



# New Women, New Church

WOMEN'S ORDINATION CONFERENCE

Vol. 44, no. 1

\$2.00

Winter/Spring 2021

## Breaking Bread at the Table of Justice: A Celebration of Prophetic Persistence

*WOC celebrates its 45th anniversary with a virtual gala and inclusive liturgy*

BY KATE MCELWEE

“Our foremothers could not have predicted” is a bit cliché when describing our movement’s dynamic herstory, but if you will allow me just one more: “Our foremothers could not have predicted we would have a forty-fifth anniversary gala, virtually.” Over three days, WOC supporters zoomed in and logged on to “Breaking Bread at the Table of Justice: A Celebration of Prophetic Persistence,” to mark our forty-fifth anniversary from the comfort of their homes.

The anniversary was not just a birthday party for WOC, but a ritual to honor the strength, resilience, courage, and community that has endured despite so many attempts by the Vatican to thwart our mission. It was also a reminder of the strength of the WOC community and the leading role we’ve played in the transformation and renewal of our church.

We began the festivities with a toast to WOC to honor our foremothers and leaders, celebrate our roots as activists and feminist ministers, and share colorful stories of actions-past. With punny “WOC-tails” in hand, we came together to laugh, reminisce, and appreciate just how far our movement has come. Some in the Zoom room were introduced to WOC in 2015 at the “Gender, Gospel, and Global Justice” conference in Philadelphia; some were on the task force for the first Women’s Ordination Conference; most of us are somewhere in between.



We then released a curated series of videos from advocates, activists, academics, and leaders in the women’s ordination movement, featuring Sr. Margaret Farley, Luke Hansen, Roy Bourgeois, Nontando Hadebe, Miriam Duignan, Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Sr. Teresa Forcades, and many others. It was a joy-filled day of affirmation and gratitude, but don’t worry if you missed it: The videos are free to watch and still available to all on our website’s “Gala Hub.”

We closed our anniversary celebration by breaking bread together. Our liturgy planning team of Diann Neu, Kori Pacyniak, and Katie Lacz assembled global voices and visionaries to be bread for one another. Marsie Silvestro sang a moving rendition of “Bless you, Sister,” and as Jean Marchant commented at the end, “This was a three-tissue liturgy!”

*continued on page 10*

### *In this issue*

From the Executive Director ... 2

Theological Reflections ... 3

Emerging Voices ... 4

Walking with Women Called ... 5 & 8

Escuchando a las Mujeres ... 6

Ministry of Irritation ... 7 & 11

News and Notes ... 10

Book Reviews ... 14 & 15

Merchandise & Prayer Card ... 16

# From the Executive Director



DEAR WOC MEMBER,

The buzz around the Vatican these days is that Pope Francis is a “pope in a hurry.” From the expansion of Canon Law 230 to include all laypeople, to the appointment of Sr. Nathalie Becquart to the Synod of Bishops (see page 11), to the appointment of six women appointed to the Council for the Economy, and to the woman appointed as a prosecutor of the Vatican court, it sure seems like Francis is making up for lost time on his early call for a more “incisive” and “capillary” presence of women.

Appointing women to Vatican administrative positions models what is “possible” - easy, at least canonically, ways to promote greater inclusion. A change in canon law, however, to reflect widely accepted practices that recognize the liturgical leadership of women, is radical. I said as much to the *New York Times*, Reuters, the BBC, and so many major news outlets that contacted WOC for comment. Our phones and inboxes were buzzing and brimming with media requests: a great testament to the increasing visibility of WOC and years of building media relationships in Rome.

This issue represents the many ways WOC is both growing, and rising to the challenge of not only a “pope in a hurry,” but witnessing for women’s ordination in a global pandemic. On page 10 we welcome two new board members, Bernadette Raspante and Robert Yohanan, and introduce you to Anna Burnham, our new digital organizer (be sure to read her “Baptism by fire” recap of our Vocations Awareness Week efforts on page 7).

In addition to more media visibility, more and more high school students are connecting with WOC, usually through our Young Feminist Network (page 8), and it was a delight to interview high school senior and poet, Meredith Toussaint, about how she discovered WOC and what the role of women in the church means to her (page 5).

This issue also highlights feminist critiques of both *Fratelli Tutti* (page 3); and an emerging “New Christian Feminism,” particularly in Latin America. Our Latinx Outreach Coordinator, Lilian Medina Romero, participated in a Vatican-sanctioned course last July and summarizes what we can learn from the church’s response to secular feminism (page 6).

While many ordinations are on hold because of the pandemic, we have expanded our “Walking with Women Called” section of this issue to include a piece about a grassroots home church movement, WHIMM (page 4), as well as the ongoing work of our Mainstreaming Women’s Ministries survey, and our efforts to dialogue with patriarchy (page 8).

Lastly, I want to again express my gratitude for each one of you who helped make WOC’s anniversary a success. An organization does not get to mark its forty-fifth year without a heartbeat of strong, creative, persistent, generous, spirit-filled people keeping the dream alive! Together we are the living hope for a more just church and world. Thank you!

For equality,

Kate McElwee  
Executive Director

*NEW WOMEN, NEW CHURCH* is published two times a year by the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC). WOC works for the ordination of women as deacons, priests and bishops into an inclusive, and accountable Roman Catholic Church.

## EDITORS

Kate McElwee  
Nancy Fitzgerald  
Sheila Peiffer, Associate Editor

Send address corrections and all correspondence to:

WOC National Office  
PO Box 15057  
Washington, DC 20003  
(202) 675 1006  
woc@womensordination.org

.....  

## NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Jennifer O'Malley, President  
Abby Rampone, Vice-President  
Anne Latour, Treasurer  
Sara Sullins, Secretary  
Christina Ellsberg  
Nancy Fitzgerald  
Bernadette Raspante  
Robert Yohanan

.....  

## ADVISORY BOARD

Regina Bannan  
Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza  
Teresa Forcades, OSB  
Jeannine Gramick, SL  
Celine Goessl, SCSC  
Harry R. Halloran Jr.  
Mary E. Hunt  
Andrea Johnson  
Theresa Kane, RSM  
Anthony Padovano  
Donna Quinn, OP  
Rosemary Radford Ruether

In principle and practice, WOC values and seeks a diverse membership. There shall be no barriers to full participation in this organization on the basis of gender, race, creed, age, sexual orientation, national origin, or disability.

A subscription to *New Women, New Church* is included in WOC membership for an annual fee of \$45. WOC is incorporated under 501c3 as a non-profit organization. Contributions are tax-deductible accordingly.

Copyright: Women's Ordination Conference 2021 All rights reserved.

# Brothers—and Sisters—all

*The problem with gender-exclusive language in Pope Francis's encyclical, Fratelli Tutti*

BY TAYLOR OTT

Pope Francis promulgated his latest social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, in October 2020. Released amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the encyclical opens with a dark realism not often seen in Catholic social teaching. It includes biting critiques of the injustices exposed by the pandemic's effects, the inability of governments to work together, and the harmful characteristics of recent populist political movements. From my context in the United States, I recognize Francis's calls to care for our neighbor and practice politics with love and tenderness as sorely needed reminders, at a time when so many American Catholics have been seduced by the temptation to fear our neighbor and practice politics with selfishness and violence.

Among those concerned about the forces of patriarchy and misogyny, though, conversation about the document has lingered on its controversial title. The phrase *fratelli tutti* is drawn from a letter that Francis of Assisi addressed to his fellow friars; the phrase means, literally, "brothers all."

But there's been a fair amount of debate over exactly how it should be properly translated. Since *fratelli* is traditionally used to refer to a sibling group of either only men or mixed genders, some commentators, including those in the Vatican, point out that it is meant to include everyone and may be translated into English as "brothers and sisters all."

But the title refers, after all, to Francis of Assisi's all-male audience—and Pope Francis continues that gender-exclusivity with his repeated use of the word "fraternity" throughout the document. Regardless of how the Vatican intends to translate the phrase, these masculine words obscure the very existence of women and non-binary folk. The fact that the title remained in place even after many people pointed out the problem weeks ahead of the document's release speaks volumes.<sup>1</sup>

In writing about the problem of all-male language for God, Elizabeth Johnson famously argues that "the symbol of God functions."<sup>2</sup> Her objection to exclusive language is not only that over half of humanity is erased by it, but that such language has practical effects and does real harm. Language has tangible effects – Johnson's work demonstrates that using exclusively male language for God upholds patriarchal structures, constitutes a barrier to seeing women as made in the image of God, and posits men as closer to the divine than women. Though the language found in *Fratelli Tutti* is not at the absolute center of our faith like the very being of God is, the language there also functions. In using gender-exclusive language, it both reveals and re-inscribes women's marginalization within the institutional church.

First, the symbol of *fratelli* functions in that no women are cited among the footnotes of the document. If we are to understand "fraternity" to include all persons—and not just men—we must wonder why it is in fact only men's voices that are included in this encyclical.

But the exclusion of women runs deeper, too. If women were truly included in Francis's social and theological reflections, it would show not only in the language but also in the analyses on which the pope bases his arguments. To his credit, Francis does recognize that women often do not possess equal rights, even in societies that claim to uphold equality as a value (23). But true inclusion of women must go far beyond the mention of women in a couple of paragraphs. It must also mean, for example, speaking to the burden that COVID-19 has placed particularly on women in the form of economic damage and increased risk of domestic abuse. It must also mean acknowledging the patriarchal and misogynistic underpinnings of destructive forms of government, as well as the successes of female leaders. It must also mean recognizing the long-standing contributions that women have made to theologies of encounter and care.

This is also true of other groups marginalized by the hierarchy: if the experience of people of color were reflected in the document, there would be no statement of how "we" thought society had moved past racism (20); if LGBTQ+ voices were heard, Francis would understand that the phrase "brothers and sisters" does not include everyone. There may be legitimate debates over Italian grammar, but *Fratelli Tutti*'s gender-exclusive title



Taylor Ott

clearly points to a pervasive trend that shapes the document's contents.

It is striking, though, how often Francis indicts himself and the institutional church with his own words. The second chapter of the document is a meditation on the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which Francis asks the reader to consider which of the characters in the story they most resemble. What do we do, he asks, when we are faced with suffering persons? One can only imagine how the hierarchy might see itself in this parable, if only they read it with women's eyes. How many have seen the pain of women struggling to claim their dignity and place in the Roman Catholic Church, only to pass by on the other side of the road? If the inclusion or exclusion of "those lying wounded along the roadside" is the criterion by which to judge religious projects (69), how well has the institutional church lived up to the test when it comes to groups oppressed on the basis of sex? Francis also reminds readers that we should not overlook the fact that the religious characters in the parable are the ones who fail to care for the wounded man, asserting that "a believer may be untrue to everything that his faith demands of him, and yet think he is close to God and better than others" (74). How often have powerful persons in the church ignored the cries of women, and even thought themselves closer to God for it?

How often have powerful persons in the church ignored the cries of women, and even thought themselves closer to God for it?

But *Fratelli Tutti* poses a challenge to women, too—especially women of privilege. Many of the pope's insights should compel women to love better, to consider our complicity in unjust economic and political systems, and to build a habit of thinking in terms of global solidarity.

continued on page 12

## Meeting a Young Catholic Feminist

High school student and poet Meredith Toussaint talks about women's ordination with Kate McElwee

**KM: What was your *aha* moment about women's ordination? When did you realize (according to the official Roman Catholic Church) women could not be priests?**

**MT:** Growing up, I always realized that women couldn't be priests in the Catholic Church. In elementary school, I absolutely loved serving at Mass, and I remember feeling a certain sadness that that was as close as I could get. I was sad that I would never participate in the Mass more than holding the book or handing a cup to Father, and, though I couldn't articulate it, deep down it made me angry that I didn't even have the option of being the one to facilitate that miracle. As I started high school, I began to feel more uncomfortable with the lack of anything female at church, aside from the references to Mary being blessed among (when they really meant above) all women. It frustrated me that in the Eucharistic prayer, there was a long list of male saints we hardly know anything about. Where are all the capable women who contributed just as much to the church? My parents taught my confirmation class, and during sophomore year when we talked about the seven sacraments, I remember my mom commenting on the side that women could actually only receive six, and that wasn't really fair. That's when I really started to think about it, and after a while I finally realized just how wrong it was.

**KM: How did you discover WOC and the movement working for women priests?**

**MT:** In my senior year writing class, our last project was to write a research paper arguing a point we care about. When I had the thought to research women's ordination, I realized I didn't really know any good arguments for why women should be priests. I knew the all-male priesthood was unfair, but I couldn't really defend that point. I had spent years trying to accept the church's reasoning for the ban on women's ordination, and while I didn't believe it in my heart, I also didn't have any good arguments against it in my mind. After school one day, I looked up "women priests," and WOC was the first thing that came up. I scoured the website for the rest of that night, and I think I read every single word. As I read, I found myself nodding along and whispering yes! with every article. I knew for sure that this was what I wanted to do my project on, and

that it was something I really cared about. With each new article, I was even more inspired to fight for the cause.

After school one day, I looked up "women priests," and WOC was the first thing that came up. I scoured the website for the rest of that night, and I think I read every single word.

**KM: In your opinion, how would women priests change the church?**

I think women priests would help make the church what it was meant to be: a community where all are welcome, all work together for the common good, and all are loved by God. In my own experience, I had so many women teachers and role models throughout my childhood, but never having a woman priest made that part of my faith feel distant in a way; since I had never seen someone like me in that role, it felt like many of the rituals and beliefs connected to it were not fully intended for females. The teaching of the church that Jesus chose the twelve apostles, who were all men, and ordained them at the Last Supper made it feel like the church was saying a woman couldn't have that level of a close relationship with Christ, or that Christ didn't need us the way he needed men.

As a Catholic girl, having a woman priest to look up to and to see her doing Christ's work would have revolutionized my faith, empowering me to come even closer to our Lord. However, I think the influence of women priests would reach far beyond just little girls. As male priests have been the ones to minister to both women and men for centuries, women priests would also be more than capable of ministering to men as well. Their unique insights would help the church to understand our faith anew, and bold female voices actually being heard would help to renew our church.



Meredith Toussaint

**KM: What does your Catholic identity mean to you?**

**MT:** My faith in God means everything to me, and my Catholic identity has shaped me for my whole life. I went to a Catholic school, and grew up in a family where faith was important and God's presence was felt. I have always felt at home in the Roman Catholic Church, where I was empowered by the idea that we are all one body and we stand together in our faith. But when women are not allowed to be church leaders, it just doesn't add up. I can't continue to sit in those pews when this major injustice still exists. I am a Catholic, but I realize there are major flaws with my church, so I will stay and fight for change as much as I am able. If we are truly to foster the reign of God on earth, we need to stop ignoring half of our potential, and instead use all our people, with their unique gifts and talents and personalities, to create a culture of love.

**KM: Do you have any Catholic role models or people you look up to?**

I have so many Catholic role models: my mom, who never let me believe for a second that I was less capable than a man; my sister Abigail, who has always encouraged me to be a strong woman, and has set such a good example; my friend Mary Ann, a religious sister who has spent her over ninety years on this earth doing priestly work; my grandma, who has more love in her heart than anyone I know; and so many women at my parish and in my family who live out their faith in their everyday actions. My biggest role model in this, though, is my great aunt Lea Woll, who my family calls "Sis."

*continued on page 9*

## Call and (Creative) Response

*Two years ago, a group of neighbors in Washington, DC, launched a tiny revolution.*

BY JANE VARNER MALHOTRA

It felt a little naughty. In a town of mostly rule-followers who pay our taxes on time, this act was bold. Bordering on sin, even. Hold onto your seats, my friends.

*We held a home Mass with a woman priest.*

For fellow Catholics in far-flung suburbs, for others in DC who'd been ostracized from the Church long ago, this was not such a big deal. A Catholic LGBTQ group had been holding such liturgies for years. Others had simply stopped worshipping in Catholic spaces, opting instead for some dynamic and inclusive Protestant or nondenominational communities. But this group felt a little different. More mainstream. Connected to "powerful" and traditional parishes of wealthier, close-in suburbs.

This was February 2019. It marked the halfway point in the Trump presidency, a time when many Catholic parents had stopped taking their kids to Mass. As one neighbor put it, with national leaders disparaging and devaluing women, how could she possibly bring her daughter to worship in a space that also disregarded the fullness of women's gifts. And even more so, she said with determination and anger, she wanted her son to know better. This Jesuit-educated lawyer left my Jesuit parish, affiliated with Georgetown University, as an act of conscience. She and her family began attending services at our dynamic neighborhood Episcopal parish, led by a woman priest. And she didn't look back.

Another factor was the summer 2018 release of the Pennsylvania report documenting decades of Catholic clerical sexual abuse and cover-up. It had never been more clear: The church continued to choose brand over people, especially children. Many of us were watching *The Keepers*, a Netflix series outlining the conspiring of Baltimore police and church abusers in the 1960s and 70s. Those of us brave enough to read some of the documents directly, or even the newspaper articles about the abuse--and then attend restorative justice events or panel discussions with victim-survivors—felt the trauma of deep betrayal. But what we felt was nothing in comparison to what our friends and family experienced at the violating and violent hands of our church clerics, and the

parents who wanted to trust them.

Just a month or two later, we witnessed the hearings for Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court. The parallels to the abuse crisis were not difficult to see: Both stories contained elements of toxic masculinity, corrupted power, and systems of sex-oriented domination and subordination. To me, Kavanaugh's story in authority echoed examples of men I'd known who'd been victims or witnesses of abuse, and who turned to alcohol and anger to cover up the hurt. No matter what lay beneath his stance, I felt a punch to the gut when I heard him declare that he was a good Catholic who went to church every Sunday. I shook my head in sadness, realizing that the church is complicit in raising this son to believe women are great, but not quite great enough to be deacon, priest, bishop, pope. In their reasoning, women are slightly "less than," thus subjected to oppression in certain circumstances, whether it's on the bed in her bathing suit or aspiring to preach the gospel and consecrate the Eucharist—to image Christ. Kavanaugh had been wrongly, sinfully mistaught by our church.

I shook my head in sadness, realizing that the church is complicit in raising this son to believe women are great, but not quite great enough to be deacon, priest, bishop, pope.

The DC Catholic community was in crisis. Our archbishop Cardinal Weurl and then-Cardinal McCarrick were coming under increasing scrutiny as rumors circulated about rampant abuse and cover-up. And parents at my parish were asking one another if we should even drop our kids off for Sunday school anymore, let alone drag them through the confirmation process, as I was doing with my 13-year-old son. My non-Catholic husband had stopped attending Mass with us after seeing the film *Spotlight*. I kept



Jane Varner Malhotra

saying the faith was more than perversion and abuse, that my family had turned to it over generations for consolation and community. But that history was of course checkered, too, and I struggled to know a good path forward. So naturally I turned to my rabbi.

I have the privilege of working at Georgetown University, a place that strives to live up to the ideals of a beloved community. It fails, of course, but it tries, which makes it a fulfilling space to be on most days. As the nation's oldest Catholic university, founded on principles of religious freedom, Georgetown employs a team of visionary chaplains representing a beautiful tapestry of faith and wisdom traditions. Our top Jewish chaplain happens to be a woman.

The rabbi and I became friends over the years, after I heard her offer blessings and prayers during events I'd attended. We met for coffee once in a while, and laughed and cried as we shared stories about our families and careers. We would encourage one another in our formal and informal ministries, which were lived out in a campus and city environment that can make it challenging for a woman to speak her truth.

We met in her office that fall and I shared my struggle over the question of my son's confirmation. I shared my hope that Georgetown would lead the way to envision a church that lives its Gospel truth: that women and men are equally made in God's image. I had experienced the powerful grace of the rabbi's soul preaching, as staff, students, alumni, faculty openly wept over one national tragedy after another. "Rabbi," I lamented that autumn day, "why must Catholics miss out on women's full ministry any longer?"

*continued on page 9*

# The New Christian Feminism: The Vatican's Desperate Effort to Remain Relevant

WOC's Latinx outreach coordinator attends Latin American Academy of Thought Leaders course

BY LILIAN MEDINA ROMERO

In July 2020, I attended a course hosted by the Latin American Academy of Catholic Leaders. The online event, part of the Sixth International Diploma in the Social Doctrine of the Church, centered around the theme of *Women in Public Life: Feminism and Catholic Identity in the 21st Century*. The idea stemmed from an invitation from Pope Francis to present a proposal for a “new Christian feminism” that would analyze the philosophical and historical roots of gender and feminism through a dual lens—that of the philosophical anthropology of women and of the church’s social doctrine on women.

As a secular feminist raised as a traditional Catholic in Colombia, South America, I was excited to learn more about the church’s positions. I have no academic training in theology; my understanding comes from my heritage and from my work with WOC. As a Latinx Outreach Coordinator for WOC’s program *Escuchando a las Mujeres*, I’ve had the opportunity to speak to hundreds of Catholic women who feel excluded and marginalized by the Roman Catholic Church. Most of them have expressed a need for open dialogue and support in areas such as sexual education, family planning, and marriage and divorce—all issues that directly affect their lives and those of their loved ones.

Before working with WOC, I served as an advocate for the human rights of survivors of gender-based violence, working with immigrant women to provide direct legal and mental health services. Most of the women I worked with come from Latin American countries and were raised as traditional Catholics. Sadly, most of their stories had one thing in common: They did not identify the treatment they were routinely subjected to as abuse because to them it was natural and normal. This was a direct consequence of Catholic teachings on the role of women and what they owe to their marriages and families. In the face of routine abuse, many of these women reached out to their parishes only to be shamed into staying in a violent relationship that was threatening their lives.

## Preparing for the Course

Before the course even began, we were assigned to read *Mulieris Dignitatem*, an apostolic letter written by Pope John Paul II in 1988, which served as the foundational framework for what was to come. Although I was excited to learn that the church had addressed the dignity of women, a phrase familiar to me through my human rights training, as I read the document I found myself feeling confused.

The letter recognizes the influence of women in humanity and compares their dignity to that of Mary, who is postulated as the most complete expression of women’s dignity. Like many women, I have a complicated relationship with the mother of Jesus, but offering Mary as a role model, the document narrowly focuses on women’s ability to give birth as the very nature of our dignity. Our dignity, the letter concludes, is not only related to but inherent in female biological sex.

My human rights training bells were ringing. In this document, the church is attempting to provide a new definition of the word dignity that limits rather than liberates women. I learned quickly that this alternative-definition tactic would be used frequently throughout the course, sometimes making me doubt my own understanding and expertise on women’s rights. While I was disappointed by *Mulieris Dignitatem*, I believe it is a positive reflection on women’s movements that the Vatican was in a position where it needed to respond to the issues being raised by women globally.

## What I Learned

- Women’s ordination was not on the agenda and was not covered in any of the assigned readings. However, while presenting on the importance of women to the Magisterium, the church’s teaching authority, Father Alexandre Awi Mello was asked: “If women are so important in the Magisterium of the church, why are there no women priests?” He answered by referring to Pope Francis’ apostolic letter, *Evangelii Gaudium* (104), explaining that this was a settled matter. Ordained ministry, he added, is not related to power, so women should work to detach themselves from the idea that ordination is the only way to access power in the church.



Lilian Medina Romero

I learned quickly that this alternative-definition tactic would be used frequently throughout the course, sometimes making me doubt my own understanding and expertise on women’s rights.

continued on page 13

# Vocations Awareness Week: Pushing Back Against the Hierarchy

*Campaign promotes ordination equality*

BY ANNA BURNHAM

“Baptism by fire” is perhaps a bit too on-the-nose of a descriptor for the first weeks of a job at a prophetic, justice-seeking, feminist Catholic organization. But it’s hard to think of any phrase more apt to describe my opening weeks as WOC’s Digital Organizer’s earlier this fall. My tenure began the last week of October, and I was immediately immersed into preparations for the following week’s big event: our very own Vocations Awareness Week, concurrent with the US Council of Catholic Bishop’s (USCCB) event of a similar name. It only took about ten days of working at WOC to realize what we are up against in our mission for ordination justice when we push back and speak out against the hierarchy and their excuses. And it only took that long for me to realize the full power of the community this movement has built.

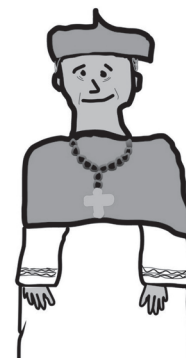
The USCCB’s annual National Vocations Awareness Week is intended to “promote vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life through prayer and education.” In WOC’s signature Ministry of Irritation style, we used the opportunity to agitate and make space for the voices of the many people who are already aware of their vocations to the priesthood but whose vocations go unrecognized and dismissed by the church hierarchy: women and non-binary people. We engaged with the week in our own spirit of inclusion, crafting a full slate of programming and even expanding the “week” by two days to make room for them all.

Our events were geared toward supporting women and non-binary people who are discerning ordination and creating awareness of the ordination injustice that continues in our church. We did this by focusing on the ways women’s vocations continue to be ignored and discounted. Here’s just some of what we got up to:

- We launched the application for our Lucile Murray Durkin scholarship, an award for women and non-binary people discerning ordination to the priesthood that offers financial support on their academic and spiritual paths. In our 2019 Mainstreaming Women’s Ministries survey and report, “financial insecurity and cost of studies” was second only to “sexism” among the reasons young women don’t pursue ministerial degrees and/or vocations in the church. Our scholarship is an important step to closing that financial gap for our recipients.
- We released our ground-breaking, herstoric conversation with His Eminence Cardinal Cartone—or, as we like to call him, the Cardboard Cardinal—to bring some satire and levity to the long work of seeking ordination justice. Just as in real life, the Cardinal was stiff and silent on the issue of women’s ordination (check out the video on Youtube to see what we mean). But even if they won’t talk to us, it doesn’t mean we’ll stop talking to them!
- We hosted a panel discussion on “What It Means to Be a Woman Priest” with representatives from two important organizations—the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP) and Roman Catholic Women Priests (RCWP). The event simultaneously created community, gave ordained women priests opportunities to talk about the daily ins and outs of their work, and provided event attendees discerning ordination with a sense of the tangible steps and training that go towards making it happen.



Anna Burnham



Cardinal Cartone  
*“The Cardboard Cardinal”*

The part of the week that has most stuck with me, though—the part that really showed me the power and unflappable spirit of WOC—was our Form Swarm. Twice, we gathered in community on Zoom as we drafted letters to vocations directors around the country and around the world (one person called in from the UK and wrote to her diocese there) to vocalize our support of women’s ordination. Our templates made it easy for participants to share their stories and as we drafted emails, we swapped some of our experiences. As I heard from several longtime WOC members about their own calls to the priesthood, I was moved by both the similarities between their stories and the deep, personal nuances.

We encouraged people to write to dioceses to which they had a personal connection, and so I wrote to every diocese I’ve ever lived in, naming the church I went to and my connection to the Catholic community there. It was a way of claiming my rightful place as someone to whom they needed to pay attention—someone with a stake in all this. Writing to my childhood diocese (the Diocese of Harrisburg in Pennsylvania) unexpectedly poked at some still-tender places as I told the vocations director that it was in their diocesan elementary and high schools that I learned both the beauty and pain of being Catholic. I wrote, *“There have been times when I sensed a call to the priesthood, and yet for obvious reasons, it felt so impossible that I ignored the call. I was taught in my Diocese of Harrisburg schools never to ignore God’s call to our vocational life, and yet, there I was, repeatedly: an adolescent and young adult forced to ignore that very call because of the patriarchal structure and exclusion of the Church. Why would you encourage young women to ignore a call that they know comes from God?”*

*continued on page 12*

# WOC's "Mainstreaming" Survey Opens Lines of Communication with U.S. Bishops

BY KATIE LACZ AND KATE MCELWEE

*How do feminists dialogue with patriarchy?* This question provokes an interrogation of theories of change, oppression, and privilege, but also requires an examination of the ministry of encounter. How do we engage with bishops and claim our power?

In our last issue, we shared the results of WOC's extensive survey, "Mainstreaming Women's Ministries in the Roman Catholic Church," which explored the paths that young women ages 21-40 take to follow their ministerial callings, and their opportunities and challenges along the way. Our intent was not simply to document these responses, as valuable as the data are for any person interested in the life of young women in ministry in the Catholic Church, but to leverage this research as a tool for dialogue.

We presented our executive summary and personalized letters to a dozen members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Education committee members, including all six American cardinals currently leading U.S. Archdioceses.

Given the silence that frequently meets our outreach to the hierarchy, we were surprised, to say the least, when our WOC office manager sent a scan of a letter from a cardinal acknowledging that he received the letter, writing, "I look forward to reading it in greater detail." We were surprised, and equally confident he would

not make it through the fifty pages of the report.

This was the first of several snail-mail acknowledgements from clerics that they had read or received our summary, some with handwritten notes of gratitude and others that could fairly be described as mansplaining.

One bishop's response offered a sliver of hope and showed us the promise of dialogue. He emailed us: "I am willing to have the conversation that you request." That never happens. Like you, reader, we have sent countless letters, postcards, ballots, and even bouquets of flowers with women's ordination greetings to U.S. bishops only to be met with silence. We released an entire parody video of "The Cardboard Cardinal" to capture this precise phenomenon. The irony is not lost on us.

In the conversation that followed, we were pleasantly surprised at the common ground we found with the bishop particularly with concern over young people leaving the Church. We also shared in the hope expressed within the survey results that younger, progressive Catholic women are still finding a way within the institution. In addition, he showed a willingness to ask for our help, requesting "resources" to mobilize women in his diocese to organize and speak out.

We understand the tension of working inside and outside the institution. As co-researchers, we spoke numerous times of the challenge of not caving to clericalism by being "excited" by the response to our outreach, while also finding hope in a new line of dialogue being opened.

Throughout our forty-five year herstory, we have been fearless in confronting the hierarchy about their deeply entrenched misogyny, clericalism, and corruption. But we also believe in the power of dialogue—that what changes hearts and minds are stories. While it is fair to say it is too little, too late, it is also true that personal encounters are a part of how change happens. We sincerely believe this.

*How do feminists dialogue with members of the patriarchy?* As the Summer 1988 issue of NWNC answered: "By taking them on face-to-face."

*Katie Lacz is WOC's program associate and Kate McElwee serves as WOC's executive director. They are co-researchers for the Mainstreaming Women's Ministries project.*

## Young Feminist Network reboot thriving on Facebook

Since it was re-formed in August 2019, our Young Feminist Network (YFN) Facebook group has provided a welcoming and inclusive online community for young women in their twenties and thirties who want to integrate their Catholicism and their feminism.

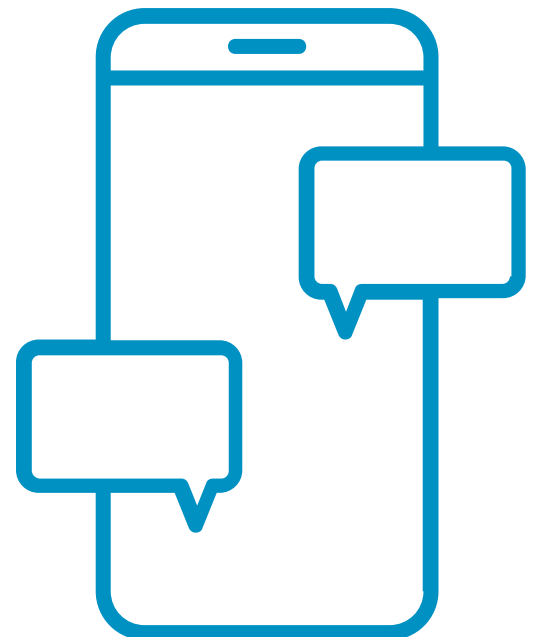
Now including more than 300 members, the group has proven to be a vibrant space for discussion, support, and sharing resources. YFN provides young people from all over the world with the sense that they are not alone if they feel isolated as a Catholic feminist, revealing that there is a whole community here to support them.

Some recent new-member comments:

- "I discovered your website today, and it was like a brilliant light in the middle of darkness. What you do is incredible!"
- "I'm feeling the same way. Honestly, I find a lot of hope in that I follow the WOC Instagram, and there's a lot of beauty there."

It's exciting to know that our work is reaching those who need encouragement, inspiration, and community.

Find out more about YFN at: [womensordination.org/get-involved/young-feminist-network/](http://womensordination.org/get-involved/young-feminist-network/)





## Conversation with a Young Catholic ... continued from page 5

She helped found the Sisters of the Living Word in 1975, and worked for the church in various roles for years. She cared deeply about women's ordination, and her whole life was a witness to the fact that women are just as capable as men. Though she died in 2010, when I was only seven, I have been inspired by her for my whole life and definitely feel her standing by my side, cheering me, and every other woman who stands up for herself, on from heaven. My sister, who had recently had her first communion at the time, served at Sis's funeral, and when she was nervous about it the night before, my mom said, "Sis would like some girls doing ministries." Whenever I feel like women will never find true equality in the church, and the fight is not worth it, I feel like Sis is telling me it's possible.

### **KM: What is one thing that would help more young Catholic women speak up for women's ordination and equality in the church?**

Throughout my life, the only meaningful conversations I've had about women's ordination have been with my family. My mom and I would talk about it, or I'd discuss it with one of my aunts, but never with anyone else. In my years of religion classes at school, we discussed countless controversial, hard topics that we were curious about and had questions about, but I cannot remember a single time women priests were mentioned. I didn't understand why, when the priest told a boy in my class who didn't even go to church that he should consider the priesthood, or why he ignored me, when I was writing prayers in my free time and serving or singing at almost every Mass. It hurt me when, in confirmation class, the priest talked about his vocation and didn't meet my eyes.

## Call and (Creative Response)... continued from page 4

Why isn't Georgetown doing anything about this?" She smiled and looked at me. "What are you waiting for?" she asked. I was stunned by the question and what it implied. I'd only worked there a few years. Surely a gender studies professor would be better suited to the task. But I met the rabbi's smile and laughed at her challenge. Dang it. If I cared this much, I realized, I could try. I could help Georgetown become the leader it aspired to be. Surely I wasn't alone. I began reaching out to others

It hurt me when my childhood priest brushed the question of women's ordination aside, saying, "It's just because we're men," and it confused me when I saw capable women pushed further and further down in the church, only washing altar linens and catering funerals.

When I heard about my Aunt Sis and all the women similar to her, I was relieved that there were others like me, who knew that it just wasn't right. I think that if women are to become priests, and if women are to have a voice in the church, we need to start talking about this issue. I think that if we finally opened it up for discussion, instead of banning the topic itself, we would find that there were many people scared to speak up who believe with all their heart that women need a bigger place in the church. I was one of those people, and WOC, the women saints, those activists who have fought on, even with countless discouragements, and chosen to not take no for an answer, and so many others, have helped me to finally use my voice for this cause that I care about so much. Now I just wish the church would listen.

*Meredith Toussaint is a high school senior from Decorah, Iowa, who enjoys spending time outdoors with her sister and reading books. She cares deeply about her faith, and is eager to see the church renewed by the voices of women, equal in the eyes of God.*

around campus who might be sympathetic to the cause, or even interested in shaping the path. I found many supporters, but most were overstretched already in personal and professional ways.

So I turned to family and neighbors. My mom is one of six daughters raised in a Catholic and staunchly feminist family in Maryland. Her oldest sister, Anne E. Patrick, SNJM, was a moral theologian, author, and professor of religion and women's studies at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. Anne had been a mentor to me throughout my faith journey, from my call toward the altar at age eight. All my aunts, and my parents, too, have supported my desire to minister. I reached out to the youngest of the six, Mary Patrick, and we teamed up to organize a series of three home masses, one each month, starting the following February.

We contacted Roman Catholic Women

## "What I was told" a poem by Meredith Toussaint

They tell Catholic girls,  
"You were made in God's image"  
They tell Catholic girls,  
"You were baptized in Christ"

They tell Catholic girls,  
"There are so many women,  
Throughout church history  
Who had powerful lives"

They tell Catholic girls,  
"Dream big, reach for the sky!  
But also follow our rules,  
And never ask why"

They tell Catholic girls  
To stand up to injustice,  
But the all-male priesthood?  
That's just one of our customs

They tell Catholic girls  
Just to trust in God's will  
But when God wants them to lead  
It's a battle uphill

They tell Catholic girls  
"You're important to Him,"  
They say to be like Jesus  
In all that he did

But Catholic women:  
Leading, not following,  
Preaching and building and  
Guiding, giving their offering?

No, no, they tell us  
That's not what God wants.  
Only a man can resemble  
His Son.

Priests, organized in the mid-Atlantic region through the Living Water Inclusive Catholic Community, who joyfully agreed to lead the liturgies. Mary and I emailed twenty friends and encouraged them to tell their friends. We found a few Catholic and lapsed-Catholic neighbors who were willing to open their doors to the blessing of a woman priest and singing strangers in the hopes of building onto the ongoing revolution of good. You see, many of us were in spiritual despair. To make visible a better church, a church of our dreams that is both public and intimate, that is inclusive and celebratory—that's what we longed for. And soon we realized that it had been in our hands all along: We could be this beloved community by simply creating it.

In two years we went from an email list of twenty to 400 people, and we've celebrated monthly home Masses

*continued on page 14*

## Welcome, New WOC Board Members

*These talented members bring renewed energy and diverse gifts*

Two new members have joined our Board of Directors—and we're excited about their unique talents and their willingness to serve WOC's mission.

**Bernadette Raspante** is a high school theology teacher, adjunct college professor, and spiritual director in Chicago. She holds a master's degree in Women and Gender Studies from Loyola University Chicago, as well as a master's in Systematic Theology from the Catholic Theological Union. Bernadette also works with the high school theatre department and in her free time enjoys creating original designs. Bernadette is also a writer, whose work has appeared in *US Catholic* and other publications.



*Bernadette Raspante*

**Robert Yohanán**, who's had a 50-year career in professional bank and not-for-profit management, is director and advisor of Byline Bank and Byline Bancorp. A graduate of the US Naval Academy who also holds a master's degree in international relations from the University of Chicago, Robert has held senior roles in banks in both the United States and abroad. He is also a former director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. In addition to his service in the US Navy, Robert has also served on the advisory boards of Catholic Charities of Chicago, the Adrian Dominican Sisters, and the US Naval Academy Alumni Association.



*Robert Yohanán*

## Anna Burnham joins the WOC Team

We are so thrilled to introduce you to our new Digital Organizer, Anna Burnham. The work of a digital organizer is not only to amplify our mission, but also to strengthen the WOC community to empower one another. Welcome Anna by sending her an email at [aburnham@womensordination.org](mailto:aburnham@womensordination.org)

**Anna Burnham** is a writer, researcher, and organizer whose experiences in community and political organizing led her to attend Harvard Divinity School for her Master of Divinity degree. She is passionate about making activist and political spaces more religiously and spiritually literate and making religious spaces (especially Catholic ones) more equitable, inclusive, and oriented toward justice. Raised amidst the farmlands of central Pennsylvania, she currently lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.



*Anna Burnham*

## Breaking Bread ... continued from page 1

What I've found most powerful about the inclusive liturgies I've experienced on Zoom, and particularly this one, has been the urgency and energy that vibrates out from our little on-screen boxes. Somehow we worship together as a community, though all of us sorely miss the intimacy of just being with one another in "real time." We miss the "after-party," too. After all, as another attendee remarked, the end of the celebration would, in "normal" times, have been the cue for us all to head out for a meal together, or a drink, and more talking. But even virtually, we found ways for creating, holding, and energizing that kind of space. It is a gift of feminist ministers, and I am grateful.

Our organizational sponsors, listed to the righthand column of this page, and the generosity of members like you, helped us raise \$45,000 to mark our milestone of 45 years. Thank you!

In a period so filled with pain and uncertainty, grief and loss, the tenacity, creativity, and friendship of WOC members reminds us that we are not alone, we can do hard things, and we are beautifully, prophetically, radically, church.

*Kate McElwee serves as WOC's Executive Director and writes to us from Rome, Italy.*

## 45th Anniversary Sponsors

**Apostle to the Apostles: \$2500**  
National Coalition of American Nuns

**Catherine's Champions: \$1000**  
Catholics for Choice; Mary Magdalene Apostle Catholic Community; New Ways Ministry; Roman Catholic Women Priests

**St. Hildegard's Helpers: \$500**  
Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP); CORPUS; Dignity Washington; SEPAWOC

**Joan of Arc's Sparks: \$100**  
Catholic Women's Ordination (CWO); The Church of the Beatitudes; Community of the Christian Spirit (CCS); DignityUSA; FutureChurch; Holy Wisdom Inclusive Catholic Community

*And a special thanks to our individual sponsors!*

# One Vote for Catholic Women

BY KATE MCELWEE

## *The beginning of a success story for grassroots activism*

“Pope did something about women” is what my husband said to me over his shoulder as I returned from my walk, midday on a Saturday. Contrary to what you may think, I dread this phrase. Pope Francis, well-documented anti-women’s ordination campaigner and prone to inappropriate metaphors about women, can really ruin a weekend.

When I learned that Sr. Nathalie Bequart had been named under-secretary to the Synod of Bishops, the Vatican News translation was a bit muddy: Would she be allowed, I wondered, to vote as a member of the synod? We wouldn’t know the answer until a bit later. But one thing was clear as day: Sr. Bequart’s counterpart would be promoted to bishop, despite Pope Francis’s frequent warnings of the dangers of clericalizing women. The lack of logic—maybe even hypocrisy—was stunning. There is no theological reason a man would require ordination to the priesthood, never mind the episcopacy, in order to serve on the synod. But in being appointed to the synod, a man gets bumped up the ordination ladder, while a woman, in the same role, is denied ordination entirely. The arguments fail. I tweeted: “Poor guy, got clericalized.”

Further reporting that weekend from the Italian version of the Vatican News interview with Cardinal Grech, General Secretary of the Synod, clarified that Sr. Bequart would likely have the opportunity to vote in the next synod - on synodality - in 2022.

It is a running joke in progressive Catholic reform circles that when change happens in the Catholic church, the institution will just assume the posture: “As we have always taught...” But I never really understood that joke until I read Cardinal Grech’s statement, crediting the Synod Fathers for their work:

“During the last Synods, numerous synodal fathers emphasized the need that the entire Church reflect on the place and role of women within the Church. Even Pope Francis highlighted several times the importance that women be more involved in the processes of discernment and decision making in the church.... With the appointment of Sr. Nathalie Bequart, and the possibility that she will participate with the right to vote, a door has been opened. We will then see what other steps could be taken in the future.”

I’ve worked for WOC long enough to know that doors at the Vatican do not open because people on the inside need some air. They open because of persistent knocking from those on the outside. That’s us. Here’s a brief timeline of the noise we’ve made knocking on Vatican doors since 2015:

- On the last day of the Synod on the Family in 2015, Miriam Duignan and I stood in St. Peter’s Square with two signs that read, “Want to Throw a Better Synod? Invite More Women!” and “Ordain Women or Stop Voting Without Them.” We were detained by Italian police for more than an hour. One journalist raised the question of Br. Herve Janson, a non-ordained person, voting in the Synod of Bishops.
- In 2016, WOC launched the Votes for Catholic Women campaign, commissioning what is now an iconic black and white image by artist Sarah Holst.
- In 2018, we organized a witness outside the Youth Synod, where an international delegation chanted, “Knock, Knock, Who’s There? More than Half the Church!” The group was harassed by police and I was grabbed and held forcibly by the arm. Those knocks were heard not only in the synod but around the world, as every major media outlet covered our action and the subsequent petition, which garnered more than 9,000 signatures calling for women religious to vote at the Synod. The issue of women voting at the synod was a standing question during the daily press briefings and a line about women voting was actually included in an early draft of the final synod document. (It was later removed.) The black and white “Votes for Catholic Women” sign became a global phenomenon, photographed in the hands of activists, nuns, and supporters around the world. But the synod spokesmen maintained their stance: “For now, this is how it is.”
- In 2019, WOC and FutureChurch projected the “Votes for Catholic Women” sign on Vatican buildings and participated in a press conference with Voices of Faith, highlighting the many sisters who had made a pilgrimage to Rome to call for suffrage at synods. The sisters wore orange and black capes emblazoned with the phrase “#VotesForCatholicWomen.”

We again delivered a petition and letters to the Synod office, requesting a meeting. The Vatican maintained its exclusion of women religious from voting in the Synod on the Amazon.

- After the 2019 synod, we delivered a letter to the Synod office requesting a meeting to discuss women religious voting at the Synods. We received no reply.

That timeline, to be honest, had made me a bit skeptical, so it took me the whole weekend to get over my frustration about the unequal treatment of a man and woman named for the job. And the Vatican’s self-congratulatory stance was especially galling. I stopped myself from tweeting: “Call me in 2022, when Sr. Nathalie is able to vote alongside her sisters, as bishops!” When NPR’s Sylvia Poggioli interviewed me on that Monday morning, she described me as “moderately pleased.” If she’d called me on Sunday, it would have been a different story.

But we should sincerely celebrate this milestone for Sr. Bequart—she is eminently qualified and deserves recognition for the barrier she is breaking. And we should also sincerely celebrate the change that we—collectively—effected. A woman will vote in the first synod ever because of the sustained, international, collaborative grassroots efforts and witness of WOC and our partners.

While we know that a piecemeal approach to justice will not deliver equality, we should also value every hairline crack that we force into the foundation of patriarchy.

Remember, after all, that just five years ago, on the last day of the synod in 2015, one journalist asked about the fact that a non-ordained man had voted at the synod, and two women were detained in St. Peter’s Square. Now, in 2021, the Vatican has granted one woman the right to vote, and assured us that a door is opening to others. This is an incredible victory for grassroots activism. Let’s enjoy this moment and keep making noise.

*Kate McElwee serves as WOC’s executive director, based in Rome, Italy.*

## Vocations Awareness Week ... continued from page 7

Now, it's worth stating that I come from an organizing and activism background. It's been my work in several iterations; it's what I wrote my master of divinity thesis on; it's a huge part of who I am and how I see the world. I am normally not scared to speak up to someone in power and tell them what I think of them, not scared to publicly express anger. And yet, there was something vaguely terrifying about hitting "send" on those emails and something even scarier about reading the first response when it dropped into my inbox a day or so later. Undoing the default reverence towards the hierarchy with which you're instilled when raised Catholic takes work and intention. It's made a lot easier when you realize that, of course, the emperor has no clothes.

I asked Form Swarm participants to forward any responses they received to me so that we could keep track of who was responding to us and what, precisely, they were saying. The responses ranged from vaguely sympathetic to totally dismissive and rude, but no matter the tone or intent behind the response, they all shared a similar message: *This isn't going to happen. I advise you to stop trying and move on.* Here's just some of the messages we received:

*"As you probably already know the Catholic Church does not allow women to be ordained to the ministerial priesthood. I don't think it's a good idea to continue your discernment in that direction; It will only lead to frustration and disappointment."* – Archdiocese of Denver

*"Thank you for writing to me and for your Faith. While I appreciate your passion and perspective, I refer to the Catechism of the Catholic Church as a response to the desire to promote women to priesthood."* – Archdiocese of Boston

*"Because I do not see this every [sic] changing, I am worried with this being your cause that a potential worker in the vineyard is sidelined. The Church does desperately need you!"* – Archdiocese of Philadelphia

*"Given the amount of inquiry, discussion, and definitive re-clarification over the years and even recently by the Holy Father on the ordination of women to the ministerial priesthood, I am unclear as to the silence to which you are referring"* – Diocese of Raleigh

*"The church teaching on ordination comes from Rome and I recall the Pope commissioned a study on this very topic.*

*We will see where the Spirit goes. Until then I continue to promote women and men to serve the church in various capacities as they already do across our parishes so joyfully and fruitfully."* – Archdiocese of Seattle

The hierarchy's refusal to accompany anyone on a vocational path that diverges from their own outdated and unjust agenda does not mean that we will stop navigating and pursuing those paths with tenacity and commitment.

Most of what we got, though, was total silence. From the Jesuits, the Franciscans, the Diocese of Newark, the Archdiocese of New York, the Archdiocese of Portland, the Diocese of Syracuse, the Diocese of San Diego, the Diocese of Harrisburg, the Diocese of New Orleans, and so many others, we received not a word of response. We were simply ignored—our stories, our inquiries, our pleas were not taken seriously enough for even a word in return. I imagine the thought process goes something like: *"If we ignore the email, they'll eventually get discouraged and shut up. If we ignore them, they'll just go away and then we won't have to deal with this problem anymore."* This logic though, is of course completely fallible, because we know that we will not go away. Instead, their silence and their excuses fuel our fire. The hierarchy's refusal to accompany anyone on a vocational path that diverges from their own outdated and unjust agenda does not mean that we will stop navigating and pursuing those paths with tenacity and commitment. Their silence will not be returned by more of ours. We are still here.

Vocations Awareness Week with WOC was a welcome both warm and fierce. I am so glad to be here with you all.

*Anna Burnham is WOC's new digital organizer, based in Raleigh, North Carolina.*



### LUCILE MURRAY DURKIN SCHOLARSHIP

\$2,200 AWARDS FOR WOMEN &  
NON-BINARY PEOPLE  
DISCERNING ORDINATION

WOMENSORDINATION.ORG/PROGRAMS/SCHOLARS  
HIP  
APPLICATIONS ACCEPTED UNTIL APRIL 29, 2021

## Brothers—and Sisters—All continued from page 3

But by leaving women out in such an explicit way, *Fratelli Tutti* puts a fine point on a truth that has long existed: When the institutional church reflects on the world, it does not seem to see the women there. The relevance of magisterial teaching will always be limited by its refusal to include women's voices, and women's engagement with documents like this can only be half-hearted if we are not present in them. The symbol functions.

*Taylor Ott is a PhD candidate in Theological and Social Ethics at Fordham University.*

<sup>1</sup> Others have similarly written about these issues of inclusive language. In particular, see Phyllis Zagano, "Fratelli tutti" does not include women, and neither does 'fraternity,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (September 21, 2020); and Meghan Clark, "Fratelli Tutti" shares practical wisdom, but lacks insights of women," *National Catholic Reporter* (October 5, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 5.

## New Christian Feminism... continued from page 6

*My takeaway:* You don't need to be an expert on the Magisterium to know that any position or role that holds authority—especially decision-making authority—is a position of power that impacts those who don't have the same authority. The Catholic Church has untold spiritual, political, and diplomatic influence: The Holy See, after all, is recognized as a permanent observer of the United Nations. And it's plain that ordination is essential to all decision-making and leadership roles in the church. Yet Fr. Mello attempted to convince course participants otherwise. I found this insulting to our intelligence and another example of the pain the hierarchy inflicts on those women God calls to serve in ordained ministries.

- Equality is to be understood from the perspective of complementarity. Panelist Maria Luisa Aspe Armella, a historian who serves as president of the board of directors of the Mexican Institute of Social Doctrine, gave a comprehensive presentation that summarized historical facts validating the impact of secular feminist movements on equality in the workplace and the political sphere. She recognized the important contributions of the #MeToo movement and identified gender-based violence as a condemnable sin. However, though women and men are created equal in the eyes of God, Armella held that we have different roles and responsibilities when it comes to marriage, family life, and religious leadership.

*My takeaway:* We are equal, but our equality is limited. Armella never discussed how the church's teachings on complementarity may impact relationship power dynamics that directly result in acts of violence against women.

- On “the Body and Identity,” the church's narrative is fueled by fear and confusion. Marta Rodriguez Diaz, head of the Institute of Higher Studies on Women at Rome's Pontifical Athenaeum Regina Apostolorum, described different “philosophical approaches” to understanding the relationship between our body and our gender identity. She began by sharing that there are cultural and social aspects that shape the gender identities of women and men, so some gender roles can be considered socially constructed. But she insisted that the danger comes when “gender ideology” is used to deny what is “inherently attached to a person's sex.”

*My takeaway:* The church accepts that some gender roles are socially constructed, as long as they do not deny one's biological reproductive destiny, or “dignity.”

As you can imagine, the speaker failed to denounce the dangers of binary gender roles, overlooking the human rights aspects of this narrow interpretation of dignity. She described members of the LGBTQ+ community as participating in destructive gender ideology.

- The Grand Proposal: “A New Feminism.” Finally, Italian Senator Paola Binetti conducted a presentation on Christian Feminism, with its core tenet prioritizing (what the church would call “traditional”) family life. According to Senator Binetti, the proposed concept of Christian Feminism is characterized by the values of gender roles that fulfill a complementary purpose in raising a family. Her presentation was critical of secular feminism, which she portrayed as being hyper-focused on individualism and “rights.” Abortion, “assisted reproduction,” and even maternity, she said, should not be viewed as a woman's *right*, but as matters of the family and community with, of course, abortion as a selfish betrayal of her purpose.

### Summing It All Up

This course gave me a window into the struggle of an institution that is fighting to remain relevant and influential in a world that is no longer blinded by its authority. The proposed concept of Christian Feminism is a desperate effort to appeal to the women and young people who have left or are considering leaving the church because their teachings no longer resonate. “Christian Feminism” is a rebranding of oppression, using feminism as their trendy new word. It is a faux feminism created by institutional Catholicism.

None of the main speakers identified as women with a call for ministry, Catholic members of the LGBTQ+ community, single mothers, or survivors of gender-based violence. Without their voices, representation and an intersectional lens to the issues they face, any “new feminist proposal” is empty and superficial.

The creation of the concept of “New Christian Feminism” seems to be the church's determined effort to defend their traditional belief system and keep it relevant.

To do that, the church has appropriated and twisted the language of human rights. The institution has carefully picked powerful human rights words to rebrand their traditional teachings and get people to find new meaning in their relationship with the church.

Just as I was excited when I first learned about *Mulieris Dignitatem* because I thought that it addressed the issue of dignity as defined in human rights literature, many women may find in this new and re-signified “Christian” feminism an interesting narrative that provides a new sense of inclusion and belonging, and a reason to stay. Furthermore, it may allow them to make their demands for equality without aligning themselves with pro-choice movements or other forms of feminism that the church has demonized.

But for me, there is a glimmer of hope. As disturbing as these new and sophisticated ways of disguising the oppressive teachings of the church sound, this course offers a positive message. It shows that international human rights law and secular feminist movements have pushed the church into a position where they can no longer dismiss the conversation on equality. In many ways, church leaders have realized that they must join the push for women's equality in public life—after all, Pope Francis himself has called for equal rights for women in the workplaces and civil society.

The bad news for the church is that they have little credibility in this area as it is an institution that discriminates against women and in whose eyes one gender is more equal than others.

While not all Catholic women will see through the hidden messages and coded language of the church, the fact remains that women are asking crucial questions. I know this from my small group sessions during this course—and from the hundreds of Latinx Catholics I've worked with through *Escuchando a las Mujeres*.

So here's my final takeaway: Christian Feminism is a flawed concept, the response of church leaders to the urgent need for transformation within the church. To me, that is good news. I am more convinced than ever that the church will be forced to reckon with the tenets of feminism and equality, or else be condemned to disappear.

*Lilian Medina Romero is WOC's Latinx Outreach Coordinator, based in the greater DC area.*

John Wijngaards, *What They Don't Teach You in Catholic College: Women in the Priesthood and the Mind of Christ*. Lafayette, LA: Acadian House Publishing, 2020. 212 pages. ISBN 13: 978-09995884-4-4; \$16.95.

REVIEWED BY SHEILA PEIFFER

John Wijngaards' latest book on women priests is a valuable contribution to the growing body of work examining the Catholic church's continued exclusion of women from ministry. Although maintaining rigorous theological standards, this relatively short book is very readable. Its clarity and brevity, coupled with pastoral insight and personal anecdotes, create a persuasive narrative. It serves as a perfect introduction to the subject of women priests, while also providing a useful summary of the historical data, relevant scripture, and academic reasoning for those already familiar with the field.

Most readers of *NWNC* will, of course, fall into the category of those familiar with the arguments countering church teaching on ordaining women. Nevertheless, as the preface asserts, this book offers "much more than an update: It throws the net wider, it digs deeper, it lays bare the real issues." Wijngaards delves into cultural prejudices, misinterpretation of Scripture, tradition, the *sensus fidelium*, and all the other canards of justification the church has relied on. He boldly asserts that the arguments of *Inter Insigniores*, Pope Paul VI's 1976 prohibition of women's ordination, "cannot be substantiated from any scriptural text" and that those arguments are wrong because "the scholastics, to whom the document refers as the source of the argument, put forth a philosophy of the sexes that can no longer be defended by any Christian." (95) He also recognizes the critical argument that "the presence of female priests would benefit the emancipation of women in general. What better message of true equality could be presented...than by showing women operating as priests on an equal footing with men?" (39)

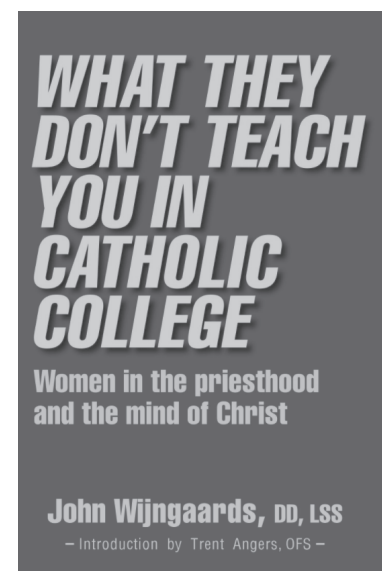
In addition to making a compelling case for women's ordination, this book also includes helpful references: an extensive list of sources, notes and an index, and appendices summarizing papal documents opposing ordination of women and providing a timeline of key dates in the worldwide movement for ordination.

Unfortunately, the author occasionally lapses into "complementarity" thinking, as when he writes that "female charisms and social skills would also significantly improve the church's pastoral care for people" (141). More egregious is the inclusion of Appendix 3, titled "The Genetic Basis of Gender Roles."

This section repeats all the most glaring stereotypes of "masculine" and "feminine" based on physique and supposed emotional disposition; it is surprising in its lack of nuance and current scholarly and scientific thinking. However, Wijngaards himself has retracted the slant of Appendix 3 in an article in October 2020 in *Novena News*.

He writes that:

"careless formulations in 'Appendix Three' may have given the impression I endorse the Vatican's binary, cis-gender agenda. Far from my mind, I assure you . . . a person's gender identity and sexual orientation should not be an obstacle to diaconal, priestly or episcopal ordination. A person is a person and every baptized person shares in Christ's prophetic, royal and priestly mission and is therefore, in principle, enabled to receive the sacrament of ordination."



John Wijngaards' book is a welcome addition to the theological discussion of full inclusion in the priesthood, arguing what most of us feel is painfully obvious: "women should be welcomed into the Catholic priesthood." (xi)

Sheila Peiffer is the past president of the WOC board of directors and WOC's NY representative to the UN.

<sup>1</sup>"Gender identity should be no obstacle to priestly ordination" *Novena News*, October 16, 2020. <https://novenanews.com/gender-identity-no-obstacle-to-priestly-ordination/>

## Call and (Creative) Response ... continued from page 9

without fail, except in March and April 2020, as we shifted gears to Zoom.

They are radically joyous gatherings of people of all ages and genders, and typically a few pets. The masses feature music, tears, burning truth, quiet wisdom, dry wit, and donut hour, of course. We eventually named our group WHIMM—Washington Home Inclusive Monthly Mass, and this year we added a leadership circle (called The Donut, naturally). Twice

a year we host a public mass in a park just a few blocks from the Vatican Embassy.

We base our creative path on the writings of my aunt Anne, found in the book *On Being Unfinished* (Orbis, 2017), which my aunt Mary brought to press posthumously after Anne died in 2016. I affectionately call it the playbook to the revolution. Like my mom and all her sisters, Anne enjoyed a deep faith rooted

in liberated conscience. She encouraged a creative response to all things, especially obstacles, including systems of supremacy.

The Patrick sisters also love a good laugh—for how else can a feminist be Catholic?

Jane Varner Malhortra is a WOC member based in Washington, DC. Find more about WHIMM at [whimmdc.org](http://whimmdc.org)

Phyllis Zagano. *Icons of Christ*. New York, NY: Paulist Press. 2020. 129 pages. ISBN: 978-08091-5500-2; \$14.95.

REVIEWED BY NANCY FITZGERALD

*There has never been a formal decree against women being ordained as deacons, nor can there be one, lest the Church deny its own history.*

It's quite a history, too, and Phyllis Zagano documents it in this small but powerful volume. A prolific author and scholar, and a member of the first papal commission for the study of the diaconate of women (2016-18), Zagano takes readers through the centuries for a glimpse at the all-but-forgotten record of women's ministry as ordained deacons—from the earliest beginnings of the church through the gradual—and intentional—eradication of their role in the late Middle Ages.

The history of women deacons, Zagano points out, goes back to the earliest days of the nascent Church, predating even the establishment of the priesthood. There's Phoebe, of course—the only person, man or woman, to be identified as a deacon in Scripture, her title attested by no less an authority than Paul himself. And, of course, there are other intriguing New Testament references, and even a job description for female deacons: Women candidates for the office, just like their male counterparts, writes Paul in his first letter to Timothy, “likewise must be serious, not slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.” Even the US Conference of Catholic Bishops seems to recognize the existence of a historical female diaconate; Zagano points out the footnote to 1 Timothy 3:8-9 in the New American Bible: “This seems to refer to women deacons.”

And there's evidence, hidden in plain sight in—of all places—the Vatican Library, which contains some five liturgies for ordaining women deacons, ranging from the fourth through the ninth centuries.

And though the evidence is compelling throughout the early centuries of Christianity—Zagano references dozens of tombstone inscriptions found in the ancient region, clearly placing women deacons all over the ancient Near East—the attempt to suppress the female diaconate goes back just about as far. Zagano documents the writings of popes, bishops, theologians, and an assortment of other male luminaries who offer reasons—from the absurd to the maddening to the horrifyingly familiar—why women cannot serve in this office. Take your pick: they run the gamut from women are “innately stupid” to women are inherently impure. Mostly, the arguments have misogyny and fear at their core as they deny “the full humanity of women”:

Ancient taboos regarding blood and, consequently, menstruation join with unusual understandings about sexual relations and outrageous commentary about women to require women to keep their distance from the sacred and for men who touch the sacred not to be near women.

But despite the vitriolic, relentless efforts to suppress the ministerial work of women, that work continued—after all, the male hierarchy wouldn't have found it necessary to forbid a female diaconate—and deny its existence—if it had not actually been thriving, doing Gospel work, and making up for the failings of an ill-prepared and often corrupt male clergy.

Zagano examines the female diaconate through the sacramental, ministerial work they accomplished, from forming women and children in the faith and assisting at their baptisms to hearing confessions, serving at the altar, and anointing sick and dying women. She also explains the theological arguments against the validity of women's diaconal ordination, showing how notions like “unicity of orders” simply do not make sense, theologically, historically, or practically.

Still, despite all the restrictions, the story of women deacons hasn't been erased. “Before the diaconate became known as an ordained ministry, women were already living it,” writes Zagano. And they continue to live it today, in parishes and hospitals and Sunday school classrooms, without the formal recognition and authority that ordination would confer. The author argues for the restoration of this order to women—denying it, after all, is denying our long and rich history. Recognizing it would not only be an important step in addressing—and beginning to reverse—the misogyny that's baked into the institution of the Church. It would also be a simple way to meet the needs of the people of God.

Zagano holds that while there is ample evidence for a historically established female diaconate, evidence for female priests is less compelling. Although other scholars disagree, re-establishing women's ordination to the diaconate would be a major step toward full inclusion of women in the Catholic Church. After all, she writes, “The entire church—the people of God and the hierarchy—must understand and accept the history of and a present need for the sacramental ordination of women.” Phyllis Zagano's work, brilliantly researched and engagingly written, is a must-read for all those striving for gender justice in our Church, eager to advance the truth that “the soul enfleshed as female can receive the grace and charism of orders.”

*Nancy Fitzgerald, based in Pennsylvania is a WOC board member and editor of NWN.*

Enjoy this prayer card featuring a drawing by WOC board member, Christina Ellsberg



# Women's Ordination Conference

P.O. Box 15057

Washington, DC 20003 USA

NonProfit  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Brentwood, DC  
Permit No. 932

Enjoy this prayer card prepared by the WOC board!



*"I watch what I do to see what I really believe." Helen Prejean*

**God of love, you make the sun rise on the evil and on the good;**

**You send the rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**

**Show me how to love with reckless abandon, as you love.**

**Show me how to care for others with tenderness, as you do.**

**Show me how to see your image even in those the world calls unworthy.**

**Like our sister Helen, show me how to roll up my sleeves and live my prayer in a broken, hurting world.**

**Amen.**

**Sister Helen Prejean** (1939-), a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph, devotes her life to counseling death-row prisoners, working with the families of murder victims, and campaigning for an end to capital punishment. The author of *Dead Man Walking*, her tireless advocacy has helped to shape the Catholic Church's opposition to all executions as an attack on human life.

**Women's Ordination Conference**  
*womensordination.org*

## WOC Merchandise



#OrdainWomen bumper magnet  
\$7



Women's Ordination 101 resource  
\$20

To view this and other merchandise online, visit:  
**[womensordination.org/store](https://womensordination.org/store)**

To place your order, use our online form at the above site or email: [woc@womensordination.org](mailto:woc@womensordination.org).