

*Because Sometimes True Fidelity Lies in the Courage to Dissent*

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

**Holy Thursday**

April 5, 9 - 10 am

PRAYER SERVICE AND WITNESS  
WITH MARY MAGDALENE AWARDS

**Ordination Day**

Saturday, May 19, 9:30 - 10:30 am

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LED BY A WOMAN

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**EQUAL**

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

Vol. XV No. 4

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**WRITES**

**MISSION STATEMENT** - *As women and men rooted in faith, we call for justice, equality, and full partnership in ministry. We are committed to church renewal and to the transformation of a structure which uses gender rather than gifts as its criterion for ministry.*

### **MARY OF MAGDALA: HISTORY AND MYSTERY**

#### **Part I**

*by Karen B. Lenz*

A black Ethiopian priestess from one of the goddess cults that flourished in and around Egypt and Palestine at the start of the common era; a "temple prostitute" adept at sacred sexual rituals; a widowed Jewish noblewoman of independent means and social standing; the only female author of a gospel that bears her name; the faithful friend and follower of Jesus who, unlike the make disciples, did not abandon him as he hung dying on the cross, and to whom the risen Christ first appeared; a cult figure whose followers willingly faced persecution and even death rather than renounce their faith; the woman of sin in *Luke* who washed Jesus's feet with her tears and dried them with her hair; the sister of Lazarus and Martha of Bethany; the "beloved disciple" and/or the author of the Fourth Gospel; the disciple who understood most clearly the teachings of Jesus and whom Jesus's designated, to the disgruntlement of Simon Peter, as leader of the others after his death; the Holy Grail itself; the woman who anointed Jesus with spikenard; the repentant prostitute featured in countless homilies and works of art, from ancient times to *Jesus Christ Superstar*; the model for the black madonnas of southern France; the consort, fiancé, or wife of Jesus and mother of his child(ren)—all roles ascribed or suggested by various commentators at different times to the woman the alternate and canonical gospels alike identify as "Mary Magdalene."

One of my favorites among the many stories that exist about her is this one:

After the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene, head of the band of women who had followed and financially supported the Jesus movement, traveled to Rome. There, due to her high social standing, she was admitted to the court of Tiberius Caesar. She upbraided the emperor for the mess Pilate had

made of Jesus's arrest and trial. As she spoke, she picked up an egg from the dining room table.

She informed Caesar that after his death, Jesus had risen from the dead. Caesar was infuriated, shouting, "A man could no more rise from the dead than the egg in your hand could turn red"—whereupon the egg immediately turned blood red, which is the reason why for 1500 years Eastern Orthodox

*continued on page 2*

#### **NON-RENEWAL**

We're not asking you to renew. We don't really have memberships. We just need your money—NOW!

SEPA/WOC has just enough to publish this issue of *Equal wRites* and send it to all our friends. We want to keep publishing for another year, however. So renew our hope and confidence that we are doing something important by keeping the voices of Catholic feminists coming to our parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and many other states, where we have more and more readers. We've expanded this year to include a COR/Philadelphia Corner (Catholics Organized for Renewal) and we encourage other reform-minded Catholics to share ideas, news, and plans for action with our growing community. Our web site is [www.sepawoc.org](http://www.sepawoc.org) and our e-mail list is [WOC-SEPA@yahoo.com](mailto:WOC-SEPA@yahoo.com) if you are looking for updates more frequently than quarterly.

So many of you have been very generous for many years, as our movement has changed and grown; please renew your support today. If the envelope included in this mailing is missing, send your contribution to our treasurer, Marianne Jann, 49 Driscoll Drive, Ivyland, PA 18974. Thanks so much!

*...Regina Bannan, president*  
[bannan@temple.edu](mailto:bannan@temple.edu)

Christians exchange red eggs at Easter.

An intriguing story, and unlikely to be historically accurate. But what is the historical reality behind the controversial *New Testament* figure about whom there seem to exist more oral and written accounts, traditions, legends, myths, speculation, and imaginative fictions, than any other, excepting only Christ himself?

It is impossible for anyone, on the basis of the surviving, often seemingly contradictory, evidence, to say for sure. But an examination of some of the ways the Magdalene has been visioned in the centuries since she traveled with the diverse and mismatched band that accompanied Jesus during the years of his public ministry, a group in which she enjoyed a special and perhaps intimate place, may yield some insight into the meaning and message her story holds for the church universal, its women, and the notion of radical discipleship—Jesus never used the word priest in reference to his closest followers—today.

Let us begin by summarily rejecting the image—Karen King in her *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* calls it “a piece of theological fiction”—fostered by the church for thousands of years, of Mary Magdalene, long blonde disarrayed hair streaming over semi-bared breasts spilling out of her blouse, as sorrowful, penitent prostitute. (*Author’s note: this is an image encountered as close to home as a February homily in the Redemptorist parish just blocks from the Catholic Worker house where I live.*)

This view of the Magdalen apparently derives from Luke’s account of the unnamed woman who approaches Jesus at dinner in the house of a Pharisee and stands behind him weeping, washing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. The host balks at this, identifying the woman as “a sinner,” whereupon Jesus responds by declaring, “Her many sins have been forgiven, because she has loved much.” (*Luke 7:47*)

Nothing identifies this woman as Mary Magdalene, except speculation and *Homily 33* of Pope Gregory I (also called the Great), delivered in the year 591, in which he authoritatively—and it is generally agreed, erroneously—asserted that the woman in Luke’s account was indeed the Magdalene.

That’s not all. According to David Tresemer in his “Preface” to Jean-Yves Leloup’s translation of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, the Greek word—*harmartolos*—used by the evangelist to describe the woman, and generally translated “sinner,” carries no connotation of sexual misbehavior, and was commonly used to characterize someone who had violated Jewish law, or perhaps failed to pay taxes. There is a Greek word for harlot, *porin*, which in fact appears elsewhere in Luke’s gospel, but not here.

Thus Tresemer concludes, “In fact, *there is no direct reference to her—or to Mary—as a prostitute anywhere in the Gospels.*” (author’s italics, p. xv)

Even the hidebound authority of the magisterium of the church finally recognized and acknowledged its error, officially repudiating Gregory’s characterization of Mary in 1969 – “though the image of Mary as penitent whore has remained in the public teachings of all Christian denominations. Like a small *erratum* buried in the back pages of a newspaper, the church’s correction goes unnoticed, while the initial and incorrect article continues to influence readers.” (Tresemer, xvii)

Why did such an egregious misrepresentation of the truth—at least insofar as we are able to glimpse it through the veils of history—come to be, and why has it grown and flourished unchecked for such a very long time?

One frequently-suggested answer is that it is symptom and

product of the deeply-ingrained misogyny the male hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church has nurtured through the ages, and represents a deliberate attempt, via the control and reconstruction of history, to discredit and marginalize the woman who played a significant, even pivotal, role in the early church—and, by extension, all the women who came after her.

If not a penitent prostitute, then, who *was* Mary Magdalene? She is, to begin with, the only woman besides Mary, the mother of Jesus, mentioned by name in all four canonical gospels—and in each reference to her and other women, excepting only one which appears to be primarily a list of Jesus’ relatives, her name appears first.

From these accounts we learn that Mary was one of a group of women who traveled with Jesus and the Twelve (*Luke 8*) and she is identified as the woman from whom Jesus cast out

### MARY MAGDALENE AWARDS AT HOLY THURSDAY WITNESS

SEPA/WOC will present its first Mary Magdalene awards during its annual Holy Thursday Witness for Women’s Ordination on April 5 (see p.1)

Among the recipients, who exemplify in various faith-based contexts the event’s theme, “Be Not Afraid: Honoring and Celebrating People of Courage,” will be local ordained Catholic women Eileen DiFranco and Judy Heffernan, Methodist Minister Karen Onesti, Methodist Minister Beth Stoud, Medical Mission Sister Margaret McKenna, Father Roy Bourgeois, and Sister Falakah Fattah.

seven demons (*Mark 16*). Along with other women, she is present at the crucifixion (*Matthew 27, Mark 13 and John 19*) and after his death at the tomb (*Matthew 27, Mark 15*). And on Easter morning, alone or in the company of other women, she is first to encounter the risen Christ (*Matthew 28, Mark 16*), who bids her go and tell the others (*John 26*).

And that’s pretty much it for the canonical gospels—excepting the stories of unnamed women or other Marys who may or may not be the Magdalene. (More on that later). But there are other sources—notably *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and the gospels and commentaries discovered in 1945 in the desert at Nag Hammadi in Egypt and generally referred to as “the Gnostic gospels,” which greatly enlarge our picture of the early church and Mary’s role in it. (The history of which gospels and accounts were selected to form the canon, which rejected and ordered suppressed, when, and by whom, on what authority and with what motivation, is a fascinating subject we shall reserve for examination and comment at a later time.)

In his “Introduction” to *The Gospels of Mary*, Martin Meyer observes: “In...other...texts the significance of the role of Mary Magdalene as a disciple of Jesus, and a beloved disciple, becomes even more apparent. In the *New Testament Gospels* the inner group of disciples often takes on the character of a males-only club, with reserved membership. Other texts, however, show that this was not the case. According to these texts, there were both male and female disciples around Jesus, and *The Gospel of Mary, The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Philip, The Dialogue of the Savior, and Pistis Sophia* all depict Jesus associating equally with men and women.” (p.x-xi)

**Karen Lenz** editor of **Equal wRites**, lives, works, celebrates, and resists at the Philadelphia Catholic Worker.

## DIALOGUE BOX

### ON WOMENPRIEST ORDINATIONS: AN EXCHANGE OF VIEWS

In the November 9 edition of the Philadelphia archdiocesan *Catholic Standard and Times* a letter commenting on the Pittsburgh womenpriest ordinations (see *Equal wRites*, Sept. 2006) appeared, signed "George A. Morton." and asking for prayers for the "priestesses" and others "publicly injuring the Body of Christ," and concluding, "Thank God for the sacrament of penance."

The letter also said, "How sad it was to read about the riverboat 'ordinations' of priestesses [sic] and deaconesses [sic] in Pittsburgh. 'My Will Be Done' would have been an appropriate title for the boat.

We know who is at the helm of the 'priestess' movement. We have met him countless times in our own lives. 'Enjoy the cruise.' Captain Satan says. And all too often we do, on his terms"

#### *The following letter is a response to George Morton.*

You really have to hand it to George Morton. He makes me remember why I am in this movement in the first place. His arrogance and idolatry light a fire unto my soul and reenergize my efforts to confront the evil that exists in a hierarchy that is drunk on its own power.

A better title for the boat would have been "God's Will Prevails." In spite of obstruction, intransigence, insult, and false accusation, the Spirit bursts forth and moves forward. Jesus the Renegade, Jesus the Radical know what these holy women endure: Blessed are you when they insult you, curse you, and condemn you in my name.

I thank God for the courageous women who have fulfilled God's will and who have successfully overcome an ingrained and crippling religiosity that chokes vocations to death. I thank God for the Women's Ordination Conference who, in Christ-like fashion, has rendered so much support to this outcast. I thank God for the Apostolic Catholic church where my own vocation will be consummated.

And as for publicly injuring the Body of Christ, you would have to search long and hard to find someone who has injured him more than Roman Catholic leadership. Do not speak of faithful women injuring the Body of Christ, Mr. Morton, when the Pharisees in their sashes and robes whom you proclaim as holy men have cut his heart in half.

Thank you for your miserly offer of prayer and sacrifice (poor prayer and small sacrifice). Offer it instead for those men whom you have made the singular voice of God on earth.

Poor and small reflects their spirituality.

Yes, I too thank God for the sacrament of penance. And when this soon-to-be deaconess becomes a priestess, she will be happy to hear yours.

...*Maria Marlowe*

*Maria Marlowe is a member of the core committee of SEPA/WOC. She is also a deacon candidate at the Church of the Beatitudes in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania. [www.churchofthebeatitudes.org](http://www.churchofthebeatitudes.org)*

### NOT "OKAY FOR NOW"

I'm so pleased to discover, through *Equal wRites* and other sources on the Internet, that so many people are openly in favor of the ordination of women as Catholic priests, conveying solid arguments in support of that, and taking action. The scholarship on the Bible and on early church history that I've seen in connection with this issue is really impressive.

I don't think that it is "okay for right now" that women are barred from serving as priests in the official church. This is a position that the official church can and should change as quickly as possible.

I think that the church hierarchy in the United States does not understand that the ban on females as priests causes or contributes to a lot of problems. Among other things, there is obviously a severe shortage of priests, yet about 36 million American Catholics never can be eligible for this vocation, because a priest has to be a man. Additionally, I think that discrimination against a class of people really tarnishes the church; it contradicts the church's teachings and mission. How could any sacrament not be for women as well as men?

Sincerely yours,  
**Harry E. La Rock**  
Evanston, Illinois

#### **Editorial Board of *Equal wRites***

*A Publication of SEPA/WOC*

Editor: **Karen B. Lenz**

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## COR CORNER

### GUMBLETON LETTER

Following his removal from the pastorate of St. Leo's Church in Detroit, (ostensibly because at 77 he was past the mandatory retirement age), followed by the Vatican's unprecedented requirement that he seek the permission of the ordinary of any diocese in which he planned to speak, Bishop Tom Gumbleton requested permission to address two Call to Action conferences in Arizona. Permission was denied.

Gumbleton, who has been outspoken on peace issues and a strong advocate of gays and lesbians and the role of women in the Catholic church, believes that his support of proposed legislative changes which would extend the time limits for legal action against sex abusers of children, was responsible for the actions taken against him.

COR/Philadelphia is sending the following letter to the Arizona bishops involved.

Feb. 20, 2007

Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas, Diocese of Tucson  
192 S. Stone Avenue  
Tucson, AZ 85702

Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted, Diocese of Phoenix  
400 E. Monroe Street  
Phoenix, AZ 85004-2336

Bishops Kicanas and Olmsted:

We, member organizations of COR/Philadelphia, strongly protest your refusal to grant Bishop Tom Gumbleton permission to speak as scheduled at the Call to Action conferences in Arizona.

Discouraging—let alone prohibiting!—dialogue and the free expression and exchange of ideas and opinions, which reaches its apogee in the edict of silencing, is a tactic appropriate to fearful and repressive tyrannical systems, and completely dis-synchronous with the inclusivity and mutual respect that should by definition lie at the core of any organization that claims the name Christian.

Bishop Gumbleton, whether or not you agree with his views, is an honest and courageous man of God, attempting to apply the values we profess to share—love and compassion, for instance—to the world in which we live. Would that all bishops, including yourselves, had the moral fortitude to take public stands for peace and the innocent victims of violence, including the children who are victims of sexual abuse.

To attempt to silence such a man is unconscionable.

Sincerely yours,

Catholic Parents Network of the Delaware Valley  
The Community of the Christian Spirit  
The Philadelphia Catholic Worker  
(Other Signatures Pending)

cc: Bishop Tom Gumbleton  
Cardinal Justin Rigali  
The Papal Nuncio

## BIG TENT

by Regina Bannan

WOC has always had very different kinds of people under its big tent. People who want to be ordained in a cathedral by a bishop and people who think that ordination is irrelevant, to

mention just the extremes. Some of the most important denizens of this tent are people who want to build communities of faith. We are seeing more and more of those in our region. Long-standing groups are changing, and new groups are coming into being as women are ordained or otherwise claiming their ministry and leadership. To some, it seems out of control.

But what's wrong with a circus? As a child I was afraid of the frantic activity of the clowns, in particular. But now I see as an adult, to quote an old friend who sometimes has fearful ideas of his own. There is nothing to fear in outrageous humor and exaggerated actions. There is much to be gained by shedding the structure of the rings—necessary for some performers and for some in the audience, but not for all. What happens under the tent but outside of the structured spaces can be more alive, more focused, more emotional, more challenging.

More real? As real, at least. Wherever two or three are gathered is the fundamental criterion. Anything more than that has to be examined.

My wish for WOC is that everyone be comfortable in this tent. Some will want to dialogue with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church. Some will want to explore how to minister more effectively their own way. Some will want to find a new worshipping community. Some will want intellectual challenge. Some will want spiritual growth. Our activities will change from time to time but we are all part of the circus train, on this journey to destination after destination that enacts again and again the great mystery.

*Regina Bannan teaches at Temple University.*

## NO TURNING BACK

## TWO WOMEN OF THE TIMES

by Karen B. Lenz

*The following appreciation is an editorial, and does not necessarily represent the views of SEPA/WOC. Readers are invited to submit commentaries of their own on women in the news. Equal wRites will print as many as possible.*

Syndicated newspaper columnist and author (*Shrub: The Short But Happy Political Life of George W. Bush*) Molly Ivins died in late January at the age of 62 after a seven-year battle with breast cancer.

Born in California, Ivins grew up in Texas and was educated at Smith, the National Institute of Political Science in Paris, Columbia—and by reading the muckraking *Texas Observer*, of which she proudly became co-editor in 1970.

She was spirited, irreverent and sometimes profane, with a razor-sharp wit that honed in on its target with the deadly precision of a “smart” missile. Writing in the *Observer* before the opening of a Texas state legislative session, she said “When the legislature is set to convene, every village is about to lose its idiot.”

She worked for several newspapers in Texas and elsewhere before her columns were syndicated, and even survived a short and miserable stint in the newsroom of the *New York Times*, which seriously cramped her style. According to Katherine L. Seelye's *Times* obituary, Ivins “cut an unusual figure there, wearing blue jeans, going barefoot and bringing in her dog, whose name was an expletive.”

Characteristically sardonic in detailing her treatments for

cancer, she said, "First they mutilate you, then they poison you, then they burn you. I have been on blind dates better than *that*."

George W. Bush was the frequent target of Ivin's wrath. When he was governor of Texas, she called him—referring to the high numbers of death penalty sentences carried out there—"the fry 'em and fry 'em governor." Strongly opposed to the war in Iraq, Ivins campaigned against Bush's re-election in 2004, and later called for his impeachment.

After her death, Bush issued a statement in which he said he respected "her convictions, her passionate belief in the power of words, and her ability to turn a phrase." He added, "her quick wit and commitment to her beliefs will be missed."

Molly Ivins, dead at 62—and we celebrate a life that brought us just a little closer to the day when the truth shall indeed make us free.

In what sounds suspiciously like damage control, Harvard University has named Drew Faust—a historian and academician who taught for twenty-five years at the University of Pennsylvania, where she directed the Women's Studies Program from 1996-2000—its first female president, succeeding Lawrence H. Summers.

Summers sparked an intense and widely-publicized controversy in 2005 with his remark during an academic conference that innate differences in the abilities of men and women might explain why fewer women than men had successful careers in math and science.

Under Summers' administration at Harvard, the percentage of tenured positions offered to female faculty declined dramatically. In the year before his remarks, only four of thirty-two tenured positions in the university's Faculty of Arts and Sciences were offered to female staff members.

Summers also reportedly used as an example to illustrate his views on gender-based intellectual differences the story of one of his daughters who as a child received two toy trucks in an effort at gender-neutral parenting. She treated the trucks like dolls, he recalled, naming them "Daddy Truck" and Baby Truck."

A few months after the conference, and facing an unprecedented "no-confidence" vote by the faculty, the wording of which cited his "managerial skills" and the controversial remarks, Summers submitted his resignation as president of Harvard. His five-year tenure had been the shortest of any person to hold the position since the Civil War.

Drew Faust, who has served since 2001 as the founding dean of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, is an expert on the Civil War and the American South. Her fifth book, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South of the Civil War*, won the Society of American Historians' Frances Parkman Prize.

## LENTEN POINTS TO PONDER

*Equal wRites* invites readers' contributions and reactions to its "Points to Ponder" column

"Because of the enormous wind and rain we have had, a lot of the daffodils have blown down, though not as many as I had feared. But the truth is that their peak is past. We shall have them for another week and then they will be gone. It

seems quite unbelievable but that is what spring is—the letting go. The waiting and waiting and waiting, and then the letting go."

...May Sarton in *Encore*

And that too is what life itself is—the waiting and waiting and waiting, and then (if we're lucky) a few days or years or hours of glorious bloom, and then the letting go.

...karenblenz

"I believe in compulsory cannibalism. If people were forced to eat what they killed, there would be no more war."

...Abbie Hoffman

**Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza**, eminent biblical scholar, at the Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network in November 2004, challenged the group to take on Nationalism as a feminist analytic and strategic issue, much the way the race, class and gender have been problematized to helpful ends. "Patriotic nationalism is the most powerful discourse of the day. Nationalism, gender and religion are not separate, distinct discourses; they inform and construct each other." In our studies "nationalism as the systematic kyriarchical [hierarchical] structure that determines all of our discourses remains mostly unmentioned and unexplored."

...*WATERwheel*, Vol. 17, no 1. 2004

Ezekial excoriates false prophets as those who have "not gone up into the gaps." The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discern itself for the first time like a once-bound man unbound. The gaps are the clefts in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock—more than a maple—a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. Spend the afternoon. You can't take it with you.

...Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

*continued on page 11*



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## THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD (REVISITED)

*Editor's Note: With this column, Mary Byrne resigns as regular columnist for Equal wRites. We both regret and respect her decision, thank her for many shared insights, and wish her well on her continuing journey.*

by Mary Byrne

It has been almost thirty years since I first tried to quit the Catholic church. After dutifully attending daily mass throughout my teen years for mostly the wrong reasons, I walked into my first *bona fide* faith community in a church basement on the campus of St. Michael's College in Toronto. For two hours every Sunday, kindred spirits celebrating Vatican II spontaneity clustered in song and worship and gospel truth. The year was 1968—right before everything changed. While American campuses were hosting student radicals, the campus of St. Michael's College was boasting radical priests— notable Dutch exiles, a smattering of silenced diocesan clerics, a memorable but definitely extravagant left-winger bounced from Harvard into our laps. Forget dogma and doctrine, the reformers ruled the intellectual roost. Back then, Catholic equaled free thinker; being Catholic *and* a reformer was like winning the identity lottery.

There has never been a time when I loved being Catholic more than those two years in the catacombs. In 1970, I returned to the States, taught ESL by day, completed my degree by night and on weekends went looking for basement Catholics. Months turned into years and then decades of searching interrupted by momentary forays into communities that were almost but then again not quite like Toronto. As the years fell farther and farther away from Vatican II, the gatherings became smaller and less joyful and more circumspect. The open window fervor of post-Vatican enthusiasm was replaced by the slowly clanging door of an endangered hierarchy. Just when I thought it was all over, out of the ashes of a dying church rose the clamor for reform on the wings of feminist theology. In 1992, I found the basement once again—this time behind the closed doors of women preaching and sanctifying and hiding from ecclesial retribution.

In the ensuing fifteen years, I have been sustained by the courageous and prophetic Catholic reform movement. With the encouragement of women and men who dared, I received my masters of divinity, was commissioned into ministry, founded two small faith communities, ordained other women into ministry, and gratefully helped spread the word on the pages of this publication. Although the road was never easy, it was always alive with the kinetic energy of those who pursue a vision. That is, until recently.

The symptoms of what I now call Roman Catholic Reform Withdrawal (RCRW) began about a year ago when I detected an annoying little whine in my writings. The condition gradually worsened when an indistinct drone of “I don't care” slowly turned into a bellow directed at every e-mail proclaiming the most recent heinous hierarchical idiocy or injustice (often synonymous). On the one hand, hope was evidenced in so much progress. The river ordinations—Danube, St. Lawrence, Hudson, Pittsburgh—restored women to ordained ministry and so many of the faithful to the spaciousness of a tradition based on Gospel inclusivity. There was so much to do now. Like Mary Magdalene, we had witnessed a resurrection with the mandate to go forth and serve in the light of those momentous events.

But, recently there are indications that, at least in our rhetoric, we are not moving beyond crucifixion. The conversations within various reform groups reveal a continuing focus on “the church”—the silencings, the excommunications, the latest absurd denial, the secret, sordid abuses of power. With

every e-mail bringing tidings of this dying “church” of paranoid clerics, I became more disheartened. We had been to the tomb, witnessed the risen Christ and instead of rejoicing, we are walking back to Golgotha to raise our fists at the tyrants. I wondered what news there is of those who are walking the road to Emmaus?

I know this pattern. It is called Battered Woman's Syndrome. Symptomatic of this condition is the belief as well as the fear that the abuser, omnipresent and omniscient, will “get” the victim if she dares to claim her own entitled life and walk out the door. Well, we have walked out the door and into the legitimacy of our own callings but still the specter stalks us. Still we turn our heads around to engage and enable the very toxic dynamic of victimization and reaction. Like the song, “Here He Comes Again,” we continue to romance this very warped relationship in so much of our dialogue. It is hijacking our energy, ransacking our imagination, paralyzing us in anger, and taking up valuable space in souls that long to serve. Haven't we had enough of these guys? We keep wanting to reform the church. But you can't rehabilitate/reform someone who does not want to go there. And, quite, frankly, the bullies who run the institutional church are not budging from their trenches. Indeed, they are more deeply entrenched. Must we continue to keep them company?

It began to occur to me that after some forty years or so of reform, that something else was beckoning. But what lay in between felt like a vacuum. Over the summer, I took my anguish and confusion into the garden. Day after day, on my knees, hands in the good earth, I weeded and planted and pruned and thought about life after reform. The outcomes haunted me. If not a practicing Catholic, if not a reforming Catholic, then what, then who? There were no answers. Just a disquieting sense of somewhere else, a place that was free of the anger and the resentments and the smallness of spiritual dysfunction—a contagious condition borne of direct *and* indirect contact with a dysfunctional church. The unbounded God whom I met in the garden every day was an invitation. Without having the words to describe where I was leaving or going, I slipped into this place waiting on the wings of imagination.

I no longer have the heart or the language to write about the church. This article is my last public discussion of popes, bishops and priests who follow the ancient Rites of Power, Privilege, and Persecution. And indeed this is my last contribution to *Equal wRites*, a brave and constant voice of reform. To all the women and men of this publication who have led us to the rivers with words that turned advocacy into action, I am deeply grateful. However, it is time for me to move on. For the moment, I am acclimating to this new sense of catholic, minister and God. It is time to be silent and then let the words for this place find me. This place that feels more like transformation than reformation.

In the meantime, send me postcards from Emmaus. When we to meet along the road we will recognize one another in our stories of ministering to those who hunger and thirst, in the breaking of the bread, and in our joy of going about the true work of our shared priesthood—without looking back.

*Mary Byrne is a minister and writer. She is currently working on a book, **As the River Flows**, on Roman Catholic women called to ministry.*

## STEM CELL ETHICS AND OUR COUSIN NANCY

by Marian Ronan

Something remarkable happened since the last issue of *Equal wRites* went to press. A woman became speaker of the House of Representatives for the first time in US history. And not just any woman, either. Nancy D'Alesandro Pelosi, a Catholic mother of five who grew up in Baltimore. The kind of person with whom you might have gone to Catholic school. Someone with whom I nearly did go to Catholic school, since she graduated from the same women's college I attended a few years later, Trinity in Washington. Nancy Pelosi, our Italian Catholic cousin.

Nor did cousin Nancy just "rest on her laurels" after ascending to her historic position (to use a phrase favored by the IHMs who taught me). She and her party set out to vote into law historic legislation during their first hundred hours in power. One of these was a new national minimum wage law, the first in ten years. This is the sort of thing about which American Catholics used to get excited.

Another bill passed in the "first hundred hours" was one that broadens the types of stem cell research that can be supported with federal funds, something stringently restricted by the previous Congress. In recent years, an issue like this one—involving sex/gender issues, and especially the embryo—has become much more readily associated with "religion," and even with Catholicism, than the minimum wage is, although it is a lot easier to imagine what Jesus would say about the minimum wage than it is to imagine what he would say about stem cell research.

Yet the question of stem cell research is one at which progressive Catholics—and everybody else—should take a careful look, because it is not what it seems. Indeed, the controversy over stem cell research serves as a prototypical example of how sexuality and gender can become the driving issues in most if not all public conversations, to the detriment of those conversations.

Consider what we "know" about stem cell research. It is a new area of scientific research that promises to cure a number of devastating diseases, many of which afflict helpless children. Unfortunately, the research is conducted on special, not readily available kinds of cells, the most promising of which would seem to be harvested from embryos. Thus the strong opposition of the Vatican, the Catholic hierarchy, many right-wing Christians, and the Bush administration.

A development in stem cell science that became public around the same time that the new Congress began working on its 2007 stem cell bill illustrates the extent to which stem cell research has been virtually subsumed under questions of sexual morality, and especially the status of the embryo. On January 8, just before the house bill passed, researchers in regenerative medicine at Wake Forest University reported discovering stem cells in amniotic fluid, cells that could be used for research.

### SEPA/WOC E-MAIL LISTSERV

If you would like to receive and share information related to the women's ordination movement, and engage in dialogue with others committed to the cause of full equality in ministry in the Roman Catholic church, you are invited to join the SEPA/WOC listserv. To do so, contact Gaile Pohlhaus at [gaile.pohlhaus@villanova.edu](mailto:gaile.pohlhaus@villanova.edu).

Commentators immediately conjectured that this discovery would solve the ethical problems associated with stem cell research. Indeed, the next day, Mexican Cardinal Javier Lozano Barragan, president of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Ministry, announced his joy over the discovery, provided that the method for obtaining amniotic stem cells would not put the pregnant woman or her baby in danger. "The ethical problem" with stem-cell research, Cardinal Lozano Barragan stated, has always surrounded cells obtained by destroying human embryos.\*

In point of fact, researchers at Harvard University responded a few days later that amniotic stem cells would not solve this thorny ethical problem because there were still some things that embryonic stem cells could do that amniotic stem cells could not. But even if this were not the case, Cardinal Lozano Barragan's assertion that the use of embryonic stem cells is the crux of the ethical question regarding stem cell research deserves careful consideration. This is so because it is a belief widely shared, not only among those who support the right to embryonic life, but among those who believe the use of embryonic cells in groundbreaking medical research is entirely ethical. A good example is Catholics for a Free Choice, who support embryonic stem cell research as part of their programmatic support of the Catholic right "to choose."

The trouble with this belief is that it is erroneous. There are grave ethical problems that attend stem cell research that have nothing whatever to do with the embryo. Most people associate stem cell research with the permanent cure of deadly disease—encouraged to do so by television ads like the one during the last election in which Michael J. Fox trembled on screen from Parkinson's disease—but few grasp that these cures are nothing like vaccinating individuals to prevent polio. No, stem cell research will enable scientists to cure certain diseases by permanently altering the human germ line. That is to say, they will insert scientifically modified genes into human beings that these human beings will then pass on to their offspring. Once carried out, these interventions can never be reversed.

Well, what's the matter with that, you say, if it protects the children of the future from juvenile diabetes? Sounds good, I admit. But then ask yourself, what else may these scientifically-altered genes accomplish? The leading proponents of stem cell research, many of them rich old white men, also anticipate that before long, individuals will be able to purchase packets of modified genes to insert into their children to alter their genetic makeup, and that of their descendants. Such gene packets could, for example, raise a child's IQ, or increase the amount of oxygen a person's bloodstream can absorb, thus vastly increasing his/her athletic ability. Some of the strongest supporters of stem cell research are even banking on the possibility that eventually genetic modification will enable people to live forever. Some of these individuals are having themselves frozen before death in hopes of being thawed out and genetically altered for immortality when the immortality gene is available. This is the sort of genetic engineering that, when applied to mere food by Archer Daniels Midland et al, inspires passionate opposition.\*\*

Restrain yourself from dismissing this scenario of human genetic modification as science fiction. After all, you may already be wearing clothes nanotechnologically engineered to resist stains. Instead of dismissal, consider this. We now live in a society where millions of children and adults don't have access to basic health care. Who exactly is going to

*continued on page 8*

OUR COUSIN NANCY *continued*

have access to gene packets that will make them geniuses, or, for that matter, cure their juvenile diabetes? Poor black kids? Undocumented immigrants? WalMart workers?

This brings us back to our Italian cousin. Nancy Pelosi grew up in Baltimore, but now she lives in San Francisco, just north of Silicon Valley. A while back the Silicon Valley had a great financial crisis linked to the globalization of the computer industry. A lot of people lost their jobs. More recently, a budget initiative was introduced asking California voters to allocate an obscene amount of money—\$3 billion up front, but really, a lot more—to fund stem cell research. The ads for this initiative were enough to break your heart: parents with terminally ill kids on their laps begging the voters’ support. The initiative passed. Stem cell research is expected to equal or surpass the (recently somewhat revived) computer industry as an engine of economic prosperity in California, curing diseases and enhancing the lifestyles of the upper tiers of California’s population. Federal funding of stem cell research can only hasten this process. The new Democratic Congress, under our cousin Nancy, is attempting to improve the financial situation of more than the working class. And there are ethical issues here other than the embryo that we really must consider.

\* Cindy Wooden, “Vatican Official ‘Rejoices’ in News of Amniotic Stem Cell Discovery,” Catholic News Service, January 9, 2007, [http://www.catholic.org/international/international\\_story.php?id=22627](http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=22627) .

\*\* The classic critique of human genetic engineering is *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age* (Owl Books, 2004), by Bill McKibben, the journalist who also broke the global warming story years before it was on the radar screen. Used copies of *Enough* are available for \$3.65 on Amazon.com.

*Marian Ronan is Associate Professor of Contemporary Theology and Religion at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. Her article on the world water crisis, another issue not subsumed under sex/gender controversy, may be found*

*at [http://www.absw.edu/docs/ABSW\\_RonanWorldWaterCrisis2005.pdf](http://www.absw.edu/docs/ABSW_RonanWorldWaterCrisis2005.pdf)*

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**ORGANIZE** a special celebration of her feast day, **JULY 22ND**, to honor this great woman witness of faith known in the early Church as the “Apostle to the Apostles.”

**FOR INFORMATION** on St. Mary of Magdala & how you can organize a special celebration: go to [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org), call 216-228-0869 (x3) or email [magdala@futurechurch.org](mailto:magdala@futurechurch.org).

## HOW TO SPELL A SOUL

by *Cassie MacDonald*

Leave morsels that the soul loves  
a poem, say, or a fig  
on the path to your self  
each day come  
at the same time  
and sit a little closer

or

lie in the grass at night  
until you feel the turning under you  
of a great wheel  
that is the soul

or

when you hold the hand of your beloved  
leave a little space between  
where the soul can crawl in

or

down from Mount Subasio  
eat an olive

or

fall down hard

or

make someone laugh. laugh yourself

or

sing loud in a language you don't really comprehend

or

*Cassie MacDonald, poetry editor of Equal wRites, is an activist and poet who is in the process of opening Peace House in Camden, New Jersey—“a place for peace and poetry and prayer.”*

### FINANCIALS

#### Southeastern Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference

##### As of December 31, 2006

Beginning Cash Balance 1/1/06	2,341
Chasuable Fund	590
Unrestricted	<u>6,827</u>
Revenues received as of 12/31/06	7,417
Expenses:	
Bank Charges	17
Chasuable	296
Donations	230
Postage & Delivery	747
Printing	5,641
Web Hosting	<u>175</u>
Expenses as of 12/31/06	<u>7,106</u>
EndingCash Balance as of 12/31/06	2,652



## GEORGE PARKER, AMBASSADOR OF THE KIN-DOM

by *Karen B. Lenz*

My friend George Parker, ringleader of a gang of aging ambassadors of the Kin-dom whom I long ago dubbed the South Philly Good Guys, died in February at the age of 74.

I don't remember if I ever talked with George—though I may well have—about women's ordination during one of our many conversations over coffee and the Dunkin' Donuts that he loved. But George was savvy and straight-on, the proud father of three daughters, and we often laughed and groaned together over the foibles of the church we both continued to call home. So I'm not sure exactly what George thought about the issue of women priests—and I honestly don't care.

I saw George, usually accompanied by Jack and Tom or one or two of the others, regularly, a number of times every year. They came to bring donations of clothing or school supplies, or candy for our children at Easter from the first communion class of their parish school, or the big check from the annual Mummer's Show they sponsored every December for the benefit of several organizations that serve the homeless—including us.

And for all the years—nearly ten now—that I've been at the Catholic Worker, the no-holds barred dinners we do on every major holiday for anyone who wants to come—but especially for the neighborhood guys who live in abandoned houses or bare-bones rented rooms and come to our door daily for food—have been underwritten by George's South Philly Good Guys.

Sometime the week before Thanksgiving or Christmas—and often more than once—George would call and say, “Are you gonna be there? We're coming by.” And within hours, he would lead a delegation bearing turkeys and hams and always a bag of salami and cheese and other treats for the house. His crew made holiday dinners at a local shelter, he told me early on, brushing away my thanks, and these were just some extras that had been donated. Not exactly a lie, I thought, but almost certainly not the whole truth either.

In the last few years—“I'm just too old to shlep those big birds around anymore,” he told me, laughing—there were instead envelopes stuffed with enough twenties to pay for our dinner with some left over for turkeys and fresh fruit for the families of the after-school kids.

Early last November George told me, in his customarily simple and matter-of-fact style, that he was ill. The chemo had been discontinued, and he was to start hospice care the following day. It was just too late when they found the cancer, he said, for them to do anything much about it.

I was stunned and momentarily speechless. “But don't worry,” he assured me, “we'll see you at Thanksgiving, just like always.”

And see us at Thanksgiving they did. It was to be the last time I saw George; the steps at the entrance to his modest South Philadelphia rowhouse barred wheelchairs. But shortly before Thanksgiving, assisted by several of the gang who called him with what sounded to me like great affection, “Georgie,” he appeared, weak, but smiling and somehow triumphant on what I sensed was his final grand tour of the places—more in number than I'd realized—he had been regularly supporting for years.

He was tired but happy as he presented the by-now familiar cash-stuffed envelope, and he stayed for close to an hour, laughing and joking as always. None of us mentioned his illness.

I told him we would be making pies for the holiday and I

wanted to make one for him “Aw, you don't have to do that,” he said.

“We are,” I insisted, “so you might as well tell me what kind you'd like.”

“What kind you got?” he asked, mildly interested.

I started frantically naming every kind of pie I could think of. I would have done anything for this man. “Let's see—apple, pumpkin, sweet potato, cherry, blueberry...”

He brightened. “Blueberry? You got blueberry?” he inquired. “I love blueberry,” he said happily. Then he caught himself. “Naw—I'm the only one likes blueberry. Make it apple—everybody else likes apple.”

And that was George Parker—choosing pie for what we were both fully aware would be his last Thanksgiving dinner, he chose apple—for the others.

He stood up then, with an effort, came around the table, stooped and kissed me, and headed for the door. “George!” I blurted impulsively. “Thanks for everything. I love you.”

He stopped, and turned to face me. “It's been my pleasure,” he said slowly and deliberately, and was gone.

The night before Thanksgiving, Magda delivered the pies—a blueberry and an apple, with a container of hand-whipped cream, and stayed and watched hockey with him for an hour or two.

I talked to him frequently in the weeks that followed, until he was unable to speak, and his wife would answer the phone, unfailingly cheerful and upbeat. “How is he?” I'd ask, and she'd relay any messages I had for him.

Christmas was chaotic here, and the cookies we'd earmarked for George just didn't get delivered. But a couple of weeks later, we made cookies again, and filled a tin for him. In what was surely no coincidence, some of the South Philly Good Guys, bearing gifts as always, appeared the following day.

“How's George?” I asked.

“Not good,” Tom told me, and as our eyes met and filled, Peaches remembered, “The cookies!” And so we sent him snowballs and white chocolate chip and peanut butter cookies and coconut macaroons, aware that he almost certainly couldn't eat them himself, but might be pleased to have them for “the others.”

I dialed his number an hour or so later, and before I could identify myself, his wife said, “Karen! Tom told me you were going to call. Thanks for the cookies.”

I gave her a message for George, who, although weak was alert and coherent. I told her to tell him that Dorothy Day believed that Christ presents himself to us today in the form of the poor, the hungry, those in need—the very people George had been faithfully feeding and supporting for years.

“So tell him he has nothing to fear—that Jesus is waiting to thank him, and welcome him home.” She said she'd tell him.

A good friend of mine who is a theologian (nobody's perfect) once told me this notion is theologically suspect, to which I reply that to me all theology is suspect, and that no advanced degrees are needed to understand what Jesus asks of us.

My view of the church and the priesthood has grown and changed over the years. After considerable reflection, I have concluded that the primary duty of a priest is to help people become aware of the presence of God, which of course surrounds them all of the time, so that they can then act accordingly. There are, naturally, many different ways to do this.

Thus I can now say that I aspire to the priesthood—the universal priesthood open to, indeed incumbent upon, every member of the Body of Christ. And I pray to be as successful at my vocation as my friend George Parker was at his.

*Karen Lenz lives and works at the Philadelphia Catholic Worker*

## ONAN'S WIFE

by Jim Plastaras

Chapter 38 of *Genesis* is one of the less delicate narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. Commentators over the centuries have focused on the punishment of Onan's sin, which was described as equivalent to masturbation, *coitus interruptus*, and by extension, all forms of contraception. Tamar, the central figure and heroine of the story, all but disappears in their treatment of the narrative. The evangelist Matthew does give special mention to Tamar in his Jesus genealogy, but delicately omits the circumstances of Tamar's union with Judah, her father-in-law. He says only: "*Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.*" (Matt 1:3)

Commentaries focusing on the sin of Onan tend to miss the main point of the story, whose central characters are Tamar and her father-in-law, Judah, with Onan playing only a minor role. This reflection will leave to one side what *Genesis* 38 might or might not have to say about contraception, in order to relish, and be edified by, the story as it stands in its own right.

The Tamar narrative comes as an interruption toward the beginning of the Joseph saga (Gen 37-50), *Genesis* 38 deals with incidents from the early history of the Judah tribe, when Judah lived apart from the other tribes and was more closely linked to the Canaanites living in the land. Judah married a Canaanite woman, and picked a Canaanite woman to marry his firstborn. The very survival of the narrative suggests that the Judah tribe proudly remembered Tamar as mother of its clan. The prophet Ezekiel would say to his fellow Judeans: "*By origin and birth you are of the land and Canaan; your father was an Amorrite and your mother a Hittite.*" (Ez 16:1)

The first verses introduce the *dramatis personae*: (1) Judah, father of the clan; (2) his three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah; and (3) Tamar, a Canaanite woman given in marriage to Judah's oldest son, Er. The stage is set when Er's untimely death leaves Tamar a childless widow. The narrative does not indicate the nature of Er's wickedness, but says only: "*Er was wicked in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord put him to death.*"

Er's death brings into play the peculiar institution called the Levirate law. Mosaic Law strictly forbade a man to marry his sister-in-law (*Lev* 18:16), but ancient custom made an exception in the case of a man dying without children. The deceased man's brother was then *commanded* to marry the widow to act in his deceased brother's stead and give him an heir (*Dt* 25:5-9). Accordingly, Judah gave as commanded his second son Onan: "*Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.*" Although a man could not be compelled to marry the widow, refusal brought with it a great deal of opprobrium. This might explain why Onan gave only external compliance to his father's command without any intention of providing his deceased brother with an heir: "*Whenever he lay with his brother's wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother.*"

The narrative does not spell out the reasons why Onan's action was seen as "*evil in the sight of the Lord,*" but they may have included any or all of the following:

Avarice: Er wanted to keep for himself the double-share of the inheritance that would have otherwise gone to his dead brother's heir.

Injustice to Tamar: His actions condemned her to

childlessness, considered by the people of those times as the greatest evil that could befall a woman.

Hypocrisy: He pretended to carry out his filial duty to father and deceased brother, while continuing to spill his seed upon the ground.

Whatever the ramifications of Er's wickedness, the Lord "*put him to death also.*"

Onan's departure left Tamar and Judah at the center of the stage. Judah now takes on the role of hypocrite-like father, like son. Judah announced his intention to do the decent thing and arranged the betrothal of Tamar and Shelah, his youngest son. Judah, however, had no intention of giving his only remaining son to Tamar in marriage. His excuse was that Shelah was still too young. The betrothed Tamar returned to her father's house where she was to remain until her fiancé should come of age. Her betrothal placed her under the same obligation of fidelity as through she were already married to Shelah.

Time passed. Shelah grew into manhood, but still no marriage. Tamar, realizing that Judah had no intention of letting her marry Shelah, now took matters in her own hands. Hearing that her father-in-law was going to Timnah for the sheep-shearing, she outfitted herself as a Canaanite temple prostitute and sat down at the crossroads to wait for Judah. With the help of providence, her ruse succeeded. Judah turned aside from the journey to spend the night with the veiled harlot. Having promised to pay her a young goat upon his return, he gave her as pledge his staff and signet seal. Then comes the denouement:

*After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again. . . . About three months later Judah was told, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant." Judah said, "Bring her out and have her burned to death!" As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. "I am pregnant by the man who owns these," she said. And she added, "See if you recognize whose seal and cord and staff these are." Judah recognized them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." And he did not sleep with her again. (Gen 38: 19, 24-26)*

Judah finally finds his moral compass and confesses: "*She is more righteous than I.*" Tamar, who deceived to get was rightfully hers, was more honest than Judah. The story, however, does not end on a note of *lived happily ever after* for Tamar. She was now a mother, but would spend the rest of her life as a single mother. Judah "*did not sleep with her again,*" and presumably would not free her to marry anyone else. Tamar's reward—if it can be described as such—would come from the Lord. She gave birth to twins!

Perez, who squeezed by his twin brother to claim the honor of firstborn, would be remembered as ancestor to King David and Jesus.

I will not attempt to spin out moral lessons from the story, but let the story speak for itself. I will, however, take a stand for Tamar, that she be listed among the heroines of Scripture, rather than among the "Really Bad Girls of the Bible," where author Liz Curtis Higgs places her alongside Jezebel, Delilah, Bathsheba, and Herodias, in her efforts to draw "*Lessons from Less-Than-Perfect Women.*" Well, yes, I guess Tamar was *Less-Than-Perfect*, but so are all the male figures presented in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

*Jim Plastaras earned his license at the Pontifical Biblical Institute and is the author of three books in biblical theology, including The God of Exodus.*

experts and authorities (who for obvious reasons)  
tend to be self-appointed  
—a barefoot person after all  
crafted the first pair of shoes—  
generally favor the predictable:  
poetry say  
in matching couplets  
or worship  
formulaic and carefully timed.  
churches make me nervous.  
I must confess  
I have never seen the point  
(which is different from never having seen  
the light)  
of constructing spires or pyramids  
cathedrals even  
in a universe  
ablaze and reeking  
with the sights and sounds  
and smells  
that loudly proclaim  
the presence of its creator  
to celebrate, contain, and sadly, market  
the builders' visions of God;  
buildings that in the end  
need to be locked  
to keep people out? or keep God in?  
and which serve mainly  
to block out the sky  
...anonymous

## POPE: DYLAN A FALSE "PROPHET"

Pope Benedict XVI, in his newly-published book, *John Paul II: My Beloved Predecessor*, reveals that in his former incarnation as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Vatican's Doctrine of the Faith, he was opposed to the appearance of folk icon Bob Dylan at a church-sponsored youth event in Italy in 1997.

"There was reason to be skeptical--I was, and in a certain sense I still am--to doubt if it was really right to let these types of prophets intervene," Benedict says in the book. The event included appearances by a number of performers, most of them Italian; only Dylan was mentioned by name.

The American folksinger performed three songs before the Pope: *Knockin' on Heaven's Gate*, *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, and *Forever Young*, before personally greeting the pontiff.

Born Robert Zimmerman, Dylan has at various times said he was agnostic, Jewish, and born-again Christian. Benedict is a trained classical pianist who reportedly plays a half hour of Mozart every evening.

## SOME THOUGHTS ON CANON LAW

by *Gaile Pohlhaus*

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* canon law is "the rules which provide the norms for good order in the visible society of the Church." One might liken it to by-laws of a corporation or organization.

In the introduction to *The Code of Canon Law* promulgated in 1983, Pope John Paul II said "As the Church's principal legislative document founded on the juridical legislative heritage of revelation and tradition, the Code is to be regarded as an indispensable instrument to ensure order both in individual and social life, and also in the Church's own activity. Therefore, besides containing the fundamental elements of the hierarchical and organic structure of the Church as willed by her divine founder or as based upon apostolic, or in any case most ancient, tradition, and besides the fundamental principles which govern the exercise of the threefold office entrusted to the Church itself, the Code must also lay down certain rules and norms of behavior."

In the introduction Pope John Paul II also traces the very roots of canon law to the Law of Jesus—"Love of God, and love of our neighbors as ourselves"—and the Sermon on the Mount, especially the beatitudes.

As the introduction reminds us, the first ten centuries of the church saw an uncounted proliferation of ecclesiastical laws. In the middle of the twelfth century a monk, Gratian, collected all these laws. There were many and they frequently contradicted one another. Additional compilations were put together through the centuries until the first coherent code was promulgated in 1910. Pope John XXIII of happy memory called for a revision of the code on the same day as he called for the Second Council of the Vatican. The revision was not undertaken until after the council but was promulgated in 1983.

Contrary to what some think, canon law is neither theology nor revelation. As stated above it is a collection of rules for good order. Unfortunately, as with most law, it requires special training to understand how it operates in the church. In fact it has, with respect to the sacraments especially, acted in such a way as to minimize and legalize theology. Baptism provides a good example. Catholic children are taught that in the case of emergency anyone may baptize by pouring water over the head of the person to be baptized and saying (while pouring) "I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." What a minimization of a beautiful sacrament and the beautiful theology of being baptized into Christ and receiving the salvific grace of God.

Technically, and looking at canon law with legalistic eyes, the ordinary of a diocese may excommunicate an individual—but does this reconcile with the teaching of the one who said "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" when questioned about the laws of Palestinian Judaism? Does excommunication make sense in a world that is not predominantly Catholic? Does it make sense when pastors don't know their parishioners and visitors don't stand out like sore thumbs? But even more puzzling is the prohibition to the table of the man who ate with publicans and sinners, including his betrayer. For a code of law that finds its roots in the law of love this is hardly a loving thing to do.

*Gaile Pohlhaus is an independent theologian of the Church of Philadelphia*

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## Book Review

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***The Virgin of El Barrio: Marian Apparitions, Catholic Evangelizing, and Mexican American Activism***, by Kristy Nabhan-Warren, New York University Press, 2005, 301 pp. Paper. \$21.00

reviewed by April Renee Lynch

Religious historian Kristy Nabhan-Warren has, it appears to me, based her book *The Virgin of El Barrio*, subtitled *Marian Apparitions, Catholic Evangelizing, and Mexican American Activism*, on the project of her doctoral dissertation, one that was at least ten years in the making. An assimilation of this fact is key to the reader's appreciation of the anthropological, psychological, and sociological "detective" skills the author brought to bear in undertaking her painstaking project. For a decade and more, Nabhan-Warren wove herself, using the tools described, into the warp and woof of the Ruiz extended family. During that time the family had Marian apparitions visited upon it; the chief recipient of these visions was the family's matriarch (wife, mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother) Estela Ruiz. In order to examine—and then establish—the significance of the aforementioned visitations, I will use this review to explain the knowledge gained by (as well as the activity of) the Ruizes.

In December of 1988, Estela Ruiz received the first of what would, until 1998, become regular apparitions and locutions from the Virgin Mary (all of which Estela Ruiz revealed to the number of faithful supporters that grew in response to Estela's sharing of Mary's messages). The Ruiz family's matriarch considered these spiritual communications from the BVM to be a gift (to herself and the world) precisely because Estela and most of her family were up until that time "of the world," in Estela's words, not "of the spirit" (my own words). Before Mary's visits to Estela (and, later, various other relatives) neither she nor they considered themselves religious. They believed that they were too savvy for what would take them away from their middle-class status; indeed, despite their deep roots in the *barrio*, most members of the family were college graduates. Estela holds a master's degree in the field of education.

The messages were simple. Mary directed, by means of the backyard shrine set up through Estela, Reyes (Estela's husband) and other family members, those who had not listened to her before to acknowledge, then change, their evil habits and those who were already on the straight-and-narrow to continue along this path. The world, said Mary, was in the grip of the Evil One; it was up to those listeners to the word (at first her word and later, as the up-and-coming movement gave more recognition to her Son, that of Jesus Christ) to acquaint others with what they had come to know, that is, to evangelize.

Kristy Nabhan-Warren arrived at the Ruiz's enclave in South Phoenix as a visiting doctoral researcher; she swiftly became a friend and surrogate family member. The decisions

she made in the role of close family friend compromise, I think, her work in opposite proportion as she would represent her information to be impartial. It is, of course, naïve to think that all this type of research is—or even should be—free from "taint," so to speak. The researcher's personal opinion is not only proof of that person's analytical acumen, but it also acts as a test of the researcher's theory *vis-à-vis* the subject to which attention is being paid. That is to say, for example, in order to understand that "God moves in mysterious ways," to quote the nineteenth-century hymn, the one who studies God must experience God on one's own as Source and Prime Mover.

The reason I mention impartiality versus involvement is that, so far as this subject is concerned, a certain amount of personal concern on the part of Nabhan-Warren-as-observer enriches the finished product. Being and doing in the name of God do not exist in a vacuum. Neither does the affect of one who attends the family she would study. The task was to act in "good faith" and as a favor to involve herself in Roman Catholic ritual, in the evangelizing I spoke of above, as well as a Latino/a activism preceded by the type of Liberation Theology championed by Father Gustavo Gutiérrez, O. P., among others.

The writing of *The Virgin of El Barrio* functions as an exercise in earthly acuity; in so doing, the author has claimed for herself a portion of the stuff of higher authority. The book is well-written—nothing if not detailed, informed by the sense that the author is a fair judge of people, and shows the author as surprisingly accurate when it comes to forming an opinion about how she will operate given her scholarly and human idiosyncrasies. My hope is that we will all do as well in our dealings with God, the challenge of our own respect for others, as well as the self-regard that teaches us about the first two.

*April Renee Lynch* is one of the few African-American MA students currently studying at the Jesuit School of Theology, in the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA. She is waiting to hear if she has been accepted into the Ph.D. program in religion and the arts at the GTU.

### LOOK WHO'S ON THE WEB!

For information about women's ordination, and updated information about SEPA/WOC activities, check out our website: [www.sepawoc.org](http://www.sepawoc.org).

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# Movie Review

***Sister Rose's Passion*, directed by Oren Jacoby, Docurama Studio, 2004, 39 minutes.**

**\$26.95.**

reviewed by **Marian Ronan**

Released in 2006, *Sister Rose's Passion* is a short form documentary that tells the story of Sister Rose Thering, a Dominican Sister of Racine, Wisconsin, who spent most of her life fighting the Catholic practice of teaching that the Jews killed Jesus. Characterized as documentaries often are by numerous talking heads, in this case, experts on Catholic anti-Judaism like James Carroll, the film might, in fact, be taken for a documentary about Catholic anti-Judaism and how, since Vatican II, it contradicts the teaching of the Catholic church.

*Sister Rose's Passion* is also, however, the story of a remarkable and fast-disappearing breed of American women, the American Catholic sister. Rose Thering was born in 1920, and entered the convent well before the renewal of religious life was initiated in the 1950s and reached its peak in the late 1960s. The film reminds us of what once constituted the way of life of American Catholic sisters. We see Sister Rose in a classic black and white Dominican habit, and learn that there were sixty students in the first class she taught. The film reminded at least one of its viewers that before the Council, American sisters by and large were nobody to mess with.

Before Vatican II, Sister Rose's order sent her to St. Louis University to earn a doctorate. One gets the impression that the dissertation research she undertook was chosen for her—research money was available, and soon she was analyzing how Jews and the death of Jesus were presented in Catholic religious education textbooks. Sister Rose's evaluation was less than enthusiastic. After she delivered a lecture on the anti-Judaism she had discovered, the bishop called her in and asked her not to wash the church's dirty laundry in public. She went right ahead and did so. Eventually, the bishops at Vatican II drew upon Sister Rose's scholarship to write *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions, which renounced the classic Catholic accusation of deicide against the Jews. Sister Rose spent the rest of her life teaching Jewish-Christian relations at Seton Hall University and collaborating with Jews in many different interfaith contexts.

Despite Sister Rose's refusal to stop washing the church's laundry in public, one of the impressions I took away from *Sister Rose's Passion* is how enormously loyal she was to the church throughout her entire life and what an absolutely classic rules-and-regulations no-nonsense nun she was. Her research led her to conclude that the church's former teaching on the Jews was wrong; with the passage of *Nostra Aetate*, anti-Judaism was officially against the teachings of

the Catholic church, and Sister Rose went about telling this truth to everyone with considerable authority. The institutional authority she carried with her was part of the reason she was effective in her mission.

In this respect, Sister Rose Thering is a microcosm of the renewal of American Catholic women's religious life in the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, the Vatican ordered women's religious congregations to update. Many of the superiors of the various groups didn't want to do it, but did so out of obedience. After a while, however, mostly by dint of getting to know one another and seeing the similarity of the problems their groups faced, the sisters became absolutely committed to renewal. By the late 1960s, the Vatican and the bishops considered that the sisters had renewed enough, but the cat was out of the bag. As with Sister Rose, things were never the same again.

Anyone who buys the DVD should be aware that the information on the package is misleading; *Sister Rose's Passion* is not 88 but 39 minutes long; some not uninteresting background material comprises the remainder.

**Marian Ronan** teaches a graduate course, Religion and American Film, at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA.

## National Women's Ordination Conference Membership Application

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I am willing to be a contact in my local area.

Yes  No  Project-specific only

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### WORLD DAY OF PRAYER for Women's Ordination

March 25, 2007



## CALENDAR

### Centers for Spiritual Growth and Support

The following centers and groups offer programs and activities of interest to progressive Catholics. If you would like to include events in the *Equal wRites* calendar, please contact Karen at 215-232-7823 or [equalwrites2005@aol.com](mailto:equalwrites2005@aol.com)

**Franciscan Spiritual Center**, a contemplative place of simple beauty, respectful of creation, and reflective of the Franciscan values of hospitality, mutuality and Gospel living, offers programs which are holistic, ecumenical, collaborative in nature and supportive of nonviolence. The center provides accommodations, space for spiritual direction, prayer, study, art and exercise on a beautiful, handicapped-accessible campus. Clare House offers a quiet place for contemplation, guided retreat weekends and directed prayer. Reiki training, grieving support and Taize prayer are also ongoing. For more information, call 610 558-6152 or check the web site at [www.osfphila.org](http://www.osfphila.org). The center is at 609 S. Convent Rd. in Aston, PA.

**Jesus House Prayer and Renewal Center** is a Roman Catholic center that is open to people of all faiths. The mission of Jesus House is to offer programs, prayer support, spiritual direction, and hospitality toward all God's people. Its quiet, reflective atmosphere fosters reconciliation for those who are separated from church or society. The center offers a variety of retreats, personal growth seminars, book studies and days of reflection. Groups are also welcome to use the center's facilities for their own programs. Come to the center on March 22 for a Lenten Mini Retreat. For more information, call 302-995-6859 or check the website at [www.jesushousecenter.org](http://www.jesushousecenter.org). The center is located at 2501 Milltown Road, Wilmington, DE 19808.

**Kirkridge** is a retreat and study center rooted in Christ close to the earth where people of diverse backgrounds find community and experience the transforming power of the Spirit for personal wholeness, reconciliation and justice in the world. Its work is based on the understanding that the life of faith requires not only action to transform the world toward greater shalom, but also the cultivation of a deep spirituality to sustain that compassionate action. In March Kirkridge offers *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church*, *Creating Culture of Peace: Nonviolence Training for Trainers*, and *Building a Vocal Community: Singing in the African-American Tradition* workshops. Programs in April include: *Earth-honoring Faith* and *Earthcare/Kirkridgecare*. For more information on these and other programs, call 610-588-1793, check the site at [www.kirkridge.com](http://www.kirkridge.com) or e-mail [kirkridge@fast.net](mailto:kirkridge@fast.net). Kirkridge is located at 2495 Fox Gap Road in Bangor, PA.

The **Lourdes Wellness Center**, a ministry of the Franciscan Sisters of Allegheny, New York, is sponsored by Our Lady of Lourdes Health System. The center hosts a wide variety of wellness workshops, offering programs on yoga, meditation, feng shui, hypnosis, aromatherapy, guided imagery for pain management, Feldenkrais method, reiki, shiatsu and reflexology. The center also offers special programs for older adults through its 50-Plus Club. In May, the center will host two sessions *Mary of Nazareth, Woman of Faith*, exploring faith and courage of Mary. The Lourdes Wellness Center is on 900 Haddon Avenue, Suite 100 in Collingswood, NJ. Please call 856-869-3125 for information, or check the website at [www.lourdeswellnesscenter.org](http://www.lourdeswellnesscenter.org).

At **Pendle Hill**, education is envisioned as the transforming of people and society. Programs offer the resources and time for integrated spiritual, intellectual and personal learning. Guests come to Pendle Hill to study, learn more about Quakerism, seek an experience of community living, deepen prayer and spiritual life, or discern a future direction. This spring, join with others in April for a workshop *The History of Feminine Spirituality*. Choose from "Quaker Faith and Practice", "Bible/Sacred Texts", "Spiritual Development", "Conscious Use of the Body", "Peace and Justice", "Arts and Spirituality", and "For Educators" workshop themes. Social Action and Social Witness Internships support and encourage young people who are, or wish to be, actively engaged in social justice work. For more information on any Pendle Hill programs, call 610 566-4507 or check the website at [www.pendlehill.org](http://www.pendlehill.org). Pendle Hill is located at 338 Plush Mill Road in Wallingford, PA .

The **SSJ Center for Spirituality** is a sponsored ministry of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill rooted in the charism of unity and reconciliation. In a spirit of hospitality, the center welcomes individuals and groups for spiritual direction, retreats, and other opportunities for deepening one's relationship with God, self, and all creation. For more information on these and other programs, call 215 248-7231. The SSJ Center is at 9701 Germantown Avenue in Chestnut Hill, PA.

**Temenos**, an outreach ministry of the Swedenborgian Church, is a nonprofit conference and retreat center. It exists to facilitate renewal and transformation in human lives in the Swedenborgian spirit of inquiry and personal growth and the belief that the sincerest form of worship is a useful life. Programs are open to persons of all spiritual traditions and the sacred space of Temenos is also available for private individual retreats and for groups wishing to reserve space for their own programs or events. Visitors are welcome at worship Sundays followed by a spiritual discussion group. Come to Temenos for ongoing Yoga classes, for Mindfulness Meditation or to join the Course in Miracles. For information call 610 696-8145 or e-mail [programs@temenosretreat.org](mailto:programs@temenosretreat.org). Temenos is at 1564 Telegraph Road in West Chester, PA.

### Local Groups Working for Peace, Justice and Equality

The **Brandywine Peace Community** continues its peaceful resistance to the manufacture of weapons by Lockheed Martin and to America's presence in Iraq. Join the community for a monthly potluck supper and program on the second Sunday of each month, 4:30 pm, University Lutheran Church, 3637 Chestnut St., Philadelphia (bring a main dish, salad, or dessert to share.) Upcoming events this spring: March 11 *The Media Versus the Public in the Iraq War* presentation by Prof. Edward S. Herman; April 6 *Good Friday Stations of Justice and Peace* at Lockheed Martin in King of Prussia, PA. For information, call 610 544-1818 or e-mail [brandywine@juno.com](mailto:brandywine@juno.com). For updates, see the site: [www.brandywinepeace.org](http://www.brandywinepeace.org).

**Call to Action/Philadelphia**, a group committed to church renewal, serves southeastern Pennsylvania, south Jersey and Delaware. For information on organizational meetings and programs, call 215 345-1176.

**COR/Philadelphia (Catholic Organizations for Renewal)** is a coalition of individuals and groups, including SEPA/WOC, sharing a commitment to a renewed church. All are most welcome to attend planning meetings. For information, call 215 232-7823.

**Dignity Sunday Liturgies** are at 7 pm at St. Luke and the Epiphany Church, 330 S. 13 St. in Philadelphia. The church is wheelchair-accessible. For information on these and other Dignity programs, call 215 546-2093.

**House of Grace Catholic Worker** holds a liturgy and potluck the first Monday of each month September through June at 1826 Lehigh Avenue. Contact the house for details: 215 426-0364.

**Philadelphia Catholic Worker** hosts liturgy and potluck every Thursday at 6 pm at 430 W. Jefferson Street. The Philadelphia Catholic Worker is a community striving to follow in the footsteps of Dorothy Day. Children of the neighborhood are the focus of the group's ministry. Donations of food for holiday food boxes and Easter dinner--everyone is invited!--are welcome, as well as help cooking, serving and cleaning up. For information, call 215 232-7823.

**Southeastern Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference** core committee meetings with liturgy are held monthly, and all are welcome. For information on time and location, call 215 545-9649.

### *Spirituality and Healing Workshop*

#### Level 1

*Understanding and Benefiting from the  
Connection between The Spiritual and The Physical  
(Only prerequisite is a willingness to learn)*

Whether you are a professional in a "helping field" (Health care, counseling, teaching, clergy, for example) or are on a journey for personal growth, this workshop is for you! We will be exploring Ancient Traditions and learning contemporary applications for everyday living.

**Saturday, March 31, 2007**

**9:00 am - 5:00 pm**

to be held at

**Philadelphia Catholic Worker • 430 W. Jefferson Street • Phila, 19122  
Presented by The Time Out Center, Jenny & Jim Ratigan, Facilitators**

If you would like further information or if you would like registration materials please contact us at 610-695-9780 or [info@thetimeoutcenter.com](mailto:info@thetimeoutcenter.com).

# SCRIPTURE REFLECTIONS

## Holy Week 2007

by Judith A. Heffernan

This is the Lenten cycle in which we hear about Jesus in the desert, the Transfiguration, the waiting father, and the woman whom the religious leaders wanted to stone to death.

Some of our most reflected-upon messages come from these readings... "One does not live on bread alone...It is good for us to be here...Your brother was lost and is found...Let the person without sin cast the first stone."

I read all the Easter Gospels, too, and this year's message for me is "Do not be afraid."

I was reminded of planning the Community of the Christian Spirit's Martin Luther King liturgy this year and finding two marvelous articles.

Father Bryan Massingale of Marquette University, writing in *U.S. Catholic*, comments that until recently he admired King in a way that rendered King safely irrelevant. What changed was Bryan's experience of breaking his own silence about several justice issues.

Out of concern for Bryan, many of his friends asked him, "WHY COULDN'T YOU JUST KEEP QUIET?"

Bryan drew strength from remembering King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech: "There comes a time when silence is betrayal...our lives end the day we become silent about things that matter..."

Jeff Cohen and Norman Solomon also reflect about this very issue. They point out that in the annual review of King's life, the chronology always jumps from 1965 to 1968, as if King took a sabbatical near the end of his life! Why?

King had begun to call for deeper human rights—e.g. to

point out that for people too poor to eat at a restaurant or afford decent housing, anti-discrimination laws were hollow. He called for radical changes in the structure of our society, the redistribution of wealth and power. He added that true compassion is more than flinging a coin at someone begging—compassion sees that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring!

In 1967 King also called the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and called for an end to the Vietnam War. King added that Congress appropriated military funds with alacrity and generosity, but provided poverty funds with miserliness.

Cohen and Solomon comment that *Time Magazine* called King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech "demagogic slander" and the *Washington Post* said "King has diminished his usefulness to his cause, his country and his people."

Indeed, justice is not easy—but it is our call, as it was Martin's.

On Holy Thursday this year we will again witness together, pray together and sing together for justice in our church. We will celebrate courage, listen to each other and pray for continued courage and direction.

We will remember that Martin said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We will remember that Martin refused to accept the view that humankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of war that the bright daybreak of peace can never become a reality.

We will remember that the resurrected Jesus tells us, "Do not be afraid."

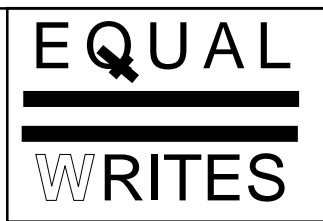
*Judy Heffernan* has a Master of Divinity degree from a Catholic seminary. A member of the Community of the Christian Spirit, she is an original member of the Women's Ordination Conference.

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**AFFILIATION:** *Equal wRites* 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.

**MANUSCRIPTS AND CORRESPONDENCE:** If you would like to contribute an article, letter, or anything else to *Equal wRites*, please send it double-spaced, with your name, phone number, and a short biographical note. The next issue will be June 2007. Final deadline for submissions is April 15. Send to the editor: Karen B. Lenz, 430 W. Jefferson St., Philadelphia, PA 19122 (215) 232-7823, or e-mail her at [equalwrites2005@aol.com](mailto:equalwrites2005@aol.com).

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