

## **CACW COLLOQUIUM 2016**

### ***Women as Witnesses to the Joy of the Gospel***

#### **Women in the Media: Call the Midwife!**

After listening to Maria Harries yesterday, I have taken as my new mantra, 'I am not here not to be provocative'!

I want to begin with a story about a turning point in my awareness of how women have been subverted, regularly, since the time of Jesus. After ten years teaching English and Religion at a Year 7-12 school, I applied for a position as Religious Studies Co-ordinator in a senior high school. The syllabus for Studies of Religion – a new HSC course which could be offered in all schools, not just religious schools, was about to begin. I attended a summer school in 1992 specifically designed to prepare teachers who would teach this course. One of the syllabus units was Women and Religion. Sr Catherine Thomas was one of the lecturers and she focused on St Brigid of Ireland as a suitably influential woman. I had lived in the parish of St Brigid, RT, all my life, and attended St Brigid's PS. I knew St Brigid was Irish, and I knew what she looked like – ie I knew what her statue looked like – but that was about it, I'm not proud to say. I learned – thank you Sr Margaret – that Brigid was strong, defiant, devoted to her faith despite her father's objections, the founder of the first double monastery, ie for women and men – an advocate of education and a canny young woman who earned her father's wrath by refusing to marry the man he had lined up and by sharing his wealth with the poor! However, most importantly, Sr Catherine advanced the notion that Brigid, rather than being appointed abbess, had been ordained bishop! And sure enough, her statue in my church shows her holding a staff in one hand and a model of a church in the other. Suddenly I knew why, for so long, I had known so little about this wonderfully feisty, forward-thinking woman of Ireland! And once you know, you can't 'un-know'...

Now a few rhetorical questions - and there will of course be an opportunity for you to ask questions shortly.

- Did you know that in 1964 the Second Vatican Council declared that expressing opinions “on matters concerning the good of the Church” was an obligation of the faithful? Canon 212, #2-3, says, “The Christian faithful are free to make known to the pastors of the Church their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires....they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest ... their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful...”
- Did you know that the epistles provide much evidence of the integral – and integrated – role of women disciples in the early years of the Church, although the readings we hear at Sunday Mass don’t always highlight this? I’m thinking Priscilla, Dorcas, Joanna, Susanna, Junia, Phoebe, Lydia and so on.
- We have been reflecting on “women as witnesses” throughout this colloquium. Did you know that the significance of St Mary Magdalene as the first witness to the resurrection, the one who then shared its joy, is that in Jewish life women were not accepted as witnesses in a court? This was not a denigration of women, but rather recognition of the absolutely crucial role of women in the Jewish home. It could not be demanded of a Jewish woman that she leave her home duties for another arena. The role of the woman in the home was absolutely equal – and complementary – to the role of the rabbi in the synagogue. Today, of course, liberal Judaism invites women to lead the community as rabbis.
- Finally, did you know that one need not be ordained to be a cardinal?

I could go on! My point of course is that there is so much to know that makes a difference but unless we educate ourselves, often we won’t learn what we as women need to know at Mass or at parish or diocesan gatherings.

The title of this workshop is “Women in the Media”. I don’t really think of myself as a ‘woman in the media’ although my work as editor of Maitland-Newcastle’s magazine *Aurora* and as a member of the diocesan Communications Team sits within the media landscape. It might be appropriate here to say something brief about the *Aurora* model, because it’s unique in Australia – maybe the world! *Aurora* is the magazine of the DoM-N, distributed as a monthly insert in six regional newspapers. This means that its audience runs the gamut from cradle and committed Catholics to rabid atheists. It therefore means that while the magazine is no less Catholic, I try hard not to assume knowledge or faith on the part of the reader, and to present a balanced, non-clerical, Francis-oriented view of Church and Church people. In fact a priest once complained that there were too many female writers being published – yes, just a little ironic.....

Back to the media in broader terms – I believe, even in these days when the secular media and the Catholic Church have an uneasy relationship, the Church needs the media - including its own communications personnel. I’m not saying the Church needs the media to tell its good news stories – although that doesn’t hurt.

I’m saying the Church’s spokespeople – usually men – need to be asked the curly questions – eg, about sexual abuse of children by some clergy, religious and laypeople under the auspices of the Church – and I mention that because it’s probably the single most significant issue we have yet to genuinely address.

The Church’s representatives need to be asked why there is still such a limited role for women in church governance, decision-making, discernment.

The Church’s representatives need to be asked why women are leading figures in financial institutions, government and government departments, industry, the media itself (ABC now has a female managing director), the arts – the list goes on – but not in an institution that teaches that we are all made in the

image and likeness of God. I suspect that NASA is probably more just in its dealings with women than our church.

Remember that it was Julia Gillard who initiated the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – and Joanne McCarthy, *Newcastle Herald* journalist, who was instrumental in informing the public of many crimes against children, and against all of us. And we ought to be grateful to them.

The Church's representatives need to be asked why officially allowing women's feet to be washed on Holy Thursday is such a big step forward. I for one didn't know until earlier this year that technically for a priest to wash a woman's feet – usually foot – was an act of defiance!

The Church's representatives need to be asked why, in an age when Britain has its second woman PM; when the US may have a woman President (please), when Australia has had a woman Prime Minister (sad as that episode was) and when women such as Aung San Suu Kyi, Ireland's Mary McAleese, Pakistan's Malala Yousafzai (Nobel Peace Prize 2014), our own Quentin Bryce and Marie Bashir – are such sterling individuals, using their gifts for the benefit of the society in which they live – why is the Catholic Church still so conspicuously behind the times?

In many ways the church has got off lightly in terms of not being called into question – perhaps the sexual abuse of children has muddied the water in terms of other issues that might be raised.

It is the gospels – not the writings of the fathers, not canon law, not encyclicals or bulls or exhortations – that are our bedrock as disciples of Jesus. And the gospels portray Jesus encountering women, understanding women, forgiving women, befriending women, relying on women. Goodness, he's even born of a woman! So the template is there for women – made in the image and likeness of God – to offer their gifts in the full service of the gospel. The gospel is our good news – but in 2016, the template

for women to offer their gifts in the service of the Church remains far more circumscribed than it does for men.

Yet the Church – and churches – are full of women! And we women ought also to be asking these important questions in the circles in which we live and move and have our being.

More and more of what we know about the world – consciously and unconsciously – we know through the media. And thankfully, more and more of that knowledge, those impressions, comes to us through women’s written and spoken words. Often, when media representatives are investigating an issue, they look for opinions and experiences from a variety of sources, and from women and men. Most diocesan Churches have few authorised spokeswomen, and even if one is available, depending on the issue, the journalist will be well aware that the woman may be experienced, committed, articulate and well qualified but she will ultimately have little influence on decision-making. It’s time this was not so.

Pope Francis – thank you God – says in *Evangelii Gaudium* that the Church needs to “create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church (#103). I could quibble with “still broader” but let’s trust the underlying good intent and try to move forward.

Our key questions are ‘what would a more incisive female presence look like?’ and ‘What difference would it make?’

I’m sure some of you are thinking that a more incisive female presence would, metaphorically only, wear a collar. I believe in ordaining women as much as I believe in baptising women (girls), but while I believe it will happen, I don’t believe it will be in my lifetime.

Meanwhile, let’s try to be more creative – more broadminded – more gospel-oriented – more hope-filled – and more incisive – in our imagining and our praying.

In small groups, please create some word-pictures of **a more incisive female presence** in the Church of Rome, of your diocese, of your parish, and if you work for the Church, in your school/hospital/aged care facility etc.

### **My examples**

- Women can't be bishops, but women can be consulted regarding, or nominate ordained men for, episcopal appointments
- Women can't be priests but all members of a parish community can be consulted on priestly appointments to parishes, chaplaincies etc
- Regarding positions where women can be appointed – eg vice chancellors, chancellors, Directors of Mission, of Schools, of agencies, departments/teams, editors – let's be sure that if the appointee is a man, that man is better qualified (in the broadest sense) than any woman who was considered or who applied.
- Is there a reason women can't be invited to preach during celebrations of Eucharist on particular occasions? It is unbelievable that there are so few occasions when the 'faithful in the pews' hear the wisdom and experience of a woman of their own. In fact, some may hear from ministers of other denominations/traditions more often than female members of their own community.
- Is there a reason priests can't be encouraged, in preparing their homilies, to consult women theologians, scripture scholars and spirituality writers? They can easily be directed to appropriate sources.
- Is there a reason there cannot be an expectation that priests – and men generally – would look for opportunities to engage meaningfully with women, to listen to women speakers, to ensure that parish bodies are as open to women as possible – as a matter of course?

- Is there a reason that so often, guest speakers at a diocesan level offer a session specifically for the clergy? Not only is this not the best use of busy people's time, it means that the questions and conversation arising are all from not only a male, but an ordained perspective. I believe there are very few occasions when the clergy of a diocese need to be catered for separately.
- Do all dioceses have Diocesan Pastoral Councils (or equivalent) which are open to the gifts, wisdom and experience of women, religious or lay? If not, why not?
- Women deacons...back to the future!

**Listen to responses → what is required for these kinds of changes?**

- The faithful in parishes and religious congregations need to be prepared to ask questions – to be open about their expectations – to encourage and support women with gifts and commitment ...it has to be said I think that sometimes women can be our own worst enemies. We can be very judgmental of one another and sometimes, ironically, we expect higher standards of each other than we do of the church men who have such influence in our lives.
- Education is key and is probably readily available in your parish/region - and parishioners need to encourage each other to take up opportunities. While there are, at least in metropolitan centres, many 'one off' opportunities', I believe the best way forward in terms of education is not 'one off' or online, but through face to face learning as part of a group. We learn from each other as well as from the designated 'wisdom person'.
- Cf former NSW Governor, Professor Marie Bashir– she's taking violin lessons at 85!
- There need to be opportunities for us to imagine a different church – for our daughters, grand-daughters, god-daughters, nieces, students.... I taught Studies of Religion to senior students in Maitland 1992-2003 and the Church's discrimination towards women was a mystery to them. I taught the 'official reasons' but they rang hollow and they still do. It's become a cliché to tell a

girl that she can be whatever she wants to be – ability, energy and commitment assumed – but it's not so in the Catholic Church. If we want the next generations to follow us, what are we offering them?

- We are all, I'm sure, witnesses to the gospel every day – some days we might do better than on others! However, John's gospel says, "the truth will set you free" and part of witnessing the joy of the gospel is owning our own truth, our own reality, its beauty and its disappointment.
- Today, we are all journalists – social media, blogs, online forums and opportunities to submit opinion pieces for publication are all third millennium ways to enter the media landscape.
- Let's talk, and think, less about ordained priesthood and more about the priesthood of the baptised. In fact, let's redeem the priesthood of the baptised...*Lumen Gentium* teaches that all who are baptised participate in the priesthood of Christ.

"Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men,(100) made the new people "a kingdom and priests to God the Father".(101) The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man [*sic*] they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light.(102) Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God,(103) should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.(104) Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.(105)

Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ.(2\*) The

ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. But the faithful, in virtue of their royal priesthood, join in the offering of the Eucharist.(3\*) They likewise exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity. *Lumen Gentium* 10.

- And while on priesthood, how many members of the academic staffs of our seminaries are women? → Sydney 2 of 6
  - Brisbane 1 of 8
  - Wagga 0 of 16
  - Perth 2 of 11
  - Melbourne 0 of 8

This year I took out a subscription to *The Tablet* – the independent Catholic weekly published in the UK – a luxury – but I’m convinced that if I read it cover to cover every week I would know more than I need to know. And no, I’m not on commission...

In March this year Joanna Moorhead wrote, “Recently there has been a lot of publicity about an initiative that probably is not going to catch on in the Vatican, though it would be wonderful if it did: the Owen Pledge, named after a development economist called Owen Barder, who campaigns to get other men to sign up to his pledge. [quoting Barder] “At a public conference I won’t serve on a panel of two or more unless there is at least one woman, not including the chair...’What happens if we have tried to find women but there is nobody available?’ ‘Try harder. There are loads of brilliant women...if your organisation does not have any to field, the logical question must be: why is that? And the very next

question must be: how can we correct such a glaring imbalance in the way we run our affairs?"

[20160326] The implications for our Church are obvious.

I don't know if Owen Barder has any daughters... but I believe sometimes the attitude of a man changes when he becomes a father of a daughter or daughters. Suddenly, it matters that girls have prospects, opportunities, the same hopes as their brothers. Of course men-who-are-priests don't have daughters...

I have often thought that the impasse on female altar servers could have been broken much earlier if mothers, or preferably, parents, simply said, 'Our daughters *and* our sons serve, or there will be no servers'.

I want to draw on another writer from *The Tablet* to put forward a notion which was a light bulb moment for me. Sara Maitland, writing about St Mary Magdalene says, "...there are now voices, including the Pope's, saying we need a renewed theology of women. Personally I disagree; I think we need a new theology of men, of masculinity. St Luke's gospel, and two millennia of the Church's teaching, have made clear that the normative Christian is female." [20160618] I'm not sure what a "new theology of men, of masculinity" might look like, and that's not this morning's concern, but something in me thinks 'yes, she's right'. Perhaps we need to develop our theology of ordination of men? I look forward to a time when a Council for Australian Catholic Women, diocesan offshoots, a federal minister for women and women's affairs, and regular talk of quotas in government, and horrifying statistics around domestic violence, are all anachronisms, but that time is not now, not yet.

### **Call to action**

### **SO...where to from here?**

Some of our conversation has already involved practical steps to move toward a more equitable, gospel-oriented, contemporary Church in terms of gender norms and decision-making.

I want to conclude with some consideration of what you might go home – back to your parishes – and do.

- Speak out
- Speak out from a position of confidence and knowledge
- Continually inform and educate yourself. There is more to know, and to read, than any of us can ever master – or should that be mistress?!
- Read beyond your comfort level – read Joan Chittister, Elizabeth Johnson, Phyllis Zagano, Ilia Delio, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Joyce Rupp, Serene Jones...not only about women, but as theologians and scripture scholars. Every theologian's/scholar's voice is different, but so much of what we hear is from a male perspective.
- Don't be put off by the term 'feminist', which simply means one who recognises the equality of women.
- Be true to your conscience. Who is to argue with, "My conscience calls me to say/do this"?
- Your question may not always be answered – but making a statement may plant a seed that may bear fruit in time, eg, "This parish council (or whatever) doesn't reflect the gender balance of our society or of our parish community." "The conference/workshop/seminar only has male speakers." "When decisions need to be made, men are called. When cakes need to be made, (flowers arranged, brass polished) women are called."
- Say 'yes' to the opportunities you are offered. That's why I'm here! The opportunity/invitation/position/course/conference can't always be for another woman.
- Encourage other women to say 'yes'. Often if you say "I'm doing this course/reading this book/attending this seminar – will you join me?" the answer will be 'yes'.
- Believe in the possibility of change – that it's only a matter of time – and speak as if you believe in this possibility. "When the Church fully utilises the gifts of women..." "When women can be

cardinals..." "When we stop naming women saints as 'virgins' – we don't name men in this way – why do we do so for women?"

- Tell it like it is – if you believe, as I do, that the Church discriminates against women, say so. Incidentally, it used to be a compliment to be described as discriminating – it meant that you had high standards and judged well. That meaning's almost been lost and to discriminate against – to go against the gospel – is not what the Church ought to be about.
- Invoke Sophia/Wisdom, of whom Joyce Rupp writes, "Sophia was truly another way of naming the divine." ("Desperately seeking Sophia", *US Catholic* [www.uscatholic.org](http://www.uscatholic.org) )

### Questions/comments?

- Hands up if you watched, and loved, *Call the Midwife*! My final challenge is a big one! Be a midwife at the birth of something new. In Pope Francis' refreshing approach, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, in the words of more and more of the commentators and of the baptised, there is movement. Labour pains? Let's do all we can to avoid a stillbirth!

## COUNCIL FOR AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC WOMEN

### Women as witnesses to the joy of the gospel

September 2016 – Mary MacKillop Place

Any time women come together with a collective intention, it's a powerful thing. Whether it's sitting down making a quilt, in a kitchen preparing a meal, in a club reading the same book, or around the table playing cards, or planning a birthday party, when women come together with a collective intention, magic happens. – Phylicia Rashad

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

— Rainer Maria Rilke

“To stand in a tradition is not to stand still but to stand in the deep, loamy soil that feeds further growth.” Janet Soskice (Quoted by Prof Richard Lennan, inaugural Sacred Heart Cathedral Lecture, 20160803)

“Quite simply, women bleed and suffer so that others can live. Not glamorously or gloriously, but in a bewilderingly hidden, unrewarded and quotidian way. Further, this bleeding and suffering is for many women a source of shame and humiliation, a public disgrace, as was the death on the cross, until the light of the gospel revealed it as glory....” Carmody Grey, “Shedding blood for the life of humanity is just what women do” *The Tablet* 16 April 2016

“Women,” Thomas Aquinas, archdeacon of the Middle Ages, taught in his definitive compendium of Christian thought, *Summa Theologica*, “are subordinate both in nature and in purpose....” (466-72) They are, therefore, he reasoned, carnal by nature and “have not sufficient strength of mind to resist concupiscence.” Those ideas not only justified the oppression of women; they were also the ideas that, by implication, created a spirituality that limited women and anchored men in notions of preeminence as harmful to the men themselves in one way as they were to women in another.” Joan D Chittister, *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men* William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, 1998.

“Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men,(100) made the new people "a kingdom and priests to God the Father".(101) The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man [*sic*]they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvellous light.(102) Therefore all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God,(103) should present themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.(104) Everywhere on earth they must

bear witness to Christ and give an answer to those who seek an account of that hope of eternal life which is in them.(105)

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“The witness and the achievements of Christian women have had a significant impact on the life of the Church as well as of society. Even in the face of serious social discrimination, holy women have acted “freely”, strengthened by their union with Christ. Such union and freedom rooted in God explain, for example, the great work of St Catherine of Siena....In our own days too the Church is constantly enriched by the witness of the many women who fulfill their vocation to holiness. Holy women are an incarnation of the feminine ideal; they are also a model for all Christians, a model of the *sequel Christi*, an example of how the Bride must respond with love to the love of the Bridegroom.” *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* #27 John Paul II 1988

“I would like to stress the fact that, even though significant advances have been made in the recognition of women’s rights and their participation in public life, in some countries much remains to be done to promote these rights. Unacceptable customs still need to be eliminated. I think particularly of the shameful ill-treatment to which women are sometimes subjected, domestic violence and various forms of enslavement which, rather than a show of masculine power, are craven acts of cowardice....The equal dignity of men and women makes us rejoice to see old forms of discrimination disappear, and within families there is a growing reciprocity. If certain forms of feminism have arisen which we must consider inadequate, we must nonetheless see in the women’s movement the working of the Spirit for a clearer recognition of the dignity and rights of women.” *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family* #54 Pope Francis 2016.

#### **On the Synod on the Family, Rome, 2015**

“...There were 30 women at the Synod, out of 315 people attending. And even the women who attended were not allowed to vote. ...We can reasonably assume that despite the Synod’s focus on families, most of the voters have never had any involvement in raising families, and certainly not of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth. While hopefully all would at times have provided pastoral care to families, none have directly dealt with an abusive spouse, struggled to regulate family size, questioned whether to stay in an unhappy marriage, or dealt with a child identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.” “Family Synod Neglects Feminine Genius” Beth Doherty *Eureka Street* October 2015.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ.” Galatians 3:28.