



Addressing Issues with Obfuscation

By now you would have read many articles arguing whether women can be ordained as deacons, both for and against. In this issue we are offering you three more, plus a comment, not so much because they argue in favour or to convince you accordingly, but to draw your attention to the manner of communication sometimes coming from the Vatican on contentious subjects.

You might expect that an official statement coming from the Petrocchi Commission on Women Deacons would offer a very clearly reasoned argument in order to gain acceptance of the decision not to support the diaconate for women at this time. Instead, without further explanation, we are told that the masculinity of those who receive Holy Orders 'is an integral part of sacramental identity' and to change this would be 'a rupture of the nuptial meaning of salvation'. Little wonder that this was not explained further. To do so would be to equate an analogy with reality.

Let me express the analogy briefly. Jesus Christ is seen as the bridegroom and the Church is seen as the bride; Holy Orders sacramentally represents Jesus Christ as the bridegroom; the priest acts in the person of Christ; therefore, the person must be male. Some early Church fathers such as Augustine and John Chrysostom use this analogy often about Christ and the Church, but never about gender which only gets linked to ordination last century. That is why the above statement only confuses and the link with salvation is a bit of a stretch. If this was to be so convincing, why is the issue still left open?

Another piece of confusing communication came from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith on January 27th criticising theologians when they write in blogs and online commentaries for 'narrowing the church's ability to holistically engage faith and

reality'. They risk 'losing the breath of our perspective' said the dicastery prefect, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernandez.

Admittedly, the context of the statement was in relation to those who were questioning the concept of Synodality, but what is the general message? What is contained in 'our perspective' and do those who lose it prevent the Vatican from presenting faith and reality? Is it that there are so many blogs and commentaries, now easily put on line, that calling writers to account (like the Inquisition of the past) is no longer feasible or manageable? Is there an implication that such writers, who are part of the Church, are against the Church?

We would hope that these examples are not a new trend in asserting authority obliquely. We would hope that the four commentators in this edition are not viewed as 'narrowing the church's ability to holistically engage faith and reality'. Undaunted, but with humility, we will continue through this newsletter to question matters of belief, assisting our members to deepen their faith, as we have done for the past twenty-five years.

John Buggy

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Letters

I am writing in response to John Buggy's question 'Will Synodality Work?'. It could be a great step towards reform if done with training and patience, as well as encouragement to lay people to play a pivotal role.

However, the whole process depends on the will of the Bishops who have all the power to make or break any attempt at reform. Sadly, I hold no hope that there is great interest or enthusiasm on their part to work towards this.

I base this on the reaction to the reforms of Vatican II Council which was deliberately destroyed by the machinations of some Bishops and which now puts the Church in the declining positions it finds itself today.

*Elizabeth Lonergan
Springwood*

On Sunday February 15, 2026 part of the Gospel read: 'You have learnt how it was said: "You must not commit adultery". But I say to you: if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'

Really! Then I think it is fair to assume that about ninety per cent of the Australian male population is guilty!

*Drew Porter
Wagga Wagga*

The Decline of Sacramental Confession (Reconciliation)

In Australia today there is a marked decline in the number of Catholics joining in the celebration of Mass compared to those still registering in the national census as Catholics. There is an even greater decline in the celebration of the sacrament of Reconciliation. While there would be no single cause influencing this decline, the introduction and withdrawal of the post Vatican II Third Rite of Reconciliation was short-sighted and regressive. The third rite gave a focus on a communal, societal aspect to reconciliation that is needed in our society, that helps bring about the kingdom of God in our time. Its introduction and withdrawal may also have helped in the decline of the practice of individual Reconciliation.

The preaching, with over-emphasis on Old Testament guilt and sin (damnation and hell) when I was growing up in the 1950's and 60's, lead, in my opinion, to the high attendance at what was then called Confession. In today's post-Vatican II Church, emphasis on God's love, and a personal relationship with Him, leads to a more balanced appreciation of Reconciliation. I wonder if there is a link in the decline of the sacrament to the more recent awareness around individual conscience, the Church's teaching (on sexuality and other contested concepts such as original sin) and the extent of priests' sexual offending that came to light in recent times. The confessional puts one in a vulnerable position when trust might be in question.

The recent book *For I have Sinned* by James M O'Toole, featuring in this edition of *ARCVoice* (page 13), explores the American experience of Confession's 'rise and fall'.

*Brian Bright
Member of the ARC Secretariat*

Petrocchi Commission on Women Deacons:

A Vatican Deception

You've been duped – exposing Vatican deceptions about the decision on women deacons

(Dr) Luca Badini Confalonieri

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The Synodal process has been hijacked. One of the main discussion points throughout the Synod was the urgent need to increase women's access to church ministries, with indications that the prospect of *restoring* women deacons was a real possibility. Instead, a committee of 10 Vatican insiders – plus not one, but two Popes – decided against it.

This is evidence that Catholics everywhere – even Synodal participants themselves – have been kept in the dark. Below is a forensic examination of all the machinations to deceive and deny women's role in the church and how the Vatican has lied about their decision-making process. Including the difficult question we have to ask:

Did this story of subterfuge come about because Pope Francis did not want the sexism behind the decision to ruin the 'spirit of synodality'?

But first and foremost, the claim that women were not sacramentally ordained as deacons is false. The historical evidence should not be denied. So why is the Vatican allowing members of the latest papal study commission on women deacons to repeat that line?

The Vatican has created their own version of history but here is the truth:

- Historical documents (such as the 8th century *codex Barberini Gr 336* [Barb.gr.336, held in the Vatican Library itself and fully digitalised]) confirm that rites for the ordination of women deacons exist which contained the ritual features exclusively used for ordinations to the so-called 'major' orders of the diaconate, presbyterate and episcopate (as distinct from the ordination rites to the minor orders such as porter, lector, etc.).
- Specifically, those ordinations of women as deacons took place in the sanctuary, in front of the altar and during the Eucharistic Liturgy immediately after the Anaphora, and included the imposition of the bishop's hands – all elements unique and identical to the ordination of male deacons, presbyters and bishops.
- Accordingly, those women received an ordination to the 'major' orders equivalent to their male counterpart: a 'sacramental' ordination, in today's theological language.
- If their ordination rite was 'not sacramental', neither was the analogous rite used for male deacons, and those – containing the very same features unique to ordinations to major orders – used for male priests and bishops.
- Historical precedent alone is enough to justify the reinstatement of the sacramental ordination of women as deacons: if it was done in the past, it can be done again.
- And, in fact, it has been done: the Orthodox Church in Zimbabwe sacramentally ordained a woman deacon in 2024. It is a practice which is still alive and ongoing.

https://www.wijngaardsinstitute.com/petrocchi_commission_women_deacons/

A lot to learn

a comment on the Wijngaards Institute's Perspective

by Dr John Collins

The Vatican commission studying the historical background to the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate reported (4/12/25) that the result of their study 'excludes the possibility of proceeding' toward such ordination.

The commission does not have the authority to decide the question. It simply presented the result of their research and has declared that, in their opinion, the historical evidence presented for female deacons is not conclusive.

In his introduction to the results, the president of the commission, Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi, said: 'Ultimately, the question must be decided on a doctrinal level. Therefore, issues relating to the ordination of women as deacons remain open to further theological and pastoral study.'

Of interest is the fact that only 22 submissions upon the issue were received in response to requests. One issue raised in this process and reported as problematic for women aspirants is named as the masculinity of Christ, servant and model of diaconate. In dismissing this, the document reports on the character of the Greek terms involved, which are the diakon terms (noun and verb), observing that service so designated of Jesus who 'came to serve' (Mark 10:45) is required of women as much as of men, and expresses the authentic character of diaconate.

Discussion of such a terminological issue was precisely the matter of my doctoral research, and its findings have been widely published in two editions of *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* from Oxford University Press (1990, 2009), five other books and numerous journal articles.

The first essential element in the findings was that these Greek terms never gave expression to notions of serving as a helping or kindly service. The terms expressed only deeds performed under command or commission, the semantic element often extending to transference as in delivery of a letter or in the relaying of light (a factor of potentially dynamic relevance to any theology of preaching the gospel).

Across the last century and more, however, the Greek terms as used by early Christians were simply hi-jacked and declared to be specifically Christian terms of serving to meet perceived needs in a lowly and kindly (and specifically Christian) manner. This semantic somersault was theological in its origins and largely German in its character. Thus, in his first encyclical *God is love*, the German Pope Benedict XVI taught that 'The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*).'

Such thinking is almost de rigueur these years – to the (often grave) misreading of the Christian scripture. The revised third edition of the Greek-English Lexicon by the late F.W. Danker took note of the Collins re-reading of the diakon terms in the New Testament, but popes and academic theologians themselves have a lot to learn.

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MISOGYNY in religion means hating, demeaning or prejudiced views against women, often embedded in religious texts, traditions or interpretations that subordinate women to men, portraying them as sinful, deceptive (like Eve), or lesser beings needing control; thus reinforcing patriarchy and justifying inequality, though some religious interpretations promote equality. (Google)

Purity, Power and Possibility: A Response to the Diaconate Decision

Beth Doherty

When the news landed on my social media feed that the Vatican's commission for the study of women in the diaconate had once again said 'no', my reaction was visceral. A sharp drop in the stomach.

I attempted the familiar process of rationalisation: *It's not definitive. Further study has been recommended.* I spoke to some friends and colleagues. My public education colleagues saw it as further proof of how 'out of touch' the Catholic Church is, an irrelevant monolith. Let's be honest, many of my Catholic friends did too.

Eventually, I recognised the sensation for what it was: indigestion. Not metaphorical discomfort but the realisation that the decision itself was indigestible – because something in it was poisonous. Not poisonous in intent, perhaps, but in the cognitive dissonance it reveals.

Just two months ago, Pope Leo released *Dilexi Te*, his first encyclical as pope. In paragraph 12, he quotes *Fratelli Tutti*:

'The organisation of societies worldwide is still far from reflecting clearly that women possess the same dignity and identical rights as men. **We say one thing with our words, but our decisions and reality tell another story.**'

Let me just bold, italicise and underline that for you. These are the Pope's actual words.

What, then, do these words have to say to a commission that declined to affirm women's access to the diaconate, the most service-oriented of the ordained ministries? Their report acknowledged the hope that instituted lay ministries might be expanded for women, offering 'adequate ecclesial recognition' of the diakonia already being carried by them daily. But hopes are not decisions. Hopes change nothing.

In a media release from the Canberra reform group Concerned Catholics, a scorching and articulate critique argues thus:

Arguments in the report are presented in archaic language that smacks of sophistry, intended to confuse and sow doubt. Indeed, it borders on being seen as nonsense. An example is the report's depiction that appointing women deacons would be 'a rupture of the nuptial meaning of salvation'.

It is unclear how allowing women to do what they have been credibly shown as doing in the Bible which refers to female deacons (or women in similar service roles) primarily in Romans 16:1-2, where Phoebe is called a *diakonos* (deacon/servant) will rupture the nuptial meaning of salvation (whatever that means), but I guess we won't find out.

The truth is that women's 'diakonia' already sustains the Church. And the refusal to grant recognition to this reality is not just a missed opportunity; it is a contradiction.

I know this contradiction intimately. Every Sunday I sit behind a keyboard and microphone in my suburban Canberra parish – the largest in the Archdiocese.

I have been studying theology for over 20 years at this point. Last week, at dinner with my Parish Priest, he joked to me: 'You are way more qualified than I am; you should be up there giving the Homily instead of me'. (I don't think it's his favourite thing to do). Yet in the context of the Eucharistic liturgy, I cannot preach. I can sing, but only as support.

Before Vatican II, women weren't even permitted to sing in the liturgy. Today, our voices are welcomed – but our silence at the ambo speaks louder than any hymn we offer.

But, if I'm honest – this isn't even the real kicker about this decision. It's not about power or leadership even. The diaconal ministry is about service, humble service.

I don't think most women who seek the diaconate are secretly harbouring fetishes of processing into St Peter's Basilica in a mitre or dreaming about donning a Roman collar. Actually, they already perform the majority of diaconal functions, mostly without recognition. I think they just want 'the same pay for the same work', to coin a secular phrase – ironically, not a whole lot of pay – 'the pay isn't great, but the superannuation is out of this world' says the old maxim about priesthood.

What unsettles me most, though, is the way women often become the guardians of their own exclusion. When I posted a link to an article about the 'no' decision, a woman was one of the first to tell everyone who was disappointed to get back in their box; that women already hold roles as Diocesan Chancellors and agency heads. Another kind woman once said firmly to me, 'I just don't agree with you changing the pronouns! God is my Father.' The default masculine grammar flows unquestioned, even though older women in our parish quietly alter the psalms as they proclaim them. Some read inclusive language with a giggle. Some with a frown. These small acts signal a yearning for a more spacious imagination.

My own yearning to participate began early. In 1994, I asked our parish priest if I could become an altar server. He knew my family well as he frequently came

over for dinner and debated theology with my mother until the early hours of the morning. He said ‘no’, uncomfortably, I think a bit surprised at my boldness. Some parishes in my diocese had girls performing this role, some didn’t – it depended entirely on the priest’s theology.

By the age of sixteen, I was composing songs, and I wrote a song with the lyrics, ‘God is there and he’ll/she’ll always be’. After Mass, self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy cornered me. My priest had approved it – but that didn’t matter. My lyrics were ‘unscriptural’. My father, then on the Parish Council, defended me so fiercely that he walked out and has never returned to formal parish life.

Over the years, I’ve accumulated several small objects that represent the formation – and deformation – of my Catholic womanhood: a lace mantilla, a True Love Waits ring, the book *Boy meets girl* by Joshua Harris. These are the relics of purity culture: a theology that masquerades as virtue, but functions as control.

Purity culture – popular in evangelical circles but deeply internalised within Catholicism – teaches girls that their holiness hinges on sexual purity. I grew up hearing analogies that reduced girls to wilted flowers, or, in one particularly problematic youth group session, sticky tape with no more ‘stick’. Boys were told to be strong. Girls were told to be responsible – for themselves, and for the behaviour of the boys around them.

By nineteen, after some perfectly normal teenage relationships with nice Catholic boys, religious scrupulosity consumed me. Shame became my default position. I confessed the same sins over and over. I volunteered obsessively. I tried to earn back a purity I believed I had lost. This is what happens when the Church teaches girls that their worth can be broken by touch. I started to think I was not worthy of leadership, even of love, and yet did not apply the same standards to the boys and men around me making the same or worse ‘mistakes’.

Two saints illuminate the consequences of this culture: Maria Goretti and Dorothy Day.

Maria Goretti, canonised for resisting sexual assault, is held up as the epitome of virgin purity. Yet the real heart of her story is her forgiveness. Meanwhile Dorothy Day – who loved, failed, repented, started again, had an abortion, then later a child outside marriage, and built a movement of radical hospitality – embodies mercy, justice and a holiness capacious enough for failure.

Yet which woman is offered to Catholic girls as the model? Which story is sanitised for safety?

And what does this have to do with women’s roles in the Church? The elevation of purity over integrity shapes not only sexuality but power. Men’s failures are treated as lapses. Women’s are catastrophes. Church documents uphold women’s dignity while confining them to motherhood. *Humanae Vitae* places the burden of fertility management squarely on women. *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* forecloses the conversation about women’s ordination with a single sentence.

And now the diaconate commission tells us that further ‘study’ is needed – while Rome continues to ask women to remain patient, remain hopeful, remain silent.

Yet, we remain. At least some of us, many holding on by our fingernails.

We remain not because the Church has earned our loyalty, but because the Gospel has. We remain because our longing for justice is not a departure from the Catholic tradition but a deep fidelity to it.

Dorothy Day once said, ‘Don’t call me a saint – I don’t want to be dismissed that easily’. She understood that holiness is gritty and embodied, lived in the kitchen and the picket line, not depicted in stained glass.

So where do we go from here – after another ‘no’, another door politely but firmly closed?

I for one am a bit sick of climbing through windows, of trying to smash the stained-glass ceiling. I’d like to get on with the real work of reform, get my hands dirty ministering in the real muck and mess of people’s lives. I’m tired of arguing. I don’t want to expend more oxygen on arguing for truth when this energy could be spent on service, singing and even celebration.

The Church needs women not as symbols of self-sacrifice or paragons of chastity but as leaders, teachers, theologians, prophets and preachers.

The ‘no’ is a failure of imagination. It is a non-definitive decision, because the words are there in scripture.

The Church does not merely include women.

The Church is women.

My hope is simple:

May women preach – not merely through music, but with words.

May our hymns rise as both prayer and protest.

May the Church expand its theology until it can hold the fullness of women’s lives.

May we listen to the stories we once silenced.

May we refuse to shrink.

May we refuse to leave.

Our time to speak, sing and lead is now.

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Women's role in the church remains a hot potato the Vatican can't seem to handle

Christine Schenk

The all-male Catholic magisterium is caught between a rock and a hard place

Despite a worldwide synodal process naming women's inclusion in church ministry and decision-making as an 'urgent' issue to be addressed at the 2021-2024 Synod of Bishops on synodality, a papal commission recently made public a 2022 decision in which they ruled out admitting women to the diaconate. Even so, commission president Cardinal Giuseppe Petrocchi said the issue still remains 'open to further theological and pastoral study'.

Before the 2023 synod session, I conducted an informal study of 18 national syntheses or media summaries of grassroots synodal input from all over the world, some of which included whole regions such as Asia and the Amazon and Latin America. Virtually every synthesis named 'women's role in the church' as an urgent consideration. Over 70% included women's ordination to the diaconate or priesthood as a way of including women in leadership.

That is a lot of hope and expectation rising up from the people of God. Is the Holy Spirit telling us that female exclusion from ordained ministry and church decision-making is no longer acceptable and that something needs to be done about it?

Members of the Women's Ordination Conference, Women's Ordination Worldwide, Roman Catholic Women priests-USA gather near the Vatican to pray for the Catholic Church to open up the priesthood to women as the worldwide consultation known as the synod begins Oct. 2, 2024.

Women's diaconal ordination was a synod hot potato. Consider the following chronology:

- In a May 2024 interview with CBS' Norah O'Donnell, Pope Francis gave a hard NO to female deacons 'if it is deacons with holy orders'. Yet synod delegates persisted.
- In July 2024, synod study group five – whose members were not identified – entrusted the issue of studying

women's leadership roles to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, or DDF.

- On Oct. 18, 2024, the synod delegates expressed 'palpable outrage' when Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the dicastery, and other members of the study group failed to arrive for a previously scheduled meeting. Instead they sent two officials, neither of whom were study group members with authority to answer delegates' questions.

Synod representatives demanded that Fernández report to the assembly as planned. Cynthia Bailey Manns, a delegate from the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis (and now a member of NCR's Board of Directors), remembers the group reminding Fernández they expected the study group 'to adhere to the same tenets of synodality – co-participation, co-responsibility, transparency and accountability – that were expected of all synodal delegates: 'We *all* need to be synodal. If not, it leads to misinformation and mistrust.'

- On Oct. 21, 2024, Fernández told nearly 400 synod delegates and organisers that his study group was being led by DDF deputy Msgr. Armando Matteo, and promised to give delegates a full list of the group's membership. He also announced that Pope Francis' 2020 women deacons commission – led by Petrocchi – would continue its work and invited delegates and others to submit materials.
- By an over two-thirds vote, the synod's final document included the female diaconate in Paragraph 60: 'There is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church: what comes from the Holy Spirit cannot be stopped. Additionally, the question of women's access to diaconal ministry remains open. This discernment needs to continue.'
- On Oct. 26, 2024, Pope Francis signed the synod's final document in its entirety, thereby making it part of his magisterium 'not as a binding norm, but as a set of guiding principles', as explained in *Vatican News*.

Ten study groups continued their work, including the one on the female diaconate assigned to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. Which brings us to the present moment:

- In mid-November 2025 – just weeks before Petrocchi's Dec. 4 statement – it was announced that the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith synod group on the female diaconate ceded their responsibility to Petrocchi's 2020 commission. It is likely that they did so with full knowledge that the commission had already voted against a female diaconate.

Given the above scenario one can only wonder what happened to transparency and the much vaunted synodal process. Until now, all papal commission proceedings on the female diaconate were kept secret. Requests from synod delegates to review the outcomes

of previous diaconate commissions fell on deaf ears. Kudos to Pope Leo XIV for at least making the commission's 2022 vote public.

It is noteworthy that in 1974 Cipriano Vagaggini conducted an exhaustive study on the history of female deacons for the Vatican's International Theological Commission. His findings (which were apparently suppressed at the time and then later released) concluded that women could be ordained to the diaconate and that their ordination rites were the equal of male ordination even if the work they did was different from that of male deacons.

The preceding convoluted – and painful – chronology suggests that the issues of women's diaconal leadership – indeed women's ecclesial leadership and juridical agency – are far from settled.

And for good reason. The statement published 4th December is rife with dubious theology, not only about women deacons but about the nature of salvation through Jesus Christ. Consider this proposition:

The masculinity of Christ, and therefore the masculinity of those who receive Holy Orders, is not accidental, but is an integral part of sacramental identity, preserving the divine order of salvation in Christ. To alter this reality would not be a simple adjustment of ministry but a rupture of the nuptial meaning of salvation.

The gist of course is that women are not men and therefore they cannot be ordained.

This line of thinking echoes the same problematic theology that appears in other church documents denying ordination to women.

Are Christians saved by maleness or by the Word of God, enfleshed in Jesus, human and divine? Jesus' maleness is irrelevant to our salvation. Framed more positively we need to understand 'Christ as representative of all humanity, not of biological maleness', to quote Mary Grey.

Using nuptial arguments to deny holy orders to women is also highly suspect. It fails to understand the nature of metaphorical language in speaking of the Divine. The function of a metaphor is to convey meaning beyond our capacity for literal expression. Describing Jesus as a 'bridegroom' is metaphorical speech evoking the beauty of spousal love. By definition, metaphors are not to be taken literally. To literalise a metaphor kills its power to evoke something far greater than words alone can convey.

Petrocchi's commission split down the middle about including the 'masculinity' argument. One wonders if the five female commission members voted against it.

It is important to note that members of Petrocchi's commission did not participate in the synod, presuming current members are those named in 2020. No 'conversations in the Spirit' for them. Furthermore, it reached its conclusions two years before the 2024 synod closed. While it did cite material sent after the final document was signed by Pope Francis, it discounted worldwide synodal calls for expanded roles – including ordination – for women.

It is good to remind ourselves that this recent commission report/statement is consultative, not juridical. Pope Leo has yet to speak.

Which brings me to another point. Petrocchi said the commissions were unanimous about the need for women to 'express adequate participation and co-responsibility in the decision-making bodies of the Church, including through the creation of new lay ministries.'

So who determines what is 'adequate?' As long as Church decision-making rests solely with ordained men, women's juridical agency – indeed that of all the laity – is denied.

This is a core issue with which the synod is grappling. Will our church expand the deliberative voice for all the people of God?

For my part I'm unconvinced that continuing the clerical system as it now exists is to anyone's benefit. We need a renewed ecclesial ministry cleansed of patriarchal privilege. Maybe synodal processes will seed a future in which that can happen.

Meanwhile, for my sisters and brothers who are ready to bail, I heartily recommend reading (or rereading) theologian and Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra M. Schneiders' book, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church*.

Schneiders had this to say about her prophetic title: "The title *Beyond Patching* is deliberately ambiguous. By it I want to suggest, first of all, that the old garment is beyond repair and that only a thorough-going reform of the Church can respond adequately to the feminist critique."

Published in *The National Catholic Reporter*.

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Vatican II and Revelation

Part 1: A Profound Change

John Buggy STL

In January this year, Pope Leo drew attention to the Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum, describing it as ‘one of the most beautiful and important’ documents of the Council. Although that importance for him was that Jesus ‘speaks to men as friends and lives among them’, the Pope, in my opinion, failed to draw out its ground-breaking significance which has almost been completely neglected since it was endorsed at the Council. In three successive parts, I hope to illustrate the opportunity that has been lost by not having its message implemented in the sixty years since that Council.

When people speak of the changes that occurred after The Second Vatican Council, they usually refer to the Mass being said in English with the altar facing the people, communion being received in the hand, greater involvement of lay people, etc. These changes, significant and timely as they were, are not of the same importance as the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation that dealt with the way in which what we believe is transmitted to us through the scriptures and tradition. This document is of great importance because of the potential that it has to lead the Church forward in our understanding of the faith itself, not just in its practice.

It is most interesting to understand how this document came about in its final form. Prior to the Council, documents were prepared by experts in order to stimulate the discussion and debate that the assembled bishops would have to embark upon before they settled on the consensus of the Council. If two-thirds of the bishops were unhappy about any document, then it was re-written rather than modified. The first draft of this document was unsatisfactory to a large majority of those at the Council, but the majority was just not large enough for it to be rejected. Pope John XXIII, realising the significance of this subject area for the future of the Church, wisely directed that the document be re-written at the beginning of the Council in November 1962. Many people then contributed to the next

versions until finally the fifth version emerged and was agreed upon by the assembled bishops in October 1965. This document, although somewhat short in relation to other documents from the Council, had the potential to lead the Church forward in a most dynamic way.

What was the significant difference? It centred on the problem of dealing with the inerrancy of scripture. When we were at school, we were generally taught that the Bible was the word of God and this was presented to us as if the writer of the scriptures was merely the instrument through which God revealed himself in those writings. We were often given images that indicated the writer had little influence on what he was writing because he was only the inspired instrument of God. The first version of the document presented to the Council was consistent with this image. The ‘truth of salvation’ (*veritas salutariis*) also contained the argument that, if the Holy Spirit inspires all scripture, then all of it must be true.

For a long time prior to the Council, scholars had great difficulty dealing with, among other things, the view of the world that is depicted in the sacred writings. How could we deal with a world created in seven days when our knowledge of the universe is now so much more sophisticated? How does one reconcile the Genesis description of creation as a flat world with the stars fixed on a dome above the earth when we were about to land a man on the

moon? To say that the scriptures do not err requires a very different interpretation of truth, even if we are looking at cosmology alone.

Imagine the turmoil in the minds of the Council's bishops as they sought to endorse a different type of document. If you recall that it was only in the nineties that the Church finally got around to exonerating Galileo for saying that the earth was round and not the centre of the universe, then you can understand the dilemma that the Council Fathers had in coming to grips with these questions.

The fifth version of the document on revelation was forward-looking, although its impact has not yet been felt. It recognised that revelation is a continuing and dynamic process and that not everything is revealed at once. It gave expression to the discernment of the assembled bishops that, while all scripture is inspired, not all of it is revelation. It then went on to accept that discoveries in science and archaeology, coupled with the study of ancient languages and of literary forms, help us to open up the meaning and truth of the scriptures. This was epoch-making and courageous, but in the sixty years since then inappropriate conservatism and centralised control have limited severely the impact that this document should have had on the culture and faith life of the Church.

Certainly, we can point to the fact that greater emphasis has been given to the Old and New Testaments by having a wider variety of readings used in our Sunday liturgies. We can also point to the variety of translations that have now become

acceptable and of greater encouragement to read the Bible. But we have yet to see the impact of how, as Catholics, we deal with the truth of scripture. The Constitution on Revelation endorses that the Bible teaches religious truth rather than literal or historical truth. This has been hard for a lot of people to accept because of the way they have been taught about the Bible for most of their lives. And it has been hard for bishops and clergy to interpret it in practice, because the implications are somewhat daunting and the focus of the Church has moved away from these questions in the intervening years. Many of those who have tried to revive the spirit of those Council deliberations have often been either unsupported or suppressed.

In the next two parts I will touch upon the way that the scriptures have come into existence and how modern scholarship sheds light on their meaning. We will reflect briefly on how much richer our appreciation of the person of Jesus and his message could be if we were assisted to use what we now know about scripture and tradition and to place less emphasis on what is non-essential. If this appreciation gradually filtered into our methods of education of the young and our expression of faith in the sacraments and liturgy, we might not have so many of the difficulties we currently seem to be experiencing in addressing faith, truth and relevance.

Next Issue

Part 2: The Scriptures and Religious Truth



Life after Death

Garry Everett

The Christian view of life after death owes everything to the Christian view of God. Our experiences of love are foretastes of God's greater love for us.

In that wonderful stage production and movie, *The Lion King*, the opening song is entitled, 'The Circle of Life'. Like the verses of our favourite psalm, we should ponder the words of this song also. The lyrics by Tim Rice touch into the eco-spirituality theme of the inter-connectedness of all things. The music by Sir Elton John conveys the feeling that every ending is a beginning of something new. These two concepts, inter-connectedness and new beginnings, are also doorways which open to allow us to talk about the rich religious reality of life after death. Most major world religions offer limited commentary on the topic, usually in the expressions of some form of reincarnation or some form of a place called heaven.

Contemporary scientists subscribe to a broad theory that planet earth will one day cease to exist, or at least all living things on the planet will die. This will occur, they explain, because the sun is increasing in temperature and moving closer to earth. Ultimately, the planet will be de-oxygenated, thus removing the vital ingredient of life. This might take a billion years ... or less.

Probably since the earliest forms of intelligent life appeared on earth, humans have speculated about where they came from: why are they here and is there something else after this life?

Christians have scoured the scriptures, the Old and New Testaments for answers which they find reassuring. In general, Christianity has settled on, and taught, the theology of heaven and hell. However, this is not a universally-supported teaching and books such as *Hell, No!* by Father Richard Rohr offer a plausible alternative.

What is of critical importance to our efforts to think about life after death is, not surprisingly, our beliefs about God. Most of us encountered at some point in our lives the belief in God as judge, who rewards the good and punishes the wrongdoer. In fact, this belief was so dominant, that every family, city, state and country was organised around this core belief. Rules exist to promote the good order of things and, if you keep them, it's good news; if you break the rules, you are fined or experience some other form of punishment.

We may even still believe that this is how God behaves too!

Some theologians and spiritual writers began with a different belief about God, which was also sourced in the scriptures. Simply stated, it is of God as unconditional love.

New challenges now emerge.

Firstly, as humans, we have no real experience of unconditional love. We know love of a spouse, a carer for a patient, a parent for a child, the Good Samaritan for the needy. All are marvellous expressions of love, but not of the unconditional kind. We simply can't comprehend, nor express adequately, what we have neither shared nor experienced: unconditional love. We may struggle to appreciate Jesus's great parable of the Forgiving Father because deep down we know we would not have acted in the same way as the father. That way is the way of unconditional love. We probably would have placed some conditions on the prodigal son. Despite our best efforts, we cannot love unconditionally because that kind of love is reserved to God alone.

A second problem about unconditional love now emerges. In place of judgments, rewards and punishments, how are we to explain God's forgiveness of our failings, small and large? If God is like the Forgiving Father and forgives unconditionally and wraps us up in love, it doesn't seem 'fair'. 'What about Hitler?' we cry. At this stage we might be grateful that this is God's problem and not ours. Being fair and being seen to be fair are by-products of our system of reward and punishment, and ultimately of the view of God as judge. Forgiving and loving unconditionally comes from somewhere else.

A third issue of love affecting our views of life after death stems from the words of Jesus in John's Gospel: 'Perfect love drives out all fear'. One aspect of being human is our fear of the unknown. Imagine what it must have been like for the first humans to experience the setting of the sun and the earth being cloaked in darkness.

They had no knowledge of what was happening and no way of knowing if the light would ever return. Fear must have reigned supreme. Many people face death, or think about it, from a stance of fear. Yet Jesus promises no fear because God loves us 'perfectly' or unconditionally.

The Christian scriptures offer several references to life after death. Recall the parable of Dives, 'my father's house has many rooms', the wailing and gnashing of teeth episode, the resurrection story, and 'the eye has not seen, nor the ear heard ...' hope expressed by Paul. Much discussion and reflection

will be needed if we are to examine these and other references for insights into the God we believe in, and who shapes our beliefs about life after death.

The Christian view of life after death owes everything to the Christian view of God. This view has not been consistent over the centuries, and we struggle to reconcile new insights with old ‘certainties’.

However, one thing is certain: our human experiences of love are foretastes of God’s bigger and better love for us. As the songwriter says in

Nature Boy, ‘The greatest thing you’ll ever learn, is just to love, and be loved in return.’

As true for God ... as it is for you and me.

GARRY EVERETT has spent all his professional life, as well as much of retirement, as an educator, mostly of adults. Garry’s enduring interests lie in family, Scripture, theology and Church renewal. At a local level he is involved in social justice and ecumenism. He is also a member of his parish St Vincent de Paul Conference.

The Circle of Life

lyrics by Tim Rice; music by Sir Elton John

... **From the day we arrive on the planet**

And, blinking, step into the sun
There’s more to see than can ever be seen
More to do than can ever be done
There’s far too much to take in here
More to find than can ever be found
But the sun rolling high
Through the sapphire sky
Keeps great and small on the endless round

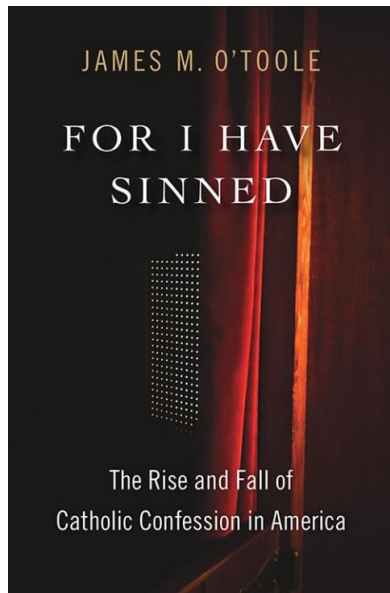
... **It’s the circle of life**

And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
Til we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the circle
The circle of life

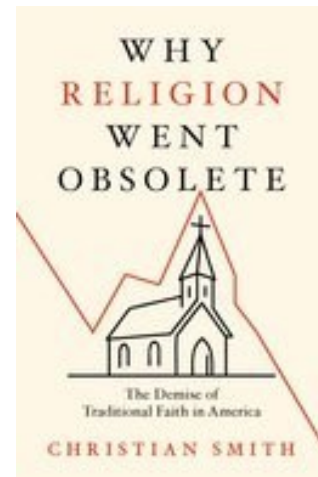
... **It’s the circle of life**

And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
‘Til we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the circle
The circle of life

New Books



For generations, American Catholics went faithfully to confession, admitting their sins to a priest and accepting through him God's forgiveness. The sacrament served as a distinctive marker of Catholic identity, shaping parishioners' views of their relationship to God, their neighbours and the wider world. But starting in the 1970s, many abandoned confession altogether. Focusing on the experiences of both laypeople and priests, James M. O'Toole reconstructs the history of confession's steady rise – and dramatic fall – among American Catholics.



This book explores the decline and obsolescence of traditional American religion, particularly among post-Boomers, attributing that to major societal shifts over time in technology, economics, culture and beyond. It highlights the role of long-term trends in the particular American context, rather than 'secularisation' as an inevitable or uniform result of modernisation. While traditional religion has diminished, new spiritual and occult practices have also re-emerged. It also challenges the idea of cyclical religious revivals, arguing that contemporary forces continue to accelerate religious decline. Struggling to adapt, religious institutions face no-win situations where their efforts appear insincere or outdated. Factors like higher education, evolving family dynamics and economic changes have further eroded religion's influence. Rather than validating received secularisation theory, however, this book argues for a re-enchantment of American culture that presents complications both for religion and secularism.

and an old book:

Who is Worthy?

The role of conscience in restoring hope to the Church

Ted Kennedy

- **Core Theme:** The book focuses on the **primacy of individual conscience** in religious life. It was written largely as a response to the theological stance of then-Archbishop George Pell, who Kennedy believed was undermining the teachings of Vatican II regarding conscience.
- **Inspiration:** Father Kennedy's work with marginalised groups, including Aboriginal Australians and the LGBTQ+ community, heavily influenced the book. He questioned why people who showed 'grace' and 'nobility' through their suffering were often excluded from Holy Communion.

The Author:

Father Ted Kennedy was a 'radical' figure within the Church, known for his lifelong commitment to social justice and the poor. He was a co-founder of the **Aboriginal Medical Service** in Redfern and was frequently in conflict with the Church hierarchy due to his activism.

Women and the Catholic Church

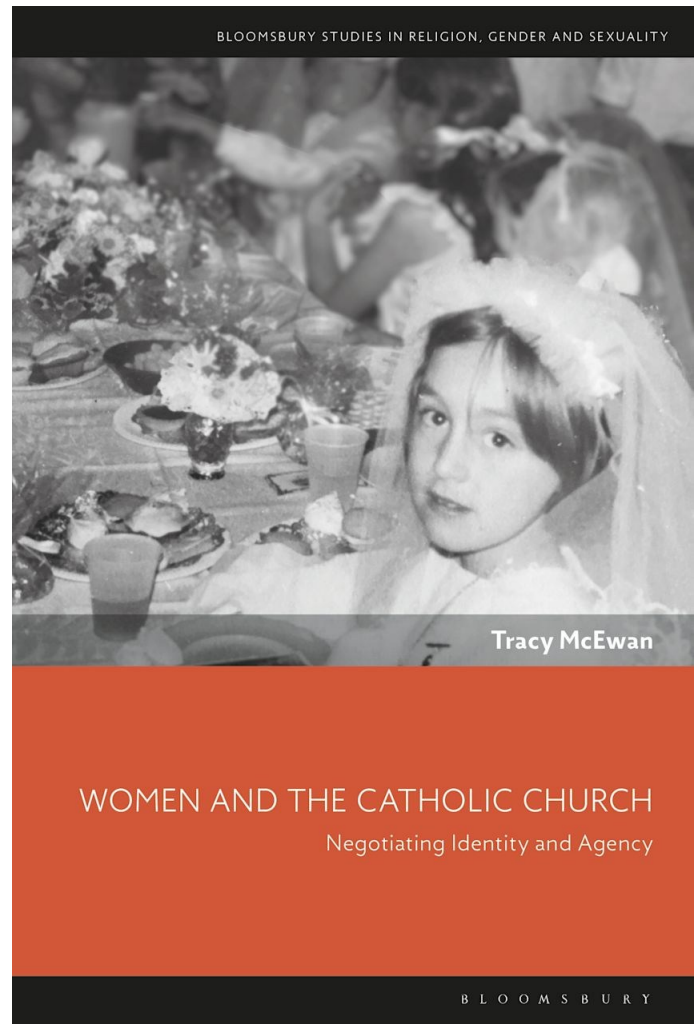
Negotiating Identity and Agency

Tracy McEwan

How do Catholic women make sense of their involvement in a church with restrictive gendered roles and responsibilities? Is there a vision for church which might provide Catholic women with a community of hope, justice and flourishing?

Introducing a new methodological approach to studying Catholic women, this open access book provides fresh insights into women's religious and spiritual experiences and church participation. Drawing on a case study of Australian Catholic women, Tracy McEwan develops the notion of 'technologies of Catholicism' to explore the ways in which women shape their religious and secular identities against the backdrop of a masculinist Church.

This book is a key resource for those seeking to understand women's struggle to negotiate the impact of Catholicism and its oppressive gendered theologies. It introduces the term 'everyday spiritual abuse' to explain the harm Catholic women experience on a day-to-day basis as they negotiate multiple material, spiritual and structural inequalities. It proposes an alternative feminist model of church, which is contained and produced in herstories of women.



Tracy McEwan is a theologian and sociologist of religion and gender at the University of Newcastle

Extract

After announcing my intended study, I was taken aside by a manager in my Catholic workplace and warned not to discuss my research topic with 'anyone'. A short time later, at a workplace morning tea, I was approached by a Catholic priest who knew of my research. After the usual greetings, he questioned me.

'Tracy, do you know that God made Mary the most holy woman ever?'

'Um, yes', I replied.

'Yes', he persisted, 'God made Mary the most holy person ever placed on the earth, but he put Joseph in charge of her.'

At the time I was baffled. What was it that was so dangerous about studying Catholic women? What were they afraid I would discover?

This book is about Catholic women. It explores women's identities and agency in the Catholic Church through the stories and experiences of the thirty-six Gen X Catholic women in Australia. Yet, it also tells my story and the stories of countless other women who day by day negotiate lived Catholicism and live out the consequences of not being recognised as a 'good Catholic woman'.

Extract from *Unbelievable* by John Shelby Spong (2019)

Why Neither Ancient Creeds Nor the Reformation Can Produce a Living Faith Today Twelve Theses for a new Reformation

1. GOD

Understanding God in theistic terms as ‘a being’, supernatural in power, dwelling somewhere external to the world and capable of intervening in the world with miraculous power, is no longer believable. Most God talk in liturgy and conversation has thus become meaningless. What we must do is find the meaning to which the word ‘God’ points.

2. JESUS THE CHRIST

If God can no longer be thought of in theistic terms, then conceiving of Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity has also become a bankrupt concept. Can we place the experience of ‘the Christ’ into words that have meaning?

3. ORIGINAL SIN

The Biblical story of the perfect and finished creation from which human beings have fallen into ‘original sin’ is pre-Darwinian mythology and post-Darwinian nonsense. We have to find a new way to tell the old story.

4. THE VIRGIN BIRTH

The virgin birth understood as literal biology is totally unbelievable. Far from being a bulwark in defence of the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth actually destroys that divinity.

5. MIRACLES

In a post-Newtonian world, supernatural invasions of the natural order, performed by God or an ‘incarnate Jesus’, are simply not viable explanations of what actually happened. Miracles do no ever imply magic.

6. ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

Atonement theology, especially in its most bizarre ‘substitutionary’ form, presents us with a God who is barbaric, a Jesus who is a victim, and it turns human beings into little more than guilt-filled creatures. The phrase ‘Jesus died for my sins’ is not just dangerous, it is absurd. Atonement theology is a concept that we must escape.

7. EASTER

The Easter event gave birth to the Christian movement and continues to transform it, but that does not mean that Easter was the physical resuscitation of Jesus’ deceased body back into human history. The earliest biblical records state that ‘God raised him’. Into what? We need to ask. The reality of the experience of resurrection must be separated from its later mythological explanations.

8. THE ASCENSION

The Biblical story of Jesus’ ascension assumes a three-tiered universe, a concept that was dismissed some five hundred years ago. If Jesus’ ascension was a literal event of history, it is beyond the capacity of our twenty-first century minds to accept it or to believe it. Does the ascension have any other meaning, or must we defend first-century astro-physics?

9. ETHICS

The ability to define and to separate good from evil can no longer be achieved with appeals to ancient codes such as the Ten Commandments or even the Sermon on the Mount. Contemporary moral standards must be hammered out in the juxtaposition between life-affirming moral principles and external situations. No modern person has any choice but to be a situationist.

10. PRAYER

Prayer, understood as a request made to an external theistic deity to act in human history, is little than an hysterical attempt to turn the Holy into the service of the human. Most of our prayer definitions arise out of the past and are thus dependent on an understanding of God that no longer exists. Let us instead think of prayer as the practice of the presence of God, the act of embracing transcendence and the discipline of sharing with another the gifts of living, living and being.

11. LIFE AFTER DEATH

If we are to talk about eternal life with any degree of intellectual integrity, we must explore it as a dimension of transcendent reality and infinite love – a reality and love that, when experienced, lets us share in the eternal.

12. UNIVERSALISM

We are called by this new faith into radical connectedness. Judgment is not a human impossibility. Discrimination against any human being on the basis of that which is a ‘given’ is always evil and does not serve the Christian god of offering ‘abundant life’ to all. Any structure in either the secular world or the institutional church that diminishes the humanity of any child of God on any external basis of race, gender or sexual orientation must be exposed publicly and vigorously. There can be no reason in the church of tomorrow for excusing or even forgiving discriminatory practices. ‘Sacred tradition’ must never again provide a cover to justify discriminatory evil. The call to universalism must be the message of Christianity.

Can a new Christianity be forged on the basis of these twelve theses? Can a living, vital and real faith that is true to the experience of the past, while dismissing the explanations of the past, be born anew in this generation? I believe it can, and so to engage in this task I issue this call to the Christian world to transform its holy words of yesterday into believable words of today. If we fail in this task there is little reason to think that Christianity, as previously understood and constituted, will survive the century. It is my conviction that we must move beyond theology, beyond creeds, beyond human perception to catch a new vision of the Christ. This book, *Unbelievable*, will be my attempt to just that.

John Shelby Spong

Have your say

ARCVoice is a report of news, opinions and reflections on the renewal and reform currently experienced in the Catholic Church.

Your contributions, letters, articles or comments are most welcome.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or of ARC.

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