The Catholic Church

http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0440b.htm

Written by Katharine Massam, Theological College, Centre for Theology and Ministry

As definitions of leadership have widened to encompass styles of influence and decision-making that extend beyond formal and institutional authority (Sinclair; Everest), the extent of Catholic women's leadership within and beyond the church has come more clearly into view. The Second Vatican Council (1958-1962) and the wider women's movement prompted changes for women's participation in leadership and its style, as well as in the scope for leadership by women within institutional Catholicism. Behind the changes of the late 20th century, the longer established role of women vowed as religious 'sisters' or 'nuns' (especially as they modelled professional independence as teachers and nurses), the strong affirmation of family life and the endorsement of marriage and motherhood as vocations, and definitions of success focused on qualities of personal integrity independent of worldly achievement all powerfully refract the story of Catholic women's leadership in Australia.

Theologies of Leadership

The governing ideal, in Catholicism as in other Christian traditions, that success is not measured by results but motivated by a counter-cultural gospel of service, has paradoxical implications for leadership. Even while hierarchical assumptions govern much of institutional life, the central baptismal paradigm of service has allowed some Catholic women access to authority and stretched the boundaries of their leadership. Feminist theologians since the late 1960s have critiqued the 'texts of terror' used to support the oppression and marginalisation of women, and raised awareness of alternative traditions in Christian scripture emphasising liberation, reconciliation across boundaries, and embodiment (Trible; Fiorenza, 1993). Work by American scholars, including Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, and, in particular, the publication in 1983 of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's pioneering study In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, as well as Fiorenza's subsequent visit to Australia in 1995, were particularly important for Australian women seeking to hold together commitments to Catholicism and feminism.

The historical stereotype of Australian women as 'damned whores' on the one hand or 'God's police' on the other, was both enabled and undercut by strands of Christian theology that resonated within Australian Catholicism (Summers, 1975; Summers, 1999; Wright). The dichotomised choice between Eve the fallen temptress and Mary the Virgin Mother of Jesus was increasingly recognised as inadequate and problematic by Christian feminists in the 20th century. It played out in the popular culture of Australian Catholicism, as in wider Christian circles, as profound mistrust, even fear, of independent women in public life, while it also paradoxically affirmed the importance of feminine influence. As a complex symbol, the honour accorded to Mary in 20th-century devotion in Australia gave a feminine face to Catholic ideals from anti-communist politics to healing the sick, from family prayer to multi-culturalism. Often a marker of socially conservative faith, Mary was also a model of active discipleship in groups such as the Grail, the university Newman Societies and the Young Christian Workers: a woman of prayer who spoke up, reached out to others and whose faith was tested by deep suffering (Noone, et al; Massam, 1996). Theologically, Mary's role in salvation history was highlighted through doctrinal decision and controversy. In 1950, the Australian church celebrated when the Vatican gave formal status to the belief that her body had not remained on earth after her death but was assumed with her soul into heaven. Astonishing to Protestants, the affirmation of her female body hinged on the significance of her unique relationship with Jesus. In the
late 1980s, questions about whether to push this further with a formal definition of her status as 'co-
redemptrix' alongside her son were put aside as dangerous distractions. But her role remains of interest to
theologians seeking to reconceptualise the Catholic priesthood (Beattie), and her prominent place in
devotional culture secured the significance of women within this religious worldview.
Feminist insight into the operation of power has critiqued the church and highlighted roles and expectations
differentiated unequally by gender. The critique found fertile ground, partly because Catholic women in
Australia, and especially the women religious, had solid leadership traditions built on the bedrock of church
teaching that affirmed discipleship as universal. Australian traditions of anti-clericalism and secularism
made it easier for Catholic women to navigate between the limits of the institution and the inspiration of the
faith; many found Catholic structures offered community, autonomy and purpose (O'Brien, 2005, 9-10).
Role models—from Mary mother of Jesus, through a panoply of female saints, to local Sisters who
contended with local priests and bishops even while they were committed to the same vision of church-
attested to the doctrine that women and men were equally called to citizenship of heaven.

A heavenly citizenship occasionally recast assumptions about earthly participation. For example, in
February 1887, Eliza Tainan Willaway was probably the first Catholic woman to speak on a public
platform in Australia (Massam & Smith, 12-14). An Aboriginal Nyoongar woman in her twenties, Mrs
Willaway welcomed Cardinal Patrick Moran to the town; she spoke as matron of St Joseph's 'Native School
and Orphanage' at the Benedictine Mission of New Norcia in Western Australia, alongside two male
speakers representing the Aboriginal men and the colonists (WA Catholic Record, 10 February 1887, 4).
Eliza Willaway's address was warm, simple and conventionally respectful of the monks who ran the
mission and the cardinal's high office as a 'prince of the church'. But it is not so much what she said, as that
she spoke at all that is significant for understanding the dynamics of Catholic women's leadership.

Later occasions where Catholic women spoke in public have been remembered more clearly; in 1915,
Archbishop Mannix thought Maude O'Connell (Kane, ADB; Heywood, 'O'Connell', AWR), a former
teacher, was the first Catholic lay woman to take a public platform when she addressed Melbourne's
Catholic Federation on her work as a shop steward and the right of women to equal pay for equal work
(O'Brien, 2011, 109); and, in May 1990, the Advocate reported that Sr Helen Lombard, leader of the Good
Samaritan Sisters, became the first Australian Catholic woman to preach in a public church service when
her sermon was part of the regular ecumenical occasion in Canberra to mark the opening of the federal
parliamentary year (Advocate, 24 May 1990, 4). The wider institution of Catholicism stood in an
ambiguous relationship with all three occasions, and each example points to common themes: that Catholic
women's leadership was least contested in a 'separate sphere' of the church, that it was easier to find a
forum in the secular world and in other church traditions than to claim a place within the masculine
structures of Catholicism, but that it was also Catholic values that informed the innovation in leadership in
each case.

The 'separate sphere' that enabled Catholicism to recast the parameters of leadership is most intriguing in
the example of Eliza Willaway. Within the context of the mission superintended by the capable founder,
Rosendo Salvado, there was a de facto re-definition not only of Aboriginal citizenship but also of women's
role beyond the colonial limits that vested Eliza Willaway with significant responsibility and a public
voice. On the day she spoke in 1887, the crowd included other Aboriginal Catholic women accustomed to
public responsibility: two other matrons at St Joseph's whose names we do not know; Mrs Helen Cooper,
the trained government post mistress and telegraph operator; and her successor, Mrs Sarah Ninak. Within a
complex 'middle management' structure, a commitment to the spiritual value of meaningful work shaped
employment opportunities in the monastic town. Eliza, Helen, Sarah, and others whose capacities were
recognised, exercised responsibility and were encouraged to view their role as a contribution not only to the
life of the community but also to the life of the church. In this worldview, offering a public welcome to a
distinguished visitor as well as exercising leadership in the hostel and post office were a sacred duty, akin
to prayer, and open equally to all believers. Leadership was not understood as a function of status but was
to be determined by 'calling' and God-given capacity.

But access to public leadership within Catholicism was mediated by the church authorities. While Eliza
continued to act on behalf of the monastery for some decades (Massam, 2012), by the early 20th century,
the capacity of Aboriginal women in the town had become invisible to Salvado's successors, and their roles were absorbed into the work of vowed religious. Outside the mission context, the understanding of vocation came overwhelmingly to mean a calling to religious life in one of the congregations devoted to teaching or nursing.

Leadership of Catholic Women Religious

Aspirations to 'leadership' in itself, or even to a particular ministry, do not feature in the reasons Catholic women joined religious communities or remained members (Turner, 21), but Catholic teaching and nursing sisters were the largest cohort of church workers and church leaders in Australia through the 19th and 20th centuries. Fanning out to follow the Irish diaspora, the new 'apostolic congregations' of sisters in the 19th century retained much of the monastic lifestyle of earlier nuns, but were founded to work outside the traditional cloister, responding more flexibly to local need. By 1910, there were 5,000 nuns teaching in, and administering, Catholic schools in Australia; numbers more than doubled to 11,245 by 1950, and, while the proportion of Catholic women choosing this option dropped dramatically in the 1960s and 70s, women religious have remained at the forefront of innovation and commitment to apostolic outreach (Fogarty, vol. 2, 278, n.62; Walsh, 360-89; McLay, 472-80). The networks of urban and rural primary and high schools, the key hospitals in major cities, occasional and relatively short-lived training colleges for teachers and nurses, and the less prominent welfare agencies all attested to the enterprise and acumen of the leaders of these groups. Some, like the gracious negotiator and innovative educationalist, Gonzaga (Mamie) Barry (McTigue & Palmer, ADB), leader of the Loreto Sisters, knew never to relinquish the title deeds to the banks (Clark, 91-2); many, like the gifted administrator among the Sisters of Mercy, Vincent (Ellen) Whitty (O'Donoghue, E., ADB; Lemon, 'Whitty', AWR), oversaw the spiritual and material well-being of dozens of teaching sisters in far-flung schools, while navigating a delicate power-balance with the bishop (O'Donoghue, M.X.; Hetherington & Smoothy); and others insisted with the inspiring teacher and leader of the Presentation Sisters, Mary Eymard Temby, that education was 'to be open to life and to dreams' (Victorian Honour Roll of Women, 2001, 262). Most prominently, the official recognition of Mary Helen MacKillop (Thorpe, ADB; Lemon, 'MacKillop', AWR) as a saint of the church saw the founder of the Australian congregation, the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, embraced as 'an extraordinary Australian', both conforming to Australian stereotypes of rural battler misunderstood by authority, as well as resisting the conventions of secularism. At the liturgy to mark her beatification in 1995, women leaders gathered to stand alongside the bishops as Pope John Paul II celebrated the Eucharist at Randwick (Pilcher, 41-3). Such a visual representation of women's place in the church's leadership has proved exceptional, but the celebrations of MacKillop, first in 1995 and then at her canonisation in 2010, have drawn attention not only to the ongoing work of her sisters in education and social justice but also to the collaborative style of her leadership and her resolute focus in adversity (Foale; Gardiner).

Within the genre of Catholic autobiography and biography, tributes to 'the nuns' feature regularly by convent-educated professionals and are not outweighed by distance from church structures and doctrines (Ryan; Summers, 1999; O'Connor). For example, Josie Arnold's rare account of lay Catholic life in the 1940s is adamant in the condemnation of the inequality of women and men within the church but offers a warm and appreciative picture of the Good Samaritan Sisters who educated her at Santa Maria, Northcote:

'The sisters were not some homogeneous lump of goodness … They were intelligent, strong, vigorous and capable women … They were extraordinarily strong women without that sense of frustrated failure that is often to be seen in groups of spinsters. Most of them had a charm that is always found in people who are following their own meaningful vocation and who are deeply satisfied by it. I believe that every girl who came into contact with such nuns must at some time have contemplated joining them.' (Arnold, 96-7)

The Australian women who did 'enter the convent' chose an alternative to marriage and family and were affirmed for their 'higher calling'. Statistically, they were disproportionately from rural areas, and with strong awareness of their Irish heritage (Clark, 151; O'Brien, 2005, 170-1); while the number of lower middle-class or working-class recruits increased over time in Australia (O'Brien, 2005, 169-80). The convents were powerhouses of female leadership and certainly conscious of their role in fostering the next
generation of Catholic wives and mothers, but, surprisingly, nuns were generally unaware of the rise of Christian feminism until the discussion was well underway in other churches in the 1970s. Erin White identified four reasons for that delay:

[W]e were too busy to hear; we had too many responsibilities to feel powerless; we were encouraged to be anti-intellectual; we lived in a Catholic female ghetto largely shielded from the more crass aspects of sexism and the more enlightened aspects of ecumenism' (White, 10).

These structural realities of convent life, in which Sisters were wary of 'non-Catholic' discussion and focused on practicalities in an absorbing sphere of influence, put the emphasis on maintaining the existing systems. But the Vatican Council's encouragement to reclaim their original purpose, combined with invitations to read 'the signs of the times', brought social questions, including the status of women, into focus as faith issues for lay Catholic women as well as nuns.

**Faith and Public Life**

The leadership options and opportunities for Catholic women were affected profoundly by the assumption that family life, marriage and the raising of children comprised the primary and probably exclusive realm of vocation for most women outside the convents. The statement on social justice and the family issued by the Australian bishops in 1944 offered a typical view:

'While Catholics opposed the exaggerations of feminism and had long realized certain dangers (now more generally admitted) of "emancipation" and "sex equality"; they have never denied the right of a career to certain women. But obviously, the overwhelming proportion of girls in this or any other age regard marriage and babies as their right, and our society must be chiefly concerned in encouraging and protecting the career of motherhood. No woman should be forced back to the kitchen, but no woman should be prevented from finding her own way there, and being happy there.' (The Family, Social Justice Statement, 1944)

The view was pervasive and influential enough to establish cultural norms but, significantly, Altair, a small group of Catholic women graduates in Sydney, wrote to the bishops objecting to the statement's narrow approach. Members of Altair included Jean Daly (O'Brien, 'Daly', *ADB*), a founder of the NSW St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, later secretary to the Australian Liaison Committee of International Women's Organisations and Australia's delegate to the UN Status of Women Commission (1951 and 1955), and Mary Tenison Woods (also a founder of NSW's St Joan's Social and Political Alliance), who would lead the United Nations' Office of the Status of Women from 1950 to 1958 (O'Brien, 'Tenison Woods', *ADB*; Heywood, 'Tenison Woods', *AWR*), as well as Norma Parker (Land & Henningham, *AWR*), whose graduate work at the Catholic University of America pioneered professional social work in Australia (O'Brien, 2005, 89). The letter went unanswered but it points to traditions supporting alternative choices.

At the first general meeting of the Catholic Women's Social Guild (CWSG) founded in Melbourne in 1916, Anna Brennan (Campbell & Morgen, *ADB*), active in the National Council of Women and later to become the president of the Legal Women's Association, addressed members against the tyranny of housework because 'it could deaden and kill any desire to change the world' (Campion, 61). It is a point supported by historians Sally Kennedy (10-12) and Sophie McGrath (35). In the same tradition, Rosemary Goldie, who left 1930s Sydney to eventually become the most senior woman in the Vatican public service, observed that 'women who were "to change the world for Christ" must indeed be womanly but not a stereotype of womanhood' (Goldie, 195). Influenced by the Ladies of the Grail and the rising awareness of the Lay Apostolate, Goldie saw, from her role at the heart of the Vatican administration, that projects to encourage the participation of women in society as well as church could build a bridge between the institutional religion and the wider women's movement.
A role for women of faith in shaping society had motivated Catholics in early campaigns for suffrage (McGrath, 34), and, increasingly, awareness of distinctive Catholic teaching on economic and social issues supported the CWSG and related groups such as the St Joan's Alliance and the Catholic Guild for Social Studies (Kennedy; Massam, 1996). An active adult faith for students and workers was the focus of 'Catholic Action' movements from the 1930s onwards. Reaching its peak in the 1950s, but continuing in significance as other movements grew from it, the National Catholic Girls' Movement encouraged an apostolate of the laity 'ministering to the laity' and taught a method of action-reflection developed by Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn that also shaped the thought of liberation theologians internationally (Massam, 1996, 192-202). As Anne O'Brien and Sally Kennedy have argued, institutional expectations of traditional piety meant Catholic Action in Australia was resolutely 'masculinist' in public, despite comparatively stronger interest in Catholic girls' schools and among young women (O'Brien, 2005, 90-2; Kennedy, 237-47). The 'intellectual apostolate' of those involved in the university-based Newman Societies was smaller, involving fewer women than men, but made a disproportionate impact, fostering thoughtful engagement with issues of faith, developing a theological and liturgical literacy alongside other academic disciplines, and encouraging critique. One effect was to deepen and enliven the contributions of lay Catholic women in parishes and in the professions; another, especially after the encyclical Humanae Vitae precipitated a 'crisis of authority' in 1968, was to radicalise them out of the church but into other arenas for leadership (O'Brien, 2005, 231-63).

The network, 'Women and the Australian Church' (WATAC), was founded in May 1982 explicitly to encourage the participation in church and society of women who no longer saw themselves as 'of' the church, and to raise awareness of 'Christian feminist issues' (Moore, 97, 98). Rejecting both sexism and patriarchy, the first national conference in 1987 accepted Sr Sonia Wagner's definition of Catholic feminism as a basis for future planning. Wagner argued for a shift in worldview: '[Catholic feminism] wants transformation of values and a working for justice and a new reality from within. [The Catholic feminist] values co-operation rather than competition, mutuality and shared decision-making rather than top-down hierarchical decision-making, integration rather than dualism' (cited in Moore, 98). The meeting also issued a national statement focused on the 'equality of personhood of women and men and … our equal call, in baptism, to fullness of life in the discipleship of Jesus' (cited in Moore, 98). It called for commitment not just to principles but to a leadership process of listening to both scripture and experience. The statement reflected a confidence that networks of women acting collaboratively could bring about change; it led to a list of seventeen priorities that spanned theological and social questions, and invigorated the organisation for energetic work through to the late 1990s, a decade remembered as one 'of extraordinarily energetic work and challenging activity' (Moore, 100).

The work included the sacramental and pastoral leadership that had opened out in the decades following the Second Vatican Council. Catholic women's leadership continued to expand into roles previously reserved to ordained priests, such as parish administrators, members of chaplaincy and episcopal teams, theological teachers, and liturgical co-ordinators. Access to the highest levels of institutional decision-making within Catholicism remained restricted to clerics; the formal teaching against women's ordination to the priesthood was clarified and discussion closed in October 1995, and prohibitions were strengthened in July 2010 to automatic excommunication for anyone ordaining a woman or a woman seeking to be ordained. However, the move to preserve an exclusively male ordained priesthood has also focused attention on the style of leadership within the church.

In 1999, a report on the participation of women in the Catholic Church drew together findings of the single largest research project yet undertaken in Australia (Research Management Group). The national Catholic social justice statement of 2000 was dedicated to a formal consideration of the report by the Australian bishops. It affirmed the baptismal equality of all members of the church and the 'fundamental reality [of their] consecration to the universal priesthood of Christ's faithful' ('Woman and Man'), while resisting calls from both progressive and conservative voices for changes to church teaching and practice. The bishops took up a recommendation to establish an ongoing body to monitor and encourage women within the church. The small staff of the National Office for the Participation of Women (NOPW), as an agency of the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, continues to work together with the national Council for Australian Catholic Women 'to ensure that the dignity of women is honoured and their gifts are given space
to flourish for the sake of the Church’s life and mission’ (NOPW website). A mandate to increase awareness of the need for participation by women in the church is not permission for a radical change in the institution. But a monthly e-newsletter gathers both resources for prayer and news items that reflect a commitment to social justice and church teaching, and raises awareness of Catholic women in a range of roles. The 2005 anthology of Catholic women's stories, published as something of a sequel to the 1999 research report, included diverse perspectives, from fervent through worried to disheartened, in keeping with open-ended practices of theological reflection on experience (Council for Australian Catholic Women). Women committed to the practice of Catholic faith continue to significantly outnumber men in Australia. There are implications for leadership within and beyond the church as Australian Catholic women continue to advocate a theological vision of collaboration and interdependent service.

Additional sources: Advocate, 24 May 1990. West Australian Catholic Record, 10 February 1887.

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Online Resources


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• Daly, Ann
• Daly, Dame Mary Dora (1896 - 1983)
• Daly, Jean Mary
• Goldie, Rosemary
• Healy, Mary (Mother Gertrude) (1865 - 1952)
• MacKillop, Mary Helen
• McGuire, Francis Margaret Cheadle
• O'Brien, Anne Philomena
• Parker, Norma Alice