

Because Sometimes True Fidelity Lies in the Courage to Dissent

JOIN US AS WE WITNESS FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN MINISTRY

Holy Thursday
April 2, 2015 11:00 AM
STANDING TOGETHER
FOR WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Ordination Day
May 16, 2015 9:30 AM
EUCCHARISTIC LITURGY
LED BY A WOMAN

18th & Race Streets
(Near the Cathedral of Saints Peter & Paul)
Philadelphia, PA
For Information, 215-545-9649

EQUAL

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

Vol. XXXII No. 1

MARCH 2015 - JUNE 2015

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.*

We Will Be There! Will You?

By Mary Whelan

It's that time of year again when we invite you to join us on Holy Thursday, April 2 at 11:00 a.m. when we gather in the Sister Cities Park, across the street from Saints Peter and Paul Basilica in Philadelphia. We bear witness to the need for the full inclusion and participation of women in the Catholic Church through ordination. This is the day of the Chrism Mass when the priests of the Archdiocese come to the Cathedral to receive the Holy Oils for sacramental use in the parishes throughout the church year. On Saturday, May 16 at 9:30 a.m. we meet in the same place to celebrate a Eucharistic Liturgy led by a woman on the occasion of the ordination of male candidates for the priesthood.

If you have come in previous years to either or both events, we hope you will come again. If you have never been to a witness, consider coming this year. You will be joining a joyful and hope-filled people as we maintain our steadfast presence, standing together for women in the church, speaking truth to power. That sounds lofty, but it's what we do and have done for 35 years. To the entrenched male power structure we speak our message, we sing our message and we pray our message, fully aware that we may not be heard. (In two separate articles in this issue of *EqualWRites* you will read about the "deaf ears" of the male hierarchy.)

They may not be listening but they know we are there. By our presence in front of the Cathedral we demand to be seen. Over the years I have watched the priests process through an open door in the back of the church. Some look at us curiously, some turn away. But we are seen; that is what matters. We stand across from the Cathedral—a profound experience for me, which, I believe, offers a powerful mes-

sage: We are here and will continue to be here. We join others in cities across the country who witness on the same day for the same reasons. Won't you help us increase our presence?

Pope Francis in February forcefully repeated his message to the cardinals that they must reach out to those marginalized by society. "The credibility of the church on the Christian message... rests entirely on how Christians serve those marginalized by society." (*The National Catholic Reporter*) Our presence outside the cathedral shouts out: "Here stand marginalized people within our own church."

In his February 7, 2015 blog post, *Pope Francis: Church urgently needs to offer space to women*, John Thavis noted that Pope Francis made intriguing remarks at the opening of The Pontifical Council for Culture on Women (Women's Cultures: Equality and Difference) held in Rome this February. "He said it was important for women to be full participants in church and social life, and not just feel like guests ... Society, at least in the West, had wisely moved away from seeing women as subordinate to men. At the same time... it was a mistake to try to impose a model of 'absolute equivalence' between men and women. He said the proper relationship is an equality that recognizes and appreciates differences between the sexes."

I mention this because I believe we must keep the real issue in the forefront. We are not content with being on the sidelines, relegated to seeking "new forms" of participation in the life of the Church as part of Rome's scramble to include women on panels and as consultants. The Pope himself uses the words "full participants" though his vision and ours are at odds. There is no mention of ordination because he has

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Announcing 2015's Mary Magdalene Award Winner: Jenny Ratigan



We went to congratulate and talk with Jenny Ratigan in her own home. If there was one word to describe the home, and Jenny and Jim, her husband, as they greeted, fed, and spoke with us, it would be “peaceful”. But even that one word is not enough. Their home and they were also beautiful, surrounded by art, sculpture, pottery, pictures, and it and they were warm with welcome and gentle hospitality. It was not surprising, therefore, to hear Jenny describe her approach to both her life today, “I believe in coming to the issues, problems, ironies, injustices of the world from a life of contemplative prayer. Then when the light appears, we are ready to respond.”

Sometimes that light was not as easy to see. Her childhood prayer life had been especially important to her, but Jenny also found herself often “lost in anger” at the “blindness of the institutional church.” A graduate of Marquette University, she eventually earned a PhD in Religious Studies and taught at both Villanova University and Rosemont College. She also became an early activist for the recognition of the gifts and leadership of women in the church. In 1975, she began attending formation meetings and conferences of the women’s ordination movement and continued that involvement for over 40 years.

Her major contribution, she believed, was what she brought to those she taught: “I was able to design Religious Studies curricula that emphasized courses in women and spirituality in which I was able to raise consciousness specifically about women and religion and connect students to the rich contributions of women spiritual leaders throughout history and in the present day.”

This major accomplishment went well beyond the two colleges. In fact, recently, in her work as Subject Specialist doing credit reviews for a major college accrediting agency, she helps ensure standards, for religious programs at Bible and other colleges and seminaries. “In areas of inclusive language and the promotion of women’s scholarship, I’ve seen progress!” she noted.

In presenting her with the Mary Magdalene Award, we salute those accomplishments and her lifetime support of the gifts of women, past, present, and future in the church. We also celebrate her contributions in so many other arenas: her work with the Philadelphia Catholic Worker House and St. Francis Inn, with the Women’s Sacred Music Project, with the International Thomas Merton Society, and her faithful participation in the worship, prayer, and social justice activities at Daylesford Abbey, her ecumenical work with Won Buddhist Institute, and so much more.

We also salute her views on women’s ordination: “Ordination is already here, no question about it. If we look beyond the institutional church, we see a rich prophetic, mystical proclaiming church. We are truly one on the way, not the same path but the same destination.” She continued, “One thing that speaks to the institutional church is ‘need’. Where will it be when there are no more male priests to serve? Fortunately, communities where women are leading are alive and everywhere and quite amazing. They are the ones already meeting the spiritual needs and serving communities that would not exist except for them.”

Forty years of advocating for women’s leadership in the church is a long time, but Jenny is not discouraged about the future. “I think it is a mistake to look at progress only in terms of the final outcome. We are now stronger in our ability to pray together, to take courage in the small steps taken and to stay on the road together bringing our unique gifts. We are stronger in our determination not to be locked into one image of God but to reclaim and proclaim God’s many images.” Coming on these issues from a strong prayer life, however, she sees as essential. “I am not putting down righteous anger, but anger that is stultifying, that makes us brittle rather than creative.”

She summarizes her philosophy beautifully: “Our lives do unfold in stages but always as an organic whole. If we awake to the spirit, we speak the language of discernment and learning, looking always toward our forward movement in the next stage of the journey. The last leg of our journey is not who we are just at that time, but our whole journey, our whole history, makes us who we are. Sacredness comes in holding hands in the circle of all that people have done, in all the journeys together.”

LEGACY AWARD

Honoring Br. Joseph (Bart) Schlachter

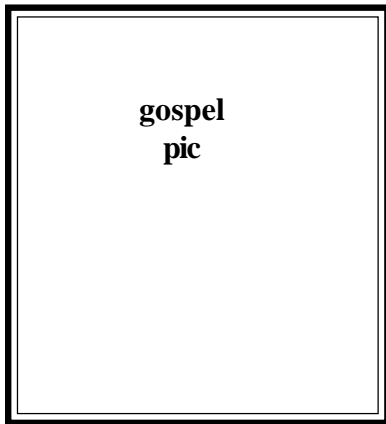
We are proud to honor this exceptional man for his many years of tireless support and advocacy of women’s leadership in the church and women’s ordination

Brother Bart was 83 when he died, active until the end of his life. He was passionate about renewal of the church and especially women’s role in the church. He was keenly aware of those who were “on the margins” and never hesitated to speak with them and for them when he had the opportunity, but, more importantly, to make certain they were included in the discussion.

He knew that women were not seated “at the table” and he was not comfortable with that exclusion, and so he joined the Southeastern Pennsylvania Women’s Ordination Conference as well as Call to Action and COR/Philadelphia. He attended lectures, workshops, the annual witnessing in front of the Cathedral — it seems, over the years, he was always “there” to listen, to support, the causes he believed in.

If you attend the Holy Thursday Witness in front of the cathedral on April 2, you will see an empty chair nestled in with the rest of us who are standing. That was Bart’s chair which he used when he found it difficult to stand through the whole witness but was determined to be there. It will make us miss him even more but will also mark our never forgetting all he has meant to us.

**“Gender, Gospel & Global Justice”
International Women’s Ordination Conference
September 18, 19 and 20, 2015
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**



The venue will be the Hotel & Conference Center of the Philadelphia Marriott Downtown. “We expect,” according to Erin Saiz Hanna, WOC Executive Director, “up to 1,000 participants to attend – a combination of WOW (Women’s Ordination Worldwide) delegates and members, other Catholic reform groups, theologians and students, and supporters and advocates of women’s ordination from around the world.”

Speakers include Professor Tina Beattie, the British theologian, writer, and broadcaster, Fr. Roy Bourgeois, and Sr. Theresa Kane. There will also be smaller workshops with guest speakers and facilitators and panels where a variety of speakers will be interviewed by a host and by the audience.

Over three days, you will have the opportunity to:

- Network with individuals and groups working for women’s ordination in all Christian churches,
- Fully participate in women-centered, feminist theology, liturgies, and leadership in prayerful interfaith action,
- Learn more about the impacts of the Catholic Church on women and girls around the world,
- Take a stand against misogyny and sexism in religion.

REGISTER NOW AT:
www.womensordinationworldwide.org

Register **before April 15** to get discounted conference fee. See you there!

Note: WOW is still seeking people to host and lodge some guests in their own homes. Please email sepawoc@sepawoc.com if you can help. Thank you!

We Will Be There! *continued from page 1*

previously declared “that door is closed.”

Through our presence on Holy Thursday we are saying, “We must have a place at the table”. Recently I heard a quote from Elizabeth Warren that goes something like this, “Be careful. If you don’t have a place at the table you might be on the menu.” And it feels as if we are on the menu! (Despite the “reassurances” from Cardinal Gerhard Mueller last year that “we don’t want to gobble a woman a day.”) I come to Holy Thursday and Ordination Day because I believe women need to be at the altar, at the table, and not across the street in a park.

Mary Whelan *is a co-editor of EqualwRites.*

SEPAWOC TREASURER’S REPORT CY 2014

Beginning balance: 1/1/14	\$1,933.48
Revenues (Donations):	\$6,790.08
Expenses:	\$6,416.63
Ending balance: 12/31/14	\$2,306.93

Prepared by Mary Whelan

ATTENTION *EQUALwRITES* FAITHFUL READERS

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Deaf Ears in the Bishop's Mansion *By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco, RCWP*

Over the last decade, the forces of history and the sinful actions of mortal men have repainted the Roman Catholic landscape. There was a time when the opinions of the church ruled all believers without question. That time is now past. We do, indeed, live in a new and different world where the paradigms of the past like absolute obedience and top down decision making without the input of people no longer make sense, especially since the foibles of the men who once made those decisions have been exposed and we see them for what they are, mortal men with clay feet who have fallen short of the glory of God.

The sexual abuse scandal and its cover up by the hierarchy have removed the scales from the eyes of the faithful. In addition, the bishops' and some priests' less than charitable attitudes towards women, gay people, and those who dare to disagree with episcopal directives have made many members of the People of God question and then often reject religious authority.

As churches close and people walk away from traditions that sustained their ancestors for centuries, some wring their hands in despair. Others bemoan the loss of those good old days. A few fulminate. Many of stout heart in the reform movements continue to work for change that they think might draw the church kicking and screaming into the modern world, hoping against hope that the church will change its mind if it hopes to survive in the modern world.

Then, there are increasing numbers who think that any continued effort to change the minds of an entrenched monarchy which has everything to lose if it adapts to modernity or listens to the voices of their people, is a huge waste of time, effort and money. There are many reasons for arriving at this conclusion. Here are several:

The October, 2015 World Meeting of Families, billed by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia as the "largest gathering of families in the world," states that it will, "emphasize the impact of the love and life of families on our society." The synod of bishops to be held in Rome in October, 2015 hopes, in the words of Archbishop Paglia, President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, "to deepen the understanding of the theology of the family." The pope and the assembled bishops, according to Paglia, "will be there for them (the family) with a shepherd's care that is wise, brave, and full of love."

Sounds like one great big love-in, doesn't it? But you need to read the fine print for both events. The reality is that there are strict rules for attendance and many have been excluded not only from voting, but also from participating.

In order for members of religious communities and priests to attend the meeting in Philadelphia, they must submit a letter from either their bishop or their superior stating that they are members in good standing. I tried to register as a priest member of a religious congregation, which is what I am. I intended to have my bishop, Andrea Johnson of Roman Catholic Womenpriests, write a letter of recommendation for me. As I presented my credentials on the registration form, the screen whited out. A bit later, I tried to apply as a private

person. The same thing happened. When the Women's Ordination Conference tried to register as vendor at the meeting, their application was refused. One must wonder how many other members of families and organizations who wanted to share the impact of family love on society were eliminated simply because of who they were.

In addition, the pricey admission fees- between \$125 and \$325 for adults and \$95-\$200 per child- in addition to food and lodging will preclude the most vulnerable families with the most needs from attending. Thus, the light shining from those families on the edge will be largely absent from the discussion.

In order for lay people to attend the synod in Rome as auditors without voting rights next October, they must submit a 250 word biography to be followed by a Curriculum Vita, just to be considered.

Such exclusionary practices insure that the outcomes from both meetings will remain within the narrow confines of the Vatican party line. This should be apparent to all from the outset. Without the voices of real people with real stories who live without the safety net extended to all clerics, all of the decisions that derive from the meetings will be completely off the mark. Nothing will change.

While there are some who have been gladdened by the world meeting and the synod, there are others, like me, who think, "Why even bother." The ghost of the 2002 Philadelphia Synod reminded me of the hierarchy's perennially adamant hearts and minds. At the beginning of a 2002 pre-synod meeting I attended, a monsignor with a patronizing voice warned us after prayer that we were not to bring up any topics for discussion that disagreed with church policy. And so, our long suppressed dreams and hopeful hearts were dashed before

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**St. Mary Magdalene Community
Mass schedule
Every Sunday at 9AM
Drexel Hill United Methodist Church
McBurney Chapel
600 Burmont Rd
Drexel Hill, PA 19026**

We have two satellites:

**Second Saturday of the month at St. Luke's
UCC Church, 125 North Main St.,
North Wales, PA 19454 at 5PM.**

**Second Sunday, 10:30 AM at Holy Inno-
cents St. Paul Episcopal Church,
7001 Torresdale Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19135
For information contact
emdifranco@aol.com**

What the Church Can Learn from Catholic Families By Maureen Tate

Anyone from the Philadelphia area is well aware of the Vatican's World Meeting of Families that will take place here September 21-27, 2015. We hope our readers are also following plans for the Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) conference that is also happening in Philadelphia the weekend immediately preceding, September 18-20. The fact that these two events are happening back to back begs the question of how these two forums relate to one another.

Those of us who have worked on issues of women in the church, for what seems like many lifetimes, can be excused for growing weary of such questions. One might well respond... isn't it obvious?! The church excludes women from ordained ministry, a prerequisite for meaningful participation in church leadership and decision making. Women cannot be ordained because they don't "resemble Jesus" in his maleness, a line of reasoning insulting to men, as well as women, in its faulty reductionism focusing on anatomical attributes. Women, as wives and mothers, drawing on what Pope Francis refers to as their "feminine genius", have a great deal of experience with sex and families. The metaphor of family is often used to describe the church. Therefore, doesn't it seem likely that if women were ordained, and in the room for discussions and decisions on church teaching on the family, they just **might** have some wisdom to contribute on the subject of sexuality, marriage, family planning and family life? But since the obvious appears unpersuasive, perhaps further reflection is in order.

After so many decades of fine theological scholarship by women, debunking the Vatican's rationale against women's ordination and documenting women's experience in church and society, we seem to have the proverbial "falling on deaf ears" situation. What will it take to open ears and minds and hearts to the fundamental truth of women's equality before God and man [sic]? How would Jesus have handled such obstinacy? Surely he must have wondered at the obtuseness of those who could not see the wisdom and truth in loving their neighbor as themselves. In fact, it seems to elude us even now. Is it simply that we cannot know what we are not ready to know? Is it a matter of consciousness evolution or willful disregard?

I have been giving a lot of thought to matters of church and family. As it happens, all of the consequences and complications with the Institution's teaching on family and sexuality have landed on my doorstep and I can no longer ignore the real damage done to families by those issuing ignorant condemnations and reiterations of Vatican truth. My family, like many others, has witnessed the pain of divorce and the

struggles of those who search to love and trust again. We include those who strongly support women's ordination and those who reject that position because the Church says this is the way it is, discussion closed. We include those who sought the blessing of their same sex relationship in marriage and those who hold that such blessing is reserved only for heterosexual couples. We rejoice in the gift of grandchildren, those coming in abundance by those practicing natural family planning, and others who may yet join us, conceived in ways the church considers anathema. This is Catholic family life. Deal with it... and we are.

In the midst of preparing this reflection, I received a gift in the form of a dream. I often have vivid dreams and remember them. In recalling this one, I was amused to realize how engaged my subconscious was in this topic. In the dream, I was seated with my husband in our church waiting for mass to begin. My three very young grandchildren were with us, as were some other friend's children, all playing around the edges of the church. Instead of liturgy as usual, what began, with some musical fanfare, was a dramatic presentation, or play, on the subject of "the Catholic family". This consisted of all male clergy, clad in vestments, sitting around a kitchen table doing an entertaining role play of a family meal. The children rushed up to see what was happening, amused and spellbound by the play's exaggerated dramatic and comical effects. Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

In deconstructing this dream, it cannot escape notice that the family meal represented the Eucharist. However, their traditional version of the family gathered around the table was a perversion of that natural order. It was a family table with only men! The children, doing what children do, were watching, learning, wondering and taking it all in. The intent of the play was to teach about family life. I remember my discomfort as I watched the children soaking it all in, what was said, and what was communicated in sign and symbol on the altar by those in authority. This is just as we have taken it in for centuries. But my Catholic family is not role playing. This is real life. And there is nothing "natural" about a family table without women.

The connection between women's ordination and family life is as basic as it is profound. The exclusion of women from ordained ministry remains a very clear message about what women are not and cannot be. It is deficit thinking in which the male reality is normative. This has had huge implications, throughout history, for gender designated roles in society and in the family. Family life has long reflected gender roles as proscribed by church teaching and codified in church life: men as presiders and deciders; women as help mates who

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For information, call Roberta Brunner or Margaret McLaughlin, (215) 572-5623, or write P.O. Box 353, Abington, PA 19001

Deaf Ears in the Bishop's Mansion

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we even began. The meeting, and the ensuing synod, was a complete flop. The needs of Philadelphia's families, many poor and living close to the edge, were disregarded. I predict that the same thing will happen this year, only it will be couched in the kinder, gentler words of Pope Francis.

There is, however, good news in all of this. The People of God have grown up since Vatican II and no longer require the Vatican or the bishops to approve of the decisions they have made within the context of their own lives.

Between 1994 when Pope John Paul II began the world meetings of families and the present, the world and the world's families, have undergone a vast transformation. Wars, revolutions, economic hardships, disease, and global national and civil rights movements have moved many nations in the world away from a feudal organization of society into a place where all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, and economic status are guaranteed, if imperfectly, the right to life and liberty. Citizens who live in 21st century western democracies no longer feel obliged to heed voices that hark back to a world that existed a thousand years ago. That world is dead and will not be resurrected.

Unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Church chooses not to comprehend the needs of the modern family nor its tenuous place in a problematic world. This is nothing new. Sadly, the Church has rarely chosen to understand the needs of families even as mothers and babies lay dying from too frequent childbirth, starvation or HIV-AIDS, and thus has squandered away its credibility to be a voice for the voiceless in a troubled world. Consequently, many Catholic families look at the church's intransigence and its profound lack of understanding and now make their own decisions absent the counsel of a clueless church.

Thus, the vast majority of women in the United States, including 98% of Catholic women, have used contraception. Gay marriage will very likely become the law of our land. Few Catholics view divorce and remarriage as an impediment to receiving the Eucharist. Roman Catholics continue to be a willing and most able change agent in this transformation of the family. The People of God shall continue to act without the counsel of the church, regardless of what is discussed or decided at the world meeting or synod, because by ignoring the needs of its people, the church's opinion about their private lives has become largely irrelevant.

The church's ongoing and deliberate misunderstanding of its own people and its lack of faith in the providence of God who moves in mysterious, creative, and life-giving rather than time worn ways has had and will continue to have harmful consequences as the third largest denomination in America is former Catholics.

Either the Vatican and the bishops act as shepherds who are, indeed, wise, brave, and full of love as they claim they are and engage in what could be a game changing practice of active listening or they can just continue to

pretend that God remains in their definition of heaven and all is right with the Aristotelian world they've adopted. Following the latter will practically insure that even more Catholics will walk away from the church they love.

There are those members of the faithful who are willing to "wait" for the church to change. However, the adoption of a "gradualist" approach to issues that have proved destructive to families is wrong-headed and flies in the face of the expressed purpose of both meetings. With people's lives hanging in the balance, waiting for a day that might never come is fruitless and ultimately, harmful to the most vulnerable people, the poor and the powerless.

Some people might be watching and waiting for the synod's decisions because Francis seems like a sip of sweet new wine that hints of spring. But that wine has a sour aftertaste because it is stored in old wineskins. The shepherd's crook will remain a symbol of power rather than of pastoral care built upon "shining love."

The time has come for the People of God to rely upon the workings of the Holy Spirit in their own lives, which is clearly in the process of birthing something new and different.

A page in history has turned. The People of God need to walk into this new chapter.

Eileen McCafferty DiFranco, RCWP (*Roman Catholic Womenpriest*) is an ordained priest and co-pastor of a community in Philadelphia. She is also the Chair of *Denominational Concerns of The Federation of Christian Ministries*. She is currently working on a book entitled, "How To Keep Your Parish Open When Your Diocese Declares It Dead."

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What the Church Can Learn from Catholic Families

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serve, listen, obey and give birth to the next generation of same. The Institution's teaching on marriage, family planning, and ministry has been persuasive and internalized. Like the children in my dream, every Catholic family was shaped by these teachings and the consequences of too large families, marital discord and unhealthy attitudes about sex continued to play out in next generations. As women were empowered to reflect on their experience and began to articulate the dysfunction and disconnection they and their families were experiencing, things changed in society and families made adjustments. The Vatican, insulated from healthy relationships with women, did not. The idea, "Father knows best", no longer holds sway with most of the faithful but our celibate male hierarchical structure is heavily invested in the only truth they have known.

Vatican documents often refer to the church as a family. Well, the truth is that Catholic families come in all shapes, sizes and variations on a theme. This is not our problem. We love, we celebrate, we disappoint and we make room for one other. The problem for families like mine is that the Institution's declarations often take center stage and things get very personal. It is a problem when family members no longer speak to one another because what "the Church says" becomes a wedge. As the Vatican becomes ever more strident and defensive in asserting its teachings on sexuality and family life, it enacts even stricter sanctions against those who dare to think or speak differently. The result is further divisiveness and the need to "take sides".

Those of us... which is really all of us...with family experience know that it is a messy affair. Family life is both ordinary and extraordinary, calling forth the best and worst in us. In the midst of all, we nurture, hurt, love, forgive, support, disappoint and love again. God's mercy and love are writ large. As a parent in a family experiencing alienation and hurt over how different family members view church teaching on women's ordination, homosexuality and contraception, I pray for guidance. Our family members love each other and yet hold divergent points of view with great conviction. I readily admit that I do not understand positions held or the experience lived by some. What should I do? I feel responsible. How can I bring the family together?

I have imagined that Pope Francis is caught in a similar bind. He must be worried about our church family. We are divided. He has opened some doors. He is not perfect, a self proclaimed sinner, who is capable of growth, just like the rest of us. He listens and is taking steps out of great love. He is carrying pain and responsibility. It is noteworthy that he is now lauded for instructing the Bishops at last year's Synod on the Family, "Let no one say: 'this can't be said; ...One must say everything that one feels, boldly'... At the same time... we must listen with humility and accept with an open heart all that our brothers say." Regrettably, it seems it is only women who may not speak boldly or be heard as we are admonished to listen with humility and accept what our male clerics say. Ironically, they sure seem to have a lot to say about women.

Our Church family can learn a lot from real Catholic families like mine. We can try, in each situation, to take the step that is most loving. We can keep the door open and "stay in the

room", in other words, in relationship. We can listen and observe more and discover new ways to come together. We can take whatever steps we can that will say "I love you". We live with uncertainty and own the loss and pain that is ours to carry. We recognize that we are all growing, each one of us God's light made visible. We cannot argue our way to understanding. We can take our cues to love and forgive one another from the Gospel and try to suspend judgment long enough to give peace a chance.

However, we need to recognize that the speech of Church authorities, regarding women and family life, has weight and consequence. As columnist William Cavanaugh recently noted in his *Commonweal Magazine* article regarding protection of free speech, "some kinds of speech can break bones". Women's bones, in the form of domestic violence, sex trafficking and sexual abuse are broken every day. We cannot ignore that one of the root causes of such violence and denigration is the inability, in diverse religious traditions, to see women as full human beings, made in God's image. It is not enough to excuse church hierarchy simply on the grounds of ignorance concerning women's experience. Ignorance is not the same thing as innocence. An educated clergy has multiple opportunities to be informed, to enter into wholesome relationships with women and to be curious about their experience. To take a position, that the "church has spoken and there can be no discussion" is not ignorance. It is culpability. It is not family values at work.

I choose to take Pope Francis at his word, that there is nothing that cannot be said. One thing we know. All families are a work in progress. Each member is a temple of the Holy Spirit, part of the mystery, creativity and light of God's presence and truth. The Catholic family is a grand experiment in what it means to live a vocation "to be light, salt, bread for 'the life of the world'," to borrow a beautiful phrase from Michael Plekon's discussion of parish life, in *Saints as They Really Are*. May the Spirit move boldly within our church family this year to help all appreciate that the Eucharist can only be a real family meal when women are also **at** the table.

Maureen Tate is a member of the *Grail* and the *SEPAWOC Core Committee*.

Conference sponsored by

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Jamie L. Manson, Roger Haight, S.J. and
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Book Reviews

Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love. By Elizabeth A. Johnson. London: Bloomsbury/Continuum, 2014. 323pp. Hardback: \$32.95; eBook: \$9.43.

Reviewed by Marian Ronan

For Elizabeth Johnson, Saving God's Threatened Creation is Central to the Faith

The post-war U.S. women's movement and the environmental movement were, in significant ways, parallel phenomena. In 1963, the year after Rachel Carson brought environmental concerns before the U.S. public with *Silent Spring*, Betty Friedan launched the second wave of American feminism with *The Feminine Mystique*. Five years later Mary Daly drew Catholics into women's liberation with *The Church and the Second Sex*. And in 1975, the ever-prescient Rosemary Radford Ruether merged the conversations in *New Women, New Earth*.

In the forty years since then, many Christian feminist theologians and activists have engaged environmental issues, as have some churches and church-related agencies. Yet as the distinguished eco-feminist theologian Catherine Keller observed recently, "Christianity on the whole continues to function as an anti-ecological public force..." Critics focus particularly on the belief that human dominion over the earth is central to the doctrine of creation. Feminist theologians have worked to reconstruct this understanding of creation and its corollary, the belief that men should dominate women because women are intrinsically connected to the earth.

Yet given the way our "Christian" nation and the rest of the "First World" continue their brutal practice of extractivism, it can be argued that these feminist and eco-feminist efforts have failed. One reason for this may be that many feminist theologians shifted to theo-ethical concerns (sexism, racism, colonialism, etc.) and paid less—and sometimes no—attention to classical systematic Christian theology. But if Christian practice regarding creation is going to change as radically as it must in this era of climate catastrophe, then the theology that underpins it must be transformed as well. Elizabeth Johnson's new book, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, makes a significant contribution to such a transformation.

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson, a professor of theology at Fordham University and a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood, NY, fashions an intellectually sophisticated yet lyric dialogue between the theory of evolution, especially Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and the Nicene Creed. Her purpose in so doing is to demonstrate that "love of the natural world is an intrinsic part of faith in God," and to create a theology that will generate passionate ethical action toward plants, animals and ecosystems—as passionate as that which drives faith in God.

The first three chapters of *Ask the Beast* comprise a close reading of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. If, like me, you have gone your whole adult life "believing" in evolution without having read Darwin, or even particularly understanding the theory of natural selection, these chapters alone make *Ask the Beasts* invaluable. As one reviewer remarks, "A more careful and sensitive reading of (*The Origin of Species*) would be hard to find anywhere, and not just among theologians." In the fourth chapter, Johnson explores how aspects of Darwin's theory have "evolved" since Darwin's own time, even as contemporary scientists affirm that the theory of evolution is "accurate beyond reasonable doubt." (102)

Throughout the rest of the book, Johnson constructs a dialogue between Darwin's theory of natural selection and the Nicene Creed, a dialogue that will enable Christians to shift their faith from an "abstract and distant deity" to a "living God intensely engaged with the world." Chapter 5 braids Darwinism with biblical images, the theology of Thomas Aquinas, and contemporary theology to represent the entire natural world, and not merely human history, as the dwelling place of God. The Holy Spirit, an afterthought in most anthropocentric theology, is the primary actor in this profound theological deepening. (This was also the case in Johnson's 1992 theological reconstruction, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*). By dint of its ongoing evolution, the natural world "continuously participates in the livingness of the One who is sheer, exuberant aliveness" (148).

The next three chapters fill out this vision, exploring the freedom of creation, the suffering and death of all things, and creation *ex nihilo*/eschatology, in dialogue with Darwinian thought. Finally, in chapter 9, Johnson's argument culminates in a new, deeply moving paradigm, that of the "community of creation" in place of the earlier top/down human-dominion paradigm of creation.

It's hard to convey adequately the scope and artistry of Johnson's writing. I was especially moved by the last six chapters, in which Johnson weaves together images and concepts from *The Origin of Species* and other scientific sources with theological texts from across the centuries, powerful biblical material, selections from English literature ("The world is charged with the grandeur of God...") and the thinking of

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A GREAT EASTER GIFT

other eco-theologians. The concluding chapter alone would make a splendid prayer book.

Elizabeth Johnson has shown considerable courage in writing *Ask the Beasts*. As you may remember, in 2011 the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a stinging critique of Johnson's previous book, *Quest for the Living God*, claiming that it completely "undermines the Gospel." A number of the theological issues that the bishops targeted in that book are also pivotal in *Ask the Beasts*. As Georgetown theologian John F. Haught explains, the bishops' critique of Johnson focused particularly on Johnson's position that God suffers along with creation.* Their position is predicated on the argument that God cannot suffer because suffering is always the result of sin. Such a theology serves to keep God separate from—uncontaminated by—a sinful humanity.

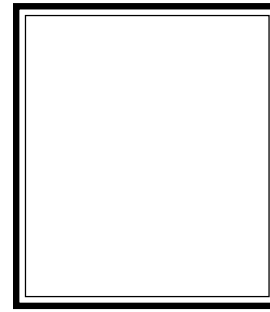
But such a dualist theology is utterly incompatible with the evolution of species. Johnson's expansive reading of natural selection in *Ask the Beasts* includes the essential function of the suffering and death of some non-human species in the eventual emergence of higher species (including us). But the suffering of non-human species is not, by definition, a result of sin, so all suffering cannot be the result of sin, and it is not theologically inconceivable that God should suffer. For Johnson, God's oneness with all of creation is so fundamental that God suffers along with creation, even as She is also greater than that suffering.

It may be that the bishops will attack Johnson's theology in *Ask the Beasts* as they did the theology in her previous work, though with Pope Francis's upcoming encyclical on the environment and his emphasis on mercy, perhaps not. All that notwithstanding, the news about the effects of human-induced climate change on God's creation grows increasingly dire. Christians (including the U.S. Catholic bishops) must acknowledge that the obligation to save that creation is at the heart of Christian teaching if such teaching is not soon to become irrelevant. There's no better way to begin this life-and-death conversion than by engaging deeply with *Ask the Beasts*.

Marian Ronan is Research Professor of Catholic Studies at New York Theological Seminary, NY, NY. She blogs at <http://marianronan.wordpress.com>.

*<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/unevolved>

VENUS OUTRAGED



The above picture introduced the report produced by the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture on Women released this February. Needless to say, it provoked widespread outrage. Cardinal Ravasi "acknowledged" the complaints and anger but chose not to remove it because he said it visually represents one of the central points of the document: "many women, alas, are still struggling for freedom (bound with rope), their voices and intellect often unheard (headless), their actions unappreciated (limbless)." *The SEPAWOC Core Committee actually wants to commend them - for their unabashed self-criticism!*

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Dear Editor:

I thought SEPAWOC's *EqualwRites* publication (October 2014) was excellent. I thoroughly enjoyed reading each of the articles and felt like they imparted timely information.

I do wish to provide some perspective on details that were mentioned in Dr. Marian Ronan's review of Patricia Miller's book, *Good Catholics*. Toward the end of the review, Dr. Ronan cited an experience she had as a board member of National WOC. On this occasion, a couple of WOC board members may have felt uncomfortable, or were perceived to be uncomfortable, being in close proximity with Catholics who would advocate for reproductive justice.

While the situation Dr. Ronan recalls may have occurred many years ago, our board had no such negative reaction during the office fire that devastated WOC seven years ago. In fact, quite the contrary occurred. After the fire that left our organization homeless, Catholics For Choice (CFC) housed National WOC for several months—free of all expenses—until we got back on our feet. At that time, both the WOC staff and board were overwhelmed by the kindness offered to us by our coalition partner.

Over the last decade, National WOC and CFC have worked closely and publicly together, often signing onto coalition-wide press statements and supporting one another's events. National WOC is proud to be a member of the Coalition for Liberty & Justice (CLJ), co-convened by CFC. Working with a kindred organization like CFC, as well as a diverse coalition like CLJ, highlights our common values, such as our belief that any community, especially a community of faith, should work together for equality.

Gratefully,

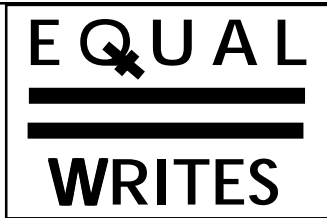
Erin Saiz Hanna
Executive Director, Women's Ordination Conference, USA

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AFFILIATION: *EqualwRites* is published by the Core Committee of the Southeastern Pennsylvania chapter of the Women's Ordination Conference. We are inspired by, but independent of, the national office of the Women's Ordination Conference.

Scripture Reflections Holy Thursday: Luke 4:16-21 By Judith Heffernan, M.Div.

On Ash Wednesday I attended a local parish. To my happy surprise I happened upon a multi-cultural, multi-lingual celebration. There we were- all different, yet together as one. It was just wonderful! Naturally this reminded me of the upcoming international gathering of WOW right here in Philadelphia September 18-20.

I cannot think of a WOW conference without thinking of the first one in Dublin in 2001. So I was very sad when I read that Christine Vladimiroff, OSB, PhD passed away in December 2014. In her life of service and leadership, Christine was a teacher at heart, a college professor, the Secretary of Education for the Diocese of Cleveland, the Executive Director of Second Harvest, President of Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Prioress of the Erie Benedictines.

In my reading I found that Prioress Christine had been directed by Rome to "forbid and prohibit" Joan Chittister, OSB from accepting the invitation to be a keynoter in Dublin. Christine dialogued with Rome for three months, sought wise advice from many, and spent hours in communal and personal prayer; she concluded that she could not, in good conscience, prohibit Joan from speaking. Then the night before Christine left for Rome to deliver her written response, 127 of 128 sisters of the community signed the letter as well, so that they would be in solidarity with Christine and Joan and would all be subject to any penalties!

MANUSCRIPTS AND CORRESPONDENCE: If you would like to contribute an article, letter, or anything else to *EqualwRites*, please send it double-spaced, with your name, phone number, and a short biographical note. The next issue will be June 2015. Final deadline for submissions is May 15. Send to eharty43@yahoo.com or mail to SEPAWOC P.O. Box 52046, Philadelphia, PA 19115.

ADVERTISING: Advertising helps us support *EqualwRites* and helps you find people who support us. Our ad rates are \$25 for one issue, \$60 for three issues. To place an ad contact mewhelan@comcast.net.

We give thanks for Christine's ministry of service and her witness to what she believed: that silencing is wrong because dialogue brings truth; that we must move from fear to freedom; that we must live fully for the sake of the reign of God—and always with joy!

There were no hierarchical repercussions, and Joan did speak in Dublin- and everywhere else. She has never wavered in proclaiming that a church that proclaims equality cannot continue to build itself on structures of inequality. She further encourages us to not be afraid to speak—but to be afraid of what will happen to the whole truth if we don't!

So, if you believe in Gender, Gospel and Global Justice, come to the conference, share, speak out. Join us in planning, volunteering, being together. We want you. We need you. ...The Spirit has anointed us to bring glad tidings...to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight and to let the oppressed go free....

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

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