
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**April 17 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 17, 9:30 am****INTRODUCING OUR MARY MAGDALENE AWARD
WINNER FOR 2025:****SISTER MIRIAM THERESE WINTER***By Marianne and Tom Tucker and Kathy Schuck*

“Grace notes from the Divine Musician have shaped the contours of my life... spirit leads the way and, as primary music maker, is sometimes singer, sometimes song.” These words end the Preface of Medical Mission Sister Miriam Therese (MT) Winter’s autobiography, *The Singer and the Song*.

Graduating from high school at the age of 15 with dreams of becoming a medical doctor and working in Africa, in 1955, Miriam Therese entered the Medical Mission Sisters in Philadelphia. While studying premed, she was told it had been decided she’d pursue a degree in sacred music rather than medicine. In addition to an undergraduate degree in music from Catholic University, MT holds a master’s in religious education from McMaster Divinity College, and a PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary. By channeling Spirit, MT pioneered the development of a feminist lectionary and scripture resources. As the first woman and the first Catholic faculty member at Hartford International University, then Hartford Seminary, MT established the Women’s Leadership Institute (WLI), integrating ecumenical, cross-cultural, and feminist perspectives. MT’s body of work is huge by any measure, deeply rooted in what she refers to as the liturgy of life. This is shaped by her multifaceted experiences locally and around the world, especially among those who are powerless and poor, with women who are incarcerated, and with any who are willing to help bring about a more just and peace-filled planet.

For many of us, the song, *Joy Is like the Rain*, was our introduction to MT’s music. Written in 1965, who among us realize that, in MT’s words, it “was sung into life at a point when I felt no life within me, yet it has circled back to me with more joy, more love than any one lifetime can hold.”

In the middle to late sixties, many Catholics in the Greater Philadelphia Area were unhappy about the dioceses’ slow embrace of the Vatican II changes and were looking for a more inclusive and immersive form of liturgy. The sisters at the Medical Mission Sisters’ Fox Chase house, with the inspiration of Sister Miriam Therese’s music, offered an alternative engaging liturgy to people looking for something more progressive. Attendance grew to such a point, the sisters had to send us out on our own, and the group eventually became the Community of the Christian Spirit (CCS). But

MT’s music also spread to many other parishes and helped to revitalize (for a time) greater interest in liturgical participation. The music group at the Medical Mission services at the time was what would eventually be called a “Praise Band” in other Christian sects. Marianne Tucker’s favorite story is when she told MT that Tom played the guitar and Tom mentioned he was teaching her (Marianne), MT invited them to join the band but only on the condition both joined. Marianne claims it changed her life and influenced their interest in liturgical music.

Poet, song writer, liturgist, author, professor, visionary ... we are grateful for the way MT sees the world, all she endured as she encountered barriers, and the legacy she leaves future generations. If only she knew the impact she’s had on us and our world!

On behalf of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Women’s Ordination Conference, we are richly blessed to honor Miriam Therese Winter with the 2025 Mary Magdalene Award. Please consider joining us as we present the award to MT on Holy Thursday, April 17th, at 11:15 am, in Sister Cities Park across from the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul in Philadelphia.

STANDING WITH, FOR, AND AS THE BELOVED**Please join us on the 45th Anniversary of our annual Holy Thursday Witness**

On the Sunday of the Baptism of Jesus in which he is told he is God’s beloved, our priest asked us: “How do *you* know you are beloved? What in *your* life tells you so?” In inviting you, once again, to turn out in prayerful force to the Holy Thursday witness for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church, we answer those questions: “We know we are beloved because people tell us we are by showing up for us.”

This year’s **Holy Thursday Witness** will be on **April 17 at 11:15am** at Sister Cities Park across from the Basilica of Saints Peter & Paul in Philadelphia.

*You Are Cordially Invited to***OUR ANNUAL ORDINATION DAY MASS
SATURDAY, MAY 17 at 9:30AM**

If you want to show the patriarchy there will be no letting them, censor our words, suppress our ministries: if you want to show them there will be no “discouragement of spirit” (It’s too resplendent for that!) - join us for our annual **Ordination Day Mass** at Sister Cities Park across from Saints Peter & Paul Basilica in Philadelphia on **Saturday, May 17 at 9:30am**. It is led by a woman blessed in sacramental love.

Voices of Hate

By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco

When I was ordained a priest as a Roman Catholic Womenpriest in 2006, I knew that there were members of my faith who would strongly disagree with my action. What I didn't anticipate was the ferocity of the hate mail that appeared in my inbox, on my voicemail, or in comments made to newspaper articles that covered my ordination.

The comments expressed the rage and suppressed violence that the ordination of women engendered in the largely male writers who often self-described as "faithful Catholics." One letter writer wondered if the Cardinal Archbishop of Philadelphia had "smacked that dumb bunny (me) down." Another wrote, "Cardinal, don't waste any time contacting the CDF, send Beadle Tim over there to enlighten Eileen."

One compared me to Satan. "Your actions are pleasing to Lucifer, and they are part of the attack he has been constantly mounting against the church ever since it began two thousand years ago." Others deeply feared the infiltration of one he defined as "the other" and suggested that I was surreptitiously warping the minds of Catholic children. To his chagrin, he felt helpless to stop the women priest movement. Many others used their considerable skill at name-calling. I was a "silly, old tragic dingbat," a heretic, a demon from hell, a liar, and a power-monger. One woman, who obviously didn't know anything about either her own religion, Roman Catholicism, or Wicca, said the women's ordination movement looked like Wicca. I think she was trying politely to call me a witch. One guy compared the woman priest movement to ovarian cancer and another asked if I took the directive to submit myself to my husband in the Letter to the Ephesians seriously since it was the word of God.

I am not making this up.

At first, I deleted the hate-filled messages sent by self-described faithful Catholics. Then a part of me felt obliged to respond to the "faithful Catholic" part of their message. So, I began countering with, "Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found, brought here together by Christ's love, by love are we thus bound," adding, "no love, no God."

I even sent some of the letter writers my cell phone number and asked them to call me so they could get to know me as a human being, rather than as a caricature drawn with the broad strokes of orthodoxy. One woman wrote back to tell me that she would never talk to a person like me. A man responded to my offer, "You are satanic. You blaspheme God. Please don't respond to this email. I am not interested in what you have to say."

The many heinous crimes committed in the name of God made me think about the intolerant and fanatical emails I had received over the course of the last nineteen years. While I had always understood that violence and hatred existed in the world, it was quite startling to have that hatred directed at me. Although I had over five decades of life under my belt at the time of my ordination, I had no idea that my fellow Catholics could be so hateful and mean. I felt that if the writers could, they would, as in the quote above, "smack me down" physically, with "God" as their witness, and then go to sleep with

snow-white consciences.

People of faith speak with many voices. All of the world's religions claim love as their dominant voice and peace as their guiding principle. Yet, that voice of love and peace is too often muffled or even drowned out by the strident and often hateful speech of the militantly orthodox who seek to impose their particular understanding of the Divine upon others. These loud and hateful voices seem willing to sacrifice the welfare of all in order to impose their own religious sensibilities upon others. While the scope and level of violence varies, no faith is exempt from its own garden variety fanatics.

The violent saga of world history with its long list of victims underlines the fact that religious zealotry is both a dangerous and lethal emotion. While zealots might couch their toxic beliefs in the language of sincerity, righteousness and even holiness, the result is always the same – innocent people get injured or perhaps, killed and lives are uprooted in all sorts of myriad ways - all in the name of God.

Religious zealotry is a narrow pathway lined with high, protective walls that keeps out both intruding thoughts and unwelcome travelers. Those walls are erected and maintained by religious leaders who preach fanaticism and make zealots feel important by assuring them of their own salvation because unlike "the others," they follow the rules.

In 1895, American feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in her ground-breaking book, *The Women's Bible* that what is preached from the pulpit is carried out by the man (and the woman) in the street. One hundred and thirty years later, far too many religious leaders continue to call for violence against non-believers or members of their own faith who do not adhere to the company line. And far too many believers of all faiths seem willing and even happy to get the job done.

The people who sent me those emails, left messages on my voice mail, and responded to stories about my ordination in the newspaper felt empowered by their own religious leaders to write me mean-spirited, vicious, unkind letters. They made hateful assumptions about my character, my devotion and my intelligence, although they didn't know anything about me. They did this because their religious leaders publicly made the same hateful assumptions about me and women like me. Without ever meeting me, the Cardinal Archbishop of Philadelphia submitted my name to Rome for excommunication, something he never did to the male priests who were accused of grievous crimes against children. He also called me a "public scandal." In 2010, the Vatican placed the ordination of women on the same level of grave sin as sexual crimes against children.

The mistrust, the perennial undervaluing of the gifts of women and, yes, the thinly veiled hatred and fear of women in the Catholic Church were highlighted in Cardinal Raymond Burke's idea of a church program he called, "Emangelization," where he explained why women have ruined just about everything in the church and need to be put, post-haste, back in their ecclesiastically defined places.

As I said above, you could not make this stuff up.

Unfortunately, violence done in the name of religion does a

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Some Examples for a New Church (Just When We Needed Them Most)

By Ellie Harty

We often justify (not that we need to) our championing the ordination and leadership of women and others who have been excluded in our Church by proclaiming the enrichment we receive by hearing *new* voices, gaining *new* perspectives, and witnessing *new* ways of bringing forth inspiration and enlightenment.

On January 22 of this year, I think we heard and saw that kind of newness in action thanks to the unique gifts an ordained woman bestowed on all of us. I am referring to Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde delivering her “Prayer for the Nation Homily” and specifically when she looked directly at one attendee, the President of the United States, and issued this plea:

Let me make one final plea, Mr. President. Millions have put their trust in you. As you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now. There are transgender children in both Republican and Democrat families who fear for their lives.

And the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labor in our poultry farms and meat-packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shift in hospitals—they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes, and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches, mosques and synagogues, gurdwara, and temples.

Have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away. Help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger, for we were once strangers in this land.

I had never seen nor experienced a religious leader issue a plea directly to me for the benefit of others. Again, the key word is “plea”. I’ve heard religious presidereas entreat God for whatever they wanted. I’ve certainly heard them *recommend* or even *command* us to do the same. I’ve heard them throw lessons and quotations at us. I’ve heard them *tell* us to help and be merciful toward those less fortunate. I’ve just never seen them look directly at each of us and plead – even beg – us to be so.

To me that way of leading and being church seemed new. It took courage *and* humility, the kind of humility that demonstrates, not just affirms, our oneness and our common humanity and the hope and promise embedded within both. The visual that day was in itself startling. The humble, courageous woman standing above the proud and powerful seated male, and from that literally and figuratively higher position, issuing, not a demand or a scold or excoriation, but a simple plea for mercy toward others. In more pedestrian terms, she offered not a carrot for his mercy (You’ll be a better person;

your poll numbers will go up.) nor a stick (You’ll be reviled unless you do this; you’ll suffer in the afterlife.). Instead, on a public stage with millions watching, she just *beseeked* a person in a position of great power to be a compassionate human being.

Intrigued with what I saw as the novelty and freshness of this way of being church, I researched some of Mariann Budde’s other homilies, and I was rewarded with this to inspire us in our own special mission:

Here (as church) we can bring our whole selves before God, with no need to pretend, to act smarter or better than we are. At the same time, here we receive grace to be our true self, cherished for who we are and empowered to live such that the love of God, revealed fully in Jesus, is expressed through us, imperfect vessels though we are. Peter has been working all night to the point of exhaustion, with nothing to show for his efforts, and he’s given up hope. When has that happened for us, when we’ve worked and worked and worked, and failed to accomplish what needed to be done?

Now sometimes I believe that what Jesus says to us in such times is that it’s okay to stop, to acknowledge that what we’re doing isn’t bearing the fruit we had hoped. But other times, he says, in essence, “No, don’t stop now. Keep going. Don’t give up. Let me help you.” And so we do. With a strength not our own, we try one more time. And then another time. And another. We don’t always see immediate results—the equivalent of a catch of fish landing in our boats—but somehow we know that it isn’t time to quit. (February 9, 2025)

I’ll add to this a very hopeful, specifically Catholic, call for what Bishop Budde has already put into practice. In January 2025’s *Commonweal*, Zechariah Mickel interviewed Monsignor Tomas Halik, Czech priest and professor at Charles University in an article “Toward a More Catholic Church”. Commenting on the future of the Church, Halik said:

We need a change in theological anthropology. We need to replace the medieval static understanding of “unchanging human nature” with a dynamic understanding of human existence as being in relationship. This will have implications for political and sexual ethics. The doctrine of the Trinity needs to be taken seriously—God is relational and created humans to live in relationships, to undertake the task of maturing and transforming ourselves by living with and for others.

Mariann Budde’s January plea to the President was both an example of how to be relational as a religious leader and a direct plea to all of us for deeper relationship with others.

Msgr. Halik ended the interview with this observation: *Many forms of the Church today resemble the empty tomb. Our task is not to weep at the tomb and look for Jesus in the world of the past. Our task is to find the “Galilee of today” and there encounter the living Jesus in surprising new forms. We need to rediscover the depth and richness of Christianity, the polyphony of Scripture and tradition, and faith as a source of beauty, freedom, and joy. I’m so grateful for these two new - and splendid - voices.*

Ellie Harty is co-editor of Equalwrites.

Planning For The Next Twenty Years

By Regina Bannan

I am part of the 83%. I went on strike in 1969. Yet I identify as a Catholic. I am deeply committed to the church of Philadelphia and to the universal church. That's why I went to one of the sessions sponsored by the archdiocese as part of a planning process for the next 20 years.

What's terrific about these sessions is that I meet ordinary Catholics who show up because there's something there for them. I learn what it is they love about the church. I try to figure out what I can share without sparking a theological debate.

That's what happened at the session on the Synod a couple of years ago. Dear Pope Francis, everybody wants to say something about women in the church. Your evangelical purpose got derailed by opening honest discussion, even about ordination.

This time I was not going to do that. Nobody asked what parish I belonged to, though I discovered this information eventually about everyone else at my table. This time, the sessions had an agenda beyond sharing what the assembled faithful were thinking. The evangelical purpose was explicit: how can the archdiocese reach out to the 83% of Catholics not attending mass? That's the 83% I am consigned to, though every Sunday I am nourished by the Community of the Christian Spirit's celebration on Zoom. If that's on strike according to the church, that's where I've been.

The central question raised in Archbishop Nelson Perez's letter is "Where does the Church need to be and how?" The answer seems to be that deploying people and resources differently will bring more people in. That implicitly acknowledges the question he disavows, the one he is trying desperately not to ask.

Most of those attending my regional session had "parish" on their minds, and that certainly is the starting point for the speakers and slides. Similar sessions will occur through May, and I encourage you to attend, if only for the interactions, if not for the information. You can see and hear something similar on the YouTubes at www.trustandhope.org.

What is the goal, going forward? *Becoming a welcoming church. Looking outward. Joyfully supporting each other's ministries. Being a community of caring people who love Jesus and love each other. Serving poor areas.*

What is the plan? Creating 50 locations staffed by five change agents. Everybody really buying into the inspiring message. "Missionary hubs" coming to life gradually as the right people come forward or are found. Some at parishes, some at service locations, some new spots. Leadership and resources for reaching out to evangelize and create community in a wide area.

This is an organizational solution to a motivational problem. It's a way to contain the withering away of dysfunctional parishes. Some in transition will have "Parish Life Directors," a terrific opportunity for women (among others) to coordinate pastoral needs. The priest shortage is one assumption underlying this plan; the absence of vocations and the

aging of the priesthood are explicitly acknowledged. That part is in touch with reality, though that's not our reality in WOC.

My assignment for this article is to look at the impact of the Synod now that it's over. It may not seem that I am writing about that. But remember the initial document of the Synod, the one about the big tent? The results of the first consultations around the world recognized the pain of the excluded and the bored. There was trust and hope that something can be done about that. I would argue that the lesson was learned. Look at the goals of this Philadelphia effort highlighted above.

Does it have to be done mostly by new people in new places with new resources? What happens to the 17% who do show up to participate in today's parishes? Can enough charismatic leadership be found to bring them along without their feeling that they have been abandoned? The presenters at the session were sincere and convinced, but they avoided the hard questions.

Hard questions are what we are in for, post-Synod. I am intrigued these days with theologian Tomas Halík, who is writing about how change can bring about the evangelization Pope Francis wants. Paul Lakeland has a review of Halík's latest book in the March issue of *Commonweal*. <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/lakeland-church-change-catholic-halik-afternoon-christianity>

Lakeland writes: "The step that Halík takes beyond Francis is to envisage how Church structures must change to make this kind of evangelization possible. In Halík's imagination, the future of a vibrant Church does not lie with a revived parish or diocese but in learning to respond to 'the hunger for spirituality' that has largely replaced any interest in traditional religious practice. Then, such a 'newly conceived Christian spirituality can make a significant contribution to the spiritual culture of humanity today, even far outside the bounds of the churches.'"

That is a prophetic vision for the future. Is it closer to reality than what can be accomplished by the plan for the archdiocese? Lakeland sees smaller faith ministries that truly accompany their members like at colleges being more what Halík envisions. I suggest that the post-pandemic proliferation of woman-churches and other small faith communities are also examples of what it takes to welcome the marginalized and grow the "spiritual culture of humanity today."

Lakeland does note how enriching the insights of FutureChurch's Catholic Women Preach <https://www.catholicwomenpreach.org> can be. That was the second time I heard about these recorded and published homilies by women for Sundays and major feasts this week. This resource was also recommended in a talk by a Jesuit expert on liturgy, John Baldovin. (I am always sympathetic to him because he was in grade school with my sister Helen.) But the "boomer liturgies" which he characterized as "over" are only "over" in the context of the hierarchy and the official rules. Explaining how and why exclusion is what we Catholics do, as he does so well, is no longer enough in the context of the Synod, and maybe not in the future of the welcoming Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Regina Bannan is the President of SEPAWOC

Remembering Anna McGarry

By Marian Ronan

A while ago, I began reading a book I'd had for a long time, a history of St. Malachy's parish in North Philadelphia. As my mentor in the Grail movement, Eleanor Walker, used to say, "I don't read my books; I feel warmly toward them." But I had been a parishioner at St. Malachy's in the 1990s when I was doing my Ph.D. at Temple, and I was curious.

I learned a lot from the book: How St. Malachy's was entirely Irish in its early years until African Americans started moving up from the South and many of the Irish and other white ethnics moved out. But when I got two-thirds of the way through the book, I read something that totally blew me away: A chapter that began, "The story of the community of St. Malachy's cannot be written without the story of Anna McGarry."

Anna McGarry! Just so you know, "Mrs. McGarry" was, I thought, the kind, elderly mother of Mary Kane, who lived with her husband Dan a few houses up from the Grail's national headquarters and farm, Grailville, when I lived there in the 1970s. Mary and Dan were one of number of couples—including Bill and Mary Schickel, Catherine and Jim Shea, and Miriam and Vince Hill, who moved near to Grailville after World War II and raised families there. This was before married women could even become Grail members. (Though Mary would become, by the 1970s, one of the national leaders of the U.S. Grail). And now, here's her sweet old mother described as one of the heroes of interracial justice in Philadelphia long before the civil rights movement!

But that's only the beginning of my discovery. After reading the history of St. Malachy, I began taking a look at the other articles in *Recovering Their Stories*, a collection about American Catholic laywomen in which my own article about Grailville appears. So I took it down and guess what? There's an entire article, much more detailed than the chapter in the St. Malachy history, about Anna McGarry, "'We are Not Here to Convict but to Convince': A Catholic Laywoman's Witness to Anti-Racism in Twentieth Century Philadelphia," by the distinguished racial justice ethicist, Maureen O'Connell.

Here's the story. Anna McGarry was the third of seven children and the first daughter, born in 1894. When she was ten, her father died, and her widowed mother struggled mightily to support the family. This forced Anna to drop out of school to take care of her siblings and then work. Anna was finally able to attend secretarial school and get a decent job when she was eighteen. According to O'Connell, these experiences of childhood poverty and family instability drove her approach to African Americans moving into the previously white-ethnic North Philadelphia where she had grown up.

McGarry herself was widowed after her husband, Frank, died from the effects of mustard gas after fighting in World War I when their daughter, Mary, was a toddler. Anna received considerable support from the American Legion, where she learned "organizational and work skills" that "changed the trajectory of her life." She also experienced racism in the American Legion and was baffled by it, and subsequently witnessed it more widely, even in her own church.

McGarry began participating in a group of white and black women meeting monthly to share their hopes and prayers and looking out for each other day to day. This group, the "Calvert Club," expanded its actions into collective efforts, enlivening the neighborhood. The group eventually grew into a home and family service guild in the parish.

McGarry went on to help pass fair housing legislation, to propose an archdiocesan home health aide employment service, and to demand employment equity for Black transit workers. She eventually became a director of the Philadelphia Fair Employment Practices Commission. She also worked directly against Catholic racism in Philadelphia, developing in 1937 a small West Philadelphia Interracial Council. This became Philadelphia's Catholic Interracial Council (CIC), with CIC branches at six local Catholic colleges. In the midst of all this, she had to navigate the archdiocesan authorities in Philadelphia who either ignored or outright repressed some of her actions.

McGarry went on to leadership in the National Catholic Interracial Council along with John LaFarge SJ. At the same time, she continued working in her then North Philly parish, the Gesu, while writing a regular column for a leading Black newspaper, *The Tribune*, and occasional pieces in mainstream Philadelphia newspapers. She also participated regularly in strikes and other actions. After her retirement and then her death, she received multiple awards, including from the Association of African American Newspapers, the National Council of Christians and Jews, and the National Catholic Council for Interracial Justice.

Through it all, Maureen O'Connell argues, McGarry understood that ideas and beliefs shape policies and actions, but that in all cases, the solution was to explain to people rather than criticize them. O'Connell finds McGarry's stress on dialogue rather than action insufficient but adulates McGarry, nonetheless, for her groundbreaking work.

Despite all this, or along with it, Anna McGarry really was that loving old lady who lived up the road from Grailville in the final years of her life (she died in 1978). In response to my questions, a Grail member, Joyce Minkler, wrote of the warm relationship between "Mrs. McGarry" and Joyce's young daughter, Jeanne Dietrick, when they lived down the road from Grailville.

In a piece of this length, I cannot do justice to the all the events in Anna McGarry's life and her contributions to racial justice, as O'Connell does in her article. For further detail, you may want to get a copy of the book yourself and read O'Connell's piece*. You can also watch "Urban Trinity: The Story of Catholic Philadelphia,"** a free on-line documentary in which Anna McGarry appears.

Whatever you choose, please be aware: there are amazing Catholic women who were nearly erased from history. But some of them are finally getting remembered.

**Recovering Their Stories: US Catholics Women in the Twentieth Century*. Sandra Yocum and Nicholas Rademacher, editors. Fordham University Press, 2024.

**<https://www.historymakingproductions.com/urban-trinity>.

Marian Ronan is a retired seminary professor and author who lives and writes in Brooklyn, NY.

Book Reviews

The Cost of Sainthood: Questioning the moral, financial, and spiritual cost of the historical saint's designation with the Catholic Church. By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco. Emergence Education, October, 2024. 325 pages

Reviewed by Maureen Tate

So many raised as Roman Catholics experienced a faith formation in which the saints carried considerable weight as central characters alongside Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Our churches, schools, our very birth names and Confirmation names, were devoted to patron saints. We were regularly exposed to stories of the saints' struggles and infirmities. The implication of course, and point taken by our young minds, was that we too should be ready to suffer for Jesus. *The Cost of Sainthood* digs deep into our saint mythology to reveal a fuller picture, at times so appalling and preposterous, that it presents a fundamental challenge to our preconceptions about the saints and the very practice of canonization. Those who enjoy a personal devotion to the saints will likely find this book dispiriting. However, others will find that DiFranco's challenge to the culture of sainthood confirms and validates our own experience. Like the author, I was also a pious, reflective, and imaginative child who was appalled by the violence and trauma embedded in the lives of the saints. I remember being traumatized by the stories of virgin martyrs whose gender and physical beauty put them at risk. As a child, I knew the price they paid for their crown of glory was too high and experienced guilt that I would never be so strong in my faith. I never questioned there might be more to the story. Eventually, the saints took a back seat as a more mature spirituality grew within me. Yet, the cannon of saints remains part of the air we breathe, from names of buildings, streets, cities, universities and churches, to our parish rituals and ethnic celebrations.

The Cost of Sainthood dares to ask who is worthy to be called a saint, who deserves canonization, and who were the people behind the myths. The author dives into the historical record to unpack the culture of sainthood and the purpose it served, from the earliest days of the Church, as a small faith community grew into a Holy Roman Empire. The saints were key figures in historical events that involved more than spiritual inspiration. Like the work being done currently to unpack systems of racial oppression, the author documents the Church's prominent role in the history of ideas and political movements, where many saints familiar to us were complicit in furthering institutions of oppression, violence and misogyny that are with us to this day. In earlier periods of church history, when so many were uneducated, religious leaders were often canonized, not because of their imitation of Jesus' way of love, but because their ideas or activity advanced the Church's agenda to maintain political power and wealth.

DiFranco does not hold back in her condemnation of the Church's advancement of its goals as empire. Through original sources, quotes, and other historical material, she builds a case that even our most cherished saints were involved in horrific instances of violence, torture, war and oppression. They provided the theological underpinnings for crusades and inquisitions against other faiths as well as other Christians they deemed heretics. Their views on women compelled the seclusion of women religious, incited the pursuit of witches, and provided a theological framework for the Church's persistent views on the submission and inferiority of women. I cannot do justice to all the saints reconsidered in the author's

investigation. While I found the back and forth through various periods of history a bit dizzying, the author demonstrates that the saints can only be properly understood in their historical and socio-political context. She gives ample examples that the cause of sainthood was often advanced to provide religious validation to secure the Church's political and economic position. DiFranco openly challenges the saintliness of those who perpetrated, through word or action, great atrocities and violence in the name of God.

A topic I found particularly persuasive is DiFranco's critique of saints who exemplified the Church's misplaced fascination with physical suffering and self-sacrifice. She identifies roots in the Church's atonement theology, a belief that Jesus had to suffer and die for our sins to appease God the Father in order to atone for the original sin of Adam and Eve. In imitation of Jesus, many welcomed personal suffering in the most extreme ways, even to the point of bringing deprivation and hardship upon themselves. Great suffering was equated with great holiness. However, the author sees it differently. She suggests that many saints exhibited evidence of childhood trauma, mental illness, and other physical ailments that were the primary cause of suffering, indicative that they were more victims than saints. In the author's view, this focus on personal suffering and sacrifice, as a way to imitate Jesus, rather than the way of the Gospel, was, and continues to be, misplaced.

DiFranco offers a strong critique of the Church's preoccupation with the "virtue" of some women martyrs, holding it accountable for distorted views of sexuality that set conditions for women's self-negation and feelings of complicity in their own oppression. "Rape culture and the paradoxical insistence upon female virginity have long been hallmarks of the patriarchy." She challenges that some of the virgin martyrs, who endured horrific forms of torture and death, such as St. Agatha, St. Maria Goretti and St. Lucy, should not be considered saints at all. While they were strong and virtuous women, the Church has promoted the value of their virginity over the value of their life. The more appropriate view is that these women were truly "victims of a perverse theology and male violence".

The church's complicity in violence and very unchristian dealings cannot simply be dismissed as reasonable given the turbulence of more "uncivilized" times. There have always been times when the Church has faced political threats and large cultural shifts that challenge orthodoxy. DiFranco counters, and powerfully documents, that Christian theology, itself, actually justified violence. Those with alternative theological perspectives or insights were routinely excommunicated, persecuted and condemned to death. "This unchristian, uncivil, and ungodly behavior morally traumatized the seedling faith, grafting intolerance into its very roots and blinding it to the divine presence in those they labeled heretics. As ecclesiastical power grew, its wielders declared themselves immune from the ethical obligations that bound others." Even today, we see the same pattern to condemn, persecute, and banish

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individuals and groups who challenge an orthodoxy that protects institution, clericalism and patriarchy. We see this notably in the exclusion of LGBTQ individuals and the excommunication of women who pursue ordained ministry.

The author challenges the very notion of canonization, finding the process suspect for rewarding unsavory characters while ignoring others, who at all periods of history, resisted perversions of the faith and advocated for peace, for the poor, and for justice. In each chapter, she introduces alternative candidates, largely lost to history, whose lives more closely imitated gospel values of love, generosity and mercy. Many were martyrs, condemned to death by saints long revered by the Church. Among the perpetrators identified are a long line of Popes and founders of religious congregations, who were proclaimed saints, no matter their worldly compromises and failure of leadership. Apparently, the cause of protecting the faith, even if it involved torture, war or execution, was deemed proper justification, if done in the name of God.

Each chapter concludes with a list of those currently canonized, who DiFranco deems invalid, and an alternative list of those who lived lives of great virtue but were never considered for sainthood. Only those with a constituency and inside track seem to rise for consideration, such as popes or founders of a religious orders, whether they were personally virtuous or not. The author’s research also reveals that the required proof of miracles is not what it seems and remains suspect.

Upon reading *The Cost of Sainthood*, I will never hear the Litany of the Saints in quite the same way again. I cannot unknow what I now know. While my devotion to particular saints was never a core part of my spiritual life, I hesitate to dismiss what we profess in the Creed as a belief in the Communion of Saints. I find solace in the idea that there may be a cohort of souls whose positive spiritual energy exists in another realm in the universe. These are not the canonized saints. My personal communion of saints includes friends, relatives, historical and public leaders. While they were not perfect, I continue to admire and draw spiritual inspiration from their integrity, courage, compassion. The notion of a Communion of Saints speaks more to me than any official list.

Do we need the saints? I believe we do need spiritual guides, those who imitate Jesus of the Gospels, who believe God is love, who love their neighbors, forgive their enemies, are generous, forgiving and demonstrate mercy. I keep coming back to the tried and true, “by their fruits you will know them”. Someday, the institutional church may grow in wisdom and reclaim some of DiFranco’s alternative saints while decommissioning those who, in hindsight, are wholly unworthy.

The *Cost of Sainthood* is timely. It covers a broad swath of history from a fascinating and unique perspective. The author acknowledges we are all flawed and complex people. Even those regarded as saintly for their piety and scholarship were complicit in barbarism masking as religious fervor. However, we must condemn the violence and perversions of crusades and inquisitions, the cumulative effects of racism, ethnic cleansing, slavery, and political corruption that happened with their blessing. We must question their sainthood so that we can reclaim the true saints of history and those among us today.

While some may find the author’s language blunt, cynical, and caustic at times, her creative images and expressions remind me of the sharp writing style of the famed feminist theologian, Mary Daly, who always seemed to capture the heart of the matter in a turn of phrase. Congratulations to Eileen DiFranco for doing the hard and uncomfortable work of uncovering history that is such an important part of our Catholic story.

Maureen Tate is a member of the *SEPAWOC Core Committee* and writes frequently for *EqualWRites*.

VOICES OF HATE continued from page 2

great deal of damage to the faith itself. Former Catholics now constitute the third largest denomination in the United States.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

People become part of a faith community for the strength to live as a community centered around God who commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Who is in charge and who allegedly represents the Divine are far less important than how we treat one another. Hate, condemnation, judgment, and excommunication are not the guiding lights of Christianity. Love is. And if our words are not spoken with love, they are nothing but sounding brass uttered by those who choose to see darkly through a glass they refuse to open to the light of Jesus.

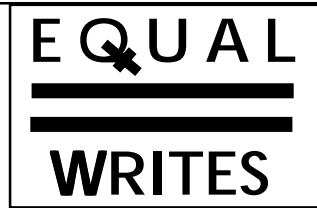
Eileen McCafferty DiFranco is the author of a new book (*See review in this issue.*) *The Cost of Sainthood and a member of the St. Mary Magdalene Community.*

Treasurer’s Report for 2024

SEPAWOC 2024 Financial Statement	
Beginning balance (1-1-24)	\$2,440.03
Revenues	
Donations	10,899.46
Total	13,339.49
Expenses	
Printing (<i>EqualWRites</i>)	7,200.00
Postal services	1,252.00
Dues	175.00
Ad (FutureChurch)	150.00
Charges website	254.50
Total	9,031.50
Ending balance (12-31-24)	4,307.99

Mary Whelan, SEPAWOC Treasurer

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Scripture Reflections Lent 2025

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

"Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."

As we stand at the threshold of 2025, we understand the centuries old phrase *annus mirabilis*, an especially notable, remarkable year.

For advocates of women's ordination, 2025 is the 50th anniversary of our National WOC beginning when we learned the power of one questioning woman who asked, "What do we do next about women's ordination?"; it is also the 45th anniversary of our first SEPAWOC Witness outside the Cathedral when we gathered with prayer, song, and one heartfelt banner: "Remember your sisters who are ready and willing to be ordained". Looking back, looking forward, we celebrate and reverence the now... and we keep on keeping on.

2025 is the 60th anniversary of the closing session of Vatican II. Brian Pedraza in *Church Life Journal* reminds us that the documents of the Council call us to be open to the presence of God working in our times; to remember that we are being led by the Spirit of God to understand together how we are called to be People of God within the events, the needs, and the longings of the time.

In 2025 we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. UNESCO tells us that over 1,000,000 children, women and men were tortured and died there. Dur-

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ing the Holocaust in Europe 6,000,000 Jews were murdered as were 5,000,000 others including prisoners of war, Roma, Resistance members, political opponents, disabled people, gay and lesbian people and people of color.

Illinois Governor, JB Pritzker, recently proclaimed that for God's sake we must be strong enough to learn from the atrocities of human history. After the German election in 1933, it took the Nazi Chancellor and Party 1 month, 3 weeks, 2 days, 8 hours and 40 minutes to dismantle a constitutional republic. Pritzker reminds us that tyranny requires fear and silence, but humanity requires truth, compassion, and courage... adding that we must never let despair overcome us.

Two weeks before our Holy Thursday Witness this year, we will remember the 67th anniversary of the death of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. He reminded us that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere and called us to do our part for good, however we can.

We also remember Coretta Scott King told us of the power in realizing that we are not breakable, crystal figurines, and we can do something to make real, positive change.

So may we stand together, pray together, sing together on Holy Thursday and Ordination Day 2025... and work together all year long to help justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Judith A. Heffernan is a member of the Community of the Christian Spirit, Saint Magdalene Community, and the SEPAWOC Core Committee.