

**THE EAST COAST ORDINATIONS:
FOUR PERSPECTIVES**

Beginning in May of this year in Toronto and continuing through the summer, Bishop Patricia Fresen of the Roman Catholic Womenpriest movement officiated at five North American ordinations, including ceremonies in Santa Barbara, CA, Portland, OR, and Minneapolis, MN. The last in this series, which took place in Manhattan in July, is discussed from various angles in the four articles which follow.

MAGICAL DAY

by Judy Heffernan

This summer I said to my friend, “You think it’s exciting to be going to Italy?! Well, I’m going to Jersey City!”

My trip to Jersey City really was spectacular. For, you see, I went to the weekend celebration of the RCWP East Coast ordinations.

I went to stand with a long-time WOC leader who tried everything in her power to open a smooth path for women’s ordination. Ultimately, as for many of us, the realization came that our calls echo the old saying that sometimes we must go where there is no path and make a way.

A few days before the long-planned ordination, the New York church location had to be changed, because the welcoming Lutheran pastor had “international pressure” to uninvite RCWP.

Judson Memorial Church gladly and openly welcomed us all—and it was delightful. We had an inclusive, sacred, joyous ordination liturgy. It was a glorious experience of church!

My traveling companion and I were both grateful for our invitation and when, on this very hot July day, we returned to our hotel in Jersey City for the celebration dinner, we could even bear with the fact that there was NO WATER in Jersey City!

However, on this magical day, when kind hotel staff had printed out clear directions to the New York church for us, when residents guided confused travelers, when we had two marvelous cab drivers, when we were surrounded by long-time workers for women’s ordination, the water returned just as dinner was scheduled to begin!

Bishop Patricia Fresen is so pastoral, so reverent, so prayerful and such a good storyteller that it was wonderful to be with her at dinner, and to listen to her account of becoming a bishop.

When approached by a male Roman Catholic bishop in good standing to consider becoming a bishop, the time seemed too hectic, too overwhelming for Patricia.

She had recently been ordained, she had just been dismissed from her religious order of over forty years, she had moved to Germany, was learning the language and was coordinating the candidate preparation for RCWP. (Like I said: h-e-c-t-i-c!)

continued on page 3

WHAT’S YOUR HOBBY?

by Magdalena Eliasova

In July, a friend visited New York City to attend a “secret” event organized by RCWP. I must have been slow on the uptake because it dawned on me only after she came back that there had been another ordination of women to the Roman Catholic priesthood. I will not argue whether women priests is an oxymoron. I will not even argue whether we need priesthood in the first place. But I will argue about what we should be doing with it.

When I was in fifth grade a particular brand of candy became very popular. Every kid in the class made sure that if she or he were lucky enough to receive a treat it was that kind of candy. Even as an eleven-year old I knew that I had that candy not necessarily because I liked it but because everybody else had it. Now, every time I hear and/or read about another ordination I want to know how are we changing the church? Showing off my candy took on a life of its own. And let us not forget about candy hoarding. “How many do you have?”

Here, let me stop those whose comments turn toward the structural change argument. Regardless of historical demarcation, this structure does not possess self-corrective at-

continued on page 3

Next issue of *Equal wRites*?

The core committee of SEPA/WOC has loved producing our quarterly cross between a newsletter and a magazine – but we will not be able to do so without more money. This time we’ve cut back the number of pages and the number we print – but we’re still not sure that this won’t be the last issue this year. We’d love to communicate in December, but we may have to go online only. We already post every issue at <http://www.sepawoc.org/>. We’d like to continue doing both – but it costs more than we have now.

If you like a print version, please contribute to it. Many of you already helped us out this year; thanks so much – and consider sending more if you can.

Mail your contribution to SEPA/WOC, c/o Marianne Jann, Treasurer, 49 Driscoll Drive, Ivyland, PA 18974. And again, whatever you can do, we thank you so much for your consistent support.

Regina Bannan, President

BEHIND THE SCENES

by *Eileen McCafferty DiFranco*

One of my very favorite scriptural quotes is composed of the two little words, "Fear not." Usually an angel speaks these words to some poor person at a most inopportune time, as one did to Mary of Nazareth, who found herself unexpectedly pregnant before her official betrothal, in a culture that treated unwed pregnant women as shameful, impure, evil women for the remainder of their lives.

The church honors this type of fearlessness, even when the story doesn't have a happy ending. Few remained unimpressed by the bravery exercised by everyday Christians who stood fearlessly in the arenas before the teeth and claws of wild animals.

Most Christians are not called to sacrifice their lives. Christians are, however, called by God to be people of integrity, people who exercise fearlessness when confronted with situations that contradict or ignore gospel values. This, too, is no easy task.

Last January, an organization called Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) approached a Lutheran pastor in New York City and requested the use of his church for an ordination of four women in July. The pastor readily acquiesced even though the contact person advised him that he might receive some unwelcome attention from the Archdiocese of New York.

Two weeks before the ordination, three Lutheran bishops, including the presiding bishop, pressured the pastor into breaking a legal contract and withdrawing the offer of his church. The bishops advised the pastor that he was risking an international incident by renting his church to Roman Catholic women for the expressed purpose of performing an ordination rite in violation of Roman Catholic canon law. The bishops worried that the generosity of one Lutheran pastor would destroy years of interdenominational dialogue between Roman Catholics and Lutherans.

This fear was planted by a religious sister, a professor of dogmatic theology at St. Joseph Seminary in Yonkers and a member of the Papal Biblical Commission. Rather than phoning or meeting with the RCWP members, and discussing the sum of all her fears in a mature, professional, and reasonable manner, the nun went right to the top of the ELCA, ignoring both RCWP, whom she casually dismissed as "dissidents" in an e-mail, as well as the hospitable Lutheran pastor.

Two days after this unfortunate incident, the pope rewarded non-Roman Catholics who participate in good-faith ecumenical dialogue with a statement that all churches other than the Roman Catholic church are not true churches, but rather mere "communities," since only the Roman Catholic church under the Pope is the one true church.

One must wonder about the nature of "fruitful" ecumenical dialogue if, in the midst of it, the Vatican feels comfortable issuing an anti-ecumenical bombshell that could destroy the long years of dialogue more completely than the ordination of four sixty-year old women in a Lutheran church in New York City.

Why did the Lutherans heed the fear-mongering of a papal representative instead of putting the New York incident into some sort of ecumenical and historical perspective? What did they have to lose from an institution that already regards them as less than zero? Would the Roman Catholics pull out

of the World Council of Churches? Would they stop ecumenical dialogue?

My suspicion is that the Roman Catholic church would do neither of these two things. There is evidence that like all bullies, the Vatican does back down when it is directly confronted by a large and potentially powerful organization.

In 2002, the Vatican forbade Sister Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun, from speaking at the first Worldwide Women's Ordination Conference. Sister Joan, foremost a woman of integrity without a fearful bone in her body, told her order that she was not willing to be bullied by the Vatican. One hundred twenty-seven out of one hundred twenty-eight of the members of her order stood behind her and advised the Pope that any action against Sister Joan was an action taken against each of them. The Vatican couldn't afford to lose one hundred and twenty-seven nuns and the good will of thousands of others, and backed down.

It is likely that Rome would have backed down if the Lutherans had stood their ground, honored their commitment and called the Vatican's bluff.

Alas, it is easier to pretend that the bully pulpit of the Roman Catholic church doesn't really adversely affect the daily life of the world's churches, even when the New York incident indicates otherwise. It's easy to pretend that ecumenical dialogue is bringing all denominations closer to the time when Christians of the world stand united together against war and poverty, when the opposite is writ large in papal pronouncements.

Mature discussion of sensitive topics should not inspire fear or cause dissension. It should not give offense. It should not give a member of a papal commission the right to call her sisters in Christ uncharitable names. It should not cause one sector of God's people to close ranks against all others, leaving bad feelings in its wake.

According to *1 Corinthians* 13:13, the Holy Spirit has given us three cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and love. St. Paul taught us that the greatest of these is love, a virtue that supersedes everything, including obedience. A wholesome and wholehearted love of God and neighbor casts out all fear. In repudiating fear and standing with the outcast, the courageous stand with Jesus himself, whatever the cost.

Eileen McCafferty DiFranco was ordained a priest by the Roman Catholic Womenpriest movement.

AN AFFIRMATION—WITH QUESTIONS

by *Karen B. Lenz*

The Roman Catholic Womenpriest ordinations are the most dramatic and visible indicators of the progress of the movement for women's ordination in the Roman Catholic church. And, predictably enough, they have generated considerable controversy within the church and even in the larger religious and secular community outside the boundaries of Roman Catholicism.

But there have also been mixed reactions from WITHIN the Catholic women's movement. Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, for one, has spoken of ordination as "subordination," and cautioned against replicating a moribund authoritative structure.

The issue of how to work for gender-based equality in ministry reminds me of a long-ago discussion with a Sister of

Mercy who was my friend and mentor. I was about to take part in a peace demonstration that might result in significant jail time. "Can't you," she asked—I could hear the exasperation between the lines—"just write some letters to the editor?"

My response to her was, different strokes for different folks. Letters to the editor are good. So is civil disobedience. So is any (nonviolent) action or activity for peace. There is no one way to peace—or anything else, including, I suspect, gender-based equality in the Roman Catholic church.

So I applaud the RCWP ordinations and the public attention and discussion that has resulted from them as one way to work for the goal. However, I think the movement needs to address some larger questions, such as whether the priesthood itself is necessary, beneficial, or even in line with what Jesus envisioned. And if so what should the function of a priest be? What can an ordained woman do that a lay Christian cannot? And are women being ordained in the hope they will help the manpower shortage in the institutional church, or in the hope that ultimately they will transform that church?

I have urged that discussion for years! But if it has happened or is ongoing on any large-scale basis, I have not heard it.

Another related question is—whether the academic study of theology constitutes the only valid preparation for ordination. Marian Ronan has urged a new model of a re-formed priesthood which would acknowledge of lifework as valid prerequisite for ordination, as well as seminary study. I suspect it may be more valid, and it would create a far more inclusive priesthood—with a greater resemblance to the motley assortment of fishermen and others of various social standings who followed Jesus.

Along different lines, we need to honestly consider whether the effort for women's ordination is, as Magda Eliasova suggests in the article on p. 1, no more than a "hobby."

One argument that resonates with me is the sacramental one. We are a sacramental church without enough priests to administer the sacraments to everyone who wants to receive them. And Eucharist is very meaningful to me personally.

Yet even my view of Eucharist is shifting. A friend arrived with a generous check for the Catholic Worker summer program last spring, and after-school kids were eating peanut butter crackers at the dining room table. "That's Eucharist," she said on her way out. And of course it was.

I also must admit to reacting to what feels to me like the exclusivity of the RCWP movement. There has been little or no acknowledgment (of which I am aware, at least), of the long and faithful work of the Women's Ordination Conference, whose members were preparing the ground years before nuns were imagining leaving their convents to become bishops. If this movement is to be in the spirit of Jesus, it **MUST** be inclusive. We need significant work on dialogue and partnership, or we risk creating another exclusive structure with its own rules, run by and for only a select few.

And so my question in the end is not far different from Magda's—What intention is there on the part of the RCWP movement to transform the church, in more ways than just the sex of the individuals who say Mass? How is the church, or the world, being changed by these already ordained? These women were all compassionate and active Christians before their ordinations, engaged in a variety of ministries. What is different now?

Hard questions, to be sure—but important ones, I think. The groundbreaking events of this past summer, which featured a total of six different United States RCWP ordinations, are too important not to have the full support and cooperation of all who agree with the goal of gender-based

equality in ministry. This is not a private party. There should be no closed meetings or "undisclosed locations." We are not at risk of being fed to the lions; we must, as Eileen DiFranco reminds us, "Fear not." Jesus welcomed all who would listen. It is incumbent on us to do nothing less.

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

Magical Day *continued from page 1*

The male bishop (whose name is locked in a vault until after his death) apologized for the timing and encouraged Patricia take all the time she needed. However, he asked her to pray about it and to consider that the movement needed both her and her ability to speak English. The bishop believed that if the movement were to succeed, it must happen in North America, and Patricia would be the perfect bride! My traveling companion and I heartily concurred!

When the bishop asked Patricia to do it for the others, she knew the time was right and again said, "With God's help, I am ready and willing."

RCWP Ordination Day 2007 for us, as the song celebrates, was a day that God has made, and we rejoice and are glad in it!

Judith A. Heffernan was ordained by her faith community, *The Community of Christian Spirit*, in 1980

What's Your Hobby? *continued from page 1*

tributes and in fact is not only not considering the implications of those ordinations but not even acknowledging them. As far as the official church is concerned, these ordinations do not exist.

I now return to my original question: What's your hobby? My hobby, collecting butterflies, is precisely what it is: a hobby. It appears to me that besides these secret (and not-so-secret) self-congratulatory ordination celebrations, we are not doing much, that we in fact are treating women's ordination as little more than a hobby. You tell me now that everyone has to make a living. No argument there. But we as a reform movement need to get lower (not necessarily down) from the high horse of righteousness and acknowledge that it is hard to sustain the true essence of Jesus' message *in practice*. Renewal is as relevant to the reformist group as to the group in need of reform.

I love my hobby. I go out there with my net, spend my free time in the open air not because the results are important but because it is right for me. Without the actual activity there is no chance of ever catching any butterflies. And there is always the hope that maybe, just maybe I might stumble upon the butterfly of all butterflies and win the collector's "jackpot"—a laudable goal, as long as I recognize that the significance of my hobby lies simply in the fact that it fulfills a need in me.

Magdalena Eliasova is a Philadelphia law student and welcomes dialogue and discussion.

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Editor: **Karen B. Lenz**

Book Review Editor: **Marian Ronan**

Regular Columnists: **Judith A. Heffernan, Jim Plastaras, Marian Ronan**

RESPONDING TO RONAN

To The Editor:

I'm writing to respond to Marian Ronan's commentary about "self-serving analogies." I understand what she means: it is apparently selfish to compare our own relatively insignificant sorrows to the genuine horrors of holocaust. We the world's fortunate few do tend to whine in a short-sighted manner; we sometimes obsess about our sorrows while ignoring the horrors of torture, war and genocide. But Ronan may have missed the point when she says Suzanne "is not telling the truth" in applying Niemoeller's quote to becoming churchless.

Two reasons why I think Suzanne's use of Niemoeller's quote was not misused: One, the quote cautions that our response to authoritarianism can become a process of acquiescence to its abuses, gradually resulting in the eventual acceptance of fascism's unrestrained use of force. At each increased repression, "bystanders" are called upon to defend those targeted for silencing or persecution. Without resistance the use of force grows until it overshadows everyone.

Suzanne's message illustrated the possible scenarios of incremental repression based upon absolutism's authoritarian tendencies. What would the adherents of moral certainty within the institutional church do to further their moral agenda if they could? Criminalize abortion? Absolutely. Outlaw birth control? Certainly. Even now they attempt to defund contraception for the poorest and most powerless. Force gays and lesbians back into closets of shame, silence and fear? Silence theologians, dissenters, and women? Keep condoms from couples at risk from AIDS? What do you think?

This brings me to the second reason I think Suzanne's use of the quote was not inappropriate. **Resistance is a genuine and valid response to religious authoritarianism**, which causes real and lasting and deep harm to individuals. I know this because of my own lifelong bitterness at the damage I have seen done to women. I did not spend my childhood watching someone near death numerous times from miscarriages, bearing children in ill health, her humanity disparaged, her health permanently ruined, without carrying an awareness of the effects of the sugar-coated misogyny within the sexual strictures of the institutional church.

It's too easy to disparage Suzanne's sorrow at losing her spiritual home compared to millions of people losing their lives to genocide. A comparison misses the point. Simply make the connections from Suzanne's concerns to the institutional church's potential via fanatic followers to take away women's ability to control her body and to choose her life's purpose. These rights are not permanently protected if we don't acknowledge that absolutism must by nature fulfill its unbending truths rather than endure contradiction. I don't believe for an instant that the institutional church's avowed respect for freedom of conscience would preclude using politics and law to enforce sexual morality as it sees it. Think we're not likely to lose our seemingly well-established privacy rights in this era of enlightenment? I agree. But who would have believed the most fundamental constitutional right, habeas corpus, would be eliminated for certain prisoners? Who would have believed torture would become a means to gain "information" when our nation has so passionately and consistently championed human rights?

Although I gave it up long ago, I can empathize with Suzanne's need for spiritual comfort. People need support while pushing up that boulder so that perhaps someday horrors will become less possible. Mostly I didn't care for the commentary because we are on the same side against destruction, fear and force. We should realize we all carry a hellish burden, even if we are just grieving over a spiritual home.

Anonymous

PRAYERS FOR PEACEMAKERS

To the Editor:

Although I usually worship with our small community (the latest figures estimate there are 50,000 of these communities in the US), this summer I attended parish liturgies in three states.

At each liturgy, prayers were offered for the military.

While it is true that I believe that it is good to pray for all creatures and creation, I wondered why Catholic parishes don't all pray for the peacemakers who work to follow the call of Jesus to nonviolence.

I felt moved to write and ask *Equal wRites* readers whose voices are heard in parish life, if you would ask the liturgical committee/the lectors/the deacons and priests to include the peacemakers in the Prayers of the People.

Thank you.

Judy Heffernan

P.S. Perhaps another time you could add that people working for women's ordination invite prayers, too.

from "22 QUESTIONS FOR CARDINAL RATZINGER AND THE SILVER LINING IN THE ELECTION OF THIS FIRST GRAND INQUISITOR AS POPE"

1. You come from Bavaria, that part of Germany that most admired Hitler and first voted for him. Did you ever denounce Hitler or fascism? If so, when? If not, why not?...

3. If you denounced Hitler then why do you carry on in his ways such as 1) bookburning and denouncing of thinkers and theologians? 2) whipping up hostility toward homosexuals as he did? 3) excluding women from of all decision-making and leadership? 4) create scapegoats including people of religions other than Catholic along with women and gay people?

4. Do you want to put gays in concentration camps like Hitler did? (In the second of two documents you wrote and the past pope signed denouncing homosexuals you did not cite even ONE scientific study of homosexuality but cited your catchecism five times. Is this anti-intellectual attitude not another Galileo case in the making?) . . .

12. Did Jesus ever say anything at all about condoms or birth control or homosexuality or the ordination of women? (In fact, today's scholarship shows how many women were in position of leadership in the early church.) Then why are you so sure of your absolutist position?

continued on page 5

14. Why do issues of social and economic injustice play so little a role in your definition of morality which seems to be 98% about sex? (Hint: Saint Augustine!) . . .

21. Why do you denounce Buddhists as “atheists” and “autoeroticists?” Why do you condemn Hindus? Protestant churches? Pagans? Goddess worshippers? Native American believers? Feminists? The practice of Yoga? (You write that it gets you “too much in touch with your body”). Is your church—mother of Inquisitions and Crusades and anti-Semitism—without sin and the holder of all spiritual wisdom? Why did your church never excommunicate Hitler?

22. Why do you forbid Catholics to talk about God as Mother? God as Child? Original Blessing instead of Original Sin (which is not in the Bible)? God as female as well as male?

Now the good news. The silver lining in the election of this, the first Grand Inquisitor as Pope, is this: Now people of conscience the world over have a clear choice between Religion and Spirituality; Fundamentalism and Wisdom; A Punitive Father God and the Mother-Father Creator of Justice and Compassion; Fascism and Control vs. Letting the Spirit Work; between a preferential option for the rich and powerful (cf. *Opus Dei*) and a preferential option for the poor (as in liberation theology).

A New Reformation can happen swiftly. It is already underway. The Internet can help feed it. The myths that have kept the Roman Catholic Church afloat for 1800 years have been washed away. (The historical Jesus never said: “Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.” That came later.) Maybe the new version of Christianity need not be Peter based (Roman Catholicism) or Paul based (the Protestant option) but Mary Magdalene based. Any takers?

Mathew Fox

TWO STORIES OF HEALING

by *Jim Plastaras*

Mark 5:21-45, and the parallel passages in *Matthew* and *Luke*, are an unusual narrative. Jesus while on his way to lay hands on the dying daughter of a synagogue official, interrupts his mission to heal a woman and invite her to be free of her shameful secret.

There are only five Gospel narratives where women are the recipients of Jesus’ healing power. (In the seventeen other Gospel narratives of healing, the persons healed are men or boys.) Mark uses a favorite literary device by weaving together the two narratives where Jesus heals. He begins with narrative A, only to interrupt the action to bring in narrative B, and then returns to narrative A to bring the story to a conclusion. Mark’s interweaving of two events in an A-B-A pattern is never haphazard, but usually invites us to compare-and-contrast the two events.

A good example of Mark’s “A-B-A” storytelling is his description of Jesus before the Sanhedrin in *Mark* 14:45. The story opens with Peter outside the Sanhedrin’s meeting place. “Peter followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest.”

Mark then switches the action to inside the hall where Jesus faces the Sanhedrin. Jesus is challenged by the high priest to state whether he is “the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”

Jesus stands his ground and answers: “I am, and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

The evangelist then switches the action back to the outer courtyard where Peter is also challenged as to whether he is

a disciple of Jesus. Peter’s response is in total contrast to the response of Jesus. Peter collapses before the challenge.

Here in *Mark* 5:21-45, there is a similar interweaving of contrasting events. The action begins when Jairus, an official of the local synagogue—somebody important—falls at the feet of Jesus, begging him to come and lay hands on his daughter. There is palpable excitement in the crowd as Jesus’ sets out with Jairus. The crowd presses around Jesus, for it wants to be witness of what would be a very special healing. After all, Jairus was an important person.

Then something unexpected and remarkable happens. Jesus stops short and asks those around him, “Who touched my clothes?”

The disciple is flummoxed and says to him: “You see the people crowding against you; how can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’”

But Jesus persisted in looking around to see who had touched him. Luke reports Jesus as saying: “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.”

There is a stark contrast between Jairus, a man of some importance, and this woman concealing her anonymity in the crowd, whose affliction condemned her to the status of non-person. The chronic flow of menstrual blood from which she suffered placed her in a perpetual state of ritual impurity, which severely restricted her contact with family and community. Though no fault of her own, she carried a heavy burden of shame, much like the burden carried by innocent individuals sexually abused in childhood.

The woman’s affliction was hidden from everyone’s view, and so was her healing. Only Jesus and the woman knew that something had happened. Jesus does not “out” the woman, but invites her to come forward with the truth about

continued on page 7

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COR CORNER

THE COMMUNITY

OF ST. MARY MAGDALENE

by *Maria Marlowe*

Like the woman for whom we are named, the Saint Mary Magdalene Community is no stranger to controversy and tension. Torn asunder last May, a part of our previous faith community rose from the ashes during the summer and rebuilt a strong foundation that continues to flourish. (It's amazing what the Holy Spirit can do with ashes.) Our worship is rooted in the deep spirituality of the Catholic Mass. Yet it is fashioned to accommodate a male and female God, full participation of the laity, and a female priest and deacon who are, at this time, the only ministers in this "little engine that could" (as we once affectionately called ourselves). Our Eucharistic table welcomes all regardless of sexual orientation, marital status, political or social beliefs, or Christian affiliation (or lack thereof). We ask only that communicants approach the Eucharist with sincerity, which is something only they and God can judge.

We are in many ways still searching. We are a new (and renewed) people and so, at this point, we go from Sunday to Sunday trusting that the Holy Spirit will continue to offer us her strong, gentle, and guiding hand. We are actively planning Advent liturgy and are discussing a Bible study. We support our community and also give regularly to the poor. We try to steer clear of political influences, remembering to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. We recognize that Christianity is both a struggle and a joy, a responsibility and a reward, a controversy and a reconciliation. Just as it was when Christ first presented it to the world, just as it will be until the end of time.

We invite all into our community. In the spirit of the Magdalene for whom we are named, we have been wounded, we have survived, and we will indeed do all we humanly can to let God's kingdom come.

Maria Marlowe is a deacon of the Saint Mary Magdalene Community.

Worship: Every Sunday 9:00 a.m., Drexel Hill United Methodist Church in the McBurney Chapel, 600 Burmont Road, Drexel Hill, PA 19026

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Mission Statement: We, the members of the Saint Mary Magdalene Community, pray, worship, and share together in Christian fellowship. It is our belief that all people are created by God and deserve to be loved. Our community promotes tolerance, acceptance, and respect. We fulfill our Christian mission by reaching out to all those in need.

Website: www.marymagdalenecommunity.org

THE PHILADELPHIA CATHOLIC WORKER

by *Karen B. Lenz*

During the years (nearly ten now) that I have spent at the Catholic Worker, we have welcomed dozens of young people—college students from the Midwest on "urban plunges" and alternate spring breaks; religion and theology classes come to talk about Dorothy Day after reading *The Long Loneliness*; recent graduates exploring the Catholic Worker lifestyle and discerning its role in their future; local college students coaching basketball or helping the after-school kids do homework; students from a Friends high school painting and weeding on several service days each semester.

Out of all of those faces over all of those years, Murray stands out. He came to us five years ago, with a group from the University of Notre Dame, here for a crash course in social justice initiatives in the inner city, or something like that. His manner was sensitive and caring; his questions and observations thoughtful. He seemed to connect with what we were about.

Over the next four years while he was at school studying theology and philosophy and marching in ROTC drills, small checks with notes of encouragement about our work with neighborhood kids and our work for peace, arrived at irregular intervals. He spent time in Egypt and engaged in deep reflection about the role of the US on global affairs. And then, as graduation approached, came a long and painfully honest letter. Having attended Notre Dame on an ROTC scholarship, Murray was committed to two years of service in the Navy—something he'd dreamed about since childhood. Now, however, he was not so sure, though he felt duty-bound to honor his commitment. How would we feel, he asked, about accepting contributions if we knew they came from a Navy paycheck?

We'd feel just fine, we quickly assured him.

He sent us his induction bonus.

Over the next year and a half, there were e-mails and fre-

HEALING FROM ABUSE REFLECTION

Nicole Sotelo will facilitate an "Evening of Reflection for Christian Women Healing from Abuse" in Philadelphia on Wednesday, November 28, 2007. Sotelo, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School, is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*. She currently works as campaign and media coordinator for Call To Action/USA.

Evening of Reflection for Christian Women Healing from Abuse Wednesday, November 28, 2007, 6-8pm
Cecilian Center for Earth, Arts and Spirit
100 W. Carpenter Lane Philadelphia, PA
For information or to register, contact Sr. Mary Elizabeth Clark at 215.849.3364 or meclark2004@verizon.net

quent long notes, always with a generous donation enclosed, from Bahrain and Texas and most recently letters written during long night watches on a destroyer stationed in the sea outside Japan.

Deeply committed to peace and praying he will never be involved in combat, he rails at the patriotic “God on our side” exhortations of the Navy chaplain broadcast nightly through the ship. The loneliness of his position fills the spaces between his words.

Lately, as his tour of duty approaches its end, his letters have been full of his plans for the future—graduate school, working with the Catholic Worker kids in next year’s summer program. And then the quiet announcement, not entirely unexpected—“When I was home, I was talking to a Franciscan priest. I am discerning whether I have a vocation.”

I struggled to find the words to respond to this. “You would make a good priest. You would make a good anything you chose to be,” I write to him.

What I did not put into my letter to Murray was my deep concern that he was considering enlisting for years, perhaps a lifetime, of lonely night watches on the deck of an institution perilously close to self-destruction.

I care deeply for this man I have watched grow from a sensitive adolescent to clear-sighted and committed adult of great integrity, courageous enough to grapple with important issues. I want him to be happy.

At the same time I understand that people like Murray (and the women of WOC) may be the best hope for the church which, like Dorothy Day, I love even while I often despair of it.

And I also know that if Murray discerns that God is calling him to the priesthood, he will not hesitate to answer that call. Perhaps it’s just that his faith is stronger than mine.

At any rate, if that day comes, it will be one Ordination Day that will find me *inside* the cathedral, praying with renewed hope for the day when we shall indeed all be one.

The Philadelphia Catholic Worker, located at 430 West Jefferson St., 215 232-7823, invites you to join them at Wednesdays at 6 pm for liturgy and dinner, or to volunteer in their after-school program with neighborhood children, or to donate a turkey or food for holiday food boxes for struggling families, or to contribute blankets, socks, or winter jackets for the children’s families or people on the street. Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, believed that Jesus presents himself to us today in the form of the poor and the sick and the hungry, and that, quite literally, what we do for them we do for him.

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Two Stories of Healing *continued from page 5*

her affliction and her healing. She had been freed from the burden of her shame. The woman, “*seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.*”

Mark then returns to the thread of the first narrative, as Jesus continues on his way to the bedside of Jairus’ daughter. The crowd, still eager to see a miracle (a woman’s unverifiable claim that she had been healed hardly fit the bill), pressed after Jesus. When the news came that the girl had died and Jesus responded that she was only asleep, the mood of the fickle crowd changed. The crowd, with the professional mourners at Jairus’ home, mocked him.

The second healing, as was the case with the anonymous woman, would take place in secret. Jesus allowed only his two disciples, James and John, and the girl’s parents to come with him to the bedside, and after restoring the girl to her parents, he charged them to tell no one.

The healing narratives of *Mark* 5:21-45 do not fit neatly into the position of traditional apologetics that Jesus’ works of healing were intended as proof of his divine mission. What took place between Jesus and the anonymous women, and between Jesus and the girl and her parents, was hidden from the eyes of the crowd.

The evangelist’s interweaving of these two healing narratives invites us to reflect on Jesus’ approach to his mission of healing—a mission to which we also are called: Jesus had set out on an important mission, but he did not hesitate to interrupt the planned activity to respond to a totally unplanned and unexpected moment of grace.

His compassion recognized no distinction of class or status: he makes Jairus—an important person—wait, as he responds to the need of this woman—who was a nobody. Jesus might have, but did not “out” the woman. He invited her to come forward and find peace by bringing to light what she had been experienced as shame.

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*.


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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.

Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology, by Sarah McFarland Taylor, Harvard University Press, 2007. 363 pp. Hardback. \$29.95.

reviewed by *Marian Ronan*

Since the Vatican II-mandated renewal of religious life in the 1960s, Catholic sisters in the US and Canada have been engaged in many significant activities—teaching in the inner city, demonstrating against segregation, criticizing Christian anti-Judaism, lobbying Congress. In *Green Sisters*, Sarah McFarland Taylor, a professor of religion at Northwestern University, explores what she believes may be the most significant of these developments, the passionate involvement of contemporary women religious in the movement to save the earth.

In an appendix to *Green Sisters*, McFarland Taylor lists fifty separate green centers—gardens, farms, monasteries, educational centers—sponsored and staffed by women’s religious congregations across North America. (One of these is located in Philadelphia, the Sisters of St. Joseph’s Cecilian Center for Earth, Arts and Spirit.) Throughout the book, McFarland Taylor describes a number of these centers, and the “green sisters” who are engaged in these and other environmental ministries. Perhaps best known among them is Genesis Farm, in western New Jersey, led by the dynamic Dominican sister Miriam MacGillis; McFarland Taylor’s many visits to Genesis Farm make her renderings of the farm especially memorable. Also highly informative and inspiring are sections on the recently founded “ecozoic” Green Mountain Monastery in Vermont, the entirely sustainable reconstruction of the motherhouse of the Sisters Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan, and the national network, “Sisters of Earth,” through which many of the “green sisters” come together.

In this study, however, McFarland Taylor goes beyond describing the ministries of “green sisters” to propose the greening of religious life as the driving force behind the revival of women’s religious life. She offers this proposal as an alternative to predictions, based on the high median age of current members of religious congregations and the tiny number of current aspirants, that religious life in North America is dying. McFarland Taylor builds her argument about the green revival of religious life around a series of environmental metaphors, one of which provides the foundation for each chapter. For example, in chapter one, “companion planting,”—the organic practice of interplanting plant species—illuminates the diverse ideological, cultural and social movements in the history of women religious that combine to make the greening of religious life possible. In another, the green emphasis on “reinhabiting” the land rather than exhausting it and moving on parallels the decision by green sisters to “reinhabit” Catholic religious life rather than leave it behind. And elsewhere, the work of conserving heirloom seeds—seeds passed down by generations of farmers outside the control of agribusiness—serves as an image of the conservation of religious life itself. McFarland does a masterful job of creating this metaphorical fabric, and weaves into it a great deal of information about women’s religious life.

At the center of McFarland Taylor’s portrayal of the greening of women’s religious life is the new story of creation as envisioned and disseminated by Father Thomas Berry and popularized by Sister Miriam MacGillis and others. Much of the book is devoted to describing rituals, litanies, laby-

rinths, and other religious activities and convictions fashioned around the new story of creation, practiced by the green sisters, and taught to those who come to their centers. The linkage between these spiritual practices and green agricultural practices is explicit and convincing. What with the widespread turn to spirituality in our time, all of this may well make green religious life attractive, and contribute to its renewal. Further, it is impossible to deny the profound impact of the work of Thomas Berry on the emergence of creation-centered spirituality as a means of drawing American Catholics and others toward the work of sustaining and defending the earth.

However, it is possible to come away from *Green Sisters* with the impression that the earth ministries of Catholic sisters in North America are primarily ahistorical and apolitical. Again and again, at the end of paragraphs, if not pages, describing deeply moving rituals, litanies, and sustainable agricultural practices, McFarland Taylor writes something like, “Of course, the sisters do not separate these practices from their opposition to environmental racism or the policies of the World Bank.” Alas, except in a few instances, McFarland Taylor herself doesn’t succeed at integrating the political and economic dimensions of the sisters’ ministries into her optimistic and lyrical vision. Since economic and political activism is and has for some time been an integral part of the ministry of Catholic sisters in North America, McFarland Taylor’s portrait of them is thus attractive and inspiring but seriously incomplete.

Marian Ronan is a member of the Grail Movement, an international women’s group which, in the United States, has been involved in preserving and cultivating the land

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Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter, by Traci C. West, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. 216pp. Paper. \$24.95.

reviewed by Jodie Tooley

In *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*, black feminist ethicist and United Methodist minister, Traci C. West, offers an alternative approach to ethics for those interested in finding a way to do justice. She proposes that they go beyond merely *naming* specific social problems. Focusing on the enduring realities of racism and the sexual violation of women, West argues for a Christian social ethics method that stretches beyond ideas and concepts by examining the concrete realities of the lives of the marginalized. West's resolve is clear as she begins: "the idea that we've 'moved beyond' our society's need for concretely identifying these concerns is a costly lie," she tells us. West opens possibilities for developing liberative social ethics by drawing real life stories up alongside classical theory and institutionalized patterns.

Disruptive Christian Ethics is divided into two parts, each addressing liberative concepts as well as liberative practices. In Part I, West places noted mid-twentieth century Protestant ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr, in dialogue with gritty life stories of African-American women's activism in 1930s Harlem, then pairs key ethical concepts with the concrete issue of the sexual violation of women in public practices. In Part II, she demonstrates how racism influences both welfare policy and morning worship, then concludes with comments by black women confronting heterosexism in their communities.

West views Niebuhr's contributions to Christian ethics as representative of a western tendency to designate white, male and Christian thinkers as generators and keepers of the moral code. The thinker's effort stays separate from communities most affected by oppressive conditions and therefore fails to address the common good. Niebuhr argued that social problems are the result of a will to power shared by all humans—pridefulness arising out of human sinfulness. Such an approach neatly skirts structural sins such as racism that are more characteristic of some humans than others.

West places Niebuhr's theory in conversation with striking responses to oppression in 1930s Harlem: housewives who organized neighbors to shop only where blacks were hired, and professional women who directed their power, energy and resources to resist poverty and racism. Positioned alongside Niebuhr, these stories of black women's real-life responses to Harlem's racist culture help us see Niebuhr with fresh eyes. He recognized that blacks would be free only when white power is redistributed, but his remedy called for blacks to rise up, not for whites to change. West observes that Niebuhr addresses moral wrong from a privileged distance.

In the second chapter in this section, West deepens this analysis by telling stories of African-American and other poor women of diverse backgrounds who were sexually violated in public practices, by police officers and in prison settings. West places these disturbing stories in dialogue with discussion regarding the relationship between universal and particular experience, and their appropriate integration. Defining her terms, West describes multiple ways her liberative method is a Christian one, with particular emphasis on the communal aspects of Christianity.

West is clear that the justice journey is engaged within and through a Christian faith community because it is in community that one is held accountable to others and supported

by them. In Part II of *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, West moves on to consider broader social and ecclesial practices by placing Mary of Nazareth's words in the Magnificat—widely viewed as a moral lesson about the poor and powerless—into dialogue with practices related to welfare reform policy. West offers several examples of racist, denigrating pronouncements about the poor uttered by politicians and members of the media which resulted in public policy that punishes poor women. Pressing on to ask, "What would it mean to listen to Mary?" West notes that Christian practices include a distinctive call to justice, and urges Christians to develop practices that break away from marginalizing values and policies. Such practices reject firm adherence to the current public agenda and engage opportunities for system reversal.

In the second chapter of this section, West considers Sunday morning worship rituals in dialogue with her own experience of racism in a predominantly white worship setting. Hers is an astute analysis of white privilege in Christian worship: its source and benefits, its language of entitlement and outreach activities eager to assist non-white others. West exposes white social dominance deeply embedded in common Christian rituals, but stays faithful to the task of developing liberative practices for worship that nourish and affirm human diversity. New multicultural emphases and literacy can guide worship design in ways that challenge entrenched patterns and disrupt commitment to white dominance. West provides several practical ideas for breaking open new paths to engage commitment to plurality as a new norm in worship.

The author concludes *Disruptive Christian Ethics* by moving her argument beyond the walls of the church to ask how liberative Christian ethics intersect with the work of activism and ministry in the broader community. Here, conversations not from the activism of the 1930s but from living African-American women—clergy and lay—who, from within their public settings, confront assumptions about the innate superiority of heterosexuality. The activists are teachers, preachers, counselors and advocates who share candid stories about their innovative approaches to the resistance of oppression, to the struggle of dissent. West calls these instructive resources "living texts" and states, "Their stories document a liberative struggle in our social history and offer liberative moral knowledge that develops ethical communal practices."

Traci West's goal for *Disruptive Christian Ethics* is that her dialogical method will help readers learn what it means to share power, and to make the transformation of unjust conditions for women a key criterion for evaluating society's health. West shows those who yearn for justice that concrete, real-life stories animate new possibilities for changing marginalizing conditions. In this multi-dimensional volume, West exposes truths that keep justice at an impossible distance and translates Christian ethical theory into a contemporary and practical toolkit. As a future pastor who hopes to do justice that extends beyond charity to radical change, I am grateful for the vision, new ideas, and hope that West has given me in this volume.

Jodie Tooley is Assistant to the President at the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, CA, and a candidate for ordination at Judson Memorial Baptist Church, an American Baptist congregation in Minneapolis.

Scripture Reflections

Week 27 in Ordinary Time Psalm 95

by *Judith A. Heffernan*

Psalm 95 reads, "When today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts."

As I discern what to do with the rest of my life, or even ponder how to respond to God's voice daily, I think about the good things I heard in the summer of 2007.

I heard over one hundred inspiring women pray together from *Evensong*, "I am a daughter of God...I am a holy fire burning with God's love".

I heard Marian Ronan say that the single biggest reason women around the world don't go to school or can't study is because they have to spend their time getting water for themselves and their families.

I heard John Dear, S.J., say that a new peace group has formed-Catholics United for an End to the War in Iraq. They welcome us.

I heard Tom Gilsenan say in *NCR* that we are spending over eleven million dollars an hour on the war.

I heard peacemakers in front of the cathedral on August 9th proclaim, "We declare peace!"

I heard Mary O'Reagan say about the RCWP ordinations that new hope is born.

I heard Bishop Patricia Fresen say that we believe in equal-

ity, we have a new relationship to earth and we do not glorify war anymore.

I heard the joyful voices of Dolly, Bill and Maureen of the Quixote Center. They have spent their entire lives working for equality, justice and peace. Hearing them always makes me happy and this time I especially heard the message of their lives.

As the RCWP liturgy was concluding I saw Bill Callahan, S.J., standing at the end of our aisle. My mind traveled to the first WOC Conference in Detroit in 1975. Bill was a keynoter and the liturgical celebrant.

Not long after Detroit, Bill was requested (AHEM!) to stop working for women's ordination, but he would not abandon the women or the cause. The hierarchical solution was that Bill could remain a priest, but no bishops would give him faculties in their dioceses!

Still, after all these years Bill does not waiver. He just keeps working for equality, justice and peace.

Sitting there, I decided not to let this moment pass—neither of us is getting any younger—I went over to Bill, hugged him with all my might and thanked him with all my heart.

Bill's real sacrifice for us is part of our mosaic. His unwavering vision is part of our story-sisters and brothers together.

When TODAY we hear God's voice, may we have open hearts and open minds.

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.

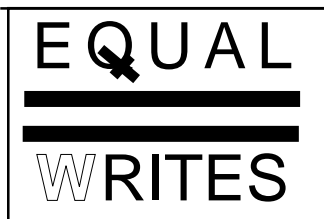
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