

Women and the Church (SLIDE)

(SLIDE) The title of the Aussie movie, *Ride like a Girl*, captures a young woman, Michelle Payne, riding to victory in the Melbourne Cup, jumping hurdles of history, sexism and bigotry to shatter a long-standing taboo. She faced odds of 100 to 1.

In the Catholic Church the ecclesial stakes are high in the struggle for the full equality of women and men. We lag behind Australian society and the rest of the world. Some of us are old enough to remember when Elizabeth Reid was appointed 'Women's Adviser' to the Whitlam Government in 1973, a world first.

(SLIDE) I recall a whole school Mass in the mid-70's with a huge banner on the back wall of the sanctuary reading, 'International Women's Year, 1975'. Our Parish Priest must have supported it, bless him.

One of my first invitations when I went to Hobart to work in 2009 was to address the Tasmanian clergy at their biannual conference, and the topic assigned was 'Women and the Church'. (Carey spoke about that as well!) I was moved by the open-hearted reception from the Archbishop, the priests and deacons to what then still a highly controversial topic. We were conscious that Bishop Bill Morris had been investigated by the Vatican and dismissed from office in 2009 by Pope Benedict for encouraging similar discussion in his Toowoomba Diocese.

Why does it remain so challenging in 2023, for the Church to recognize and celebrate the full gifts and Baptismal dignity of its women? I vividly recall a student during a Religious Education class in the 90's asking, 'But Miss, why are there only six sacraments for women and seven for men? That sucks!' Our children and grandchildren largely ignore what they see as a sexist Church. Many thinking Catholics fear the current calls for inclusion are too little too late, when so many have left the fold. Many of us live in hope and faith for a better future.

It is helpful to look backwards as well as forwards to seek some answers.

(SLIDE) Florence Nightingale in England, Suzanne Aubert in New Zealand and our own Mary MacKillop, were contemporaries, living in 19th century patriarchal societies. They could be considered 'accidental feminists', 'gutsy' female leaders. Each had a vocation; nothing would stand in the way of their mission to the world. Florence, a recognized beauty whose duty was to marry well into high society, shocked Victorian England and became instead its most powerful public health reformer. Against great opposition from powerful military, male authorities, and with a will of iron, she waded through mud and filth in the Crimea, her band of nurses bringing solace to thousands of the wounded. Her health policies and benchmarks still stand worldwide. Suzanne Aubert in New Zealand and our own Mary MacKillop both founded active, unconventional religious orders, defied

the norms of their times and respectfully, cleverly worked with and around their clerical superiors. They both far surpassed in vision and intellectual capacity the expectations and limitations placed on women in a Church and society overlorded by men. ¹

Those faithful Christian women had no feminist theology, but their clarity of conviction that they were created in God's image, and were called to mission in the world, never wavered. All three received support from exceptional men who encouraged them to 'step out' as women. In her early 20's, beset by tension and spiritual doubt, Florence met a distinguished doctor who visited her parents' home, a Dr Grinley Howe, American philanthropist and pioneer of public health in the United States. She asked him, 'Dr Howe, do you think it would be unsuitable and unbecoming for a young Englishwoman to devote herself to works of charity in hospitals and elsewhere as Catholic Sisters do?', to which he replied, 'My dear Miss Florence, it would be unusual, and in England whatever is unusual is thought to be unsuitable; but I say to you, 'go forward' if you have a vocation for that way of life, act up to your inspiration wherever it may lead you, and God be with you'. ²

(SLIDE) Just recently, Vin and I discovered the grave of another courageous female leader of the time, Tasmanian Suffragette, Jessie Spinks-Rooke, buried in 1906 in the Burnie Cemetery. She was a devout Christian who dedicated herself to public advocacy for women's right to vote, travelling by 'draughty trains and rickety coaches' across Tasmania and beyond.

These exceptional women and many others paved the way for the modern 'Women's Movement' and its influence on every level of society, including religion. In the 21st century we have the benefit of scholarship that has debunked the myths of ancient Greek philosophy that created a hierarchy with men (thinkers) at the top, descending the ladder to women, slaves and animals. (SLIDE) Catholic feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Reuther, explained that this sexist, misogynist model was 'appropriated into Christianity in the early centuries of the Common Era and would henceforth shape Western culture well into the modern era'.³ The 'Western Civilization' movement in Australia so fiercely defended by some Catholic traditionalists could gainfully apply the lens of feminist Christian scholarship to the ancient 'Fathers' of western philosophy.

Contemporary scriptural and theological scholarship no longer supports the exclusion of women that has characterized so much of Catholic history. Catholics on the six continents have spoken up for a

¹ Munroe, Jessie. *The Story of Suzanne Aubert*, Auckland University Press, 1986.

Gardner, Paul. *Mary MacKillop: An Extraordinary Australian*, Trustees of the Sisters of St Joseph in conjunction with David Ell Publishing, North Sydney 2011 (Eighth Reprint since 1993)

² Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale*, Redwood Burn Ltd, Great Britain, 1950, p. 49.

³ Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Gaia and God: An eco-feminist theology of earth healing*, Harper San Francisco, 1992, p. 184.

new paradigm as we prepare for this year's Synod on Synodality.⁴ The basic facts are stark. Universally we have 3,171 ecclesial jurisdictions (ie, dioceses, eparchies etc). How many of them are headed up by men? 3,171. How many by women? Not one. The People of God have submitted that an end to patriarchal and clerical domination of our Church is urgent. (SLIDE) A picture of a typical Synod of Bishops speaks a thousand words, a sea of men dressed in the colours of Constantinian hierarchs!

(SLIDE) And yet, in 1963, in his great encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (41), Pope John XXIII prophetically named 'Women's rights' as one of the three most pressing 'Signs of the Times'. He stated:

Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.

Why sixty years later does this issue of women's inclusion stubbornly remain such a thorn in the side of our clerically governed Catholic Church? (SLIDE) Why in July 2022 did the Plenary Council need the wake up call of that unique 'Wednesday action' on the part of women to get the point across? In the words of a courageous spokeswoman from the Council floor, who spoke up on behalf of the dissenters- 'We have had enough'. Our Catholic Church is being exposed as one of the last global organisations failing to include women equally with men at every level of its culture.

Mary Coloe, Australian Presentation Sister and scripture scholar, has examined some of the cultural factors that explain the Catholic Church's patriarchal, sexist and misogynist treatment of women since post-apostolic times. She claims that the patriarchal basis of Judaeo and Christian traditions originated not so much in the bible (even though the First Testament is intrinsically patriarchal), but in Greek philosophy. (SLIDE) She writes, "In Aristotle's words, '... a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of an inability of a sort... The male provides the 'form' and the 'principle of movement,' the female provides the body, in other words, the material...".

(SLIDE) Coloe concludes,

Hence, to be female was to be lesser, beneath, inferior, to the male. This view has dominated western Christian thinking and doctrinal development right up until the twentieth century. It is based in not only poor philosophy, but poor biology as well because the conclusion drawn was

⁴ See Vatican Dicastery for Synods website for Synod reports from countries and continents. Found at: [synod on synodality website - Search \(bing.com\)](#)

that only the male sperm contributed to the passing on of human life, and the woman was merely the 'receptacle'.⁵

St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas and the Church "Fathers" have built Catholic theology on this basis. As a consequence, we still meet a stubborn refusal to overturn these age-old fallacies and name the Church's exclusion of women for what it is.

What of the sacred scriptures? The welcoming of women by Jesus and their inclusion within His circle of influence has been somewhat lost or seriously understated in our tradition. (SLIDE) Feminist scripture scholar Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza names this circle of followers a 'discipleship of equals', a beautiful phrase that has become a new benchmark for Church inclusion. Through her world class, scholarly work, she uncovers forensically the presence of women in scripture hidden by male authorship and subdued within a system for which she coins the term, 'kyriarchy' (a system of 'lording over' others). Schussler Fiorenza's work in identifying a 'kyriarchy' at work in patriarchal, biblical cultures can be applied to any authority structure that keeps the oppressed in a state of oppression. (SLIDE) It is worth noting here that this term 'kyriarchy' was adopted by former asylum seeker and philosopher, Barooze Bucani in articulating why detainees on Manus Island found it impossible to make their protests heard. The layers of the Australian government's bureaucratic detention system made it impossible to reach those in charge.⁶ Barooze invoked the image of a highrise tower with the ultimate authority in splendid isolation on the top floor, always out of the reach of those trapped at the bottom. We can say with confidence that the Kingdom Jesus announced was the antithesis of a 'kyriarchy'.

(SLIDE) On the eve of the historic global Beijing Women's Conference in 1995, Pope John Paul II wrote:

We are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. If objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision. When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the

⁵ Mary Coloe, 'A Matter of Justice and Necessity': Women's participation in the Catholic Church. *Compass*, a journal of Topical Theology, Vol. 43, 3 (2011) 13-18.

⁶ Barooze Buccani, *No Friend but the Mountains*, 2018. Picador, Sydney, p. xxvii

gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. As far as personal rights are concerned, there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area... this is a matter of justice but also of necessity (para 3 & 4).²

As Catholics, the People of God are entitled to ask and indeed are asking, in every continent: If this is a 'matter of justice but also of necessity' what could possibly be stopping the Church from embracing women 'in every area'? Why are they still excluded? What if a woman experienced a call from God to become a Catholic priest? (SLIDE) St Therese of Lisieux from the seclusion of her French Carmelite Convent wrote in the 1890's of her own desire for priesthood:

I sense in myself the vocation of Warrior, Priest, Apostle, Doctor, and Martyr. In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I will be love'. And further, 'I feel in me the vocation of the priest. With what love, O Jesus, I would carry You in my hands when, at my voice, You would come down from heaven. And with what love would I give You to souls'⁷.

(SLIDE) The late Bishop Geoffrey Robinson in the recently published *towards the end of my days*, wrote about the problem of the doctrine of infallibility, invoked in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1994. The document was intended to end once and for all any discussion about the Ordination of women in the Catholic Church. Bishop Geoff contested the two arguments put forward against Ordination for women. Firstly, the argument that there were no women present at the Last Supper. He asked, who can say authoritatively that there weren't women present? The work of scripture scholars such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and José Pagola have shed credible doubt on that ⁸, claiming that women were customarily present at Passover meals. Secondly, there is the argument of the Church's 'constant tradition' that has always rejected women as ineligible for priesthood. This is a 'weak' argument Bishop Geoff wrote, because it relies on the judgment of 'past bishops with extreme negative views concerning women that today appal us', including such 'lurid' descriptions of women as 'charmings of the clergy', 'appetising flesh of the devil', companions of the very stuff of sin, the cause of our ruin', and worse.⁹ We need fearless and refreshing truth-telling such as this.

And so, we ask, what is being done to overcome patriarchy and the clericalism that have characterised our Church for so many centuries?

⁷ *The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*. Manuscript B, September 8, 1896 trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. ICS Publications, Washington, D.C 1996 (p 190-200) Cited at: [Oct 1 - St Thérèse of Lisieux 3. priestly vocation and doctor of the Church - Catholicireland.net](http://Catholicireland.net)

⁸ Pagola, Jose. *Jesus, An Historical Approximation*. Convivium Press, Florida, 2007. Ch 8, 'A Friend of Women'.

⁹ *Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, Towards the end of my days: Theological and spiritual reflections*, Ed. Seamus O'Grady. Garratt Publishing, Melbourne, 2022. p. 326-329.

There is much positive development both in Australia and globally. Since the early 1980's Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), founded by a number of leaders of women's religious congregations, has attracted Catholic women (and some men) as members from every part of Australia and beyond. I have been there since its inception. WATAC, in partnership with The Grail, currently facilitates *Women Preach*, a podcast familiar to many of us as a model of women's participation in Church through preaching Sunday homilies during the past 18 months, over seventy so far. The Plenary Council expressed some support for this practice.

(SLIDE) During forty plus years, women and supportive men have met in small groups or at public conferences, in collaboration with Catholic tertiary educators and leaders of religious orders, to pray, confer, celebrate and study feminist theology. They have invited eminent speakers to come Down Under – the great populariser of Catholic feminism, Sr Joan Chittister, has come to Australia several times. Caroline Oisek (Ordination of Women), Catherine La Cugna (the Trinity as the basis of inclusion), Sandra Schneiders (scriptural interpretation), Rosemary Radford Reuther (theologian and champion of justice) Virginia Mollencott (Inclusive metaphors and names for God), Elia Delio (Spirituality and Cosmology), are among those whose works were influential. The list goes on. This has developed a depth of understanding about the need for openness and change in Church thinking and practice.¹⁰(SLIDE) WATAC is a member of the global Catholic Women's Council (CWC), founded in 2019 to be a 'global umbrella organisation of Roman Catholic networks working for the full recognition of the dignity and equality of women in the Church.'¹¹ The Catholic Women's Council initiated a virtual pilgrimage across the world ending at Rome in 2022. Let's join them for a moment ... (SLIDE with VIDEO link)

For many centuries, women religious have been perhaps the clearest model Catholicism has had of self-determining women, albeit within the patriarchal constraints of Canon Law and clerical oversight. Today despite depleting numbers they remain a powerful, prophetic force ... highly educated, respected in mainstream culture for their open-hearted response to the decrees of Vatican Council II, tackling the real needs of people and determined not to be thwarted by rigidity in Church leadership. (SLIDE). Female voices, both lay and religious, were powerful influences at the Plenary Council: women like Aboriginal Shirley Quarisemin, Dep. Chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC); Congregational Leaders, Stancea Vichie, Missionary

¹⁰ An example of related scholarship is to be found in *The Leading for Mission Collective*, which is a group of influential Australian Catholic scholars, including women, who are driving the understanding of mission down deeply into many aspects of the life of the Church community. The collective is led by missiologist, Professor Therese D'Orsa, who has worked in this field for over fifty years.

¹¹ Catholic Women's Council. Found at: [Catholic Women's Council | Home \(catholicwomenscouncil.org\)](https://catholicwomenscouncil.org)

Sisters of Service, and Monica Cavanagh Sisters of St Joseph; Claire Victory, lawyer and former National President of St Vincent de Paul Society; and Gemma Thompson, co-writer of the Tasmanian *Make Jesus Real* series of student texts.

(SLIDE) Religious women, for example the Presentation Sisters at St Mary's College in Hobart, have educated countless Australian girls to understand their dignity as women and assume leadership in society and Church. Religious orders of women have been champions of women's advancement and human rights across many countries.

Here in Australia religious orders have taken seriously the need to keep their charism alive as numbers of vowed members dwindle. Through new Canonically approved organisations, they are continuing their apostolates in the spirit of their founders, but with all lay leadership. (SLIDE) Calvary Ministries (governing the two Tasmanian Calvary Hospitals), is an example of such a new entity, in Canon Law identified as a 'Public Juridic Person' or PJP. Formation for the lay people taking over the leadership of these good works has been a high priority. The Boards of Management of PJP's model inclusivity, averaging 50% women members, while ASX listed companies have had a target of 30%. In many ways women are leading organisational innovation in our Church, and could do much more if the opportunities were there for full participation in ministry. Male ecclesial leadership needs to step up to remove the obstacles to a fully inclusive Church.

(SLIDE) It is a hopeful sign that Pope Francis has appointed at least five women in the top echelons of the Vatican, Sr Natalie Becquert, Undersecretary in the Dicastery for Synods; Sister Alessandra Smerilli in the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development; (SLIDE) Professor Michelina Tenacand and two other eminent women theologians in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

(SLIDE) On International Women's Day 2023, the most extensive global survey of Catholic women ever undertaken, was presented to Pope Francis by co-author and WATAC member, Dr Tracy McEwan. Initiated through the University of Newcastle, with over 17,000 responses received from 104 countries, it represents the experiences of women and presents 14 key recommendations to feed into the Synod preparation. (SLIDE) These recommendations, which echo the Plenary Council and the Synod recommendations so far, include: Increased Church leadership for women, including Ordination; Enacting guidelines to eliminate sexual, spiritual and physical violence; Addressing corruption and mismanagement with transparency and management best practice; Ensuring that

Catholic social teaching is applied to address poverty, climate change, homelessness, war, and economic injustice.¹²

(SLIDE) Incidentally, in the 14th century, Doctor of the Church, St Catherine of Siena, like Tracey McEwan in 2023, also visited the Pope. St Catherine presented Pope Urban VI, not with a document, but with five candied oranges, and a recipe for 'conversion', not only of the oranges from bitterness into sweetness but also of the Pope himself, suggesting that 'once the Divine Cook had finished with him, Urban's soul would take on a sweetness that was not there before'.¹³ Feminine ingenuity can be very creative!

(SLIDE) Finally, we ask, what *theological foundations* can underpin the call for full equality of women and indeed of all the Faithful, at every level of Catholicism?

It can be argued that the exclusion persisting in our Church rests on a failure to fully embrace God's Creation in all its rich diversity. Creation theology teaches that everyone and everything created is an expression of the Creator God who 'Is Love'. We humans are 'sparks of the divine', each of us created in love to be the 'image and likeness' of God. Whether we happen to be a woman, a man, heterosexual or homosexual, black or white, rich or poor, married, single or divorced- in God's realm, we are each an 'imago dei'. Human dignity and equality find their expression in Catholic Social Teaching, and originate in the mystical and scientific web of God's cosmic plan for creation, in which each of us here this morning are graced to share.

(SLIDE) Jesus' teaching is radical, bringing lofty theology right down to Earth: those most despised and neglected in society, those at the bottom of the heap, are the most loved in God's family. There is absolutely no place for 'lording it over' anyone (Matth 20:25); rather, the 'first shall be last and the last shall be first' (Matth. 20:16). In the Reign of God, all are invited to the feast (Luke 14:15), but the 'mighty shall be put down and the humble raised up'. (Luke 1:52). All of which is why St Paul could utter those words that ring down the centuries, 'We are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). Our Church needs to treasure and model the impact of those teachings.

Yes, the door is slightly ajar with many promises, and some women are at last shaking up the Curia.

(SLIDE) However, as long as females are still not recognised by Church authority as eligible to act 'in persona Christi' as males are, whether at the altar or in positions of ultimate authority, the Catholic

¹² Found at: <https://www.newcastle.edu.au/newsroom/featured/catholic-womens-cries-for-change-to-be-heard-at-the-vatican-on-iwd>

¹³ 'Generativity' as Symbolic Code, article by Prof.ssa Donna Orsuto, Pontifica Università Gregoriana, Roma, Italia. Paper presented at the Cultures and Faith Plenary meeting in Rome (Feb., 2015), organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture. Summarium Vol. XXIII, 2015, N.2.

Church remains incomplete. It is ‘flapping awkwardly on one wing when God gave it two’ as former President of Ireland and Canon lawyer Mary McAleese expressed it¹⁴. This failure to recognise the God-given identity of half of humanity perpetuates a sexist Church, despite the constant teaching that ‘In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave *nor free*, because we are all *‘One in Christ Jesus*’. Just as we heard from Pope John Paul II at Alice Springs in 1996 that the Catholic Church can never be its true Australian self until it takes to heart the gift of our First Nations People, so too we can never be the universal Church we need to be without the full inclusion of women. I wonder what Tasmanian Dame Enid Lyons, first woman in Australia to enter the federal House of Representatives, fervent Catholic and champion of women and family, would have made of the contemporary global move towards full inclusion of women in Church as well as society.¹⁵ (SLIDE) (She was recently honoured with the unveiling of her statue in Canberra, attended by her descendant, Tasmanian Sister of St Joseph, Jo Brady).

(SLIDE) Much remains to be done. In 2023 women and girls in many countries, still lack access to education, a voice in government and law-making, they are still being met with violence in their homes. They suffer the lion’s share of global poverty and sexual abuse. Tragically, women will have to look to religions other than Catholicism for outstanding models of equal rights and Gospel dignity for women. One of the most disturbing Synodal testimonies I have read came from the Indian Catholic Church where nuns are reportedly being sexually abused and raped by Catholic clergy. There were heartfelt pleas for justice to be done, and an end to the clericalism and patriarchy that have closed a blind eye to such terrible abuses.¹⁶ Our Church needs radical conversion made visible in root and branch change if we are to be ‘the shining stars in the midst of darkness’ Pope Francis calls us to be in *Fratelli Tutti*, and agents of ‘Good News to the nations’ as Christ commissioned.

In Australia our Church could be challenged by the decisive action of Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins who investigated toxicity within the culture of the National Parliament, and has instigated radical, overdue reforms to that culture.¹⁷ Perhaps the Vatican could also benefit from the services of a ‘Sex Discrimination’ Commissioner!

May Pope Francis and his successor hear the global voices of Catholics and work towards a Church that is embraceable for all. Excuses are inexcusable.

¹⁴ Found at: [Text: International Women's Day address by Mary McAleese | ICN \(indcatholicnews.com\)](https://www.indcatholicnews.com/text-international-womens-day-address-by-mary-mcaleese)

¹⁵ Found at: [International Women's Day in Canberra - Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart \(sosj.org.au\)](https://www.sosj.org.au/international-womens-day-in-canberra-sisters-of-saint-joseph-of-the-sacred-heart)

¹⁶ Article by Myron J. Pieriera. Found at: [Synodality poses big challenges to the Indian Church - UCA News](https://www.uca.edu.au/news/synodality-poses-big-challenges-to-the-indian-church)

¹⁷ ‘It’s Personal’ article by Fiona Harari, *Weekend Australian Magazine*, Mar. 25-26, 2023.

‘Revolt and humiliating’: 10 things we learned about working at parliament from the Kate Jenkins review, article by Tory Shepherd, *The Guardian*, Nov. 30, 2021.

The Church's commitment to *Laudato Si* and to ecological conversion has become an integral part of our Catholic Faith in recent years, climate deniers relegated now to the dust bin of flat earth Church history. Could our children live to see an inclusive Catholic Church where the presence of women at every level is visible and effective, and the cancers of clericalism and sexism are things of the past?

(SLIDE) May the fresh air of synodality blow through all the ecclesial corridors and corners of power across every diocese in every country with the force of the Roaring Forties, sweeping away the exclusion that stymies our two thousand year old Catholic Church from being a 'True North' in the world. The Holy Spirit and the Synod are beckoning our Church forward. We live in hope and pray for a fully inclusive Catholic Church. So much of the work has been done; now we need a tipping point.

(SLIDE) I finish with this song *Rows and Rows of Men* from Fr John Crothers, Sydney Priest, enduring friend of those 'at the peripheries', and tennis partner on Mondays with Bishop Vincent Long.

Dr Trish Hindmarsh, Launceston April, 29, 2023.
