Ordain Women Banner Flies in Rome
honoring St. Therese of Lisieux and all women called to priesthood

By Kate McElwee

In celebration of the feast day of St. Therese of Lisieux, a five yard-long purple “Ordain Women” banner was placed on the Sant’Angelo bridge, just in front of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The banner stayed in place for nearly two hours before it was removed by authorities.

What I didn’t share in our media release was that I was shaking with nerves that morning, as I prepared to drop and attach a banner to the historic bridge, considered an illegal act of defacing a landmark.

I spent the weeks before the action slowly collecting supplies (raising some suspicion with the cleaning supplies store clerk when purchasing seven wooden broomstick handles and two mop handles — the witchy irony is not lost on me, Mary Daly), painting, and practicing the drop off from my terrace with a friend. Walking the mile or so from my home to the bridge early Sunday morning and watching the police patrol the empty streets, every part of me said, “turn back!”

The banner drop in Rome and the many witnesses across the U.S. honored St. Therese and all women called to priestly ordination. Deemed the “Little Flowers of the Grassroots,” this day of action brought WOC members in front of churches and cathedrals, holding signs, handing out white roses and “10 Reasons to Ordain Women” leaflets.

A 19th century French Carmelite nun and Doctor of the Church, St. Therese wrote in her journals and confided to her sister Celine her deep desire to be a priest. She wrote: “I sense in myself the vocation of priest.” Dying of tuberculosis at just twenty-four, she believed God made her terminally ill, preferring her death over the disappointment and pain of not being ordained with the men when she came of the usual age of ordination at the time.

Therese’s story of vocation is often absent from her narrative of a pure “Little Flower,” making her a popular model for humility and docility among Catholic groups. Pope Francis himself claims to have a special devotion to her, always carrying her Story of a Soul in his suitcase, according to reports. However, a closer reading of her journals and the testimonies of her sister and family members, make clear that her fierce love for God was complicated by a Church that would not honor her priestly call.

The erasure of women’s priestly vocations and the issue of women’s ordination from Catholic spaces is nothing new. The institutional Church would have us know that there is no need for further discussion, attempting to silence voices with inconvenient questions. Catholic groups take this charge upon themselves in the form of harassment, bullying, “outing,” and smear campaigns, threatening the security and livelihoods of fellow Catholic disciples. On social media, “new feminism” groups use polite pastels and flowers to champion John Paul II’s theology of the body, dismissing feminist questions with traditional feminine fonts.

continued on page 14
Dear WOC Member,

Writing from my desk in Rome, I am overwhelmed with gratitude for you and our members throughout the world. Your persistent and courageous support of our mission has continued to inspire and re-inspire the movement for women’s ordination and full equality in the Roman Catholic Church—something supposedly impossible.

But the impossible seems impossible only until it isn’t. Your prophetic activism, unwavering witness, and radical hope prove this year in and year out. Change, when it comes, can feel sudden. Yet those who are paying attention, advocating and organizing year after year, know the journey it took.

When you visit Siena you will find pie-sized rounds of something called panforte, or “strong bread.” Heartly and sweet, this was both a local currency among monasteries but also pilgrims’ food for their journeys to Rome. Dense and caloric, you can imagine the energy boost it would provide, both consuming it and knowing it was tucked away in your satchel.

As siblings on the journey, I hope this stellar issue of NWNCC is your strong bread: WOC members transforming the impossible into ministry. Our cover story features the path toward an “Ordain Women” banner flying in Rome, followed by reports from two landmark councils of the Roman Catholic Women Priests communities on page 3.

This issue launches a special series from a group called RAPPORT, Renewing and Priestly People: Ordination Reconsidered. Today on page 4. Partnering with WOC, we will publish more of the stories of their work and share stories of call from among their members. Jamie Manson writes “The Story of Two Vocations,” on page 8, featuring the three recipients of the first annual Lucile Murray Durkin Scholarship and their calls to ordination as young Catholic women.

Nickie Valdez, a feminist Catholic lesbian and Dignity San Antonio chapter leader writes to us of her search for belonging on page 10. Eco-feminist theologian Ivone Gebara has composed an original piece for this issue excerpted on page 11, where she writes about women’s ordination in the context of ecofeminism. She offers new insights and nuances for us to consider.

While there are more nuggets throughout this issue, our News and Notes includes a letter from Board President, Sheila Peiffer, announcing my role as sole executive director of WOC and Erin Saiz Hanna’s Farewell. Erin and I worked together for nearly seven years, sharing a lifetime of memories making the impossible possible. Erin gave so much to WOC and her gifts and talents made our movement stronger. We wish her and her family the best in their next chapter.

Together we are the strong bread, the body of Christ that we need in these “impossible” times. Uncompromising in our mission and living our vocations in the world, the journey is illuminated with your graces. Thank you for your companionship.

With every blessing,

Kate McElwee

Kate McElwee
Women Priests Gather, Discern Paths Ahead

Two historic gatherings of women priests took place over the summer to celebrate movement milestones and prayerfully consider the paths ahead. Today there are more than 200 ordained women throughout the world.

The Council of 2017 Discovers Our Emerging Future

In Middleton, Wisconsin, eighty ordained Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) gathered for “The Council of 2017, Discovering Our Emerging Future,” a first of its kind convening to discuss the movement for ordination and the growing organization. The group met for a weekend for the purpose of honestly processing and assessing the demands, hopes, and questions they are facing. They faced the courage to see things whole and to work through problems until truth, justice, or reconciliation emerges. The community cultivated “the early fruit”—the understanding that as a community, a priestly sisterhood, we share strength, affection, and a common purpose to perfect ourselves. These ties which bind us, can bless us, heal us, and feed us, with a common humble Eucharist. The historic gathering included the election of two new women bishops, Suzanne Thiel and Jane Via (former WOC board member). This news was reported by Lillian Lohr, RCWP.

Celebrating the Face of the Divine Presence In, Around, and Among Us

The Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP) held their annual retreat and meeting in July 2017 in Cleveland, Ohio. They brought together forty-one members from fifteen states, plus Canada and Colombia. Presentations included budget discussions, seminary course options for continuing education, a seminar on team-building, and a video-based motivational workshop, combined with two spiritual sessions intended to deepen our appreciation of our special calling. The highlight for many was the opportunity to talk about our spiritual lives as priests, our ministries and how they shape us, and our deepest impressions of the graces we have received since being ordained or accepted as a member. Intense, intimate conversations between individuals or among small groups lasted for hours and even into the night. Our time together ended with being sent forth with the music, “Go Make a Difference” This report was provided by Peg Bowen, ARCWP.
Some Herstory

RAPPORT: Our Founding
By Joan Sobala, SSJ

This article is the first in a series for our newsletter. In successive issues we will enlarge on the RAPPORT story and we will also include two “stories of call” to introduce NWNC readers to the varied women who make up our group. If our story and our group’s mission resonates with you, consider joining us for one or more gatherings. Currently we meet once a year, typically on the East Coast for about four days of prayer, conversation, and continued discernment. You may reach us through the WOC office.

The roots of RAPPORT can be found at the Third Conference on the Ordination of Women, held at the Henry the VIII Hotel (of all places) in St. Louis, Missouri in October of 1985. About 250 participants came, expecting the program to enlarge upon the agenda set forth by two prior international meetings and the nine-year old national organization named Women’s Ordination Conference: to promote the ordination of women to the priestly ministry now.

The facilitators, however, built the program around the belief that we are all priests by our baptism. Therefore, they sought to persuade us that we don’t need the Church to approve us; let’s just go out and minister.

At the end of an hour’s lively discussion, Nancy DeRycke and I invited the group to a gathering scheduled for the following year at the Sisters of Saint Joseph Motherhouse in Rochester, New York. Seeing these women with eagerness and conviction etched in their faces, I knew that we were responding to God’s call in a new way through this very gathering.

Half of those sixty-two actually came to Rochester in June of 1986. We began as we intended to continue, with shared insights, prayer, and strategizing. The group, initially called ORT (Ordination Reconsidered Today) included then, and as often as possible afterwards, presentations by scholars, activists, and the ordained from other Christian traditions as well as our own. That first gathering found us face to face with one another and with our God. And because we envisioned a future together, we wrote out on newsprint these words:

You are my People. I am your God.

I am with your God. I will be with you on the journey.

Each of us signed our names then, and over the course of the years, as new members came on board, they too signed their names to this essential belief that we were on a God-guided journey with one another. Thus the journey began. Some years we met twice, once in Washington DC at the time of the November bishops’ meeting, another time, elsewhere in the country. By 1989, we discovered that there was a well-known group of Jewish women who called themselves “ORT”, so we changed our name to RAPPORT—Renewing and Priestly People: Ordination Reconsidered Today. New people joined us as others departed, some taking temporary leaves due to personal concerns or responsibilities. We met with some bishops and helped them to understand the urgency of our calls. We listened with them to speakers, and shared discussions and meals. We worked to promote the “Bishops Pastoral on Women’s Concerns” and as the document went through many revisions that gutted the soul of the document, we advocated for its defeat. Eventually, we ceased our work with the bishops. The times and the changes in hierarchy called for us to set that work aside.

We wrote and revised our vision statement and studied the restoration of the diaconate for women. Over the years, we have joined forces with other renewal groups in the Church when the companionship fit. We have prepared academically and spiritually for what we hoped would come in the not too distant future. Some of us would become Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP) and others would stay the course until the relevant canons are changed. But through it all we have felt a strong belonging. And all the while, we more deeply became a community, learning to breathe together in prayer. August 2018 will mark our thirty-second year together and we will host our forty-sixth meeting. Our current membership consists of women from all over the U.S. and Canada. RAPPORT has always been a cell within WOC that has ardently carried the initial impetus.

Joan Sobala, SSJ is a founding member of RAPPORT and lives in Rochester, NY. She is a Sister of Saint Joseph of Rochester NY and served on the WOC Office Ministerial Team from 1979 to 1982, along with Ada Maria Issisi-Diaz and Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt.

“Teresa’s” Story of Call

By RAPPORT Member Who Must Remain Anonymous to Protect Her Church Job

Back in the 1970s and 1980s in the parishes where I worked, the ordination of women was expected. No one said when or how, but many said why and who. Among them was a man calling to thank me for visiting his father in hospital who added, “You should be a priest.” And a parent of a Confirmation candidate who stopped me to express gratitude for our group’s visits to a home for sixteen- to twenty-one-year olds with disabilities who said, “I can’t wait ’til you’re a priest.” When you hear that night and day for years and years you cannot help but ask God, “What is happening; what do you want me to do? To say?”

I used to put off that call by responding, “I don’t think God would talk to me about that until Julie is twenty-one.” Julie was born in 1970 and is our youngest child. She later learned that her pastor boss was a pedophile. She had sensed he was deeply troubled but did not suspect criminal behavior. God seems to have transformed her horror into blessed service as she works in a Catholic high school and guides students in mission service here and abroad.

Listening to people and to God challenges me to ask God these forty plus years: How can I better serve? What does God really want me to do now? Our choices are often between two or more goods and I would question what is the greater good; what helps the common good; what is the good that is most needed for the most vulnerable people?

So, I accepted invitations to speak and teach to prepare volunteer religion teachers even before I had the academic background to support my enthusiasm. People’s faith stories and struggles drove me to accept a

continued on page 5
very ill priest’s invitation to accompany his return to seminary; he asked me to be his moral support. I thought I would audit and was surprised to be invited to matriculate. The next twenty years sped by with more joy than I can describe. Applying theology to childraising and full-time work for the church was exhilarating. Because some fervent parishioners used scripture as a sledgehammer of harsh judgment I eagerly studied biblical theology; because people said I should or would be a priest I studied for the divinity degree so as to be prepared for that eventuality. And because people asked me to be their spiritual director I studied spirituality. Earning a doctorate in ministry with concentration in spirituality and masters degrees with honors in scripture and divinity gave me a twenty-year field education that fed my compassion for people and passion for faith renewal and for accepting biblical challenges, i.e., Matthew 25:31-46.

A few years into that process came the conference where RAPPORT was born. Among my nine conference roommates was a woman who upon arrival as pastoral administrator at an old inner city parish witnessed the boiler explode and the roof leak. Parishioners opted to repair both; everyone gave money she did not think was possible. She wept as she spoke of their generosity, their love, and their success at keeping their parish afloat and alive.

The conference speakers had a different tone. One proclaimed, “They don’t want us! They don’t want us! They don’t want us!” with such gusto that the Holy Spirit fairly blew us into a corner where we found people who do want us to serve no matter how long it takes the hierarchy to recognize our call and our gift. We were not giving up on the institutional church. I have never wavered from wanting to serve. Way back in the 1970s and even the 1980s we believed our Church would and could ordain women and we thought it would be in our lifetime. Obviously, the hierarchy looks that possibility; our letters go unanswered; our ministry goes unrecognized by those in leadership until we look to Pope Francis who listened to women religious and called for and appointed experts on the subject to a papal commission on women deacons. We hope to be consulted; there is a world of ministerial experience and pastoral need to be examined; I am not alone in serving the church as a volunteer for a dozen years, as director of faith formation for twenty years and later as pastoral associate for over twenty years. This work is a calling; our children named that long before I did. I thought I put parenting before ministry. Our children and grandchildren tell me I am their inspiration to work for social justice. Our daughters in law thank me for raising sons who are great partners to them, true spouses and wonderful fathers; our sons-in-law thank me for raising daughters who are great partners supporting family with enthusiasm and good cheer. We have eleven living grandchildren and all of us are blessed to care for a much loved family member with a disabling illness as well as help one another through the grief we carry since the fatal accident of a cherished grandchild whose kindness and love live on in each of us.

Almost twenty years ago some women were ordained by Roman Catholic bishops whose identity is known only by those women and a few witnesses. The bishop’s names are in a locked vault in Europe but their work is being felt on every continent. Some of those ordained women were later ordained bishops; even though they were officially excommunicated they continue to minister throughout the world. These women bishops went on to ordain women only to be excommunicated as well.

Others of us have not been ordained and we simply do what needs to be done when no ordained person is available to do a grave side or nursing home service or hospital or hospice visit or be an open heart and hand to those who come to us in need. I love working with men and women as God builds up the faith community. I would also love to anoint sick people who request it, to absolve those who have unburdened their souls to me, and to unite and feed those I have prepared for the sacramental life of the church in Jesus’ name.

When I look at churches closing and the statistics of so many people opting out of regular worship or even being married or buried from their church I have to wonder at a church that continues to limit the ministerial gifts of people who would draw at least some of those people to worship and service in Jesus’ name. An official in our diocesan office asked me to preach at a church whose pastor was from Africa because parishioners asked for a preacher they could understand. I was glad to do it and became friendly with the priest who told me he was from a diocese where each priest was assigned sixteen mass centers and could not reach them all in one month as some of the roads were impassable. And years before I met him I read a work by Bishop Lobinger where he said in his part of Africa each priest was assigned 70,000 people! Yet, we justify luring these priests away from the people who need them. They are brought here to minister among us because we have a priest shortage here! Will the hierarchy recognize that the Holy Spirit has some other ideas of how to address that shortage? When will the hierarchy address the injustice of limiting women’s ministerial gifts? When will the hierarchy address the sin of sexism in the church? When will the hierarchy act on the obvious reality proscribed in the Book of Genesis and called for in the early baptismal formula Paul cited in Galatians 3:28? God created men and women in God’s image; we are all one in Christ, Jesus. I have no answer as to when. My only response is to love each person and serve, serve, serve with a whole lot of help from God and many holy people.
Since I first came to know her name, the renowned balloonist Jeanette Pickard has been one of my heroes.

At the age of 79, Jeanette was ordained an Episcopal priest as part of the Philadelphia Eleven in 1974.

At the time, I was 34 and remember thinking that I could be as ready for the long-haul as she was.

Now I am 77 and closing in on her date of achieving this once unthinkable goal.

Will the relevant canons of the Roman Catholic Church be revised before I turn 79?

The yen, the call, the prickling up and down my spine have not gone away since I first felt them as a young woman.

I am ready, O God. My leaping heart, searching mind, tenacious soul and slowing-down body are ready.

Joan Sobala, SSJ
September 13, 2017

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Dear friends,

I wanted to let you know that my last day with WOC will be Wednesday, August 23rd. I have accepted a position of Director of Philanthropy back in my home state of Rhode Island in the education of young women and girls field.

Let me begin by saying what a privilege it has been to serve this organization for the last 9+ years. When I started at WOC under my predecessor, Aisha Taylor, I was 27, and less than two weeks after I took the job, our office burned down to the ground. (Do you remember that?!) I often reflect this ministry was truly baptism by fire from the start!

What I learned quickly was that WOC members are strong, resilient, kind, optimistic, and remarkably generous. WOC members emptied their pockets to rebuild WOC and I was deeply moved by their compassion. Throughout the years, members became my friends and WOC became a home. From your creative actions to your inspiring liturgies, you have helped me grow into the person I am today. What an honor and gift it has been to walk beside you in this prophetic work. You will continue to inspire me every day.

While I am truly proud of the many accomplishments during my tenure here, I am deeply aware that it is this collective sisterhood that has carried WOC to the powerful, prophetic and visionary place it is today. WOC’s success lies in the passionate work of our partners in the church-justice movement. I believe WOC has and will continue to change the landscape for women in the Roman Catholic Church.

I would like to especially thank current Co-Executive Director Kate McElwee for all her support, creativity, tenacity, and inspiration over the last several years working together. I also would like to thank our Office Manager, Carol Johnson, and our National Board of Directors. WOC has a strong team in place and I am confident that together they will continue to grow WOC in new and exciting ways.

I extend my tremendous gratitude for your understanding during what may feel like an abrupt departure. As some know, my mom recently and very suddenly passed away. This professional transition is part of larger personal transition of needing to be closer and more available to my family during this difficult time. Our staff and Board of Directors are moving with efficiency to navigate the transition with minimal disruption to WOC’s action work.

With transition comes new energy, ideas and innovation, and I’m truly excited to see what is in store for WOC next. Thank you for the opportunity and pleasure of working with you all.

With every blessing,

Erin Saiz Hanna
WOC Board President
Sheila Peiffer Announcement

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to announce Kate McElwee as the full executive director of WOC. Kate has been a vital leader of WOC for the past six years, serving most recently since 2014 as Co-Executive Director. She assumed full Executive Director responsibilities when Erin Saiz Hanna resigned on August 23.

Erin played an important role in the development and success of WOC since joining the staff in 2008. While we greatly miss Erin, we wish her the best of luck in her new endeavors supporting girls’ education in her home state of Rhode Island.

Kate will lead the global movement for women’s equality and ordination in our Church from her base in Rome, coordinating with staff at our headquarters in Washington, DC and with our dedicated members and volunteers around the world.

Kate first joined WOC in 2011 and has brought strong leadership, fresh creativity, and heartfelt passion to the organization. Last year, for example, she coordinated with Women’s Ordination Worldwide to host the Jubilee for Women Priests in Rome, using the occasion of the Year of Mercy to bring the call for women’s ordination directly to the Vatican.

The Board of Directors thanks Erin Saiz Hanna for her dedication and service to WOC over the past nine years. We look forward to Kate’s leadership as our movement continues to champion women’s equality in our church.

Gratefully,
Sheila Peiffer
President, WOC National Board of Directors

Nominations Open for WOC Board of Directors

WOC is the most visible advocacy group for women’s ordination into an inclusive and accountable Catholic Church. We are currently looking for people who are willing to serve on our Board of Directors. Nominees should be passionate about women’s priestly equality and building a church where all are welcome to share their gifts and participate fully in ministry regardless of gender, race, class, or sexual identity. We welcome people of all abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, and immigration status. People of color, young adults, LGBTQIA, and people in underrepresented communities are strongly encouraged to apply.

We are looking for nominees with a diverse range of experiences and skills, including, but not limited to, fundraising, communications, organizing, theological reflection, advocacy or, most importantly, a passion for being a feminist voice within the Church speaking out against all forms of sexism and oppression.

WOC Board members work together to set direction, ensure resources, and provide oversight for the organization. We meet twice a year in person and once by conference call. Members serve a three-year term. In between meetings, members collaborate on committees and projects on a regular basis. To read a full description of the responsibilities of board members, visit our website.

If you would like to be considered for nomination to the Board, complete an online application and send us your resume. If you would like to suggest someone for the Board or have any questions, contact WOC Board President, Sheila Peiffer at Sheila.peiffer@yahoo.com.

Nomination applications are due January 24, 2018, with personal interviews scheduled for February. The new Board term begins in fall 2018.

We encourage all WOC members and friends to give this opportunity prayerful consideration. Help WOC continue to be courageous and prophetic as we create a discipleship of equals in the Board itself, in the organization at large, and in the worldwide Roman Catholic Church.

WOC Remembers Barbara Blaine

“Few people have done more to protect kids and help victims than Barbara Blaine.” - Barbara Dorris. WOC grieves the sudden loss of Barbara Blaine, who passed away at sixty-one years on September 24, 2017. Blaine was a pioneer and fearless advocate for survivors of sex abuse in our Church. A speaker during WOW’s 2015 conference in Philadelphia, she shared her vocation to the priesthood as a young woman, and her path toward a life of social justice work. Her spirit and legacy will continue to inspire generations to work for justice. Our prayers are with the family and friends of Barbara Blaine and the entire Survivors Network for those Abused By Priests (SNAP) community during this difficult time.
A Tale of Two Vocations: New scholarship offers hope to women who long to be ordained in the Catholic church

By Jamie Manson

“There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in,” Graham Greene writes in his novel The Power and the Glory.

For Sheila Durkin Dierks, that moment came around the age of five or six when she was playing priest.

“I can still see the light and feel the air in the room,” Durkin Dierks said in a recent interview with Women’s Ordination Conference, “and I said to my mother that I intended to be a priest when I grew up.”

Her mother, Lucile, quickly shut down the idea, reminding her daughter that only boys could be ordained to the priesthood.

Like a character in a Greene novel, the grace of that first calling would follow Durkin Dierks throughout her life. “That moment has never left me, but neither did the absolute feeling that I would be ordained,” Durkin Dierks recalled. Years later, when she discovered the Greene quote, she tucked it to her bulletin board.

That same grace seemed to work over time on her mother, too. After Lucille’s death 1999, Durkin Dierks discovered a letter she had written in 1977 to a Cincinnati Catholic newspaper. “When, in the future, women are serving God and His people in the fullness of priesthood....[these] brave pioneers and their sisters will be blessed for their courage and perseverance,” Lucile proclaimed in a letter to the editor.

“My mother was a strong advocate for women in the context of her time, always leading organizations in the parish and diocese and in the community, trying to take the ministry of women to the next level,” Durkin Dierks says. Nevertheless, her mother’s prophetic vision stunned her.

Durkin Dierks’ sense that she would be a priest became a reality when she and her husband, Peter, joined the Light of Christ Ecumenical Catholic Community in Boulder Colorado. In 2009, the community sponsored her for ordination into the Ecumencial Catholic Communion. Today, she still serves that parish and is also the primary pastor of Community in Discernment, also in Boulder.

One year ago, as a way to honor both her mother’s vision as well as her own calling to the priesthood, Durkin Dierks endowed and launched the Lucile Murray Durkin Scholarship Fund for Women Discerning Priestly Ordination. The fund, which is operated through the Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC), offers small grants to women who are enrolled or accepted into an undergraduate or graduate studies program, and is primarily directly to women who wish to be ordained Catholic priests, including Ecumenical Catholic Communion priests or Roman Catholic Women-priests.

Though Durkin Dierks acknowledges that the scholarship will not offer large sums of money, its greater purpose is to acknowledge that Catholic women are called to the priesthood. “It can serve as an encouragement to those who may not have the means to pursue and fulfill their inner vocational voices,” she says. “It will signal for young women their right to answer their calls, and become well educated to do so.”

This past July WOC announced the first three recipients of the scholarship. Two of the women, Elaina Jo Polovick and Lisa Cathelyn, are currently pursuing Master of Divinity degrees at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara in Berkeley, CA. The third recipient, Sarah Holst, is a Master of Divinity Student at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. Each woman received a renewable gift of $1,000.

For these women, even a little bit of hope and encouragement will go a long way. Though each has a different vision of how she might minister, they are all aware that they are seeking to serve an institutional church that does not view their callings as valid. Unlike Catholic men who are discerning the priesthood, church leaders will not rejoice in, pray for, or support their vocations. Unlike their male seminarian classmates, they will face significant financial hardship as they pursue their vocations. Each of them is accruing steep loan debt, and none of them expect to find well-paying jobs in ministry—if they find jobs at all.

The possibility of employment in a Catholic setting seems especially unlikely for Sarah Holst since she is seeking ordination with the Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) movement. According to a 2007 decree from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Holst will face automatic excommunication (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20071219_attentata-ordonna_en.html) for receiving sacred orders from RCWP.

A native of a small town in Nebraska, Holst felt called from a young age to a life of community, prayer, and service. “I assumed I would be a sister,” she said in an interview with NCR. But a priestly vocations video that she watched as a high school senior at a CYO meeting stopped her in her tracks.

“The movie was called ‘Fishers of Men,’” she recalls. “And even though it was super cheesy, after I watched it, I got into the car and just burst into tears.”

While she was an undergraduate student at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, Holst went through the formation process for a women’s religious community. But a calling to the priesthood and to marriage led her to abandon that plan.

She served two years in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, did one year with the Episcopal
Anger is not an unfamiliar emotion for Elaina Jo Polovick or Lisa Cathelyn as they witness the stark contrasts between their struggles to earn a Master of Divinity degree and the privileges enjoyed by their male, Jesuit classmates who have their tuition, housing and food fully covered by the Society of Jesus. A three-year M.Div. program at JST costs over $50,000. That doesn’t include the $3,000 for medical insurance and inflated rates for rent and food in Berkeley. Though the Jesuits technically take a vow of poverty, Catholic women who have no hope of ordination often find themselves living on the poverty line.

Cathelyn, who is on Medicaid because she cannot afford the school’s health insurance plan, says that most of her non-Jesuit classmates work two or three jobs to try to pay their rent and food bills. She lives in a community with six other students, but the rent still runs at $750 per person per month.

“Unfortunately the best schools in theology are located in cities that are very expensive to live in,” she says. “All I can do is hope and pray for job security after I graduate.”

Cathelyn’s interest in theology and ministry was first sparked while she was an undergraduate student at Marquette University where she minored in theology and became acquainted with Ignatian spirituality. After graduation she did a service year with the Sisters of St. Joseph in Minneapolis, offering direct services to clients at a healthcare clinic. On weekends she would attend the local parish, St. Joan of Arc. “It was so vibrant,” she recalls. “The pews were filled. That’s when I decided I wanted to be a part of this.”

Cathelyn says there was no “aha moment” that called her to ordination. She grew into her calling by co-leading liturgies, doing ministry in a women’s prison in Dublin, California, and preaching—which she was allowed to study not at the JST, but at the neighboring Episcopal seminary, the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. “I have felt unwelcome or disused by the institutional church,” Cathelyn reflects, “but I hear the people that I am serving saying ‘we want you, we need you,’ and I need them, too.”

Even amid the hurt, Cathelyn says that she cannot imagine not being Catholic. “I feel like it’s in my blood,” she says. She hopes to try to stay within the church and change the system from within. “If the church is a boat, I’d rather be inside rocking the boat than outside of it making waves.”

Her deepest hope is that the Pope Francis’ recently appointed Study Commission on the Women’s Diaconate might open up an opportunity to become a deacon. “But regardless of where I end up,” she says, “I want to walk with the people of God.”

It was at an ordination of male deacons that Cathelyn’s classmate, Elaina Jo Polovick, first heard her own call to ordained ministry. A native of South Bend, Indiana, Polovick was twelve years old when she and her family got invited to the ordination at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. “The moment I watched them lie prostrate on the floor of the sanctuary I had this overwhelming feeling that I wanted to be among them,” she recalls.

Polovick pursued her undergraduate degree at Loyola Chicago where she befriended a young Jesuit student who encouraged her vocation to the priesthood. “He told me he believed I could be a priest,” she recalls.

After graduation, she joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and was placed on a reservation in Montana. “The town had 500 people and a priest was not available every Sunday, so lay and religious women preached and led communion services,” Polovick says.

Her ministry on the reservation and a later placement at the Newman Center at the University of Michigan, where she also preached and helped lead retreats, con-
A Sense of Belonging

By Nickie Valdez

My name is Nickie Valdez, a proud, Latina, lesbian, whose sense of not belonging has led me to work to give others a place to belong. I am currently married to my spouse of thirty-two years, Deb Myers. My adult life has been spent in community organizing, social justice work and peer support for those in my community. I came out early and got involved in NOW (National Organization of Women), as well as locally in the gay community at the gay switchboard. Through the years I have been involved in a variety of local social justice, political, and activist’s organizations. These organizations gave me a sense of belonging and a voice to claim who I am. My deep longing to be spiritual and stay connected to my faith has always been important to me and, as a result in the early 1970s, I became involved with a group of gays and lesbians to discuss our spirituality in the context of our sexuality. That is when I heard of Dignity, a national organization of gay Catholics. I became one of the founding members here in San Antonio in 1976. It has been both a place of belonging and one of seeking full participation in the Catholic Church. I have also been active in Catholic Church social justice through Pax Christ, as a member of the anti-racism team. I believe my childhood experiences impacted my calling to these life ventures. Here is part of my story.

I was born Maria De La Luz Valdez (another long story…) in the inner city of San Antonio, Texas when indoor plumbing was not yet available. My father was in the Navy and was away from home a lot. This left my sixteen-year-old mother the difficult task of raising me alone. It proved to be too much for her, I am guessing, because she just left one day, never to return. I was not yet two-years old. So I never knew my mother. All I have is a photograph of my mom, dad, and me at that young age. Since my father was away with the Navy, I grew up in my paternal grandmother’s home with my aunts and uncles. That life was dysfunctional and sheltered. I remember being called “un parche mal pegado” which means “a patch poorly sown on.” I suppose it was meant to be a term of endearment but when I realized what it meant, I concluded that I didn’t really belong there. I remember when I was about ten, telling one of my aunts, my godmother, “I guess I am all alone.” She promptly told me, “Of course, you are not alone, you have all of us.” I can say that I was well taken care of, especially by my godmother (Aunt Pat or Petra) but I felt and somehow knew deep down I was a nuisance to some of them. When my father left the Navy and came back home, he came to live at my grandmother’s. I began to hear complaints about how he was not contributing to my care, financially or otherwise. My father did not stay there long as he found himself a job, a place to live, and then met my stepmother and remarried. The complaints only grew louder about my father not taking responsibility for me. My grandmother finally asked my father to take me to live with him. My stepmother had her hands full with two other children. Even though I was a good babysitter, she was not keen on having another child to care for. I did not stay there very long, my father took me back to my grandmother. But my grandmother said she was too old to raise a child. So my Aunt Pat decided to take me in. She took her responsibility seriously and cared for me, but I continued to feel as though it was as a favor to my father and an obligation. I still didn’t feel that I really belonged.

As I grew into my early teens, I began to get involved in the local parish, helping the nuns teach catechism. I enjoyed it and the teaching made me feel good about myself. With time, I felt the calling to join the nuns, the Cordi Marion Sisters. I felt like it was a place I could belong. On entering, one of the rules of the congregation was that my parents be married by the church. When I asked my father, he told me they had not, so I informed the congregation they sought for me a dispensation (imagine not accepting an eager, faith-filled, dedicated young person because of the so-called sins of her parents…). Anyway I completed six months of postulency and two years of novitiate. However, in the end, the congregation was not able to grant the dispensation, stating that if they made this exception, they would have to change their rules (imagine that…). This was a very painful experience for me. I was so disappointed and confirmed again that I did not belong.

On leaving the convent at seventeen, I returned to my aunt’s house and went to high school. It was the 1950s and racism was not just for the African American community. Mexican Americans were people of color, and also relegated to the back of the bus, the theater, not to mention the church. I quickly became aware of the oppressive environment for a poor Mexican American female in South Texas. And at home, when I was old enough to get a driver’s license, my dad told me I did not need to learn to drive, because my husband would do that. In school, we were forbidden to speak Spanish—the consequences were demerits. One time, I challenged my English teacher who would frequently make fun of how we Mexican Americans pronounced certain words in English. I told her that I thought she was supposed to teach us, not make fun of us. I was swiftly sent to the Dean’s Office with no repercussion for the teacher. I was also interested in art and drafting in school, but was denied the opportunity to take drafting because it was a “boys” class. And, likely the hardest lesson regarding my place in the socioeconomic strata was when I was a senior in high school. I entered a nationwide United Way logo drawing contest and earned an honorable mention award. This made me eligible for a scholarship to

continued on page 15
We can affirm that in all areas of human knowledge the conceptual framework of the past, especially in reference to the theologies and sciences of religions, can no longer be sustained. We need to affirm that new content and forms of belief are emerging within Christianity, even as conservative positions also expand and develop.

One of the renewing tendencies of theological thinking is ecofeminism, a combination of ecology and feminism as a plural social movement led mostly by women. Ecofeminist theologians claim that the struggle for movements led mostly by women. Ecofeminist theologians claim that the struggle for women's rights and women's rights are closely linked with respect to the multiplicity of life on our planet. Yet it also denounces pollution in various traditional theological concepts and beliefs. These concepts, fruits of an essentialist anthropology that has imposed itself on daily life, appear as accomplices in the maintenance of privileges and in the exclusion of women from a more active participation in the reinterpretation of the Christian faith. It is enough to recall the masculine symbolism present in the different instances of power of the Christian churches and the theological justifications for its maintenance. Using these concepts means misappropriating both the vital experience of the Jesus Movement and the vital experience of many people in our present time.

Ecofeminist theology accompanies scientific and contemporary social movements, but does not have enough audience in churches, nor does it penetrate most popular religious communities. It clashes with the pre-established truths rather than give assurance to people—that is, it is meant to challenge, not simply comfort people.

The formal education received by the clergy and pastoral agents is still based on the eternal truths maintained by a male, celibate clergy and episcopate who draw on these truths to express their power. There is very limited space for the practice of freedom, of gratitude and solidarity. Moreover, the presumed eternity of these concepts helps maintain the current economic structure that is being disseminated in the churches in the form of maintaining essentialist family and social structures for the sake of the stability of capitalism. For this reason, among others, they do not allow and do not recognize that new groups and different forms of religious power can emerge. Likewise, they do not welcome new content marked by the temporary nature and diversity of our time and cultures. Finally, they cannot accept the fact that the planet is a living being, capable of self-organization of all its elements, institutions, and people. Priests continue to reproduce a deterministic symbolic world where history repeats itself without creativity. The new events are embedded in the old dualistic anthropological interpretations marked by unsustainable simplicity and lackluster observation. Either they do not realize the evolution of life and the newly acquired theories or, in bad faith, they continue to use these concepts for their own benefit and continue the prevailing rules of order.

The ecofeminist theological perspective that I support reflects equally on the forms of reproduction of religious institutions, especially of patriarchal Christian institutions. In this perspective, the struggle of many women for diaconal and priestly ordination in these institutions may be a small step toward the public expression of the religious and representative power of women. Yet it runs a risk of continuing the same scheme of dependence on authorization or validation from the so-called “princes of the Church” as if they hold not only interpretation but the key to the continuity of Christian tradition. Ecofeminist thinking is marked by criticism and at the same time interpretative mutability relative to traditional religious concepts. It is also marked by unpredictability and human creativity capable of yielding new senses, new services, and new ways of understanding life. The drama in which we live is that we believe that there are forms of life or institutions or deities that must be eternal and that the faithful need them in that way to feel secure. Such judgments or affirmations also inhabit some groups of women who call themselves feminists. They live a contemporary feminism for social issues; more of a feminism coupled with traditionalist theological views when it comes to theology and canon law. No doubt such a belief was effective in the past when feminist theology began. But today such a posture is anachronistic. It includes the idea of the “eternal priesthood” according to the order of Melchizedek. Pure mythology and pure concentration of masculine power is able to convince itself of the importance of its kind in relation to all other beings. Without realizing it, women let ourselves become complicit with this priestly model and the legislation that maintains it. Hence I question the female ministerial priesthood as part of this hierarchical model in the Church. From it, the clergy believe to have not only the representation of God or the mystery that surrounds us, but of being the moral conscience while teaching the faithful. This is pure pretension effectively functioning as symbolic power over the faithful. Are we falling into new traps that keep us from making all things new? We are invited to think seriously about this.

Ecofeminist theology dares to repeat the words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado:

Walker, your steps are the way, and nothing else.
Walker there is no way, you make the way when walking.

continued on page 12
Theological Perspectives

Convincing ourselves that our steps are the way, that there are no pre-established truths and freedom paths is both challenge and ethical requirement. The development of these convictions is a step toward what is required of us today: disobeying arbitrary orders contrary to our conscience and the common good; not asking for permission to fight for the common good, especially for the poor and needy; instituting our priesthood in another way and in temporary forms that are re-measured to the extent of the new needs and historical subjects due to modern day demands. It is certain our visibility would be smaller and we would not perpetuate ourselves in the so-called sacred power of religious institutions. But would we not be more effective in simply loving our neighbor? Shouldn’t we become less formal and at the same time less dependent on the male order? Wouldn’t this bring us closer to the tradition of Jesus? These questions are worth asking.

No doubt some might find arguments against my proposal to consider becoming “dis-ordained.” Among them would be a new social organization for religious institutions. Religious institutions might dwell more on the observation of life as we know it and then to admit that small ruptures will allow new forms of organization to arise. These creative solutions will help people discover new and previously unpredictable ways to live out our faith. They will introduce a different movement to life, invite thought and creation of new social policies. This way of thinking has existed in nature, biology, geography, and institutions of the past and in many corners of the present as an expression of the human and social ecology that sustains the lives of many species.

I stay open to the question of women’s ordination in existing religious institutions. I certainly believe there are positive aspects to this path. I only raise the question to invite us to reflect and dialogue about the interdependence and relatedness of all vital processes. These are questions that invite us perhaps to reorganize our way of serving one another and to rescue our thinking from the Christian tradition that relies more on Greek metaphysics and the Roman policy that encased them. This is one of the challenges that ecofeminist theology. This is a challenge for our lives, our actions, our choices and our thoughts.

Walker, your steps are the way, and nothing else

I invite us to reflect on what steps we have taken. Where are they leading us? What do we want? What in these steps has been the force of the mediations from official religious institutions? Do they correspond to the need for the meaning we seek? Do those needs correspond to the real needs of the human communities to which we want to be supportive and responsive? Are they really the expression and accentuation of the creative autoepoiesis of life in us? Are they the expression of the creative force of the Gospel that we inherit and leave behind for future generations? These are some questions I believe ecofeminism can help us address.

Ivone Gebara is a Brazilian Sister of Our Lady and a leading theologian in the fields of ecofeminism and liberation theology.

A Tale of Two Vocations...continued from page 9

vinced her to pursue her Master of Divinity degree at the JST. “I wanted to impact and be impacted by clergymen,” she says. “I didn’t want to be siloed off from priests.”

Polovick has found creative ways to gain access to courses at JST that are reserved only for seminarians. “I volunteer as an actor for a course called Celebration Styles, where my Jesuit classmates learn to celebrate the sacraments,” she says. “I have played the mother of a deceased child, a dying hospice patient, and a catechumen.”

But once she is done playing her part, she is told the leave the classroom, often in the middle of the day’s lesson. “In the time I’m in the classroom I try to soak up the knowledge that the seminarians are receiving about the sacramental tradition.”

To make ends meet, Polovick works twenty-five hours a week at two jobs. In addition to her coursework, she also performs ten hours a week of field education work. “It has pushed me beyond what I can physically do.”

But Polovick refuses to allow the financial burdens or the fear of excommunication or unemployment deter her from living out her authentic calling. “I have let go of making it about me,” she says. “I had to find freedom from fear. I’m not afraid that the ordination of women won’t happen in my lifetime, but I am afraid that if I don’t fight it won’t happen at all.”

The sentiments of these women sound strikingly familiar to feminist theologian Mary Hunt, who served on the committee that chose the recipients for the 2017 Lucile Murray Durkin scholarship. “I read with tears in my eyes several of the applications,” Hunt reflects. “I recognized myself and other Catholic women I know and love in the stories these women told.”

Hunt says that she was moved by the applicants’ honesty, clarity and sense that they were in unfair situations. “But I also felt rage at the fact that, forty years after my own studies, these women are still plagued by the same issues that I confronted.”

After decades of work teaching graduate courses in theology and ministry in the U.S. and Latin America, Hunt says she is more persuaded than ever that Catholic women must continue to make their way. “We are more than capable of being ministers and the larger world needs us,” she says.

That these women would undergo debt, marginalization and underemployment to live out their vocations is a sign that their work is holy, Hunt says. Reading the applications, she says, gave her the opportunity “to be reminded of the valor and integrity of our sisters.”

Their diligence and courage, Hunt says, gives her hope that, even amid all of the hardships and challenges, “We will prevail!”

True to Graham Greene’s quote, these young women, and countless women like them, had a moment in their early years where, they believe, God opened a door and called them to a future in ministry. The question remains whether the Catholic church will fully open its doors to these women and allow them to lead the church into the future.

Jamie L. Manson is NCR books editor. She received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics.

This piece is a collaboration with the National Catholic Reporter and was also published on Oct. 26, 2017 on www.NCRonline.org.
A driving force behind the meeting in Detroit in 1975 that evolved into the Women’s Ordination Conference was the desire for the liberation of women in the Catholic Church. But during that same period, passion for another kind of liberation, the liberation of those under military dictatorships in Latin America, was driving some other Catholic women and men. In Eileen Markey’s splendid biography, A Radical Faith, readers become acquainted with (and will likely be deeply inspired by) one of them, Sister Maura Clarke.

Maura (née Mary Elizabeth) Clarke was like many American Catholic girls of her generation. Born in 1931 to Irish immigrant parents, she grew up in the traditional Catholicism of her working-class neighborhood in Queens, New York: attending Benediction, praying to the Blessed Virgin, listening to Bishop Sheen on the radio. And the religious congregation she entered in 1950, the Maryknoll sisters, was in many respects traditional as well. In the early years of her work as a missioner in Nicaragua, where she arrived in 1959, Maura and the other Maryknoll sisters were singing the Te Deum with members of the dictatorial Somoza family.

Several things changed all that: Vatican II, which mandated the renewal of religious life; Maura’s growing involvement with Nicaraguans who suffered enormously under the Somoza dictatorship; and her encounter with liberation theology, especially in the activism and writings of Ernesto Cardenal and his brother, Fernando.

Gradually the piety of Maura’s early years converged with the radical sense of justice that would shape the rest of her life. By the late 1960s, Maura and others were meeting and marching with Nicaraguans to protest the brutality of the Somoza regime. Maura interacted frequently with the Sandanistas, the revolutionary group that brought down the Somoza regime in 1979. When Maura moved to El Salvador in 1980, this history led the Salvadoran military to brand Maura and the three church women with whom she was working as subversives. On December 2, 1980, they beat, raped, and murdered Maura and her companions.

Markery’s retelling of the political radicalization and activism that led to Maura Clarke’s death is galvanizing, but A Radical Faith is by no means only a narrative of the “assassination of Sister Maura.” Rather, it is a deeply moving study of the many dimensions of Maura Clarke’s life that shaped her heroic work for justice for the people of Central America. The extent of Markey’s research is stunning: details from interviews and letters from school friends, Maura’s interactions with her spiritual director, visits with her family in New York and Ireland, how she dealt with falling in love with a priest in Nicaragua. The engrossing portrait that emerges goes well beyond Clarke’s political convictions and actions.

(Even after death threats, Maura had asked “If we abandon them when they are suffering the cross, how can we speak credibly about the resurrection?”)

At least two trajectories help to bring Markey’s extensive research together. One is the Irish history and identity of Maura’s family of origin. Maura’s father, John, had emigrated to the U.S. in 1914, but his brothers in County Sligo were active in the Irish Republican Army; he returned to Ireland in 1921 and fought in the Irish revolution. Maura’s mother, Mary McCloskey Clarke, grew up Catholic in what is now Northern Ireland, and knew well what being part of an oppressed minority felt like. From the beginning of the book, Markey uses the Clarke’s experience of struggle against political oppression to clarify Maura’s commitments and her heroism. Already in the first chapter, Markey explains that during Maura’s childhood, she often accompanied her father, John, on his after-dinner strolls on the boardwalk beside the ocean where he told stories of the Irish revolution and instilled his thoughtful daughter with an understanding of the world from the perspective of the person on the bottom: the native, not the colonist, the peasant, not the landlord…of brave, principled rebels, of people who stand against the prevailing power and for the underdog…Maura ingested the message. (pp. 27-28)

The other motif that brings Markey’s remarkable research together is Maura’s Christian faith, and, in fact, the centrality of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross to that faith. Repeatedly Markey highlights the influence of Christ’s suffering on Maura’s life and work.

After the earthquake in Managua in 1972, Maura went with Fr. Mercerreyes as he walked through the remains of the parish…(hugging) people…crying with them and (sharing) the Eucharist. It was Christ’s broken body for a ravaged people. (p. 141)

(Even after death threats, Maura had asked “If we abandon them when they are suffering the cross, how can we speak credibly about the resurrection?” (p. 241)

Since the 1970s, a number of feminist theologians have argued that the Christian focus on the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross is a major cause of women’s oppression. In 1975, the same year that many of us met in Detroit for the first Catholic conference on women’s ordination, the great German liberation and then feminist theologian, Dorothee Soelle, strongly criticized what she perceived as the sadism of Jurgen Moltmann’s theology of the cross, as expressed in his classic work, The Crucified God. And in the 2000s, U.S. feminist theologians Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock denounced the cross as a symbol of violence and abuse in two different books, Proverbs of Ashes (2000) and Saving Paradise (2008). After Vatican II some Catholic churches replaced the crucifix with a figure of the risen Christ behind the altar.

There can be no doubt that the cross has sometimes been used to encourage women to repress suffering and abuse rather than speak out about it. But as Maura Clarke’s life and death show, the suffering and death of Jesus has also inspired women to live and die in the hope of a resurrection of justice and peace for all. May reading A Radical Faith inspire Christian feminists, including Catholic women’s ordination activists, to reconsider and expand our understanding of the cross and other dimensions of our own faith in the months and years to come.


Reviewed by Sheila Peiffer

By now, NWNC’s readership will have heard of this riveting new contribution to must reads for those concerned with the intersection of personal faith and the institutional Church. I am willing to bet that most of us here identify with the focal question that Celia Viggo Wexler says drove her to write Catholic Women Confront Their Church: “Was it possible to be a woman who was an independent thinker, a professional in the workplace, who firmly believed in women’s equality, and still be a Catholic?” (p. 4)

Wexler explores this subject by reporting ten profiles in courage from a diverse group of Catholic women in varied situations both professionally and in regard to the Church itself. Each story invites us into the complexities of a woman’s personal challenges and choices—and, in so doing, engages us in inner dialogue about the common themes that suffice the book. Like the good reporter she is, Wexler outlines these issues in the introduction: privacy of conscience; importance of social justice; rejection of the church’s opposition to women priests; doubt that ordination is enough; appreciation of Pope Francis but skepticism about what he can do; and a faith that transcends the institutional church. (pp. 9-10) As these narratives unfold, we realize, as Wexler states at the conclusion, that “Catholic feminist” is not an oxymoron.

We also gradually realize that, despite the fact that about half of the featured women are well-known public advocates for both social justice and Catholic reform, the book focuses on personal change rather than institutional reform. The role models here, whether scholars like Diana Hayes or Gretchen Reydams-Schils; social activists like Frances Kissling or Sr. Simone Campbell; or church reformers like Marianne Duddy-Burke or Barbara Blaine or any of the other women whose faith journeys instill both hope and concern, engage our minds and our hearts. But the structural ramifications of the dilemma posed by the clash of conscience and institution are left to the reader. As Wexler says, “This is the conversation that Catholic women are not having with one another and should be.” Readers here are probably more aware than many that the impetus for the sweeping change needed in the Church needs to be fueled by the laity.

Although Wexler is pessimistic about Catholic women having these needed conversations, she dedicates the book to the next generation, in the hope that they will not give up on Catholicism. Certainly the stories she tells and the resources she lists are motivation and means for dialogue. Why aren’t more women having these conversations, with each other and with the wider Church?

As WOC members we would do well to take Wexler’s invigorating account of these ten exceptional women as a rallying point to amplify these important conversations. Read it, share it, talk about it, delve into the bibliography, investigate the resources, and argue with it. Keep the conversation flowing until the next iteration of a book like this contains more accounts of hope than hurt.

Sheila Peiffer currently serves as the President of the WOC Board of Directors. Wife, mother of four, grandmother of five, she has been a Director of Religious Education, Campus Minister, Retreat leader, Social Justice Coordinator and, through it all, a dedicated church reformer.

Ordain Women Banner Flies in Rome...continued from page 1

Even seemingly progressive groups and allies wash their hands of women’s ordination, in the words they use and the company they keep. I wrote about the dangers of “Putting Ordination Aside” in a 2014 issue of New Women, New Church, lamenting the trend of working for women’s “incisive presence” in the Church without addressing patriarchal roots. Bowing to hierarchy’s fears of “radical feminism,” this practice of censorship continues today, leaving the issue of women’s ordination as an untouchable “hot button,” behind closed doors.

Sidelineing an issue is not simply stopping a conversation: it is silencing and dismissive of women—it hurts individuals, weakens the Church, and sends a message to the world at-large that discriminating against women is acceptable to a worldwide organization. Dialogue is one step. Taking action gives us movement.

So inspired by the people of WOC who for more than four decades have taken risks for what is right, I walked across the bridge. Much bigger and taller than it seems, my friend and I hoisted the banner over our heads and threw the contraption across the ancient stones. Securing our message with brand new ropes, we walked away.

The banner appears so small and home-spun compared to the enormous backdrop of the Basilica. Someone on Twitter joked that this was the size of our movement (tiny), but to me, it is the space the institution has created for women (tiny and off to the side, please). But this tiny hope, this “Little Flower,” is a sign that the grassroots are empowered. People of God are not content with simply admiring the structures of patriarchy. The “Little Flowers” are in bloom.

I believe Therese would be proud of the work of WOC. I wish she could know you, and our courageous members who celebrate her vocation and work tirelessly to re-center women, amplify their voices, and celebrate their ministries.
The Keepers
Reviewed by Emily Cohen

The seven-episode Netflix series, The Keepers, explores the unsolved murder of Sister Catherine “Cathy” Cesnik, a School Sister of Notre Dame who taught English and drama at Archbishop Keough High School in Baltimore, Maryland. Sister Cathy disappeared on November 7, 1969 at the age of 26; her body was found three months later in a makeshift landfill a few miles from her home. At the time of her disappearance and murder, Sister Cathy was aware of sexual abuse of students at Keough by the school’s chaplain, Father Joseph Maskell, and was working to expose the abuse and protect the students who had confided in her.

The Keepers takes us through the details of Sister Cathy’s disappearance and exposes the extent of the sexual abuse perpetrated and orchestrated by Fr. Maskell. The sexual abuse involved multiple priests, a local doctor, and Baltimore City police officers. The series offers an honest look into the horror and trauma of clergy sexual abuse: the betrayal of children by trusted adults, the institutional failures of the church, medical establishment, and police, and the ongoing lack of justice for survivors or accountability for abusers. The Keepers also shows the remarkable courage and resilience of survivors, including the myriad ways in which survivors build community and seek justice for each other when institutions fail them.

At the center of the efforts to uncover the truth about Sister Cathy’s death are two of her former students, Gemma Hoskins and Abbie Schaub, whom we meet in the first episode. For the past several years, the two women have dedicated themselves to scouring public records, tracking down key persons for interviews, constructing timelines and connecting the dots. In their search for answers, Gemma and Abbie started a Facebook group for people to share information about the case and any relevant tips. To their surprise, the group evolved into a community of support and truth-telling for survivors of abuse by Fr. Maskell. At the time of the filming, Gemma and Abbie knew of thirty-five survivors; since the release of the series, several others have come forward to disclose their experiences of abuse at Keough.

Jean Wehner is among those survivors stepping into the light and sharing the truth of their experiences. For years, Jean was only known by her pseudonym Jane Doe, which she used in her 1994 civil suit with another survivor, Teresa Lancaster (“Jane Roe”), against Fr. Maskell and the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The case was dropped on the technicality that the statute of limitations had expired—a topic taken up in greater detail in the series. Fr. Maskell and another priest, Fr. Neil Magnus, began sexually abusing Jean after she went to confession and disclosed that she had been sexually abused by an uncle. Fr. Maskell and Fr. Magnus used their positions of authority to take advantage of Jean, often telling Jean that she deserved the abuse and using religious language to justify their behavior. Her bravery and decision to tell her story in such a public way is an act of courage that deserves enormous respect and compassion.

The Keepers provides a space for women like Jean and Teresa to tell their stories. This is the heart and the success of the series. The documentary brings us into their living rooms and gives us a seat at their kitchen tables. Here, we see the realness of survivors and can bear witness to their suffering, their strength, and the brilliant ways that they continue to support one another in the long work of healing. We also see the enormous effort and energy that it takes to fight for justice and to confront institutions with their own failures and contradictions.

Sister Cathy believed her students when they told her something was wrong. In her memory, we may all work to listen carefully to survivors, to believe what they say, and to work to hold perpetrators accountable. Our communities and our religious leaders should be worthy of our trust. The Keepers provides an opportunity to begin the work of listening and believing.

Emily Cohen has an M.Div. from Harvard Divinity School. She writes for us from Seattle, Washington.

A Sense of Belonging...continued from page 10

the Chicago Art Institute, but the scholarship was given to a white male contestant with the explanation that he was a boy and that his parents would likely have the means to send him to Chicago.

After high school, I attempted to go to college but was unable to support myself and keep up with school. I worked mostly seasonal jobs and after coming out, I wandered for a few years, got into trouble and in time found myself in jail. The day I was released, the matron told me, “You don’t belong here.” Ironically, it was those words that finally gave me a sense of who I was and gave me a new purpose.

Eventually I found my niche as a picture framer, a place where I could use my skills as a designer and artist. Later I would fall in love and be able to belong in many places—in a long term, loving relationship, in a church community, and among a number of social justice groups who welcome all that I have to give.

Nickie Valdez is a founding member of Dignity’s San Antonio chapter, now in its 41st year, and several LGBT support groups and equal rights lobbies in the San Antonio area. She and her spouse of 31 years, Deb Myers, were legally married in September 2015.
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