

THE POPE'S VISIT

by *Regina Bannan*

I wish I did things right away. I'd be able to stay in the relatively happy moment, thinking that Benedict XVI was going to move the institutional church a bit more towards compassion and away from edicts and orders. But I'm writing this on the day the excommunication of women priests and those who ordained them makes the news.

Did Benedict see the Women's Ordination Conference truck billboard following him around during his visit to Washington and say, *We have to do something about this?* Aisha Taylor, National WOC's executive director, and Erin Saiz Hanna, the new program assistant, coped with the February fire's destruction of the old banners by displaying a billboard on a

truck, wherever the Popemobile went, for days. "Pope Benedict, How long must women wait for equality? Ordain Catholic Women." Immensely creative solution. See photo.

Did Benedict notice the witness outside the basilica when all the bishops were gathered? Did the more punitive bishops say, *Support us—these women think they are too strong?* Roberta Lynch from SEPA/WOC was at the witness for all of us.

Did Benedict enjoy the birthday wishes—the gift of women's leadership—that those who gathered for Eucharist the night before he arrived extended to him? Our own Judy Heffernan, ordained twenty-eight years ago by the Community of the Christian Spirit, concelebrated with Andrea

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	EQUAL	Catholic Feminist Newsletter for Women and Men in the Philadelphia Area
Vol. XVII No. 1	██████████ ██████████	JUNE - OCTOBER 2008
	WRITES	MISSION STATEMENT - <i>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.</i>

ARE WE EXCOMMUNICATED YET?

by *Marian Ronan*

As *Equal wRites* is going to press (June 1), it seems that the Vatican may finally have issued a decree of excommunication against the fifty or more women who have been ordained under the auspices of Roman Catholic Womenpriests in recent years. On May 30, the *Baltimore Sun* published an Associated Press article which said, in part, that the Vatican has "strongly reiterated in a decree that anyone involved in ordination ceremonies is automatically excommunicated." Some took this to refer only to ceremonies involving bishops.

On May 30, however, the *New York Times* reported that the Vatican had reaffirmed a ban on ordaining women as priests, warning that the consequences of any such ordination would be the automatic excommunication of *anyone* involved. It's hard to check on this, because the decree appeared in the Italian version of the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, which is not published on the web, and also is not yet on the Vatican webpage.

Regardless of how this particular decree is worded, I think it's safe to assume that sooner or later the Vatican is going to start excommunicating people over the increasing number of ordinations. We're hurting them where they live. So what are we to make of this, and how are we to respond?

On the one hand, I'm inclined to think that paying more than a certain amount of attention to this stuff is a mistake. Unless the Vatican is going to start sending photographers to ordinations, it's going to be hard for them to figure out who "anyone involved" might be, except, of course, the women who chose to go public as ordained or ordainers. One trusts that these women anticipated retaliation; perhaps it was even part of their plan.

On the other hand, it seems kind of cowardly to leave Patricia Fresen, Eileen DiFranco, and the others standing

alone against the Vatican and the bishops. With this in mind, another approach might be for all of us to ordain each other. By "all" I mean not just everybody reading this newsletter, but all the Catholics around the world who believe that it's

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EQUAL wRITES

Thanks to so many of you who sent your checks in response to the appeal and envelope in the last *Equal wRites*. If you didn't get around to it yet, or if you're able to send more, please do. You can mail your contribution to SEPA/WOC, c/o Marianne Jann, Treasurer, 49 Driscoll Drive, Ivyland, PA 18974. Some of you long-time readers have become used to replying in June or even September—do it now if you can! We'd appreciate it very much because we've tried to take a good, hard look at what we're doing and we'd like to know that you continue to support us.

The core committee has decided to revise the publication schedule of *Equal wRites* as we begin our seventeenth year. Now we'll do three issues: around June 15, October 15, and March 15. This fits well with our witnesses on Holy Thursday and Ordination Day, allowing us to report on both events in the June issue as well as announce them in March. We will not have the challenge of trying to put out an issue when people are going away at different times in the summer, and we can still keep in touch with you in the fall. As I said last time, the costs of printing and postage have escalated, and we are not immune. This seems to be the wisest decision.

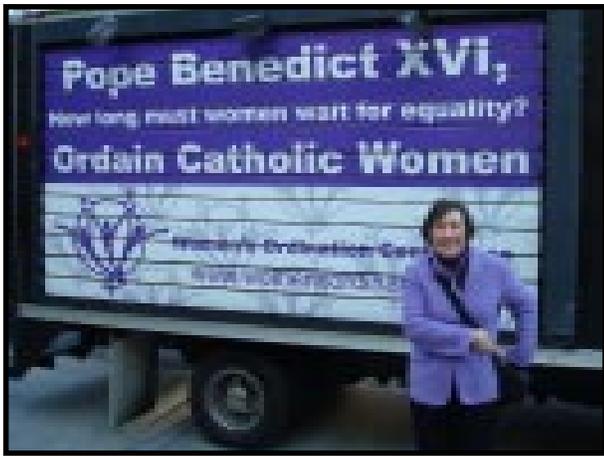
But it was hard to make. We think we are a voice for women and men in the Philadelphia area and nationwide, and we want to continue to articulate our commitment to justice for women in our church. We hope you continue to share our vision and we thank you so much for your support over this surprising number of years.

...Regina Bannan, President

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Johnson, Roman Catholic Womenpriest (RCWP) and former national WOC executive director and board member; Geri Rauch and Erin Hanna, WOC Board president and new staff member, to indicate the various ways that women are called to ministry. Also concelebrating were Elsie McGrath and Rose Marie Hudson, both ordained by RCWP and excommunicated by Archbishop Burke in St. Louis. As Marian Ronan's brother Joe said, "If you're excommunicated twice, does that mean you're reinstated?" See photo.

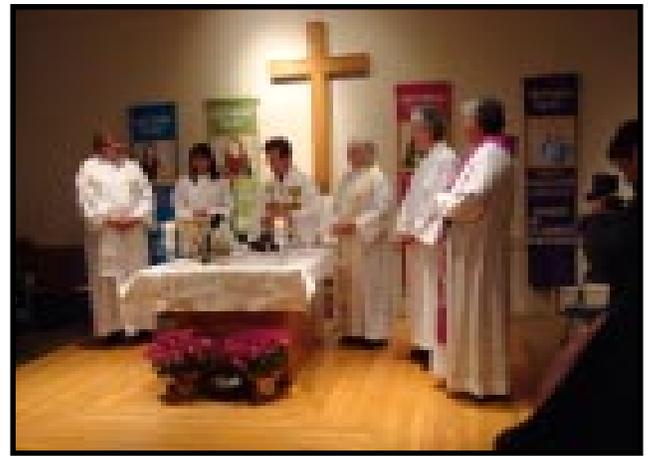
Did Benedict get a glimpse of the banners made by the Tate-McHale family for SEPA/WOC? They were the back-



drop to the liturgy and reminded us all that we are reclaiming a priesthood rightly ours. Roberta Lynch, Susan Cedrone, and I were also there from SEPA/WOC, in a packed chapel in the Foundry United Methodist Church with heroes for freedom of both sexes memorialized in the stained glass windows.

Maybe Benedict did. But it looks as if the decree was approved December 19, 2007. Maybe Benedict wanted to wait until he was safely back in Rome before making it public. Why draw more attention to the failed policies of the Roman church?

Regina Bannan is the former national president of WOC and teaches at Temple University.



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God's will that women and married men be ordained. Then we will all be excommunicated, millions of us. How many Catholics need to be excommunicated before excommunication is shown to be the petty, mean-spirited gesture that it is?

You may think that in suggesting this I am being flip, but that's not what I intend. In one sense, by calling for massive mutual lay ordinations, I am turning on its head, with the greatest of respect, the question asked by Sister Dody Donnelly at the founding meeting of the Women's Ordination Conference in Detroit: "Why ordain anybody?" I likewise mean to acknowledge one of the planks of the Protestant Reformation, the priesthood of all believers. And if you think some Christians don't still take this very seriously, please be informed that at one point, my husband, an American Baptist minister, ordained everyone he baptized.

Then again—on the third hand, so to speak—I wonder if, in response to Vatican excommunication of anyone "involved in these ordinations," massive lay ordinations are even necessary. After all, we don't want to be guilty of the kind of casuistry* for which the institutional church is notorious. Even without ordaining each other, aren't we, as a matter of fact, all "involved in these ordinations" in one way or another? Admittedly, most of us didn't attend one of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests ordinations. Some of us—I, for example—even thought they weren't such a good idea, in part because they import hierarchy into the *ekklesia* of women, and hierarchy is, in my opinion, structurally corrupting.

Still, it's worth asking, aren't we all, in some sense, "involved in these ordinations?" Didn't we take communion at the thirtieth anniversary of the Women's Ordination Conference in Philadelphia, where a number of "womenpriests"

celebrated? Or haven't we taken communion when women like Judy Heffernan, ordained by small faith communities, or ordained married men, celebrated? And if we didn't, wouldn't we have liked to? And even if we wouldn't have done so, don't we, at some level, believe that the Pope and the bishops are ethically wrong—seriously in error—when they try to justify the exclusion of women and married men from ordination in the ways that they do? So aren't we all—something like seventy per cent of the American church—excommunicated from the institution's hierarchy of truth, whether we admit it or not?

If this is the case, we are now faced with a serious question. Why—and I address this to myself as well as you—why, I wonder, do some of us continue to participate in a ritual that proclaims and reinforces the inferiority of half of the human race? Admittedly, some of us have stopped attending institutionally authorized rituals, to worship in small faith communities like the Community of the Christian Spirit or the Church of the Beatitudes. But participating in these communities, to a certain extent, avoids the central issue, which is that the male-dominated Eucharist, as it is celebrated in the religious tradition of which many of us still, to some extent, consider ourselves a part, is misogynist, at least in Europe and North America. Instead of splitting off into small worship groups that are more personally satisfying, wouldn't it be braver and more public if we went to institutionally celebrated Eucharists but refused to receive the Eucharist because it has been captured and demeaned by the patriarchy?

Now this, I realize, is a very difficult proposal. As a result of Vatican II, the vast majority of us came to believe that the Eucharistic liturgy is, as the council fathers put it, "the

source and summit of the faith.” So how can we possibly not fully participate in it? Yet, however heretical it may sound, it’s also possible to argue that the increasing centralization of the church around the Eucharist in the modern period was a tool in the gradual consolidation of church power in the hands of the Vatican and the hierarchy. Consider, for example, the white ethnic Catholics who emigrated to this country—our ancestors in many cases. Many of them brought with them devotion to the saints of their village or region. Often, after they arrived, they formed confraternities to express devotion to that local saint, and often, to accumulate money to be used for the funerals of their members. No priests were involved in this, and this drove the bishops and the clergy crazy. So they worked as hard as they could to get those saints moved inside the church, where the clergy would have control over novenas and other forms of devotion to them. For the most part they were successful. And then, with Vatican II, devotion to the saints among white ethnic—less so among Latino—Catholics fell pretty much by the wayside. The Eucharist, under the control of the priest, became “the source and summit of the faith. Maybe it’s time to reverse this trajectory, in which we, the people of God, bought increasingly into rituals that were controlled by the clergy and the hierarchy, thus leaving ourselves vulnerable to being officially put out of what we feel is the most important action in the universe. Maybe it’s time we started up those confraternities that the Irish American bishops did away with in the nineteenth century.

Or maybe it’s time we invested ourselves more passionately in the study of the Scriptures. In spring of 2007 my Baptist husband and I gave a joint sermon at University Baptist Church in Seattle, in which we discussed what each of us had learned from the other’s Christian practice. Keith said that by being married to a Catholic, he had learned how important the Eucharist is, and that if he ever pastored a church again, he would celebrate the Eucharist every week.

I, in turn, said that by being married to a Baptist, I had come to understand that the Scriptures really are as important as the Eucharist. But I didn’t say how I would enact this insight. Maybe what we should do, all of us excommunicated Catholics, is go to mass in our local parish, wearing a purple stole. And after the Gospel, we should celebrate our excommunication by marching out of church together and going someplace to study the lectionary readings. God knows, given the general quality of Catholic preaching, our reflections would be a whole lot more inspiring than the sermon. When the Vatican and the hierarchy quit making the Eucharist into a celebration of misogyny, we could march back in. * Casuistry, n., specious, deceptive, or oversubtle reasoning, esp. in questions of morality.

Marian Ronan’s book, Tracing the Sign of the Cross: Sexuality and Mourning in Post-Vatican II American Catholicism, will be published by Columbia University

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ORDINATION DAY: THREE MORE WHITE GUYS FOR THE BOOK?

by Bern McBride

It’s May 17 at the Cathedral of Ss. Peter and Paul. Inside, Martin Ivanovich, Daniel Kredensor and Brian Kean are being welcomed into the ranks of the officially ordained.

Outside our persistent band of SEPA/WOC members and friends are once again holding the annual liturgy celebrating the gifts of women already ordained and protesting the exclusion of those called but officially denied. Around us the traffic buzzes, runners whizz by, homeless folks are fed and the sun warms our backs and faces while the company warms our spirits.

Twenty some years ago, my garage-sale savvy mother-in-law Edna discovered in her native Rochester, New York, a book entitled *Notable Philadelphians*. The large book, since rebound by the monks of our favorite Trappist Monastery in Oregon, has been a regular source of information for our family about the important people in Philadelphia in 1900. Well, more accurately, the book is a yearbook of those who thought themselves notable. Page after page of pictures of notables, some in suits, some in Roman collars, some bearded, some clean-shaven—all white and all men. It’s probably not too surprising to us now that notable Philadelphia in 1900 could not find even one notable woman or person of color for inclusion. After the pictures, there follows page upon page of their notable residences, their notable factories, notable office buildings, notable department stores and, you betcha, their notable churches.

So, why am I telling you this, you ask? Well, hoping to find material for our Ordination Day liturgy in front of the cathedral I put up \$30 for a copy of the archdiocese’s two hundredth year anniversary publication, *Our Faith Filled Heritage*. Sadly, there were no prayers to borrow or adapt for our liturgy, but rather page after page of, yes, notable Catholics. I counted over one hundred pictures of notable men—including multiples of the notable Cardinals and notable Popes. And women—I could only find ten pictures of women. One was of a woman being ministered to by a notable priest, so she was more a prop than a notable in her own right. Two others made it in by association with their notable priest brothers. Mother Theresa and Dorothy Day were in, though the editors found it important to make clear that the latter had a notable co-founder, a man. So, altogether, in summing up two hundred years of history, the archdiocese was only able to identify Katherine Drexel and two or three other Philadelphia women worth noting for the ages. The archdiocese’s own stat’s, included in the publication, show that consistently throughout its history, there have been three times as many women religious as men, ordained or not. So, out of the thousands upon thousands of women who have run schools and universities, hospitals and rectories for the last two hundred years, Justin Rigali *et al.* could only find three or four worth mentioning. The editor decided instead to devote the last half of the book’s 264 pages to notable buildings—churches, many named for dead women who would not now be allowed to stand as equals at the altars of the buildings named after them.

So, Martin, Daniel and Brian, what will it be—a lifetime devoted to being three more notable white guys in the big book or Christians?

Bern McBride is a mental health administrator, writer, and member of he SEPA/Woc core committee.

CAMDEN CLOSINGS

BRING OLD STORY HOME

by Joe Sannino

Southern New Jersey has many sad, if not angry, Roman Catholics. It's our own fault. We could not replace the dying clergy.

The bishop reduced 124 Roman Catholic parishes to sixty-six for now, based on the projection that the diocese will have fewer than eighty-five priests seven years from now. The average age of the diocesan clergy now is sixty-four.

I wonder how anything like this could have happened! What happened to this diocese? Where are the new priests, our ordained spiritual leaders? Did Vatican II kill the baptismal spirit in our young? Why cannot the diocese repopulate itself?

Did modern critical science and history undermine too many myths? Has the poetry of our faith dried up? Has the person of Jesus/Jeshua of Nazareth been vitiated? Did the diocesan leaders do something wrong?

We are informed that the demographics have changed. The Catholics moved away and left their buildings standing and now there are not enough people to pay the utility and maintenance bills. This may be true in the cities where Catholics walked to their temples. But in the country/suburbs?

The raw answer is that the male celibate caste has declared itself blind. It cannot see the vocations—the divinely-indicated spiritual leaders—all around. Two thousand years of declaring the female less than the male, this leadership has only had two hundred years of any science indicating that the woman is the norm of humanity and the source of life.

Is it too soon to tell the male celibate caste to stop its silliness and blindness?

Every single official Roman Catholic altar, confessional and rectory can stay in business, if the gender prejudice could be overcome. Every single parish in Camden diocese has saintly and educated women running many of the effective services of the pastoral unit. They might not accept ordination because they have witnessed clerical cruelty and the tyranny of the male military culture. But they can run the parishes as well as any priest.

Baptized Roman Catholic women and men need to grow and take responsibility: pay the bills, fix the roof and put the leader in front.

The sadness and anger of the twenty per cent of the faithful Roman Catholics of the Camden Diocese who take exception to the changes will probably amount to very little. The vast majority will play the role of sheep and go meekly to the pastures.

Holy Spirit, you have taught us divine reality in the University of Life. Please cure the blindness of our Roman Catholic leaders who have made themselves feeble and paralyzed.

Joe Sannino was a Vincentian priest for eleven years. He is now married and has a son.

IN MEMORIAM

ARLENE SWIDLER 1929-2008

by Jenny Ratigan

After a long and debilitating battle with Alzheimer's disease, Arlene Anderson Swidler, scholar, wife, mother, grandmother, friend and our sister, passed away peacefully at her home in Philadelphia on May 24, 2008. Arlene was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1929. She received a BA in English literature from Marquette University in Milwaukee in

1950 and an MA in 1952 from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. In 1980 she received a master's degree in theology from Villanova University. Through all of those years she was an engaging teacher and mentor, writer, translator, ecumenist and activist on behalf of women in the church as well as an advocate for many other human rights causes. She is survived by her husband, Leonard Swidler, daughters Carmel and Eva and granddaughter, Willow.

On March 20, 2008, at the Holy Thursday witness in front of the Cathedral of Ss. Peter and Paul, Arlene was the recipient of the Mary Magdalene Award of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference "honoring persons who speak truth to power." One of the foremothers of the Women's Ordination Conference, Arlene helped design the first witnesses for women's ordination at the cathedral in Philadelphia, often comparing this kind of witness to other human rights witnesses around the world. She was a woman who understood that racism, classism, sexism, religious intolerance, militarism and disregard for the earth are all connected. Her writings reflect this understanding on every page.

Although we have missed her active engagement during these seventeen years of illness, we have continued to be shaped by Arlene's thought, courage and zeal for "speaking truth to power." Further reflections on Arlene from our own WOC perspective may be found in the December issue of *Equal wRites*.

A memorial service is being planned for Arlene in the fall at Rosemont College.

Dear sister, may you rest in peace!

Jenny Ratigan, Professor Emerita of Religious Studies at Rosemont College, was for many years a close friend and colleague of Arlene Swidler.

KATHLEEN KENNEDY, RIP

Kathleen Rose Kennedy, 65, of Harrisburg died on April 4, after collapsing at mass on March 30 and not regaining consciousness. Kathleen would have been immensely pleased that her kidneys gave two people the gift of renewed life.

Readers would have met Kathleen at many SEPA/WOC events because she attended every event on women's and African-American rights, history of women's suffrage, women's ordination, Vatican II theology, anti-death penalty, and anti-war within about two hundred miles of Harrisburg. Kathleen was always one of the first to the mike with a perceptive question or comment. She also frequently had letters on religious issues published in the Harrisburg newspaper.

What you may not know about Kathleen is that she also loved baseball and baseball history, especially of the Negro Leagues, and often combined visits to women's suffrage sites with visits to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Additionally, Kathleen appeared as an eccentric senior citizen named Ethel Firecracker, who drives a hearse and attends her own funeral, in a quirky, independent film called "Guatemalan Handshake," which was released April 29 on DVD.

She received a BA and MA in theology from Catholic University in the mid 1960's. However, her career was as the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Act 101 State Coordinator for Higher Education for the Disadvantaged. She is survived by one brother and his family.

Kathleen was a special person with a heart of gold, and her unique presence will be missed.

*Marjorie Reiley Maguire
Milwaukee, Wisconsin*

BISHOP GEOFFREY ROBINSON SPEAKS IN PHILADELPHIA

by *Mary Whelan*

Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, retired Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Sydney, began a month-long tour promoting his new book *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming The Spirit of Jesus* by speaking at Temple University on May 16.

This was the opening event of a two-day symposium, "Rebuilding the Catholic Church," cosponsored by Voice of the Faithful of Greater Philadelphia and the Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church.

Robinson detailed his experience and the source of his authority on the subject of power and its abuse in the church. For nine years he served in an official position on a committee appointed by the Australian church to respond to the sexual abuse crisis. He spoke with victims, offenders and bishops. "For nine years this completely dominated my life." He poignantly revealed that during this time "my own abuse came to light."

Robinson criticized Pope John Paul II for his inadequate response to the crises and questioned the manner in which papal infallibility is invoked. Bishop Robinson accused the church of not confronting the issue but merely attempting to manage it. He concluded that these events called for "complete changes if the church was to move ahead with a clear conscience." His response was this book.

It is obvious from his courageous stance that his life is forever changed. As he stated, "I had to decide if I would be a Pope's man or a victim's man." It was clear to me that at least this bishop "gets it," honors his conscience, and is not afraid to speak his truth.

I was moved by his talk, by the fact that Robinson actually met with and listened to victims, and by his response. It ran counter to what the official church had done up to this point, which is, for the most part, to have the lawyers run the show as well as protect the offenders. I was amazed to read during my research for this article that the church in America has thus far spent two billion dollar in legal settlements.

However, I was discouraged when Robinson repeatedly said that dialogue with the bishops was possible, strongly suggesting that conversation was preferable to confrontation. I note here that the first word of his book title is "confronting." I also wondered how he could calmly take this position, given the events of the weeks prior to his talk, as his fellow bishops both in Australia and the United States seemed to turn their backs on him and his message, once again circling the wagons.

In the days leading up to his American tour, Bishop Robinson was asked not to proceed in a joint letter signed by ten American bishops, including Philadelphia's Cardinal Rigali, in whose dioceses he had scheduled appearances. Their letter was prompted by a directive from the Vatican in the person of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, who not only wrote to Robinson directly but also "invited" the American bishops to write to Robinson. Re listed "doctrinal difficulties" citing Robinson's "questioning of the authority of the Catholic Church to teach truth definitively." (Quotation from Duke Helfand, in *the Los Angeles Times*, June 7, 2008.) This was prompted by the Australian bishops who are investigating his book (I assume they are searching for the dreaded doctrinal difficulties).

I credit Bishop Robinson with not backing down and proceeding with his tour as scheduled. Once again, the church attempted to silence any potential discussion of the issues that led up to the abuse, its causes and solutions. The American bishops' letter warned Robinson that his visit could be "a source of disunity and cause confusion among the faithful of the particular churches we serve." They sure do worry about us lay people becoming confused! They should remember that their inadequate response has caused as much scandal and disunity as the abuse itself. I have to wonder how many of the bishops in Rome, Australia or America even read the book.

So, yes, Bishop Robinson, I believe that most progressive Catholics who would be in your American audiences would love to be in dialogue with their bishops. But dialogue by definition involves two parties. How many bishops have been approached, invited, sought out by the laity, with little, if any response? How many bishops have met with victims face-to-face to listen to their experiences? Bishop Robinson felt that a good number of the Australian bishops were reasonable men who were approachable and willing to have conversation. I wonder if he still feels that way, as his colleagues question his book and his right to speak to the church's authority? I wonder if he would be an inspiration to the bishops who might agree with him but so far have not had the courage to speak publicly.

Until we confront this issue openly and honestly we cannot begin to heal. It is sad that the church continues its attempts to silence those who call for transparency, accountability and justice. And in the end we all know that silencing another just does not work in the long run. The goal should always be as Robinson states in the book title: "Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus."

For more information go to the website bishopeoffrobinson.org. Bishop Robinson's lecture can be viewed on Google video.

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THE INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

by *Jim Plastaras*

This article is my attempt to enunciate without equivocation what I believe regarding the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. I believe that both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are the Word of God, not only because they capture the story of God's self-revelation to humankind, but because I believe that the Spirit of God guided the process that shaped the telling of the story. This is what I believe.

But what about the individual parts of Scripture, which upon examination appear to contain contradictions and errors? It is one thing to profess that the Scriptures reveal the truth of God's Word to us. This is not the same as saying that the Scriptures, in all the individual parts, are error-free. This is the question that I will attempt to address. The devil is in the details.

Many of the errors and contradictions found in the so-called "historical books" of the Bible have to do with a misreading of sacred authors' intentions. For example:

The first eleven chapters of *Genesis*, beginning with the creation accounts, should not be read as *history* in any accepted sense of the word. The *literary genre* of these chapters is poetry and myth. The author(s) have made use of the legends of Israel's neighbors regarding the origins of humankind, and reshaped them to reflect their own understanding of how it all began. The creation account in *Genesis* 1-2 does not deal with cosmology, biology, or anthropology. The truths it conveys are faith insights: creation—all of it—is God's work and therefore is good; creation is not the result of a titanic struggle between the forces of good and evil.

Those who would find error and contradiction in the infancy narratives at the beginning of the *Gospels of Matthew* and *Luke* also are guilty of mis-reading the *literary genre*. There are inconsistencies between the two accounts. In *Matthew*, the hometown of Joseph and Mary is Bethlehem, from whence they flee after the birth of Jesus, eventually settling in Nazareth of Galilee. In *Luke*, Nazareth is the hometown from the beginning. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the house of David, but only as the result of an unusual set of circumstances. Joseph and Mary had to travel there to fulfill the requirements of a royal census. The evangelists agree on main story-line Jesus, despite his Galilean origin, was born in Bethlehem of the house of David—but they diverge significantly on the details. If the narratives are presented as "history," one of the evangelists has to be wrong! But the infancy narratives are not *history*, at least not in the sense that the accounts of Jesus' ministry can be claimed to be based on history. The Gospel narratives about the ministry of Jesus, beginning with the baptism at the Jordan, are based on the recollections of those who had been there. The evangelists had no such resources at their disposal in setting out to tell the story of the early years. It appears both evangelists, each in his own way, resorted to a rabbinic convention, called *Midrash*. They "filled in the blanks" by weaving together the Scriptures that described how God had called in chosen ones in earlier times. The message is that the hand of God had shaped the events surrounding the birth of Jesus from the very beginning.

These and other examples where the perceived errors or contradictions are linked to a mis-understanding of the *liter-*

ary genre, can be disposed of by asking the question: "What is the author's intent? What are the truths that the author intends to convey?"

The more difficult objections to the inerrancy of the Scriptures have to do with those passages where the issue is not accuracy of historical fact, but rather the author's interpretation regarding the meaning of events. "This is why (x) happened."

Some of the clearest, and most jarring examples of off-base evaluation can be seen in the *Book of Joshua*. Archeology has actually validated many details regarding the conquest of Canaan which are described in the *Book of Joshua*. The problem, however, is not with details of historical accuracy, but rather with the author's evaluation of the big picture. God is presented as the one who orchestrates the conquest. He not only decrees the expropriation of the Canaanites' homeland—because they worshiped false gods—but also commands Joshua to exterminate whole populations, women and children included. The command is given in the interest of protecting the purity of the Israelites, religious faith, lest they be corrupted by contact with the peoples of the land. There seems to be little difference between the arbitrary and blood-thirsty God of Joshua and the false gods of the Canaanites.

This same picture of a vengeful God emerges again in the story of the institution of the monarchy as narrated in 1 *Samuel* 15:1-35. God rejects King Saul because he failed to carry out God's command to wipe out the Amalekites as pay-back for their treatment of the children of Israel several centuries before at the time of the Exodus. Saul was to *totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.* But Saul spared the Agog, King of the Amalekites, together with the best of their flocks. The narrative closes with the prophet Samuel taking matters into his own hands to *put Agog to death before the LORD.*

More subtle, but equally disturbing, are the value judgments offered by the author(s) of the *Books of Samuel* and *Kings* regarding the monarchy. Isolated passages, such as 1 *Samuel* 8:6-17, present the prophetic view that the institution of the monarchy was not as God's will, but rather a betrayal of the covenant ideal:

[They said to Samuel] "appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."

This displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD, and the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king...Listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do...This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfum-

ers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves.”

This, however, is but a single passage. The bulk of the narrative that follows contains extended descriptions of the glory days under David and Solomon. The descriptions of the wealth of the royal court conveys star-struck approval rather than shock over the obscene opulence. The narratives, written by court historians, reflect the values of the royal establishment rather than the viewpoint of the prophets. The book of *Kings* is replete with judgments about who the “good” and the “bad” kings were. The litmus test, however, is not the promotion of social justice, but rather whether or not the kings promoted the monopoly of the Jerusalem temple as the only legitimate place to worship.

If, as is illustrated by these examples, the sacred author’s evaluation of events is open to question, what remains of the *truth* of Holy Scripture? The *truth* clearly does not reside in individual sections of Scripture in isolation from the rest of the written (and unwritten) tradition. The surest guide to discovering the *truth* of Scripture is to follow the trajectory of revelation. The God whom Israel first describes as *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the Warrior God who fights for Israel, will in later times be proclaimed by the prophets as a God who gathers all nations into a kingdom of universal peace. This is the end-point:

Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. (Is 2:3-4)

The earlier portrayals of who God is and what God expects of his people, such as those found in the *Book of Joshua*, are often imperfect, misguided and—dare we say it—erroneous. It would be centuries before the people of the exodus arrived at a fuller understanding of their God as *compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to a thousand generations.*

Does this mean we select only a few favorite books of the Bible for spiritual sustenance, and jettison the rest as unproductive and inscrutable? This overstates the case, but this approach will result in de-emphasizing and subordinating certain portions of the Bible in order to focus on the core truths that lead us to the endpoint of revelation’s trajectory. Jesus himself was highly selective in the way he called upon the Scriptures to validate his mission. His favorite reference was the prophet Isaiah. Remarkably, he never describes his mission in terms of the King-Messiah of the royal theology.

There may be some of you who are determined, willy-nilly, to persevere in reading the Bible from one end to the other. Here is some advice that might help you avoid being thrown

off track by some of the bumps in the road.

The historical books of the Jewish Scriptures from *Genesis* through *Kings* often present a picture of an angry and vengeful God. Do not be scandalized! These images have their origin in an earlier period in Israel’s faith development. The Rabbinic tradition was adept at softening the difficult passages by reading them within the context of Israel’s fuller understanding of its compassionate and gracious God. In one Rabbinic tradition, Yahweh is pictured as mourning over the dead Egyptian charioteers on the morning after the escape from Egypt, because *these too are my children*. The four *Books of Samuel* and *Kings* make considerably easier reading. The story-line is captivating, and the section describing David’s family problems is as absorbing as a John Grisham novel. It can be edifying reading, but don’t buy into the author’s bias for glorifying the monarchy. The author of *Second Kings* would have us believe that the disaster of the exile was brought about by a few rotten apples in the royal barrel. The viewpoint of the prophets was that the institution of the monarchy was itself a misadventure from the beginning. It is relevant to note that the reason Jesus did not measure up to popular Messianic expectations was he did not present himself as a Messiah who would restore the glories of David’s kingdom.

The *Book of Psalms* is a wonderful collection of songs and prayers, but it also is not without problems. The prayers reflect a mixture of advanced versus not-so-advanced spirituality. It is okay to skip over the “smite my enemies” prayers. These psalms may help you to vent if you are in an ugly mood, but they won’t advance your spiritual life.

Finally a word about the *Letters of Paul*. The *literary genre* “pastoral letter” reveals some unique characteristics. Some passages are quite clear that Paul is handing down, not his own teaching, but the teaching of the Lord. He says, *For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you...* (1 Cor 11:23). In other passages, Paul appears to offer his opinion, which he expects to be given serious consideration, but which he does not claim to be teaching from the Lord. In 1 Cor 11:1-16, he offers advice regarding who should cover their heads, and who should leave their heads uncovered in the prayer assembly. He concludes the discussion with the admission that he might not have convinced everybody, but closes with this less-than-authoritative argument: *If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.* [The passages from Paul’s letters that most prominently question women’s equality are found in the “opinion” sections.]

The approach which I have set forth regarding the inerrancy of Scripture is likely to be seen as dangerous and heretical by those branches of Judaism and Christianity which regard the authority of the Scriptures as absolute, apart from any reference to the teaching and believing community. The approach here suggested is actually compatible with the Catholic tradition’s emphasis on the “analogy of faith,” as a guiding principle of interpretation. The different pieces both of Scripture and of the unwritten tradition, need to be interpreted, not in isolation, but within the larger context of God’s revelation.

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*.

Book Reviews

Welcome to the Wisdom of the World: And Its Meaning for You by Joan Chittister, OSB. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007. 186 pp. \$20.00.

reviewed by Jodie Tooley

In my aging mind's eye I can see Mary Oliver's bold question printed in greeting cards and graphed onto poster art: "Tell me," the poet asks, "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" It is one of a handful of resonant questions Oliver poses in *The Summer Day*, a poem she penned in 1992. Questions like Oliver's contain great power; they shape our responses to life's forces. The quality of the questions we bring to our living is directly related to the quality of life we get back. When poets and prophets mine life's compelling unknowns, ideas turn on their heads and the creative impulse ignites. Oliver's ubiquitous question charged her readers to stay open to being astonished by life. I can't say that Mary Oliver's question prompted me to pack my bags for seminary, but a decade later, my soul's questions did.

Welcome to the Wisdom of the World is the latest publication of Joan Chittister, whom I once heard described as "one of America's spiritual voices." Sister Joan is a Benedictine nun of more than fifty years, and a widely-sought lecturer on topics concerning women, the poor, justice, and contemporary issues of society and the church. She is also a charter member of the women's ordination movement, and the founder and director of Benetvision, a research and resource center for contemporary spirituality, located in Erie, Pennsylvania. She co-chairs the Global Peace Initiative of Women, a UN-sponsored organization of women leaders of faith who work for peace, primarily in the Middle East.

Welcome to the Wisdom of the World lays open our yearning to make sense of our human lives by taking on twenty-five of life's enduring questions. Bringing the gift of story to each questions, Chittister illuminates teachings of the sacred texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. At first glance I was disappointed with what Chittister offers: I opened *Welcome to the Wisdom* expecting to read five distinct responses to a short list of looming questions, one tidy response representing each classic tradition as if Chittister aimed to quilt together an easy, everyday reference text in comparative spiritualities. I wondered if she pitched a subtle argument for Christianity by stacking principles of Christian spirituality against those of the other four lineages. Instead I discovered that *Welcome to the World* offers something remarkably refreshing—it releases readers from the temptation of proclaiming right from wrong. Chittister deftly discerns what human souls have in common by projecting life's jagged questions through the viewing lenses of five particular traditions.

In *Welcome to the Wisdom*, Chittister applies Hindu wisdom to our questions concerned with letting go. She pairs questions about with doing the right thing with Buddhism and questions about God's existence with Islam. Chittister deepens into the wisdom of Jewish heritage to respond to questions we ask when we feel empty and stuck, and she calls out the spirituality of Christian love to respond to questions that ponder purpose.

"How does Christianity say we will know truth when we see it?"—one of Christianity's five questions asks. To answer,

Chittister tells a colorful story of two monastic nuns, each living into her monastic piety with the help of her human personality. One nun served God through an uncompromising embrace of the ascetic ideal, while the other served through the expression of laughter and music. For Chittister, this illustration emphasizes that no truth is the total truth of God—we each embody some of God's truth and lack what remains of it. "God is too great to be lost in the smallness of any single sliver of life," Chittister declares. There is no single truth, no one way or one institution. Chittister urges each of us to live out our singular piece of truth, with love.

What does Christian spirituality offer when we ask, "Why can't I change?" Turning to a page of her own family album, Sister Joan tells us about her Irish uncle who drank uncontrollably in an era that did not recognize alcoholism as a disease. She supplies details of the devastation her uncle's family endured, and the amends he tried to make, too late. As she applies her story to her question, Chittister criticizes humanity's dependence upon technology that teaches us to strive for progress rather than fulfillment. She asserts that "a particular brand of arrogance" advances a notion that humans are actually capable of achieving perfection. Chittister believes our core struggles are lifetime struggles; at some mature moment we "rally the honesty" to commit to change for the sake of the world. Then, we can decide to begin.

Chittister's fifth essay emerging from a Christian spiritual lens has a political cast. Asking "What is the purpose of life?" Sister Joan describes a moment of unexpected generosity at an Erie soup kitchen one bone-chilling day. Chittister's sentimental vignette is a prelude to her challenge: "Are we meant to be moral agents in a dangerously immoral world or speculators in a promising project called existence that has been designed purely for our exploitation?" She follows one question with another: "What happens to community if we are not carrying those who cannot walk?" For Chittister, "the price of being human" is paid when one assumes a life-giving role in society. We use our gifts for the common good.

In her prologue, Chittister is clear that every culture is particular to its own time and place. But, she argues, human beings have something in common with all others who have ever lived—they grapple with the questions that shape the contours of the human condition. Read *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World* to enjoy its reflective stories and to become familiar with the rubrics of classic spiritual traditions. You'll appreciate Chittister's easy, relaxed writing, and in it maybe you'll discover a new answer to an ancient question. In the nineties, poet Mary Oliver posed a question that resonates brightly alongside Joan Chittister's fifteen years later. What am I doing with my one wild and precious life? You'll find me working to bring completion to the coming reign of God, and choosing laughter and music the whole wild and precious way.

Jodie Tooley is a Chaplain Resident at St. Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco and is a candidate for ordination at Judson Memorial Baptist Church, an American Baptist congregation in Minneapolis.

Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace by Nicole Sotelo, Paulist Press, 2006. 98 pp. \$10.95. Paperback.

reviewed by Francis Geddes, Virginia Geddes, and Ann Geddes

Nicole Sotelo has written an extraordinary book for women on finding their way home to the heart once they have suffered physical abuse. Yet it speaks not only to those who have been physically abused, but to any woman who has suffered abuse of power or emotional abuse or any type of abuse at all. She speaks to us as one who knows how to heal, quietly, steadily, surely, with the grace of God and a heart open to a new road to life once you've been beaten down. She opens the gospel to us in a new and living way so that we understand fully the compassion of God and how the Holy One has stood by us even in our times of desperation.

The author outlines three phases of the journey in healing from abuse: 1. Safety; 2. Remembrance and Mourning; 3. Reconnecting. The daily meditations are beautifully grounded in scriptural stories, prayers, reflections, and suggestions for action in response. Actively responding, the reader becomes quite proactive in her own healing.

The creative responses suggested after each day's prayer engage the buried pain at three different levels in the healing process. The first level is an affirmation and recognition of a buried resource, like awakening the "inner child" who has been asleep. The second level is a call to action to engage the resource of, say, the "inner child" by inviting her to put on some music and dance around the room so that the latent joy of the "inner child" can dance freely. The third level is becoming more proactive by encouraging the "inner child" to remember good experiences from her youth: savor a piece of candy, play a game, or skip down the street. These re-

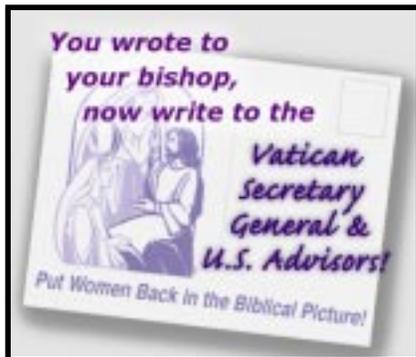
membered images can be brought back to the present moment to displace, even briefly, the painful burden of the abuse. This creative response helps the subject to discover and draw upon her own inner resources for healing, as well as God who is the ultimate Healer.

The prayers Sotelo designs for us to follow help us stop and take a breath, believe in a new life and begin steps (which may at first only be tentative and small) into a new life of wholeness. She asks us to 'wait for trust to rise.' What a wonderful image that healing will not be instantaneous but gradual. She asks that we wait for the bread to rise until our lives become a whole new loaf.

In every chapter Sotelo urges the reader to actively respond to particular challenges hidden in the painful wounds of abuse in order for the reader to move forward in her own healing. She also suggests that as soon as the reader feels comfortable doing so she should share her thoughts with a trusted friend or counselor. "Try speaking what you feel. Try advocating what you need."

Sotelo teaches us to listen to the sweet grace and love of God in even the briefest of Gospel passages so we can come to know that Grace of Understanding for ourselves. She has done us a great service.

Francis Geddes is a retired United Church of Christ minister. Virginia Geddes is a retired librarian and member of the Caritas Healing Team at the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation in Santa Rosa, California. Ann Geddes is a spiritual director and daughter of Francis and Virginia; with her father, she leads five-day Contemplative Healing retreats.



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SCRIPTURE REFLECTIONS

Summer, 2008

Matt.14, Ps.85, Romans 8

by Judith A. Heffernan

I take great consolation from the Gospel for August 3. We read that when Jesus heard of the death of John the Baptist, he withdrew to a deserted place by himself.

When I heard of the recent death of Arlene Swidler, this is just what I did. Streams of memories raced through me, and I was so grateful that SEPA/WOC honored Arlene at our Holy Thursday witness, and, together, all the gathered remembered, shared and celebrated Arlene's life.

Arlene was teacher, writer, author, translator, editor, lecturer; she was beloved daughter, marriage partner, mother, mentor and faithful friend.

Arlene was dedicated to the full equality of women everywhere in every way. She called for inclusive language (for God and us!), ecumenical dialogue and women's ordination.

We once presented Arlene with a purple stole, the international symbol of women's ordination, because Arlene was ours.

Arlene's last teaching position was in English with Temple University—in Japan! (Besides her religious studies work, Arlene was also a superb English professor!)

I then thought of an English assignment I once had about

Ranier Rilke, and I remember he wrote that we must live the questions now—and then, some distant day, we will live into the answers.

We do not know why Arlene was so ill for so long, but may we live some distant day into that answer.

One thing we already know for sure is that there was great power from her life of working for justice and understanding, a great power which has blessed us all.

As I continue reading the Gospel for August 3, I see that the crowds heard that Jesus had withdrawn, and they followed him! When he saw the vast crowds, his heart was moved.

I once named Arlene, "God's Nudger." She wanted our hearts to be moved and do the work that needs to be done. There are excommunications to reject, sexism to be overcome, bridges to be built.

This summer we will hear Psalm 85—*Justice and peace shall kiss*. We will also hear Romans 8—*all things work for good for those who love God*.

Arlene, in your life, justice and peace did kiss, and in your life, all things worked for good, because you loved God.

Arlene, we love you, we give thanks for you and we celebrate the Communion of Saints. Keep pulling for us!

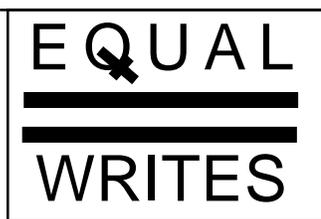
Judy Heffernan has a Master of Divinity degree from a Catholic seminary. A member of the Community of the Christian Spirit, she is an original member of the Women's Ordination Conference.

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