only nuclear attacks in human history became even more devastating when he returned home. There he realized that the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were developed at national laboratories within his own Archdiocese of Santa Fe and that thousands of nuclear weapons have continued to be produced there. Drawing on all of this and further extensive research, the Archbishop uses his pastoral letter to challenge the people of his archdiocese and all American Catholics to undertake a conversation aimed at the abolition of nuclear weapons because of the dangers they pose to God’s creation.

The Archbishop lays out in his letter the massive threat to all of life posed by the scale and extent of nuclear armaments today. But before he does so, he explains clearly that Catholic teaching has for decades condemned nuclear weapons. He begins with another trip to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that of Pope Francis himself, in 2019, when the Holy Father met with atomic bomb survivors and prayed for nuclear disarmament.

The Pope’s call for disarmament is a sobering one for all U.S. Catholics currently paying federal taxes: “The use of atomic energy for purposes of war is immoral, just as the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral.” The year after the Pope’s statement, the Vatican was the first nation to sign on to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the legally binding international agreement to prohibit signatory states from developing, testing, using, or threatening to use nuclear weapons. The U.S. has never signed on to this treaty.

Archbishop Wester also outlines the opposition to nuclear weapons and warfare from previous popes, beginning with John XXIII’s call for a ban in “Pacem in Terris,” his 1963 encyclical following the Cuban missile crisis. Wester also cites calls for nuclear disarmament in the Vatican II “Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” as well as by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He then zeroes in on Pope Francis’s 2017 World Day of Peace declaration that Jesus’s model of non-violence and forgiveness must be the foundation for our discussions about nuclear weapons.

In the second part of his letter, Archbishop Wester shifts to the reasons why we must abolish nuclear weapons, first by disproving the popular argument that nuclear weapons are justified because of their deterrence capacity. Nukes are and have been possessed to maintain primary power over adversaries, and the possession of the huge numbers of such weapons, far beyond those needed for deterrence, demonstrates that. Wester likewise shows that nuclear weapons do not save lives, since the idea that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were necessary to end World War II is now disputed by most historians.

Disarmament is also essential because the nuclear nations are now engaged in massive “modernization” of their already-bloated nuclear arsenals. The sheer life-threatening number of these weapons has been exacerbated by U.S. presidents pulling out of essential international nuclear agreements recently. In addition to the danger posed by 13,000 nuclear weapons worldwide, some of them a hundred times more powerful than the bombs dropped in Japan, deaths from the mining of uranium for nuclear weapons, cancers in weapons workers caused by chemicals and radiation, 900,000 cubic yards of hazardous and radioactive waste from nuclear research and production contaminating groundwater, and between 1.2 and 2.4 million deaths from nuclear fallout near testing sites

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are all included in the costs of not disarming from nuclear weapons.

Another concern detailed by Archbishop Wester is the number of near-disastrous mistakes and miscalculations between 1957 and 1995, when individuals or technical devices at the last minute barely prevented the launch of nuclear weapons. Other profound concerns include the fact that more and more countries are investing in these weapons, the growing possibility that terrorists groups may capture some of them, and that the invention of new cyber-warfare techniques, high-speed delivery platforms, and AI introduce new uncertainties into the nuclear scenario.

In the face of all this, Archbishop Wester proclaims unambiguously, in the third section of “Living in the Light of Christ’s Peace,” that the only alternative to the problems he has detailed is nuclear disarmament. After reviewing the stress in the TPNW on the harm to indigenous people by the production of nuclear weapons and the need for reparations to such groups, the Archbishop reviews the pivotal role, current as well as past, of the Los Alamos National Laboratory there in New Mexico in the production of nukes and the enormous harm this production has done to people and the environment.

Wester then stresses, as popes and before him have long done, the enormous harm to the poor that our massive nuclear investments have done over the years and continue to do. He agrees “...with Pope Francis ...that the time has come to commit ourselves globally to the complete abolition of nuclear weapons. We should end all these massive financial investments (in) weapons of mass destruction...which make only a few enormously wealthy—and instead invest in... education, healthcare, environmental cleanup...” and the end of “poverty and hunger.”

In the final section of his letter, Archbishop Wester offers “a way forward,” a range of suggestions for prayer, study, dialogue, and action leading toward nuclear disarmament. As an example of possibilities for prayer, he mentions the New Mexico ecumenical/interfaith Prayer Pilgrimage for Peace to Los Alamos beginning in the 1980s. He also writes about the annual August 6th Hiroshima anniversary vigil at Los Alamos, with participants wearing sackcloth and ashes like the people of Nineveh in the book of Jonah. And as an example of dialogue, the Santa Fe archdiocesan conversations among clergy, parishioners, Los Alamos employees and military using scripture and Catholic social teaching to reflect on nuclear production is cited.

Moving on to action, the Archbishop calls for massive clean-ups of the Los Alamos laboratory and a shift there from manufacturing nukes to developing technologies to monitor, dismantle and dispose of existing weapons. Another action is to demand a shift of resources from nuclear weapons to renewable energy research and implementation. Also necessary is the investment of funds in conflict resolution and peace-making programs around the world as well as the development of new economic opportunities. Finally, we must call on our elected officials to demand that the U.S. sign the Treaty

on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the most essential step toward nuclear disarmament.

The implementation of these changes will be extremely challenging. But the Church teaches that the very possession of nuclear weapons is immoral. Where and how will we begin the work to abolish them?

Marian Ronan *lives and writes in Brooklyn, NY.*

A Prayer for Our Times

Written by SEPAWOC member, Ann Zech

God of Many Names –

*Give us the **grace** we need to open our hearts and minds to Your Will.*

*Give us the **love** we need to see all humans as You do.*

*Give us the **patience** we need to work to change our community into the just system You came to establish.*

*Give us the **courage** to look at what we need to change in ourselves to live out the path to which we are being called.*

As always, we ask all this in and thru the Name of Jesus, Your Beloved, our center and strength. Amen.

SAINT MARY MAGDALENE COMMUNITY

Join us for Sunday Zoom Masses at 9:00 am

More information at: smmcommunity.org.

***EqualwRites* is a publication of
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Book Reviews

Just Church: Catholic Social Teaching, Synodality, and Women. By Phyllis Zagano, Paulist Press, 2023, 122 pages, including Appendices and Notes.

Reviewed by Regina Bannan

Just Church is a valuable book for those who have not immersed themselves in the Synod process. I admit that's not me. Since it was written before the first session in October 2023, it does not include the final report generated by the actual delegates, yet it gives the reader information in three essential areas to evaluate what happens this October: background on Catholic Social Teaching, on Synodality, and on the ordination of deacons.

This "half a loaf" debate has gone on for years. In the December 2004 *EqualwRites*, http://sepawoc.org/WOC11_04_pages_PDF.pdf, late editor Karen Lenz and very much alive founder of FutureChurch, Chris Schenk, dialogue about the strategy of ordaining women deacons before priests. (SEPAWOC Core Committee member Marianne Tucker has painstakingly put online many past issues from our huge archive; have a look sometime. We were way ahead of our time!) Many of the points raised by Zagano in this book are in Chris's argument but here strengthened with much more detail. I have tried in this review to summarize the contents and to indicate which sections might be extremely helpful in following the only discussion that seems likely to occur this fall.

Yet, as you will see, I become progressively more convinced that ordination only to the diaconate does not make common sense, and certainly not theological sense, in light of Catholic Social Teaching about the dignity of persons. But strategy is strategy, and the history of synods certainly suggests that at the same time the inspiration of the Holy Spirit sometimes causes surprises.

"Catholic Social Teaching" begins *Just Church*. Most useful is Zagano's outline of seven themes; most unusual is that her discussion of each is filtered through a focus on women. I sometimes found myself thinking what she chose to include was personal and other lenses, even other feminist lenses, might result in a different picture. Yet the essentials are here. You'll be able to refer to important Catholic Social Teaching from *Rerum Novarum* to Medellin and Aparecida and a whole lot more once you read the "Applications" sections: Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers; Life and Dignity of the Human Person; Solidarity; Care for God's Creation; Call to Family, Community, and Participation; Option for the Poor and Vulnerable; and Rights and Responsibilities.

References that touch on the argument for women deacons are scattered through the entire book. For example, this section includes both the misogynistic anthropology of some church fathers (9) and the careful definition by others a few centuries later of the structure of the "diaconia" within monasteries (21-22).

The next section is "Synodality," and again, Zagano's criterion for evaluating the various meetings for "walking together"

over the centuries is the participation of women. I summarize: in the very beginning, and in the Francis papacy, and not much in between. That includes Vatican II.

Zagano presents Francis as a sea change as she examines the theology of his calls for increasing involvement of the laity in the Synods on the Family (2014-5), on Young People (2018), on the Amazon (2019), and on Synodality (2021-4). She notes examples when discussion of women deacons was overlooked, for example, Canadian Archbishop Paul-Andre Durocher's comment in 2015 that abused women especially deserved ministry by women (36): "There has been no dogmatic statement saying that women cannot be ordained deacons." Sometimes she generally sees progress, as when she says that results for women "did not wholly disappoint," in reviewing the vote on deacons in 2019: 130 to 31 (41).

Zagano's treatment of all these synods is not as focused on deacons as I present, and she faces the problem of how to write about the Synod on Synodality before any Vatican sessions have taken place. She describes the structure of the preliminary stages but uses quotes from the earlier Synod on Youth. She is unable to include the treatment of women and deacons in the strong international documents, though she incorporates some national responses in the final section of the book.

In "Women and the Church," the third section, Zagano critiques clericalism as it's built into the structure and theology of the church. She begins in 2022 with *Praedicate Evangelium*, Francis's restructuring of the Curia which allowed lay women and men to have leadership roles in the church bureaucracy. Then she reviews the previous documents that prohibited their exercising this "jurisdiction," right through Vatican II to Canon Law in 1983. Zagano uses the dramatic 2022 vote in the Australian Plenary Council on women deacons to illustrate how the bishops' votes counted more than those of the laity and priests (62-64). Questions about the "ontological change" effected by the sacraments concludes this section.

"Women's Roles in the Church," the second half of this section, is the heart of the book. Zagano uses literary, epigraphical (Wikipedia was helpful), and historical methods to identify references to deacons over the centuries, which bolster the argument that she has presented consistently, including as a member of the Pontifical Commission on Women Deacons, that the diaconate and the priesthood are different. After examining the growth of lay ministries, she looks at how ordination to minor orders came to be reserved to those "destined" to become priests, which was confirmed by Canon Law #1024 in 1983, and emphasized since in "repeatedly issued documents, most if not all emanating from the pen of Joseph Ratzinger, that women cannot be ordained priests." While I find these documents nar-

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With New Eyes

By Ellie Harty



This is a picture of a cross adorned for Lent outside the Iglesia de San Francisco in Antigua, Guatemala.

At first, I looked at the image with what I call “new eyes”.

I saw the child’s raggedy dress as a sign of our unending mission to care for the poor and vulnerable. I saw the workers’ crudely wrought hand tools as symbols of our unending challenge to work for justice with whatever tools we possess. I saw the sword pointed away from potential victims as our pledged commitment to peace and peacemaking. I saw the ladder offering us elevation to a more encompassing world view, and I saw the dice totaling a “lucky” number signaling opportunities for future good fortune if we look carefully enough. Of course, I also noticed the thorny crown and trio of nails but saw them within the context of the other objects as symbols of profound suffering – acknowledged and grieved, yes - but ultimately surmounted.

Was that what is called the “feminine gaze”? The view of the other-gendered? Or just the human view? In any case, what did this reaction mean?

When I looked more closely a second and third time to get an answer, however, the ancient Catholic teachings and symbols embedded in me for so long took over, and I could see only with “old eyes”. The artifacts attached to the cross, I realized, were just part of the fossilized Lenten story. The huge sledge hammer to anchor the cross, the pick and chains to inflict torture, the large hammer to pound in the nails, the sword tipped in Christ’s blood, the ladder to reach the suffering Jesus to give him vinegar or pierce his side, the dice the soldiers cast for his cloak, and again, the crown of thorns and nails.

In this traditional interpretation, only the tiny dress, the one feminine object there, did not make sense. Was it a symbolic reminder of the child his mother had brought forth and who had now met this horrific end? Or am I just casting a “feminine gaze” again on tradition, and, if so, is that bringing forth anything new to the story? And, if that is so, what does that say about the old way?

In the March 4, 2022 *Global Sisters Report* Dominican Sister, Quincy Howard, described the excruciating process downsizing of her order’s home in a sprawling and amazingly beautiful rural setting in Wisconsin. To watch the dismantling

of buildings, to sort through treasured possessions, and to help in the relocation of frail residents from spaces they loved did take new eyes and deeper way of seeing and understanding transition:

Accommodating change inherently requires choosing what to carry forward and what to let go of. Navigating this pivotal moment in religious life during a global era of constant and accelerating change adds layers of complexity to that discernment.... Sisters in leadership and newer members like myself also long to claim and protect the aspects of our life that matter most deeply.

Sister Howard gives us insight into how to both preserve and radically change our own Church using the discernment process recommended by the Rule of St. Benedict:

In this painstaking discernment, the Rule of Saint Benedict equally cautions us from making yesterday a guide for tomorrow. Progress grows out of separating the essence of what should be preserved from the trappings that we are attached to. These attachments often act as barriers, looking to repeat the past or justify preserving what exists, even when it no longer serves. It can lead us to cling to familiarity for comfort, particularly when change is undesired or compelled. The tradition we want to maintain is not so much about what gets guarded or preserved through generations; it is about the passing along of what matters between and across generations. (Emphasis mine.)

In light of these challenges, what then do we do with the above pictured cross and how it represents our Lenten journey? What *does* matter? What does need guarding and preserving, what are just trappings, and what needs the steady and intense look through new eyes?

I think what some may call my initial “feminine gaze” (I would call it “human”) and interpretation of the cross in the picture does have merit even if it is not traditional. Yes, I do want us to preserve and take with us what we have long been taught: that suffering has great magnitude for all of us, and that, mercifully, we are accompanied and nourished by the Spirit along the way. But, with “new eyes”, I find myself wanting to add even more modern-day symbols of our struggles and suffering *and* the symbols of how they can be addressed and remedied.

I would add to that cross: the blue and yellow Ukrainian flag, a map of Israel and Gaza side by side, a picture of asylum seekers at the U.S. border, a gun with an X through it ... and also a Doctors Without Borders logo, a UNICEF symbol, a collage of food delivery caravans arriving at refugee camps, panorama shots of peace marchers around the world, and on and on. No wonder the cross is so heavy and growing heavier.

And yet, I would actually add still more but this time to lighten that load: our prayers and our pleas for, and our promises to create, a better life and a better world.

Ellie Harty is Co-Editor of EqualwRites.

BOOK REVIEW *continued from page 7*

row threads on which to hang a theological argument, the same man, Pope Benedict XVI, becomes Zagano’s lifeline with Canon #1009: “Those who are constituted in the order of the episcopate or the presbyterate receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head, whereas deacons are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word, and charity.” She concludes, “That is, the diaconate is not part of the priesthood” (77). I’d only conclude that deacons are not ordained, and that we all act in the person of Christ by virtue of our baptism.

Zagano’s “Conclusions” in the fourth section depend on separating doctrine, the position forbidding women’s ordination to the priesthood, from discipline, the historical evidence that women served as deacons in the first ten centuries of the church. She would like to bring both Catholic Social Teaching and Synodality to bear in reconciling Francis Catholics and those who cling to the pre-Vatican II Church. As Zagano presents it, the latter are still in the world of the condemnation of Modernism of the early 20th century; the former try to live by Catholic Social Teaching. I don’t see much reconciliation there, though Zagano is prescient in recognizing, “while it is highly unlikely that Church teaching on homosexual relationships will change, there is every reason to extend Christian charity to different forms of family in community” (84). Except for Sister Nathalie Becquart, she does not anticipate women delegates voting at the Synod.. Francis surprises.

Ultimately, Zagano’s position is political, though she does not explicitly acknowledge it. She discusses the development of doctrine but sees linking ordination to the priesthood with ordination to the diaconate as a “circular argument” that will not be resolved now because of “divine and ecclesiastical law” (94). Rather, it is enough to use the historical evidence to ordain women deacons and thus recognize women as “equal persons.” I ask: Is it?

Regina Bannan *is the President of SEPAWOC.*

SEPAWOC 2023 Financial Statement

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| <u>Beginning balance (1-1-23)</u> | 2,124.27 |
| Total donations | 8,371.80 |
| Total | 10,496.07 |
| <u>Expenses</u> | |
| Printing <i>EqualwRites</i> | 6,880.00 |
| Postal services | 816.00 |
| Memberships | 75.00 |
| Ads for Sponsorships, Anniversaries | 178.00 |
| Service charge bank | 7.50 |
| Printing Holy Thursday | 65.97 |
| Total | 8,022.47 |
| Balance on 12-31-23 | 2,473.60 |

Blessings

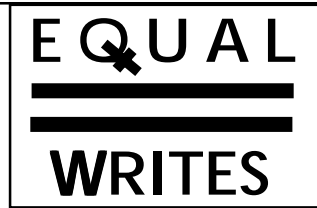
One of the themes of this issue of *EqualwRites* is blessings. I feel your financial support is a blessing. None of us can do this alone or outside of a community. Thank you for standing together with us.

Donations can be sent by check to SEPAWOC, P.O. Box 52046, Philadelphia, PA 19115. We have included envelopes. You can also donate through the Paypal link at our website sepawoc.org.

Blessing Each Other

Bless you when you’re awakening to God’s breathing within you. **Bless you** for letting God create you anew.
Bless you when you’re dwelling in darkness, despair. **Bless you** for letting God restore you to grace.
Bless you when you’re hearing a calling within you. **Bless you** for letting God lift up your voice.
Bless you when you’re searching this day and each day for ways to bring justice and mend hearts and minds. **Bless you** for letting God grant you hope through togetherness, peace through community, lights for your life.

*A Blessing
May Longing and Patience
teach you by turns:
not just the fire but the tending of it,
not just the well but the digging;
not just the vision but the enduring it asks,
by day and by darkness drawing us on.
- Jan Richardson*



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Scripture Reflections Lent 2024

Psalms: Your ways, O God, are love and truth...Renew within me a steadfast spirit...

2 Corinthians: Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation

By Judith A. Heffernan, M.Div.

Lent 2024 began on Valentine's Day. Frida Berrigan, in Pax Christi's Lenten booklet, "A Fast that Matters", reflects that surely Lent 2024 is meant to be an intersection of love and hope - a year in which both love and hope need to be stretched, restored and grown.

I then thought of Anglican Woman Bishop Jo Bailey Wells, invited to address the Pope and his advisory panel of nine Cardinals, who spoke of her hope that the Catholic Church will continue to explore with courage the topic of women's leadership. She told NCR that she is utterly convinced God calls women to sacramental ministry and hopes the Church will be stretched by the differing voices in this conversation. During Lent I attended the "Underground Railroad Museum of Burlington County, N.J. Celebration of Heroes/Sheroes", and it began with the intersection of *The Star-Spangled Banner* and *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. Which do we choose...bombs bursting in air...or songs full of faith the dark past has taught us, songs full of hope the present has brought us?

I thought of Frida Berrigan challenging us to fast from war-making, vengeance, and despair.

During Lent I attended a funeral and heard again the message of Jesus: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." I believe 2024 is an especially significant year when compassionate choices about paths, about truth and life, are urgently needed for good, for peace, for love. Frida Berrigan reflects that Jesus says, "Follow Me," and He promises it will never be dull!

Then Lent transforms into Holy Thursday blessings: Jesus blessing the bread and cup, the heart of our faith, sharing as one family around a table of love, equality, and unity... Holy Thursday blessings of sacramental oils...Holy Thursday blessings for priestly people, all of us, both inside and outside the Cathedral.

St. Hildegard shared a blessing for all of us: "May we awaken from any dullness and rise vigorously toward compassion and justice."

Please join SEPAWOC on Holy Thursday in person or in spirit—awaken from any dullness! Pray, sing, witness, and bless one another, bless the church universal, bless our suffering country and world that we may rise vigorously toward compassion and justice. Alleluia!

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