

**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.*

**A Tribute to Patricia Fresen**  
*By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco*

2002 was a momentous year for the Roman Catholic Church. On January 6, 2002, the *Boston Globe* exposed the church's long-standing tolerance for, and promotion of, ordained men who had repeatedly committed the egregious sin of pedophilia. Five months later, it received another blow when seven women were ordained on the Danube River by a bishop who fell outside of the all-boys' club in the Vatican. Within six weeks, men with very dirty hands labeled the women's ordination as "attempted" and a "contumacy." Hateful descriptors used throughout the document of excommunication disguised the sexism and misogyny that poses as church doctrine.

The Supreme Pontiff, John Paul II, could barely say the women's names in his writ of excommunication: Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, Adelinde Roitinger, Gisela Forster, Iris Müller, Ida Raming, Pia Brunner and Dagmar Braun Celeste, instead referring to them as "afore-mentioned women."

One year after the ordination and excommunication of the Danube Seven, the then sixty-three year old Patricia Fresen (1940-2024) took a huge leap of faith and was ordained a priest in Barcelona. This act ended her life as a Dominican sister and made her a bishop in the newly formed Roman Catholic Women Priest movement. The journey was not easy.

Patricia Fresen was a Dominican sister for forty-five years in South Africa. As a high school principal, she accepted students of color into her school against the rules of apartheid. As a result, she and several of her sisters served jail terms for breaking the law. She went on to study for seven years at the University of Saint Thomas and the Gregorian Institute in Rome, earning a Licentiate in Theology. There she had a ringside seat to the machinations of ordained men and came to compare the racial apartheid in South Africa with the gender apartheid she experienced in the church. She returned to South Africa to complete a Ph.D in Theology. Her admission to the faculty at seminaries in Pretoria and Johannesburg was supposed to teach young male seminarians that some few women did, in fact, have agency. That agency, however, was circumscribed by overt sexism. Her own students booed and hissed as she approached the pulpit to preach at the invitation of the seminary chaplain on South African Women's Day.

The reaction of the Dominicans to her ordination was also devastating. The order to which she had given forty-five years of her life rejected her. She lost her job, her income, her home, her health insurance and became an exile in Germany. Despite the command in scripture not to fear, the Dominicans fearfully capitulated to the skewed morality of an institution that regards the ordination of women as a greater sin than pedophilia. The Dominicans, like many other religious orders that pride themselves on being advocates for justice, chose not to extend that justice to women, in this case to one of their own. In church, as in politics, the 'ole boys' network

reigned supreme. Within this paradigm, women, and by extension, the People of God, will always lose.

Patricia Fresen enabled the women priest movement to take off in the United States. She was consecrated a bishop shortly after her priestly ordination by a bishop in good standing with apostolic succession. The rest, as pundits might say, is herstory. There are now more than two hundred women who were ordained by women bishops. Parish communities led by women dot the American landscape. Members of the faithful who do not appreciate the male clergy disinviting their female family members from the table that belongs to Jesus during weddings and funerals engage the services of members of RCWP who welcome everyone. The same is true of RCWP communities in Canada, Columbia, and South Africa.

Trish as she was fondly called, rather than Your Eminence, was a prophet who called out loudly in the ecclesiastical wilderness for the equality of men and women in the Catholic Church. As an imago Dei par excellence, she risked everything and lost everything, except for her integrity. Like Hildegard of Bingen whom she admired, Patricia helped to green a small part of a church corrupted by hubris, hypocrisy, blatant sexism, and a lust for power that the churchmen mistakenly claim comes from a loving God who shows no partiality.

In another time and a different place where love rather than power is the operative principle, Patricia Fresen would be canonized a saint. But let us say here anyway with heartfelt thanks, Saint Patricia Fresen, pray for and with us as we work for justice for all.

**A Tribute to Theresa Kane, RSM**  
*By Regina Bannan*

"For she is a breath of the power of God." I had the privilege of reading these words from the Book of Wisdom at the memorial service for Theresa Kane, RSM. Others in the Catholic Organizations for Renewal chose the reading (7:7; 25-8:1), which is really about the spirit of Wisdom, but all I could think about was how this Holy Spirit was manifest in Theresa.

You have to have seen the images of her speaking to the Pope, which the Sisters of Mercy explained in their announcement of her death. I find this remarkably frank, just like Theresa:

"Sister Theresa was elected president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in 1978. In that capacity, she welcomed Pope John Paul II to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. in 1979 during his first visit to the United States as pontiff. During her address, she urged the pope to consider the possibility of opening all ministries of the Church to women, remarks which received widespread media coverage."

"Theresa's ministry was about truth-speaking," said Sister Susan Sanders, President of the Institute Leadership of the Sisters of Mercy

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## Kicking the Can Once Again

By *Ellie Hartly*

We at SEPAWOC can't completely ignore the Synod on Synodality that just happened this October. But if you have followed the day-by-day bulletins and then read – at least in part – the final report, we might as well have ignored it (although not the brave women who marched in Rome and voiced their call for women in ministry). It certainly ignored us.

Kate McElwee, WOC's executive director, led a chorus of women from many countries worldwide imploring: 'Don't kick the can down the road on women's ministries'! The Powers-That-(shouldn't)-Be completely ignored her and us and kicked the issue "off the table" and into committees and research and study groups deep within the Vatican nest.

Luckily, we had Vatican doctrine chief, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, to mansplain all of this: "We know the public position of the pontiff, who does not consider the issue (of the female diaconate) mature....The opportunity for further study remains open, but in the Holy Father's mind there are other issues yet to be investigated and resolved before rushing to talk about a possible diaconate for some women. Otherwise, the diaconate becomes a kind of consolation for some women and the most decisive issue of women's participation in the church remains neglected."

Kate McElwee reacted by describing the experience of all of us seeking the ordination of women to the diaconate and priesthood as "a prolonged Advent, wandering and waiting in the wilderness for the in-breaking of the newness of Christ into our Church".

Massimo Faggioli, Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova, put it another way: "The Church's official teaching on women is something that keeps Catholicism stuck in what John O'Malley, SJ, called 'the long nineteenth century.'" He wrote: "The institutional Church finds itself at the Synod in a situation of uncertainty, but also of inevitability—there's a feeling that something will have to be done about the role of women. The temptation is to say, once again, 'not yet.' But unless you're under the illusion that the "masculine religious revival" in America will finally replenish the seminaries and then the priesthood, it's not something that can be postponed to the next pope, the next Vatican council, or the next century."

Our "progressive" Pope ignored us, too – but not completely. He constantly reaffirmed the all-male priesthood and, during the Synod, criticized, as "obtuse agitators pressing for a female diaconate," those marching and holding witnesses outside. He announced his agenda, instead, would call for *women to take up more positions of responsibility*. (Not leadership, mind you, certainly not authority, and definitely not power!)

Miriam Duignan, a trustee at the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research, reacted: "It's so insulting to keep on saying that the only valid role that will get the approval of this pope is to be nurturing, is to be a mother, while you can be nurturing and mothering and be a priest." At a prayer service later, she remarked: "He is putting a spiritual stamp of approval on sexism. It is so irresponsible and dangerous for him to constantly criticize, belittle, dismiss and demonize women who are just saying 'Stop lying. Stop hiding and stop trying to relegate us to second-class citizenship.'"

We could go on and on, mourning the dismissal of our concerns and of us, once again. This October's Synod on Synodality was a notable, at times monumental, disappointment. Kevin Liston, co-chair of the Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform says it all: "What began as an invitation to all Catholics to participate in the renewal of Catholicism has become a conference of insiders discussing among themselves how they are to keep the ship afloat, inhibited by outdated structures and intellectual positions. Meanwhile ordinary Catholics are disengaging in droves or barely hanging on by their fingernails."

Regina Bannan, president of SEPAWOC, was not going to let us end on a negative note: "I think of the irony of it all — it means that WOC has to continue, rather than being able to declare victory and disappear. We have the moral satisfaction of knowing how widespread the support for women's ordination is, and how the creative workarounds we have already constructed will be the way we do our work for the immediate — not the long-term — future. (We're doing more than hang on by our fingernails.)"

### A Tribute to Theresa Kane, RSM *continued from page 1*

of the Americas. "Truth-speaking *about* women's desire for full inclusion in the Church; and truth-speaking *to* Church leaders like Pope John Paul II whom she addressed as LCWR president in 1979. Straightforward and bold as Theresa was, however, she spoke truth as her God and prayer revealed it to her, and not from a place of position or judgment or blame, but from a place of love, respect, humility, and inclusion. For this, many deeply loved and admired her."

So true. You have to remember that this was three years after *Inter Insigniores*, "a document issued on 15 October 1976 by the [Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith](#) with the approval of [Pope Paul VI](#). It presents some [theological](#) and historical arguments for the [Catholic Church](#)'s inability to [ordain women](#) as priests or bishops," as Wikipedia says. I love the somewhat dismissive "some" in this tiny summary. I cannot bear to look at that text again; it was so painful at the time.

But Theresa, 42 years old and new to leadership, "spoke truth to power," as Mary Hunt said in her *Religion Dispatches* article (<https://religiondispatches.org/after-her-remarks-pope-jpii-was-never-the-same-controversial-beloved-sr-theresa-kanes-effect-on-the-catholic-church-endures/>), which is the best analysis of her impact and also has the best picture of Theresa – at the Ben Franklin Hotel in Philadelphia.

Theresa had a long relationship with SEPAWOC and us personally. She had an enormous family, some of whom lived here. She liked to visit them and she was delighted when we honored her with the Mary Magdalene Award in 2012. That recognition is for courage, and all of us stand up with Theresa Kane in telling our truth as women in the Catholic Church.

**Regina Bannan** served on the national Women's Ordination Conference Board with Theresa Kane in the 1990s.

## Spiritual Powerhouse? or Wimpy Doormat? St. Thérèse of Lisieux

By Marisa Guerin, PhD

Thérèse of Lisieux (“The Little Flower”) is one of the most beloved of Catholic saints – but she has a reputation problem with modern feminist women!

This is partly due to the flowery nature of her own writing style in the late 1800’s and very much due to the way the Catholic culture has tamed and infantilized her. As a result, Thérèse is often presented as a sweet, docile, un-complaining young nun known mostly for teaching the Little Way of spiritual childhood. At worst, she has been considered neurotic and masochistic. So many people just dismiss her, failing to recognize the liberating nature of her insights. The same feminist women who have fought their whole lives to be taken seriously generally don’t realize that Thérèse represented some of qualities they most respect: emotional strength and maturity, setting clear boundaries, getting free of internalized oppression, throwing off the violence of perfectionism. In her short lifetime – she died at 24 of tuberculosis – Thérèse attained a remarkable level of emotional self-awareness and spiritual discernment. She got there the hard way, as we all do, through her own personal experience of love, loss, trauma, and healing. Thérèse showed us what a mature person with a free and loving heart looks like. No, she was no pious doormat.

Thérèse has been called “*the greatest modern saint*” and one of only four women Doctors of the Church. So, what was so significant about her message? After all, she had an ordinary short life without any of the usual public achievements of great saints.

Thérèse’s authentic teaching is her rediscovery for the modern world of the original gospel message of mercy, love, and healing, a message that had been corrupted over the centuries. She did this largely on her own based on her intuitive understanding of the Scriptures, her life experience as a young woman from a loving Catholic family, and her intelligent, reflective, prayerful nature.

Thérèse held her ground against the pressure of the punitive, cruel theology of God that was prevalent in her time and which continues, sadly, among many in our own day. With bold confidence in her trust that “*God’s justice is always wrapped in God’s mercy,*” Thérèse laid out a vision of a loving life that included nonviolence toward oneself, patient nonviolence towards others including “enemies,” and a non-adversarial, nonviolent attitude towards the realities of life itself.

As the delegated novice director for the newer Carmelites, most of them older than she, Thérèse cut gently but firmly through the false humility and perfectionism that could disguise an ego wishing to be in charge of its own spiritual growth. One of her quotes that I personally find most helpful in my lifelong struggle against perfectionism is her advice to a novice that she would be most pleasing to God when she could “*bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself.*”

I think about that advice almost every day, when I have gotten distressed or embarrassed or angry at something I regret doing. She didn’t say to bear it grudgingly. She didn’t mention a secret plan to be perfect next time. She said “*serenely*” – to freely stop beating myself up, with compassion for my own never-to-be-cured weak self, and with an intention to do my imperfect best the next time.

In her own writings, Thérèse spoke of her “*only treasure.*” She meant her humble embrace of the truth that she would never be perfect, combined with her unshakeable trust that her flawed self was completely enfolded in God’s love and mercy. This is enormously liberating. It lets us be true and honest; it brings the fruits of simplicity and joy in place of non-stop guilt and shame.

Thérèse’s famous patience and kindness to fellow Carmelites — who were in some cases truly disturbed individuals — flowed from this deep self-awareness of her human reality. She didn’t try to justify anyone’s awful behavior but she did realize that damaged people are very likely to damage others, even if unintentionally. She loved others as best she could, on their own terms, but when she couldn’t handle the abuse that could come her way, she withdrew until she could master her own distress and return with more capacity for patience.

There is nothing at all wimpy about the inner freedom and discipline required to deal with difficult people, and Thérèse herself counseled that one should never let kindness degenerate into weakness. And yet, despite often enduring painful experiences, Thérèse maintained a calm and peaceful demeanor. In recreation, she was known as a witty mimic who kept others laughing, and she was a deeply respected mentor to the novices she counseled. Her choice to live as a cloistered Carmelite meant she didn’t have many degrees of freedom in her external life, but Thérèse lived from the inside out with personal authority and intentionality.

Thérèse is often referenced as a patron saint for women’s ordination. She did indeed wish to be a priest, and joked with her sister that her approaching death at such a young age must be God’s kindness in taking her before the age when she might have dreamed of ordination. But the fact is that Thérèse had many vocation aspirations – priest, martyr, missionary – and she eventually concluded her true vocation was “*to be Love at the heart of the Church*” in whatever life God’s Providence opened before her.

I learned this and more about the wisdom of Thérèse from my lifelong friend and mentor, Br. Joseph Schmidt, FSC. A clinical psychologist and spiritual director, Br. Joe studied Thérèse for many years and wrote multiple books about her to interpret her writings and her life to modern readers. In Br. Joe’s final years, we collaborated on a book that would summarize Thérèse’s wisdom with applications to modern life. It’s called “**Life Lessons from St. Thérèse of Lisieux**” and it was published by *Word Among Us* in 2022.

In that book, we unpacked what Br. Joe came to call the “*heart qualities*” of Thérèse’s healing vision. They are Inner Freedom, Compassion, Creativity, a Willing Spirit, Gratefulness, and Self-Surrender. They are spiritual, and yet they also fit well with the secular wisdom of Twelve Step programs. The words are lofty, but the lessons are very down to earth, for example:

- Learning how not to let others push our buttons;
- Trusting in our own unique way of prayer, no matter what the holy books say;
- Setting protective boundaries without giving in to contempt or hatred;
- Loving others the way they need us to love them;
- Becoming willing without grasping tight to our willfulness;
- Receiving God’s Providence in every moment with gratitude, whether that involves joy or sadness.

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**Spiritual Powerhouse? or Wimpy Doormat? St. Thérèse of Lisieux** *continued from page 3*

Thérèse's final and most poignant lesson to us comes from her last eighteen months of life when her sickness coincided with a terrible and complete dark night of the soul. Identifying with atheists and unable to see any of the consoling images of faith that she had grown up with, Thérèse simply set herself to trust that God is love and love is real. It was nothing that was easy; she lived her final days with the strength that had been forged in suffering. St. Thérèse of Lisieux? Spiritual powerhouse, by a mile!

**Marisa Guerin** *is retired from a career in consulting and leadership development and lives in West Philadelphia. She writes periodic blogs at [www.guerinconsulting.com/blog](http://www.guerinconsulting.com/blog), and is a long-time supporter of SEPAWOC. She is the author, with the late Br. Joseph Schmidt FSC, of "Life Lessons from St. Thérèse of Lisieux."*

**The Gifts of Hildegard of Bingen**  
*By Kathy Schuck*

"Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" Remember in the fairy tale Snow White when the queen was outraged after the mirror answers that her stepdaughter Snow White is the fairest. Even though the mirror shows the queen the qualities she lacks - kindness, humility, and patience, rather than face her need to develop these qualities, the queen chooses to invest her time and energy to destroy Snow White instead. We know how that ultimately turns out ... Snow White lives happily ever after with the prince while the queen simmers with resentment!

Journey back in time with me. September 17 was the feast of Hildegard of Bingen, a woman I'd describe as a "Renaissance Woman," even though she was born 926 years ago during the Middle Ages (spell it out 10-9-8) as in one thousand ninety-eight, four centuries before the cultural 'rebirth' history refers to as "the Renaissance" actually occurred. Born in the Rhine Valley of Germany, the youngest of 10 children, as was the ancient custom, at the age of 8, Hildegard was tithed to the church, expected to live in a cloistered environment and entrusted to the care of a holy woman named Jutta who introduced her to reading, writing, scripture, and music. Hard for us to imagine these days. At the age of 14, she entered a hermitage and took monastic vows as a Benedictine. After Jutta died, Hildegard, now 38 years old, was elected superior of the community and founded multiple Benedictine monasteries for women. Twelve years ago, Hildegard was named a Doctor of the Church. Hers is a story worth telling – and it's no fairy tale!

Incredibly gifted and wildly creative, Hildegard never fit the stereotype of the typical Medieval vowed woman. In addition to being known as writer and theologian, she is remembered as an artist,

composer, creation-centered mystic, pharmacist, and preacher. With no patience for hypocrisy, Hildegard saw the bigger picture and lived "all in." Her writings put more weight on the incarnation - God becoming human - than on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – quite a departure from the teachings of the day with their focus on sin and atonement! No wonder some saw her as a witch or a dissident.

Hildegard saw the world sacramentally, the earth as a sacred mirror reflecting our internal reality. She counseled popes and emperors and restructured her religious order so it would not be under the authority of a supervising male cleric. In addition, Hildegard traveled extensively preaching on the urgency of church reform. Just imagine for a moment how different our world, perhaps even our climate, would be if, rather than being labeled a "dangerous" woman, Hildegard and her wisdom of *Veriditas* had been embraced and shared. Nine hundred years ago, in her corner of the world, Hildegard lived a counter cultural story grounded in the greening power of the Divine, that the force of the Spirit was active and constantly moving in all things, including us, toward wholeness. I think that same force, that same Spirit, holds us as we navigate the highs and lows of our own lives even when our church doctrine remains heavily encrusted in medieval philosophy or, like the queen in *Snow White* simmers in resentment because of changes it will not see nor accept.

I encourage us all, like Hildegard, to look for enchanted moments, those places where you might glimpse the energy of wholeness and healing in surprising, maybe even puzzling ways. I'll leave you with one that came to my awareness. It was a video created in collaboration with St. Jude's Children's Hospital (It turns out the Polaris Dawn mission raises money for St. Jude's.) with the dream of inspiring the next generation to look towards the stars. The video features Astronaut Sarah Gillis, a SpaceX engineer, playing "Rey's Theme" from the movie "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" on her violin. While playing weightlessly from space, Sarah (with hair standing on end) was accompanied by members of youth orchestras in the United States, Brazil, Uganda, Sweden, Venezuela, and Haiti. Can you see it? Can you imagine the Spirit moving in all things toward wholeness? To use Hildegard's words, the performance was truly, "Ablaze with enthusiasm."

**Kathy Schuck** *is a Roman Catholic Womanpriest and member of the St. Mary Magdalene Community.*

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## Why I Wrote “The Cost of Sainthood”

By Eileen McCafferty DiFranco

Nine years or so ago, Marty Moss-Coane, the host of the former NPR show “Radio Times,” interviewed author Stephen Greenblatt about his new book entitled *The Swerve*. Greenblatt’s book discussed the discovery of a book written by the ancient Roman author Lucretius, the first to propose the atomic theory, during the medieval renaissance. In the book, Greenblatt disparagingly mentioned the church father Cyril of Alexandria and his role in the brutal murder of the pagan mathematician, Hypatia.

I looked up Cyril and was horrified by what I learned about him. He, like one of his predecessors, Athanasius, was a thug who not only burned down pagan temples and synagogues, but also the churches of those he regarded as heretics. How many other “saints,” I wondered, had such a checkered past?

This sent me on a seven- year journey where I learned about the objectional actions of many canonized saints. The wars, persecutions, crusades, colonization, witch hunts, and objectional beliefs baptized as dogma levied upon the People of God by too many of these saints gave me pause. What kind of people does the church admire enough to canonize?

The late John Paul II famously said that anyone could be a saint. He went on to canonize more saints than all of the popes in the previous five centuries combined. He was canonized in 2014, a mere nine years after his death. In 2020, the Vatican began proceedings to canonize his parents, proving that anyone can, with the right connections, be a saint.

However, the word “anyone” comes with a caveat. Only the Vatican kind of anyone, i.e., those who play by the rules of the institution, are considered worthy of canonization. John Paul II never canonized Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador because of the latter’s association with liberation theology. At great risk to his life, Romero had repeatedly begged the Salvadorean army to obey the command of the Prince of Peace and stop massacring their fellow citizens. Romero was shot in the heart by Catholic right wing death squads as he stood at the altar during Mass.

While John Paul II earned his halo by playing by the Vatican rules, he did not play by society’s rules. He turned a blind eye towards evil in the ordained who committed the grievous sin of child sexual abuse.

Of course, some saints deserved their halos and earned their title. Many others did not. The canonized people mentioned in this book might have been good rulers, abbots, teachers, translators, nuns, priests, patriots, founders of religious orders, and writers of religious tracts. They might have resisted rape or starved and beat themselves for Jesus, defended church property and power, or extended the scope of Christianity. However, far too many of them lacked charity and decency and did not follow the gospel mandate of Jesus to love neighbor as self. Some of their contemporaries regarded them with disdain. The faithful should compare their behavior to what the church- which often retrofitted them with a holiness they did not deserve- says about them.

This book is a counter-narrative to the church’s idea of holiness. The faithful deserve to know that there were saintly people in every age who lived virtuous and holy lives but fell outside of traditional church hagiography. In the words of author Kurt Vonnegut, the true saints are those who “behaved decently in a shockingly indecent world.”

Eileen McCafferty DiFranco, RCWP

### Just Published: *The Cost of Sainthood* by Eileen DiFranco

We are delighted to introduce you to *The Cost of Sainthood: Questioning the moral, financial, and spiritual cost of the historical saint’s designation within the Catholic Church* written by SEPAWOC and St. Mary Magdalene Community’s own Eileen DiFranco.

“Who is a saint?” she asks and then answers the question with a lively historical review and analysis of those chosen – and those left out – of the Catholic Church’s list of the canonized. A stunning, engrossing, inspiring read you can order at <https://emergenceeducation.com/books/the-cost-of-sainthood/>. Read more about why she felt compelled to write the book in this issue’s article, “Why I Wrote The Cost of Sainthood”.

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## “Everything You Do Is Sacred”

By *Ellie Hart*

My inspiration for this article’s title is from a poem by Hafiz. We read the poem as an introduction to a September retreat SEPAWOC’s Core Committee holds every year to refresh and re-energize us for our mission. This year we focused on how we spend the five ‘T’s: our Time, Talent, Treasure, Ties, and Testimony. As we talked and wrote about the topic, we were amazed, inspired, and encouraged by how much we actually do every day, every week, every year to better our own lives and the lives of those around us. I imagine you would be uplifted if you concentrated on your own contributions, too. And so, let’s applaud each other and gain even more ideas – and hope.

First, the poem:

From “Now Is the Time” by Hafiz

*Now is the time to know*

*That all that you do is sacred.*

*Now, why not consider*

*A lasting truce with yourself and God.*

*Now is the time to understand*

*That all your ideas of right and wrong*

*Were just a child’s training wheels*

*To be laid aside*

*When you finally live*

*With veracity*

*And love.*

We took some time to reflect on the poem and the topic, and then we began to list, under each category (Time, Talent, Treasure, Ties, Testimony), relevant activities we saw as particularly enhancing our own lives and others. Some found they went deeply into one or two ‘T’s and not into others. Others had long lists touching (and overlapping) all five. We then continued to delve further into the list by choosing the activity we found most inspiring, the one most rewarding, and the one most challenging. We finished this part of the program with a lively discussion.

Here are some of the ways and areas in which we spend our Time, Talent, Treasure, Ties, Testimony: SEPAWOC and WOC witnesses and programs (one of everyone’s favorites!), writing for *EqualwRites* (my favorite!), environmental justice and political actions, Together Women Rise and other organizations supporting girls and women in impoverished areas of the world, volunteering at food banks, churches, organizations like the Grail, Women–Church Convergence, Catholics Organizations for Renewal, church-led youth ministries and other youth programs, participating in, and leading, small faith and Eucharistic communities, writing and delivering homilies, leading liturgies, and providing pastoral care, visiting the sick, imprisoned, lonely, coaching and accompanying people through life challenges,

Are you breathless? Are you seeing where you fit in? And we continue. We are: writing plays and music, performing as singers, musicians, puppeteers, supporting and participating in the arts and Arts, writing organizational and our own histories and preserving our organization’s history in archives, writing articles for publications, newspapers, letters to the editor. We lobby and advocate for people with disabilities, participate in and speak out at rallies for peace and justice. We spend time caring for family, friends, and each other. We also donate to and support, *National Catholic Reporter*, *Commonweal*, *America*, Quixote Center, FutureChurch, Dignity, Saint Mary Magdalene Community, Roman Catholic

Womenpriests, Cranaleith, Federation of Christian Ministries, World Wildlife Fund, UNICEF, Sierra Club, National Conservancy, National Park Service, Earth Quaker Action Team, ACLU, League of Women Voters, WHY, NPR, Doctors Without Borders, Mercy Corps, CARE, and on and on. This is a list from just ten of us and it’s far from exhaustive. What if we added yours, too?

Finally, we talked about where we think we are being called both now and for the future. This topic was more difficult - or maybe we were just exhausted after reviewing all we already have been doing. We did come up with some ideas for SEPAWOC (Stay tuned for more information in future editions of *EqualwRites*.) as well as for ourselves (Also, stay tuned.).

Closing with these two poems and a liturgy helped us look forward with joy and anticipation at what might be ahead for our lives and lives throughout the world.

In an excerpt from “Testimony”, poet Rebecca Baggett quotes the famous Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, and then takes us further:

*I want to say, like Neruda,*

*that I am waiting for*

*“a great and common tenderness,”*

*that I still believe*

*we are capable of attention,*

*that anyone who notices the world*

*must want to save it.*

And I love “A Little Stone in the Middle of the Road, In Florida” by Muriel Rukeyser:

*My son as a child saying*

*God*

*Is anything, even a little stone in the middle of the road, in Florida.*

*Yesterday*

*Nancy, my friend, after long illness:*

*You know what can lift me up, take me right out of despair?*

*No, what?*

*Anything.*

**Ellie Hart** is co-editor of *EqualwRites*.

I hope you are enjoying this issue of *EqualwRites* with articles about holy, dedicated, inspiring women, some of them saints but all of them courageous activists willing to step out of safety and comfort: Teresa Kane, Patricia Freesen, Hildegard of Bingen, Thérèse of Lisieux, to name a few. We love to feature those brave women and the special women who write their stories.

Ellie Hart wrote about the 5 ‘T’s. Some of you already donate your Time and Talent, and Testimony, whether it’s reading our newsletter, writing for it, participating in our witnesses in front of the cathedral and telling others about our work. And some of you continue to share your Treasure by sending money. Thank you for those donations in 2024. If you would like to continue to read our unique publication, please remember us as you plan your end of year donations. We cannot do this without your support.

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# Book Reviews

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*Shining a Light on (Her) Story*, a Motivational Memoir. By Dr. Jackie Casper Agostini. Palmetto Publishing, 2023. 328 pp, (\$14.99) eBook (\$7.99).

Reviewed by Victoria Zelenak

Don't die before reading this book! If you do, you'll miss out on your mission!

Casper-Agostini chose to write her book *Shining a Light on (Her) Story*, a Motivational Memoir, because she wanted to leave a legacy for her family. At the age 82, she doesn't want her story to die with her. And after reading it, I agree: It would have been a great loss for the world to have missed out on being able to read "Her Story"!

In this book, she is like a weaver at her loom. She pulls the threads of her own life into the threads of our historical ancestors, creating a tapestry of different colors. She flings open the windows of women whose stories remained behind closed drapes – because history, plain and simple, has always been his story.

Casper-Agostini starts her book by shining a light on Mother Jones and Ida B. Wells. Next, she introduces her maternal grandmother, Catherine Doherty, who crossed the ocean from Ireland by herself at the age of 19 to New Jersey in 1891. This thread allowed me to reflect on how my own grandmother, Alexandria Yatushis, underwent a similar journey from Russia at the age of 18. Then, Casper-Agostini weaves the stories of lesser-known historical women Sarah and Angelina Gimke and Gerda Lerner, with the more renowned Elizabeth Cody Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

The themes of grief and tragedy are common threads in her book. Casper Agostini's mother, Veronica O'Neil Casper, became a widow at 34 with two young girls to raise. The faith and strong will that Agostini's mother possessed provided the foundation for Casper-Agostini's choices throughout her own life. In contrast, my mother's lack of faith and strong will led me to choose a different road than she did, in searching for God. Aside from that one big difference in the roles our mothers played, Agostini and I have now arrived at a similar junction in our lives. Both our marriages have lasted over 50 years and we are active pacifists and feminists, once teachers/always teachers, social justice defenders, and champions for other women of all colors. Her personal story, then, provides many points of contact for other women to identify with, helping them reflect on their own journeys.

Who's not in the story? The one imperfection in this book is brought to the fore by the author herself. Casper-Agostini critiques herself in the Introduction, page 17, where she says: "I know that I haven't done as well in learning and telling the stories of Native American women." However, the Navajo women are known to often weave an imperfection into their woven rugs. Why? Just as the women in Agostini's book held a deep sense of God as their guide and protector, so do the Native American women who believe that God cannot weave in and out of our lives when we have them all buttoned up tight, sleek, polished to cold perfection. Then there's no room for God—no need!

This slight imperfection of the lack of indigenous women's stories, then, might be the entry God needs to enter this book. Luckily, a dangling thread at the end of her woven tapestry leaves an opening for Casper-Agostini to write about Indigenous women in the

second edition of *Shining a Light on (Her) Story*. ("God willing!") After reading Casper-Agostini's book, I found my mission. I bought myself a new MAC Air Book and have dug out my old handwritten notebooks. Although I've been filling notebooks with stories over the years – beginning with my Lithuanian grandmother, my atheist mother, and my own soul-seeking adventures - tentatively called "From Atheism to God" - I have no finished product. Yet, every woman has a story to tell, and I'm going to tell mine. So should you! Neither Casper-Agostini nor I want your stories to die with you. So read Casper-Agostini's memoir, and let it inspire you to put pen to paper, fingers to keyboards, or voice to recorder.

In the meantime, make sure you support other women, whether in politics, lifestyle choices, race, gender, culture, and callings to priesthood. It's with this message in mind that Casper-Agostini concludes, "There is no theme more important than the need for women to help and support each other."

And if you want a final reason to purchase this book: Casper-Agostini is donating all proceeds from this book to the Historic Underground Railroad Museum, Burlington, NJ in memory of Louise Calloway.

*Reviewer's note: Jackie Casper, her mother, and her sister moved across the street from my family in Laurel Springs, NJ in the late 1950s. Her younger sister Maureen and I became best friends joined at the hip. While we played all day long, Jackie, a teenager, incurred adult responsibilities. Their father had died when she was 6 and Maureen was 3 years old. Their mother worked full-time. As a teenager, Jackie found herself caring for Maureen, the family home and having dinner on the table many nights. Because of the age difference and Jackie's authority figure role at the time, I kept my distance. We lived in different worlds. It wasn't until I read her book that I fully realized we had many common experiences and passions. I'm sure we crossed paths in the same Equal Rights marches while wearing our NOW tee shirts.*

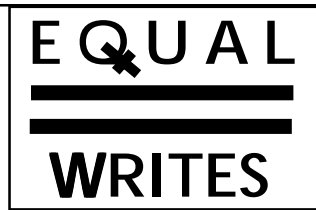
**Victoria Zelenak** has a masters degree in Educational Communication. She is a member of the Community of the Christian Spirit.

## Good Nuns Don't Give Sermons

*Good daughters don't disobey  
Good daughters-in-law don't disagree  
Good girls don't say "yes"  
Good girlfriends don't say "No"  
Good secretaries don't ask questions  
Good wives don't answer back  
Good teachers don't administrate  
Good nurses don't diagnose  
And good nuns don't give sermons  
But good women will change all that.*

By **Victoria Zelenak** (Written 1974 as a first-year elementary school teacher)





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## Scripture Reflections

### Advent 2024

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

Advent: A time for looking back, a time for moving forward. A season when we will pray the Psalm: "Teach me Your paths and guide me in Your truth."

Looking back: Late this Summer, the songs of the Angels welcomed home our beloved guides Theresa Kane and Patricia Fresen.

Theresa guided us: May critical, sacred social justice issues be a profound part of our vision, decisions and actions...and may we endure. Patricia Fresen of South Africa proclaimed to us that racism and sexism are horrendous systems of injustice, and once we become aware of that injustice, we can never go back.

Their messages resonate deeply within us in these terribly troubled times; from our heart of hearts, we pray with the Psalmist: Teach me Your paths and guide us in Your truth.

Moving forward: As Advent 2024 begins we celebrate the 49th birthday of WOC. When I read the Advent psalm, I thought about the path to WOC's beginning.

In 1970, there was an ad in *NCR*: "Deaconesses? Dare to dream. Write to Jean Barnes". Many people dared to dream; a mailing list was shared, and local and national networking joyfully began. Eventually Mary Lynch partnered with Jean in this great work.

In December 1974, Mary, a great believer in enthusiastically responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, invited 31 people to a meeting in Chicago and asked, "What do we do next?" From that one question, a national conference was planned, and the gifts and the fruits of the Holy Spirit blossomed into WOC...Dare to dream, indeed!

Moving forward this Advent, we may hear much that is the antithesis of the message of Jesus, whose birth and life we celebrate...but we can dare to live out a sermon we heard in Philadelphia in this election season: Faith is a verb, we show it in our actions...The God of love empowers us to do justice with compassion for all God's children, to move past fear, to turn the page on hatred and division, to chart a new way forward.

Moving forward, may we also open our hearts to the healing of music:

Dare to sing with Bernadette Farrell: "Longing for truth, we turn to You... Christ, be our Light, shine in our hearts, shine in our darkness."

Dare to sing with Lee Ann Womack: "When you get the chance to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance!"

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