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Women - the Church – Persistence and Hope in Rome This Year

By Kathy Schuck and Ellie Hartly



Kathy Schuck has tales to tell. Tales of a hot, sunny first week in October in Rome. Tales of the Synod on Synodality. She was there, processing, praying, singing, and witnessing for all of us who could not do the same.

We were honored to have her as our representative: of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Women’s Ordination Conference, the national Women’s Ordination Conference, Women’s Ordination Worldwide, Roman Catholic Women Priests, the Community of Saint Mary Magdelene, and her own long-term personal commitment to furthering the leadership and ministry of women in the Catholic Church.

Now she helps us experience with her some of the momentous events that were happening around her as Synod members gathered.

Day 1

“October 3rd has always been a special day to me - It’s my birthday! Turns out celebrating a birthday on the eve of the Synod opening in Rome can be both memorable and spectacular.

As a member of the Leadership Circle of Women’s Ordination Worldwide (WOW), I was thrilled to be part of the “Let Her Voice Carry” prayer vigil at the Basilica of Saint Praxedes in the Rione Monti section of Rome. This hidden gem, overshadowed by the papal basilica of Saint Mary Major, is a stunning example of Byzantine art and home to ancient and beautiful mosaics. My favorite mosaics are in the Chapel of Saint Zenon, on the right side of the church when facing the main altar. This chapel was commissioned by Pope Pascal I, who was bishop of Rome from 817 to 824, as a monumental tomb of his “mother, Theodora.

Theodora is one of four women pictured. The inscription identifies her as Theodora Episcopa. Of the four, Theodora’s head is the only one surrounded by a rectangle, a practice used to distinguish notable living people from saints. Puzzle me this - Episcopa means

the counseling, instructing, and ordering of the church’s internal life, or overseeing the distribution of charity. Typically, these jobs were performed by male presbyter-bishops. For Theodora to be episcopa implies that she engaged in the same duties as these men. This mosaic was created while she was still alive!”

Having never imagined herself leading prayer in a Catholic Basilica in Rome, Kathy goes on to describe the vigil itself: “*Let Her Voice Carry* featured the voices of women worldwide. The vigil was planned by the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC), the country-level WOW member organization in the United States. As each person entered, they were invited to choose a river stone, and while holding it, offer a silent prayer for women and the synod, or for women’s equality in the church, then release the stone into the water. Moving prayers and testimonies were written and proclaimed by women from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, Europe, and Oceania. A reception followed the vigil. It was delightful to meet people from all over the world I had only met via zoom previously! Everyone raised their hands for the final blessing (recognizing we are all called to bless) as the Spirit spoke through one woman celebrating her birthday as she proclaimed *A Prayer for the Synodal Path* by WOC”:

*Source, Sojourner, and Spirit,
to journey with You
is to walk with our gazes fixed upon a horizon of hope.
To journey with one another
is our challenge and our calling.*

*You call us to move with missionary urgency
to become a more vibrantly living sign of Your love in the world.
Break us out of worn paths,
free us from the thickets of we’ve always done it this way,
and for those who may be frightened by the new vista revealed,
grant boldness of heart.*

*May we become a church where all vocations are welcomed, celebrated, and nurtured, where Your priests reflect the diversity of Your people,
and where our structures are at the service of Your kin-dom of radically loving inclusion.*

*Cultivate in us a holy, healthy restlessness on this synodal path.
Make us unafraid of prophetic decisions
that take us along uncharted territory.*

*Give us radical unity that is Your gift and promise.
Grant us generosity of trust and expansiveness of hope as we say,
Amen. May it be so.*

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Women - the Church – Persistence and Hope in

Rome This Year *continued from page 1*

Day 2

Her report on this day should especially encourage us. “Lots of Media Attention Today!” (Many of us in the U.S. noticed the same as we watched various interviews with WOC Executive Director, Kate McElwee, airing on major television networks.)

Close to 7:30 am this morning, the area around Castel Sant’ Angelo appeared to be overcome with ‘pinkness’ as advocates for women’s ordination assembled, prayed together, and unfurled a huge piece of cloth symbolizing expanding the tent and welcoming all.” She listed just some of the outlets present that day: *The Guardian*, *NCR*, *youtube.com/watch?*, *Aljazeera*, *CBS News*. ...

Although it is historic that 54 women will vote at the synod, what I found positively energizing was all that was happening outside with various reform organizations. In addition to Sarah Rule, RCWP (from South Africa), multiple WOC board members were in Rome, as were Jamie Manson of Catholics for Choice, Bob Shine of New Ways Ministry, Virginia Saldahna of the Catholic Women’s Council.

The woman who transported the original purple tent ended up not arriving in Rome until the afternoon of the 4th, the day the synod opened. As a result, the few of us who were in Rome needed a Plan B as our witness was scheduled at 8 am the morning of October 4. We had to create something that could be unfurled two days later. Kate McElwee and Miriam Duigan found a fabric store and purchased an enormous piece of purple fabric (45’ x 10’) and white paint. We laid it out on the deck of our apartment in the blazing sun. I sketched the letters, and we began painting. Each letter was about six feet high and three feet wide. As we painted, it became clear we needed additional paint as well as additional labor. We put a call out and six younger folks joined us to paint that evening, allowing all eleven letters to be completed.

I couldn’t help but observe the theme of the Synod is ‘For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission’. Here we were, a handful of women from Africa, America, Asia, and Europe seeking equality and justice, in Rome, living communion, participation and mission, without the support of facilitators, Cardinals, Bishops, or male priests. Positively energizing! Many of you have seen photos of the large ‘Ordain Women’ tent/banner that was unfurled on 10/4 to mark the opening of the synod. Perhaps not as professional a production as an opera at the Met, or a mural in VT, accessible art nevertheless designed by yours truly!

Proof positive - we owe it to ourselves and our world to find new ways to reach out, fill the gaps, and connect heart to heart. Let’s exploit the cracks and let the light of love and peace fill our hearts and the world. Huge thanks to all of you for your prayers and support while I was in Rome.”

Day 3

“Tomorrow, Friday, October 6 will be Women’s Ordination Worldwide’s (WOW) signature event, the Walk With Women! We will meet on the steps of the church of San Giovanni dei Fiorentini, Via Acciaiuoli, 2 at 2:30 pm. At 3 pm, we will march toward Castel Sant’ Angelo. This church houses a relic of Mary Magdalene’s foot. We walk in her footsteps.” (And so did some of us from SEPAWOC. See Judy Heffernan’s Scripture Reflections on the back page.)

Day 4

Silently, reverently, wearing purple but carrying no signs nor banners, they processed through the streets of Rome walking in the spiritual footsteps of Mary Magdalene and for all women.

Results and Reactions

Was this praying and witnessing and processing – and the ensuing publicity - effective given the disappointing final report on this October’s Synod?

The Women’s Ordination Conference formal response to the final document noted some encouraging signs but more work to do: *While WOC celebrates the significant development of the Vatican’s decision-making process that allowed 54 women to vote for the first time alongside their male contemporaries, the document’s superficial treatment of the injustice of the inequality of more than half of the members of the church is cause for concern. On some level, the document seems to reflect a recognition of the wounds women have experienced at the hands of the church, but it falls short of engaging substantially with the healing of those wounds, opting instead to leave those issues to ever more studies and commissions.*

For the synodal process to retain any credibility, it will need to take seriously the full equality of women and LGBTQ+ people in every aspect of church life. A “listening church” that fails to be transformed by the fundamental exclusion of women and LGBTQ+ people fails to model the Gospel itself.

Our Future?

The Women’s Ordination Conference and our supporters will simply need to make ourselves even more visible ... to work for accountability to the grassroots, and be an uncompromising voice for equitable inclusion of women at every level of the church. We have now seen women vote in the halls of the Vatican — there is no turning back.”

Kathy Schuck is part of the SEPAWOC Core Committee and **Ellie Harty** is co-editor of EqualwRites.

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The Overlooked

By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco

Did you ever hear of Mary Elizabeth Lease or Smedley Butler? Neither did I.

Lease (1850-1933), nicknamed Mary “Yellin” by her opponents, spent a good portion of her adult life railing against capitalism. A suffragist, union representative, author, and journalist, Lease described the American government as rule of Wall Street, for Wall Street, by Wall Street. Admired by the people of Kansas who called her “the People’s Joan of Arc” and “Our Queen Mary,” the powers buried her work and her reputation under newspaper articles filled with scurrilous ad hominem attacks- which is why she remains largely unknown today.

Butler (1881-1940) was a Major General who fought in the Philippine American War, the Boxer Rebellion, World War I, and a whole series of what he called “banana wars.” Although he was the most decorated Marine of his time, he later repudiated warfare, declaring that he had been “a gangster for capitalism” who spent his career as “a high-class muscle man for big business.” A spokesperson for the American League vs. War and Fascism, Butler accused the American Legion of being in league with banking interests. Smedley Butler’s vocal support of peace and economic freedom was inconvenient to those in power. America quickly forgot about him.

Like Lease, Butler, and thousands of others who have toiled in God’s vineyard and spoken truth to power, the deeds of an ancient Christian couple named Prisca and Aquila remain an inconvenient truth for the institutional church. Prisca and Aquila founded the church in Rome - twice, in fact. Peter and Paul had nothing to do with it. There is no evidence that Peter ever lived in Rome, let alone founded the church there and became the first pope. Modern scholars now regard the stories about Peter as pious myths.

While the four gospels, written generations after Jesus died by anonymous authors, record the faith journeys of four different early Christian communities with four different traditions, the letters attributed to Paul - Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians - are primary sources. When Paul entrusted his letter to the Romans to his fellow deacon Phoebe, he wrote to an existing community in Rome whose members he listed: Epaenetus, Mary, Ampliatius, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Herodion, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobus, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and Olympas. He describes Junia and Andronicus, not Peter or John, as foremost among the apostles. In fact, Paul does not know three-fourths of the apostles listed in the gospels and disparagingly refers to those he does know- Peter, James, and John- as “the pillars”. He is such a braggart that, if he had founded the church in Rome, he would have told us so. Paul knew Peter. If Peter were in Rome, Paul would have told us that as well in his letter.

Paul also tells us the names of other founders of early church communities. In addition to Prisca and Aquila, they are Stephanus, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Chloe, Euodia, and Syntyche. Peter was not even the head of the church in Jerusalem. That honor fell to James the Just, the brother of Jesus. The stories of the twelve going out into the unfriendly pagan world, founding churches in the major cities in the ancient world, and dying as martyrs is ecclesiastical mythology.

The church founded in Rome by Prisca and Aquila was governed by a council of elders according to the *Shepherd of Hermas*, a second century anonymous work. It was not led by a single man known as a ‘pope’ who could trace his apostolic roots back to Peter and Jesus. Governance by church council lasted until the late second century when Victor I arbitrarily installed himself as ‘pope,’ a title also held by the bishops of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and later, Constantinople. The stories about Peter and the all-male establishment of the early church by ordained apostolic bishops were written back into church history to support the patriarchy. Not only has this made-up belief harmed women, but it is also untrue.

The time is long past to rethink the patriarchy. Prisca, along with her husband, Aquila, were so important to the early church that their names are mentioned six times in the New Testament. Women like Prisca, Junia, and Phoebe, and all of the other women mentioned by Paul lay at the very heart of the early Christian faith. It is time to recognize that it was the women, and not the mythological twelve, who built the early church.

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

Walking the Way:

Following in the Footsteps of Our Black Catholic Foremothers in Faith

On May 2 through May 7, 2024 some of us at SEPAWOC will be joining in a FutureChurch sponsored pilgrimage to the cities and iconic Civil Rights sites to follow in the footsteps of our Black Catholic Foremothers in Faith as they forged new paths for justice and freedom for all. We will visit Atlanta, Georgia, Birmingham, Montgomery, and Selma, Alabama, and New Orleans to engage in the rich heritage of our African American sisters.

Please consider joining the pilgrimage which FutureChurch specifically designed to “deepen our awareness of the struggle for freedom and strengthen our resolve to work for racial and reparative justice in our parishes, dioceses, communities, and in our country.” More information and registration at <https://futurechurch.org/pilgrimage/>.

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**“The Philadelphia Eleven”
Documentary Film Premier
September 30, 2023**

Review and Commentary by Judith Heffernan

During the summer of 1974 I was taking Clinical Pastoral Education, a required course for a seminary Master of Divinity degree. Many were missing from our morning session on July 29th. Where were they? We soon learned that they were attending the ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven! When our classmates returned, they were elated, enthused, energized and their jubilation was contagious! Although I did not go to the ordination in person, I was with them in spirit and in the Spirit for I had the delight of knowing some of those wonderful people involved in the ordination planning and service. We belonged to The Philadelphia Ecumenical Task Force on Women in Religion (when WOC and SEPWOC were still a twinkle in God’s eyes!) We were, as WOC and SEPWOC are now, “women and men, rooted in faith, working for justice, equality and full partnership in ministry”.

So, as you can imagine, I was really excited to attend the premier showing of the Philadelphia Eleven documentary, created to celebrate their upcoming 50th anniversary. The gathered community for the premier was a beautiful dynamic of diversity- young and old, women and men, different faith traditions and life experiences, a rainbow of color— and we were ONE, filled with amazement, gratitude and joy; and, as the welcoming speaker proclaimed, we were all descendants of the Philadelphia Eleven!

It was a profound experience to be immersed again in those wondrous times and, as Rev. Allison Cheek said, to celebrate the movement of the Holy Spirit through the People of God. Through astounding video, news clips, printed word, personal interviews and shared memories, hopes and dreams, we journeyed together, giving honor and thanks for all who brought us to this moment; we celebrated the present and together took the new leap of hope into what can be.

We were reminded that in 1970 the General Convention, the governing body of the Episcopal Church, voted to ordain women as deacons, but voted “not yet” on ordaining women as priests. In 1973 this was voted down again, as some voting delegates felt

women were not the “proper matter” for ordination. (Hmmm. Do you recall the Vatican Declaration of 1976 said women could not be ordained because we do not bear a “natural resemblance” to Jesus?!) We learned that the Philadelphia Eleven were people of courage who felt the call to ordained priestly ministry for themselves, as well as for the church, and they united with many others who felt called to support their ministry. Waiting patiently was no longer an option. They wanted to speak and live out their truth, and they pledged to do it with love. They needed a bishop and four stepped forward although those bishops were told by some that they not only would be breaking collegiality, they would also be contaminating church space! They needed a place. The Congregation of the Church of the Advocate, encouraged by their Pastor, Rev. Paul Washington, overwhelmingly said “Yes”.

The Eleven and the supporters knew this could be dangerous, but it was the right thing to do. Some people they knew and loved told them they were wrong to do this. They also received critical phone calls, some with vulgar obscenities; and someone sent a letter with fishing wire “to go hang yourselves”. Precautions were taken for safety, but the celebration was a glorious one, a day of profound joy.

During the next few years, churches around the country invited the ordained women to celebrate the Liturgy and Eucharist with them, invited all to “receive the gifts of God for the people of God”. Pastors were put on trial and sanctioned or suspended for their support of the women, but the work went on, and in 1976 the General Convention voted to ordain women. Now more than 6,000 women have been ordained in the Episcopal Church.

After the film we were introduced to some of the actual Philadelphia Eleven. They were so happy we were all there with them. They took time to talk with anyone and everyone. The gratitude we felt for their courage, joy, and lifelong commitment for all of us was still as profound as the elation we felt on that first day.

As I drove home that day, I remembered “Big Al”, my CPE classmate, who was so deeply touched by his attendance at the ordination, that he refused to be ordained an Episcopal priest until women could be ordained legally. I gave thanks for him and felt that old pain in my heart: What if Roman Catholic men refused to be ordained until women were ordained...”but, nevertheless, we persist”. I encourage you to experience the movie, read the stories of the Eleven and their supporters, say their names, and most of all, “keep on keeping on”. Alleluia!

Judith Heffernan is Secretary of SEPWOC.

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Book Reviews

***No Guilty Bystander: The Extraordinary Life of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton* by Frank Fromherz and Suzanne Sattler, IHM. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. Paperback, \$30.00. 317 pp.**

Reviewed by Marian Ronan

Over the years, I've had quite a few people ask me how I can still be a Catholic, given the sex abuse crisis, the oppression of women, Pius XII and the Nazis, and on, and on. I have often replied, "It's the nuns, stupid," thinking particularly of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur at my Catholic girls high school who more or less made me who I am.

But now, thanks to Frank Fromherz and Sister Suzanne Sattler, I have another response: "It's Bishop Tom Gumbleton!" Let me tell you why.

I had of course, heard of Bishop Gumbleton. But what I did not know was the amazing scope of the social justice issues he committed his life to, detailed in the various chapters of this book... These include opposing the Vietnam War; pushing the USCCB to oppose nuclear deterrence in their 1983 letter "The Challenge to Peace"; being arrested many times for demonstrating against nuclear weapons; leading Pax Christi USA and Pax Christi International in its work for Christian non-violence.

Other such issues include supporting LGBTQ Catholics after his brother came out; his relentless advocacy for Central American justice after the murders of Romero, the four churchwomen and others; his endless opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, driven by visits to those countries; his support of Jean Bertrand Aristide and the oppressed Haitian people, including helping to found a medical clinic there; extensive anti-racist work growing out of his long leadership of a Black Catholic parish in Detroit; and finally, his heroic advocacy for sex abuse victims.

I appreciate deeply the authors detailing Gumbleton's work in these many different arenas. How did he ever manage so many demanding and sometimes dangerous activities? And how, as an introvert, did he manage to speak out and publish so bravely on so many fraught issues?

But I am also grateful to them for their examination of the ways in which Bishop Gumbleton evolved into the Christian social justice leader that he became. These begin with the engaging story of how Gumbleton changed his position on the war in Vietnam. Born into a large working-class family in Detroit in the middle of the Depression, he was ordained a fairly traditional diocesan priest in 1956 and was made a vice-chancellor in 1960.

Then, in 1965, when a number of priests were protesting the Vietnam War, the chancellor sent him to talk them out of their protests. Gumbleton listened to them for two and a half hours and by the end they had convinced him: the war was wrong. He went on to read widely about Christian nonviolence, support conscientious objectors, and eventually visit Vietnam, denouncing the torture of political prisoners there.

In the meantime, in 1968, at the age of 38, Gumbleton had become a bishop, one of the youngest in the history of the American church.

Yet because of his indefatigable social justice activity, and because of the conservative turn in the church after John Paul II's election in 1978, Gumbleton never became the head of a diocese—an "Ordinary." But, as the authors suggest, this was probably a good thing: he would never have had the time to travel around the world witnessing oppression and returning home to fight it if he had had a diocese to run.

As mentioned above, Bishop Tom became embroiled in the sex abuse crisis. He met Barbara Blaine, the founder of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, in the early 1980s, when he was the president of Pax Christi USA, and she worked in the Chicago Pax Christi office. She told him about having been abused by her parish priest beginning when she was thirteen, and how the bishop of Toledo did nothing when she reported the abuse to him.

Tom subsequently met with many survivors, and when Barbara asked him to, he agreed to testify to the Ohio House Judiciary Committee concerning a stalled bill to extend the statute of limitations on sex abuse crimes. In that testimony, he told of his own (limited) abuse as a fifteen year old seminarian and urged the Judiciary Committee to vote to extend the statute of limitations, arguing that "settlement of every case by our court system is the only way to protect children and to heal the brokenness within the church." (231).

By the time he returned to Detroit, a number of his fellow bishops had denounced him to the papal nuncio. He had no right to speak outside his own diocese, and more to the point, his testimony threatened church finances. The Vatican demanded Bishop Tom resign from pastoring the black Detroit parish he had pastored for many years and from being a bishop, resulting in a protracted struggle with the cardinal archbishop of Detroit and his officials. People throughout the archdiocese protested his removal, but to no avail. It reflects Tom's nonviolent heart that after these retaliatory actions, he continued to celebrate the sacraments in various parishes and expressed no hatred in response to his treatment.

As I read this book, it occurred to me that Bishop Tom Gumbleton ought to be canonized. That is, until I read the interview with him at the end of the book and realized that he is still alive, at age 93, though he has struggled with bladder cancer since 2019. Who knows? Maybe he will be canonized someday.

In the meantime, I urge you to read this galvanizing biography and be inspired, as I am, to up your actions for justice and peace. As Bishop Tom says in his closing comments, "You have to do action for justice, you have to participate in the transformation of the world... That's living the Gospel message."

Marian Ronan *lives and writes in Brooklyn, New York.*

Book Reviews

Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle

By Shannen Dee Williams. Duke University Press, May 2022, 434 pages.

Reviewed by Maureen Tate

The publication of *Subversive Habits* was eagerly awaited by members of SEPAWOC. Many of us had an opportunity to hear the author, Shannen Dee Williams, speak at the Women's Ordination Worldwide Conference in 2015, when she shared her research documenting the history of discrimination against African American women who struggled for acceptance to and within Catholic women's religious communities. In 2020, SEPAWOC presented our Mary Magdalene Award to Dr. Williams for her groundbreaking scholarship and writing on the experience of Black Catholics, especially the experience of women in religious life. We were, and continue to be, inspired by her powerful reclaiming of Catholic history, one we honor and affirm as an important part of our own story in supporting women who are called to serve in all ministries of our church.

The author of *Subversive Habits* is an historian as is evidenced by the extensive detail she brings to her subject, that can at first seem overwhelming- so many names, dates, places and historical events. Once settled into the rhythm of the book, however, I was better able to focus on the overall intent and significance of *Subversive Habits*. I appreciated that the author is setting forth an historical record of the deep origins of racism and anti-Blackness in the Catholic Church in the United States as well as the extraordinary journey of Black women religious in confronting the systemic racism actually perpetuated by the Church in society.

Williams' research is exhaustive. Accessing original archives, public and Church historical records, interviews, and privately held material and memorabilia, the author pieces together the experience of Black women religious that was previously invisible or deliberately buried. Now documented, the individuals and events can never again be forgotten or erased from our Catholic history. This history is our history. As we have come to learn through the Black Lives Matter Movement, it is important to "say their name". Each woman discussed by the author had her unique journey and experience of the depth and varieties of anti-Black discrimination within our U.S. Catholic tradition. Thanks to Dr. Williams, we now know their names.

Subversive Habits is challenging on an emotional level. It is hard to reconcile the descriptions of absolute rejection, insult, and hostility directed at Black women seeking to enter women's religious communities. Many of us know these communities well and have been personally inspired by them. We may even know some of the women discussed in later chapters. It is hard to shed one's innocence about how anti-Black attitudes were pervasive in all women's religious communities, right up to the present day. It is heartening, however, to know that the hard work of truth telling, documenting histories of discrimination, and attempts at reconciliation are beginning to take place. The author, through her research and activism, has been instrumental in moving this process forward.

Despite ever increasing awareness of systemic anti-Black behaviors, teaching, policy and practice at all levels of church and society, we can sometimes be persuaded that our society has made

progress and that we would never again tolerate the levels of prejudice the author documents so extensively. Yet, the outright exclusion, verbal and psychological abuse, dismissal and blatant hostility, that was the experience of these Black women in religious life, is all too familiar even today. We see it especially in the backlash to the Black Lives Matter Movement and the rise of white supremacy across the country. Our Church is not immune to these conditions. We cannot turn away from the ugly truth that Black bodies have always been viewed as inferior in our Catholic tradition and institutions, and that the church has much to answer for, even today, in how it embraces the Black Catholic faith tradition. If the Church is not to repeat sins of the past, the Catholic Church in the United States must continue to stand without apology or exception with the cause of racial justice.

Subversive Habits provides substantial background, that was unfamiliar to me, on the formation and leadership of women's religious communities founded by and for Black women. These communities were formidable in validating and advancing vocations among Black women that is documented as far back as the early 1800's. These communities received those who were denied access to most religious communities of women as well as those who eventually left their original communities due to intolerable discrimination. These sisters were heroic for what they did to confront anti-Blackness in the midst of the cruelest realities of the slavery period. They established the first Roman Catholic women's communities for Black women and girls, began some of the earliest schools for Black children in the country, educated generations of Black children in the faith and opened doors for African American men who became priests. One by one, these women desegregated historically white religious orders and served tirelessly as spiritual leaders within the Black catholic community. For some two hundred years, Black sisters provided leadership in establishing an expanding network of schools and social services serving Black Catholics, and in desegregation efforts in white Catholic schools and institutions of higher learning, such as Catholic University.

The author makes a strong case that the documented history of Black women in religious life put them at the forefront of integration efforts going back to the earliest days of the Catholic presence in the U.S., well before the end of slavery. From slavery to the post slavery period to the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movement, the author traces the courage and determination of Black women to follow their call to religious life despite enormous obstacles in society as well as the Church. Their role in the history of desegregation, civil rights, and the Black Power movement was often invisible, underappreciated and disregarded. *Subversive Habits* documents that these women were not only trail blazers in the Catholic Church. Their work in education, health care and social service was always courageous, risk taking, and visionary, always with an eye toward the well-being of their people. Dr. Williams emphasizes the role that Black women religious played in establishing schools in the Black community and their commitment to education as a means to build an educated population for advancement of Black citizens in church and society.

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If we are in any doubt, the author makes plain the significance of the scholarship represented in *Subversive Habits*: "... the history of white Catholic racism as manifested in 338 years of Church-sanctioned slavery in the land that became the United States and more than 438 years of racial segregation and exclusion within Church boundaries remains largely unincorporated into the dominant narratives of the American and Catholic experiences ... It remains nearly impossible to speak plainly about these holy women as Black freedom fighters and to illuminate the full significance of their journeys without public awareness of the centrality of white supremacy in the U.S. Church, including women's religious life ..." The record established here makes clear that "... the Catholic Church was never an innocent bystander in the construction and propagation of white supremacy in the United States ... In the twenty-first century, the work of racial reckoning, justice, and reconciliation in the Catholic Church, as in much of American society, remains woefully incomplete."

I highly recommend *Subversive Habits* as a great work of "historical truth telling" - for finally documenting and celebrating women of color who, throughout history, faced rejection and innumerable obstacles in realizing their vocation due to the sin of racism endemic in our society, as well as the Church. Through her research, writing, and speaking, the author not only enables truth telling about this difficult reality in the history of our country and the Church but calls forth accountability, reconciliation, and a measure of healing for communities of women religious, and for all of us who seek justice and desire renewal of the Church, where all are welcome at the table and women's spiritual leadership is wholly affirmed.

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

Thanksgiving Prayer for Native Peoples

*Creator of the whole earth, we pray for the original peoples who lived in these lands for thousands of years and who blessed your Spirit in their lives and world. May they teach us to respect and reverence the earth as mother of all things. May we walk this land ever mindful of those who walked here before us and may we join hand in hand with all peoples as our brothers and sisters, precious children of You
O great Spirit of all.*

GRACE, BLESSING, THANKS, AND GIVING

By Ellie Harty

Sometimes we rail, rant, raise verbal fists (and even, with any luck, consciences!) in newsletters, tweets, posts - in *EqualwRites*, in the world. Sometimes we burst out in energy and enthusiasm in the streets, in the parks, on the concrete steps outside our churches, and the concrete piazza outside the Vatican. Sometimes, attired in pink, we process silently through the streets of Rome holding our "Ordain Women" banner for all the world to see - and respect.

And sometimes, imitating God, I guess, we rest. We just sit back and take a breath and grow thankful for what the long struggle has already given us and continues to give us: each other. That is the gift that has and will see us through whatever - positive or negative - in our quest for justice is to come.

This Thanksgiving we are especially thankful for all of you, for all who process, for all who witness, and all who pray. And I am grateful for having a special day of gratitude, a day of rest from the challenges, a day just to remember and say thank you.

Each year, as a mealtime grace, I read a passage from an article by Anne Lamott (*Traveling Mercies, Grace Eventually, Help, Thanks, Wow*, and more recently *Hallelujah Anyway*) called "Counting Our Blessings".

At Thanksgiving, she says, someone always manages to say grace:

I think we're in it for the pause, the quiet thanks for love and for our blessings, before the shoveling begins. For a minute, our stations are tuned to a broader, richer radius. We're acknowledging that this food didn't just magically appear: Someone grew it, ground it, bought it, baked it; wow.

We say thank you for the miracle that we have stuck together all these years, in spite of it all; that we have each other's backs, and hilarious companionship... We pray to be mindful of the needs of others.

We savor these moments out of time, when we are conscious of love's presence, of Someone's great and abiding generosity to our dear and motley family, these holy moments of gratitude. And that is grace.

Happy grace-filled Thanksgiving.

Ellie Harty is co-editor of *EqualwRites*.

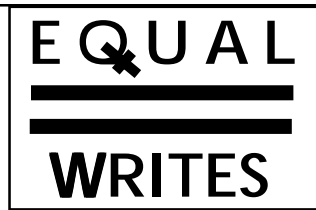
Giving more thanks....

While we are on the subject...to echo Ellie's words, "we are especially thankful for all of you, for all who process, for all who witness, and all who pray," I will add, "For all who pay."

We are deeply grateful for the financial support we have received in 2023 which has enabled us to continue our work, most especially to print the newsletter which you are reading. There are many ways we use the money you send which will be reflected in the annual report in our next issue. Thank you for enabling our very important work to continue. This is a group effort—no one can do it alone. Please help us move forward in 2024 with your end of the year donation.

Thank you.

Mary Whelan, Treasurer of SEPAWOC.



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Scripture Reflections

Advent Season

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

Every Advent, no matter what Liturgical Cycle, we hear the call of the prophets for light amid darkness, for peace amid war and for reconciliation amid hatred. The prophets lived in the land where the long-term suffering from wars abounded as it does now.

As we prepare to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus, we remember that He was born in Bethlehem, which today is in the region called the West Bank, 46 miles from the present Gaza Strip; Jesus later lived in Nazareth which today is the largest Arab city in Israel, a land about which Rabbi Sheila Weinberg reflects: One God, two peoples, one land, three faiths, one root...one earth, one sky, one beginning and now one broken heart. We see daily the horrific suffering, hear the heartbreaking cries, feel the devastating loss. As modern prophets tell us: We must do something, anything for peace and justice and do it now!

Amid this reality of war, the synod, about which we had so much preparation, information, input and anticipation took place. I was truly moved by the prayer service for peace as the synod began. Cindy Wooten's report in *NCR* helped us walk with them in prayer, in spirit and in Spirit.

We also heard the invitation from WOC and WOW and literally walked with the women. SEPAWOC witnessed for the Ordination of Women outside Philadelphia's Basilica on October 6. Our presence, with our "Ordain Catholic Women" banner, was positively greeted with smiles, thumbs up, waves, shout outs, and we had wonderful listening and dialogue with sincerely interested people. It had a real feel of development of doctrine and where the Spirit leads—a real experience of synodality!

WOC is grateful that people from around the world have vigorously supported the greater participation of women in the pastoral life and governance of the church...but also dismayed for the synod's failure to not really hear the overwhelming calls to open ordained ministries to women.

We will persist and take seriously the call of Isaiah that we hear proclaimed again this Advent: The Spirit of God has anointed us to heal the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to captives and release to the prisoners; and we will respond to the call in 1 Thessalonians — we will not quench the Spirit!

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