Catholic feminism

Pain, prayer and paradox

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I came to OCW (Ordination of Catholic Women) from about seven years with the (mainly) Anglican Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) which I had joined initially more out of concern for general questions of theology than out of a need for ordained women’s ministry. But as I watched my Anglican sisters struggle for ordination first to deacon, then to priest, I became more and more caught up in the struggle and more and more convinced that we also needed ordained women in the Catholic Church.


... Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church’s judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination is considered to have a merely disciplinary force.

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church’s divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32), I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.


Dubium: Whether the teaching that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women, which is presented in the Apostolic Letter Ordinatio Sacerdotis to be held definitively, is to be understood as belonging to the deposit of faith. Respondum: In the affirmative.


If you persist in your efforts to influence the official church, to become part of its decision-making, you will only break your heart and lose hope. What you must do is go around to the back and CREATE A GARDEN. Some day they will look out and see its beauty and marvel at its life.

— Anne Thurston quoted by Patty Fawkner SGS, ‘Women can change the world’, Address at Women and the Australian Church Luncheon, 2004.

As Christ’s faithful, we must speak out. Under Canon Law we have a right and a duty in keeping with our knowledge,
competence and position, to manifest to our pastors our views on matters which concern the good of the Church (C.212.2–3). ... We can no longer accept the patriarchal attitude towards women within our Church, and we fear that an extended claim to infallibility is stifling discussion on many important issues.


Pain, prayer and paradox

When the young French saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897) was proclaimed patron of Catholic missions and therefore of Australia in 1927, almost no-one remembered how fervently she had wanted to be a priest. The popular devotion to Thérèse that swept Catholic Australia in the mid-years of the 20th century was focused on her ‘little way’ of absolute trust in God’s love. Frequently misrepresented by well-meaning interpreters as the promotion of ‘spiritual childhood’, the vitality of her spirituality was underestimated.¹ Not simply the figure at the centre of a devotional cult, but now a doctor of the church, credited by theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar with bringing Paul’s insight on grace to the Catholic world,² Thérèse broke out of a self-focused piety and into sturdy confidence in her vocation as a Christian largely on her reading of Paul’s analogy of the Body. Thérèse saw herself in Paul’s tradition as one of the weak, paradoxically able through the Cross to confound the powerful. For her, Paul’s insight reversed all the power-claims of her day except two: those of the Church as the Body itself, and those of biology that determined the spheres in which she could live out her Christian vocation.

As authoritative and complete editions of Thérèse’s writing emerged in English in the 1970s and 1980s, it became clear that ‘the sacrifice of not having been able to be a priest always remained in her heart’.³ Australian Catholics began to hear the snippets from her autobiography that showed clear-sighted awareness of discrimination against women in the church; her wry recollection of Rome where ‘women are so easily excommunicated’,⁴ her frustration at bad preaching when she could do better herself.⁵ Stories traded in parish discussion groups seemed apocryphal but turned out to be genuine: she had delighted in having her hair cut into a clerical tonsure,⁶ and, as the second newsletter of the group Ordination of Catholic Women (OCW) also noted, in her final illness she told her sisters:

God will take me at an age [24] when I will not have had the time to become a priest ... If I could have been a priest, it would have been at this ordination that I would have received Holy Orders. Well, so that I will regret nothing, God is allowing me to be ill ... and I shall die before I [could] have exercised my ministry.⁷

In a paradox that is typical of her spirituality, Thérèse did not challenge the reality that ordination was impossible for her, and yet, at the same time, she held confidently to the view that God called her to the priesthood. Recasting her experience on the eschatological horizon, she saw the suffering involved in the paradox as itself a participation in priestly vocation.

It is also paradoxical, and intriguing, that Thérèse’s resolution of her sense of vocation foreshadowed the Vatican declarations that the church has no authority to ordain women to the Catholic priesthood. Like Inter Insigniores in 1977, and as echoed in Ordinatio Sacerdotalis in 1994, Thérèse drew on Paul’s admonition to aspire to the ‘higher gifts’ in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 and saw all callings subsumed in her conviction that she would ‘be love’ in the ‘heart of the church’. Perhaps more importantly, in her letters to the missionary priests who were her ‘spiritual brothers’ she also claimed a participative interplay between vocations. That same mutual relationship was
articulated by John Paul II in Pastores Gregis in 2003 as 'perichoretic'. The Greek term, long-used by theologians discussing the communion of the three persons of the Trinity, each in the heart of the other, points in this context towards a perfect and necessary reciprocity between the priesthood of all-believers and the priesthood of the ordained. The interdependence of priestly vocations has been affirmed through the development of 'lay ecclesial ministries'.

A faithful daughter of the church whose graceful obedience was secured by her iron will, the pain of Thérèse’s prayerful struggle with her vocation has emerged as part of the paradox she offers to the church. Hers was a private story, at least as she experienced it; but when the question of ordination became a public issue for women in the Catholic church in the 1980s and 1990s the same three strands of prayer, pain and paradox were woven through the discussion. They remained dimensions of the private story even when, in 1994 and 1995 so soon after the ordination of Anglican women, Rome declared the public question settled. Prayer threaded through a conversation that was theological as much as it was political and characterised by concern for spiritual vitality alongside human rights; pain overflowed as both anger and grief; and paradox marked new collaboration that seemed to imply a renewal of the priesthood. To set these responses in wider context this chapter sketches the international Catholic discussion through the account of Rosemary Goldie, the Australian Catholic woman closest to it, and then briefly examines the story locally from the 1980s.

Ears to hear a Roman story?

While Australian Catholics no doubt read reports of the ordination of ‘women ministers’ in other churches as they appeared in the secular press even as early as 1889 in Sydney, Rosemary Goldie might well have been the first Australian to register the ordination of women in the Catholic priesthood as a real issue. A talented linguist who left Sydney University to study in 1930s Paris, from 1946 Goldie was a staff member of Pax Romana, one of the movements influential in developing the theology of a lay apostolate, and would go on to be one of the handful of women auditors at the Second Vatican Council, and the most senior woman in the Vatican’s public service. In her autobiography she records her surprise when in 1952 she 'heard a woman say she felt “called” to the ministerial priesthood. This, if not unique, was so rare that the impression remained.' Goldie suggests the ordination of Lutheran women in Sweden in 1958 would have raised awareness of the issue for some, and that it was ‘raised at the time of Vatican II’. But it is the reminiscence of another woman auditor at the Council that provides a vignette of the climate. Mary Luke Tobin, an American Loretto Sister, kept a vivid memory of Goldie’s involvement in the Commission on the Church in the Modern World when the bishops were drafting material intended to challenge discrimination against women:

One of the authors of the commission’s document, in the process of constructing a statement about women, read a flowery and innocuous sentence to the commission members for their consideration. When he had finished, he noticed that the women present were unimpressed. ‘But, Rosemary,’ he said, addressing the intelligent and able Rosemary Goldie, ‘why don’t you respond happily to my praise of women and what they have contributed to the church?’ Pressed for a response, Rosemary answered: ‘You can omit all those gratuitous flowery adjectives, the pedestals and incense, from your sentence. All women ask for is that they be recognised as the full human persons they are, and treated accordingly.'

Taking a stand against 'sanctified sexism' Tobin observed some
Nuanced by her 1930s formation with the Ladies of the Grail, Goldie was operating out of an understanding of the complementarity of masculine and feminine within each individual:

The women who were ‘to change the world for Christ’ must, indeed be womanly, but not a stereotype of womanhood. They would also need qualities of strength, initiative, courage and steadfastness just as men needed to develop qualities of sensitivity, understanding, tenderness, etc. The model for all was the perfect humanity of Jesus.16

Explicitly rejecting stereotypes of ‘man the maker, woman the lover, or man the head, woman the heart’,17 her vision of church assumed baptised women and men were each called to embody Christ. The focus here was not sacramental ordination, but a call to discipleship.

The Second Vatican Council’s affirmation of the universal call to holiness of the whole church as People of God brought lay vocation into focus for Australian Catholics; serious Catholics no longer automatically assumed priesthood or religious life were ‘higher’ callings than commitment in the world. As the most senior woman within the Vatican administration, Rosemary Goldie was charged with fostering the commitment of ordinary Catholics to the mission of the Church. As the executive officer of the Vatican’s Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate (COPECIAL), she organised a congress in 1967, which followed two held in the 1950s. Strongly ecumenical, it took ‘unity among Christians in a world seeking unity’ as a key theme. Focused on social issues more strongly than on theology, it adopted resolutions on racism and disability unanimously. It also considered a motion drafted by the International Alliance of St Joan that:

The World Congress for the Lay Apostolate wishes to express its desire that women be granted by the Church full rights and responsibilities as Christians, both as regards the laity and the priesthood.18

The resolution was amended to omit the last phrase and replace it with the commitment to ‘a serious doctrinal study … on the place of women within the sacramental order and within the church’.19 This passed, with two votes against and 16 abstentions in a meeting of some 170 participants.20 Whether the Vatican commission on Women and Society (recommended in 1971 and implemented 1973–76) was the direct result of the recommendation or not, Goldie remained involved as unofficial secretary and prepared the final dossier on the commission’s work for Paul VI.

Between the calling of the commission on women and its report, the mood shifted beyond and within the Vatican. Goldie’s account in From a Roman Window shows a growing tension between the Catholic hierarchy and feminist voices that called for change. Co-operation with the World Council of Churches (WCC) was much more reluctant after the WCC Consultation on ‘Sexism in the 70s’ called for liberation from the heresy of sexism’.21 And while the focus of the commission was not to be women’s ministry as such, there was a growing expectation that priestly ordination for women would be considered. It was then ‘a setback, even a scandal … for those committed to the cause of women’s ministerial responsibility in the Church’22 when an instruction (motu proprio) abolishing the ‘minor orders’ of the clergy and replacing them with ‘instituted ministries’ was issued in 1972. Ministeria Quaestam affirmed new roles of ‘acolyte and lector’ based on baptism and open to the laity, but at paragraph 7, instructed that ‘in keeping with the ancient tradition of the Church, they are to be reserved to men’.23 The traditional restriction puzzled those who noticed, including Goldie, who judged frankly that it reflected anxiety
about the expectations on the commission rather than a sound theological move. The Study Commission on Women pushed on with its work in a context made tense by expectations about ordination.

Change seemed to be promised from two directions: the move toward ordination of Anglican women on the one hand and increasing recognition of women's rights within societies and the church on the other. The Australian Catholic press reflected both aspects. The Advocate welcomed the 1973 agreement with the Anglican communion on the meaning of ordained ministry as of 'deepest importance for the future of relations', and a hopeful sign of a wider context where problems such as 'recognition of orders ... may eventually be solved'. There was also a small article in November 1973 where, under the heading 'True Women's Lib began with Christ', María Pilar Bellosillo, the President of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations, and member of the Commission on Women, was quoted 'women cannot be considered second-class citizens in the body of Christ'.

Paul VI marked International Women's Year with a series of statements affirming the equality of women and the contribution of women to public life and to authority (as distinct from jurisdiction) in the church. But in a formal response to the Archbishop of Canterbury in November 1973, the Pope disconnected sacramental priesthood from considerations of human rights, replying that it would introduce a 'grave difficulty' if the Church of England ordained women.

The Pope's letter warned explicitly against the threat to Christian unity posed by ordination, not simply to the ministry of the post-Reformation churches, but to the sacramental priesthood held by the Church of England. The argument against ordination did not rely on Pauline teaching about headship, or views of women as inferior that had been held by Aquinas and others, but on distinct grounds identified as significant in the development of doctrine.

The statement Inter Insigniores released in January 1977 similarly argued from tradition. It was concerned to maintain an ecumenical tradition that the church 'does not consider herself authorised to admit women to priestly ordination'. The conclusion that the ordination of women was impossible for Rome was attributed to 'constant tradition' in the East and West reserving the priesthood to men, to the Gospel record that Jesus did not include women in the Twelve, to the apostles maintaining that practice of choosing men only, and to the importance of that tradition of Jesus and the apostles as normative.

These interdependent reasons were not offered as theological arguments, but, as Paul VI clarified in an address at the time, related to 'the fundamental constitution of the church' and the church's 'theological anthropology'. Neither the equal status of women and men in baptism, nor their equal human rights were at issue; these had been affirmed by the Council and would be defended again and again. But they were beside the point. What Rome held to was the particular nature of the ministerial priesthood instituted by Christ and handed on to the apostles. This was not a matter of leadership, or pastoral service, or outstanding holiness, which all clearly apply to women through both the public and hidden traditions of the church. The point was that the particular choice of the Twelve, seen as the call to ordained ministry, was a choice of men only, and maintained as men only in succession to the apostles. As Sara Butler, a theologian writing for American Catholic seminarians, points out in her summary of the Vatican position,

Inter Insigniores does not say that bishops and priests are chosen from among men in order to represent Jesus who is male — only that they must be men to represent in the midst of the Church the Twelve whom he chose and sent to carry out his ministry.

As the sacrament of baptism required water (not another liquid), and as the sacrament of eucharist required bread and wine (not other food), the sacrament of orders required a man. Strictly speaking this
was not a matter that was required to make sense, it was to be apprehended by faith.

It is opportune to recall that problems of sacramental theology, especially when they concern the ministerial priesthood, as is the case here, cannot be solved except in the light of Revelation. The human sciences, however valuable their contribution in their own domain, cannot suffice here, for they cannot grasp the realities of faith: the properly supernatural content of these realities is beyond their competence.\(^{34}\)

Ordination of men only was, as John Paul II would reiterate, not the result of cultural or social norms, but because ‘Christ established things in this way’.\(^{35}\)

The serious call to explore the real equality of the baptised, and for women to claim their mission for renewal and ‘rediscovery … of the true face of the church’\(^{36}\) was overshadowed by the prohibition on ordination itself. The insistence that the tradition of male apostles and successor bishops was normative and necessary for the church to be the church grew in the pontificate of John Paul II. The documents Mulieris Dignitatem (On the dignity of women 1988) and Pastores Dabo Vobis (I shall give you shepherds 1992) both articulated the theological anthropology underpinning the tradition of male priesthood. Emphasising the priest in the place of Christ as the Bridegroom in relation to the Church, the spousal imagery that stressed the complementarity of sexes, underpinned by an essentialist view of male as active and female as responsive, left many feminists unpersuaded.\(^{37}\)

The corresponding insistence from Rome that the equality of men and women included their difference, the particular ‘genius’ of women and men, but that women as women were not to be excluded from leadership but only from the priesthood, was also difficult to disentangle from patriarchy. When Ordinatio Sacerdotalis (On the ordination to the priesthood) restated the view in 1994 that Rome could not ordain women, the nature of the priesthood that Rome was defending was impossible for many to separate from views on the nature of women who could not be ordained. The further clarification in 1995 that the matter was settled had the presumably unintended consequence that, on the one hand, discussion of the teaching was stifled, while on the other, it was seen as a litmus test of the church’s attitude to women. Within Australia, Catholic feminists took a broader view. Gathering strength, especially from the 1980s, they held to the need for a broader discussion of women in the church and society; and while many cut their losses on debate with Rome some also continued to hope for a renewed priesthood open to women.

**Australian structures for a Catholic and feminist story**

Within many informal and formal structures for feminist conversation in Catholic Australia the network Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), conceived in 1982 and established in 1984, has been especially significant. WATAC was focused broadly on the participation of women in society as well as in the church. It collaborated with other groups with compatible goals and co-hosted two influential conferences in New South Wales: ‘Towards a Feminist Theology’ in 1989 with the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) and Women-Church, and ‘Women Authoring Theology’ in 1991, with MOW, Women-Church and the Feminist Uniting Network. More narrowly focused than WATAC but with overlapping membership, the OCW ‘for the ordination of Catholic women into a renewed priestly ministry’\(^{38}\) was established from a gathering held in the Canberra home of academic and church activist Marie Louise Uhr in December 1993. Both these groups were resourced by the journal Women-Church. First published in 1987 to provide a forum
for reflection and cross-disciplinary work prompted by the intersection of feminism and religion, the journal grew out of 'the enthusiasm and intellectual confidence' of an ecumenical collective, Women and Religion, that had begun meeting in Sydney in 1985.40 The forty issues of Women-Church that appeared from 1987 through until 2007 track an increasingly confident ecumenical conversation that might change the patriarchal mindset ... might see all aspects of public and religious life open up to [women] ... might see public and religious life become less competitive, less hierarchical, more caring'.41 The hope waxed, waned, flickered but remained.

There had certainly been women who made the link between the wider women's movement and their Catholicism before the 1980s. The Golding sisters Annie and Belle promoted the Womanhood Suffrage League from its formation in Sydney in 1891,42 and the Catholic Women's Social Guild in Melbourne publicly claimed a place for itself in 'the second phase of the women's movement' as early as 1916. Additionally, while those who entered religious congregations before or after World War I were unlikely to have named their call as part of a feminist commitment, by 1910 there were more than 5000 nuns teaching in Australian schools.44 Their choice modelled an alternative to marriage and family for Catholic women, and included scope for exercising leadership and decision-making.

But overall it is fair to say that as the Archbishop of Canterbury raised the ordination issue with the Pope, so it was Australian Protestant women who launched the post-war conversation about feminism and the Australian church. That discussion was confidently underway by the mid-1970s. In the first issue of Women-Church, Erin White posited four persuasive reasons for the delayed awareness of feminism in Catholic circles.45 They emerged from her experience as a member of a religious congregation, but did not apply only to nuns:

Looking back, I can now detect four reasons why Christian feminism did not penetrate these convent walls: we 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.46

The pressure of too little time, too many tasks, together with sectarian wariness about intellectual exploration that involved engaging the 'other' or reflecting on experience, were limiting realities for many women. If the Sisters were sheltered at first, as the 1970s progressed many Catholic nuns applied themselves to further studies in new ministries. The established structures of the congregations of women religious provided stability and access to resources for new initiatives, and pushed the church to 'read the signs of the times'. Encouraged by the Council's affirmation of the priesthood of all believers and the wider women's movement, Catholic lay women as well as nuns were using the lens of feminism to identify social justice issues within and beyond the church as matters that required a faith response.

The key organisation Women and the Australian Church (WATAC) grew from an initiative in May 1982 of the leadership of several congregations of women religious in collaboration with some of the bishops of New South Wales who were concerned at the alienation of women, and especially migrant women, from the church.47 The first national conference held in 1987 heard from two keynote speakers: Eileen Byrne, professor of education at the University of Queensland, who had long experience in policy and advocacy for recognition of women, including in the Anglican church, and Sr Sonia Wagner, a Sister of the Good Samaritan, with a long involvement in teacher education and pastoral planning. Wagner's definition of Catholic feminism was 'enthusiastically received' at the meeting. She rejected sexism and patriarchy, and argued for a new reality:
(Catholic Feminism) calls not for separation and for something more than reform, though that may be viewed as part of the total process. (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.  

The meeting issued a national statement that became a basis for planning. It took up the theme of transformation on the basis of 'equality of personhood of women and men and ... our equal call, in baptism, to fullness of life in the discipleship of Jesus'. Explicitly identifying this as Christian feminism, it called for commitment not just to principles but to a process of listening to both scripture and experience:

[Christian feminism] calls us to recognise that we are at a new point in history which is both creative and religious. It calls us to transformation through listening and responding to Word. This Word is spoken in the scriptures and in our tradition, in the events of our lives and in the shared wisdom we speak to one other.  

It reflected a confidence that local committed networks of women acting collaboratively could bring about change, and led to a list of 17 priorities. Realising the equal dignity of men and women, and answering the call to exercise full baptismal rights and responsibilities headed the list, followed by taking account of the particular needs of Aboriginal and ethnic women, and recognition of the ministry women exercised in daily life. Then, at number five, and without using the word ordination, came the commitment to: 'explore and open all forms of ministry within the church to both women and men and support similar movements in other churches'. The next four goals all related to resourcing prayer and liturgy although they did not name public worship explicitly: promote and use inclusive images, symbols and language, including both feminine and masculine images of God; explore scripture with feminist perspectives, and further down the list at 14, contribute to Christian feminist theology related to Australia. Two further goals related to fostering bonds and affirming other women, three addressed issues of sexuality, women's health and safety, marriage and family; and two called for recognition of feminism and women working for reconstruction against domination and injustice. It was an inspiring list spanning faith and culture that launched WATAC into new structures and a decade remembered as one 'of extraordinarily energetic work and challenging activity'.

Ordination was more clearly in focus for Catholic women in the 1990s, largely because of the Anglican struggle. Bernice Moore's historical overview identified the campaign for the ordination of women in the Anglican Church as an outstanding issue for WATAC. Members supported our Anglican sisters in MOW, we laughed and cried with them, and we grew through ecumenical interaction and dialogue. The 1993 foundation of OCW grew from, and drew on, the experience of Catholic women in MOW. A pamphlet announced five aims towards the 'ordination of Catholic women into a renewed priestly ministry', linking renewal implicitly with a 'discipleship of equals' in the church but pledging to 'speak, write and act on the question of women's ordination within the Catholic church as it is now structured and all the issues implicit in that'.

The new group had barely produced a newsletter when Ordinatio Sacerdotalis appeared on 30 May 1994, a date not lost on Catholic women as the day Joan of Arc had been burnt at the stake. The journal Women-Church titled the Spring 1994 issue 'Burning Times' and observed, 'One thing we can say about the Pope, he's got a sense of humour'. Work was underway for the conference Human Rites: Women, Ministry and Justice held in September 1994 in Canberra.
It brought together 120 women from Australia and New Zealand to hear keynote papers by Patricia Brennan of MOW on 'The Shape of Reform', and Elaine Wainwright, then teaching at Banko Seminary, on scriptural traditions of women. The conference was reported as an affront in AD2000, the journal of the National Civic Council that saw itself as a guardian of Catholic orthodoxy. The project was seen as unfaithful because the conference wrote to the Australian Catholic bishops signalling that it 'demurr[ed] from the recent papal teaching on the reservation of priestly ordination to men alone' and protesting that 'the theological and biblical arguments in Ordinatio Sacerdotalis are inadequate and require further discussion and discernment'. But most derision in the report was directed at the feminist theology of a seminar teacher, and the inclusive language used in the Eucharist celebrated by Fr Denis Uhr, brother of Marie Louise Uhr. Feminist theology was in itself a threat in some quarters.

In contrast to the polarising tone of some activists, the campaign for the ordination of Catholic women valued and aimed to keep a sense of humour. The wry, whimsical eye of cartoonist Graham English was a feature of Women-Church prized by its readers. The images were pinned up on office doors and notice boards, taking the mickey out of pomposity and nailing the argument: the woman in the T-shirt emblazoned, 'God is not a boy’s name'; the ticket seller for Vatican air, 'First class or women?'; the women addressing the heavy church door, 'Now stay open or we’ll take your hinges off'. An image of two women washing up at the Last Supper appeared twice, in the first issue and in the last. In 1987 the diswasher remarked 'It wouldn’t surprise me Mary if they don’t even mention we were here', but symbolically twenty years later the caption was 'They can say what they like—we are here'.

The faith commitment that drew Catholic women towards the issue of ordination is a feature of the materials produced by OCW. The spiritual discipline necessary for the fight was gently implied in the quote from 16th-century Catholic foundress Mary Ward that appeared at the end of the 'Convenor’s Welcome' in the first newsletter: Be Merry in These times for Mirth is next to Grace. It appeared under a line drawing probably contributed by GW Bot of a small woman, arms akimbo, reining in two horses and riders as they approach from opposite sides. Perhaps it was just a filler for a newsletter, perhaps it reflected the seriousness with which Marie Louise Uhr urged readers to remember a single motivating focus in what was expected to be 'a long hard work' in a 'long walk', despite differences in positions among the 70 or more foundational members. In that first welcome Uhr explained her own history of involvement in the Anglican movement, and the conviction that had grown for her that 'the ordination of Catholic women is an iconoclastic and healing act ... affirm[ing] the full humanity and divinity of women ... essential not only for the wholeness of both women and men, but for the wholeness of the church, for the wholeness of the earth'. A second line-drawing by GW Bot showed the 'tree of life' enclosed within a body bowed in prayer, accompanied a poem by Ruth Mills, reproduced from the MOW magazine of 1987. The poem explored the experience of a woman trying to ignore and even bury an embarrassing gift, until the growing awareness that 'perhaps he gave it to me for others' sake', compelled her to take it out, polish and lift it high. The dedication OCW gave this poem ‘for those amongst us who long to have their vocations to the priesthood tested’, coupled with the gently bowed figure, reflected a mood of quiet longing rather than demand for the recognition of the gifts given to women, but also reflected OCW’s trust that the movement towards change was of God.

Discussion, progress and participation

The UN Conference on Women in Beijing, and the announcement that the Australian Catholic bishops would launch a national study
of the participation of women in the church, kept momentum in the discussion through 1995. The OCW newsletter reported the July 1995 statement from the leaders of Religious Institutes in Australia on ‘Women in church and society in Australia’. Acknowledging the ‘fundamental dilemma posed by the fact that clerical status is usually a prerequisite for meaningful involvement in official decision-making’, the statement made a series of commitments to stand in solidarity with women in poverty, distress or situations of violence, to establish a scholarship, and to call the church and each other to account on long-standing recommendations for increased representation of women in ‘non-ordained ministries’ looking especially to the work of marriage tribunals, vocational selection panels, and to education for collaboration between women and men. The leaders also committed themselves to inclusive language in public and private prayer ‘to include women and to use a variety of images in our naming of God, who is greater than any words we can use’. The Vatican’s clarification in October 1995 identifying the all-male priesthood as part of the deposit of faith, shocked many with the level of authority it claimed and curtailed discussion of women’s ordination that might otherwise have been part of the bishops’ research project, but it did not quell the broader conversation on the status of women.

The project on ‘Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia’ turned out to be the largest enquiry into a single issue in Australian research history. Planned 1994–97, and carried out 1997–99, the report detailed existing participation by women, considered how that was supported, what barriers women encountered and strategies for increasing women’s participation. In the context of the papal prohibition, ordination was not on the agenda. Nevertheless the issue was significant in the findings. The Executive Summary of the 496 pages noted that more than 25 per cent of Catholics in parishes did not accept the teaching on ordination of women. The research found the fundamental barrier to women’s participation concerned traditions and attitudes which were seen to be inconsistent with the person and message of Jesus Christ and especially his relationship with women, and also that ‘open discussion of the issue of women’s ordination’ attracted support ‘even among those with different views on the question’. The report did not enter into the conversation or try to predict where it might go; perhaps there was a pragmatic Australian spirit that aligned the discussion with getting on with the practical work of the church:

In recent years there has been a group of women in the Catholic Church in Australia who have actively campaigned for women’s ordination. A wide spectrum of attitudes to the ordination of women in the Church is apparent, ranging from openly rejecting the traditional teaching of the Church on this matter to strongly supporting the teaching. While there seems to be much sympathy for the ordination of women, most women appear to be putting their energy into the pastoral concerns of the Church rather than a campaign for women’s ordination.

OCW had tried to speak directly to the bishops’ conference in these years without success, but a four page pamphlet ‘The hour has come’, launched in 1998 doubled as a submission to the project.

Surrounded by arguments to show the need for the Vatican teaching to be addressed, the pamphlet highlighted the central claim in large bold type: ‘Women have always brought and will continue to bring Christ into the world. No power on earth can stop this.’ It argued that it was time to speak out, and to act. The pamphlet proclaimed this message:

We have to take the debate to the streets, stand outside our churches when men are being ordained and when male priests assemble to celebrate their priesthood. We stand in witness to
a vision of an inclusive Church, we stand in silent prayer as a symbol of the exclusion of women from priestly ordination; we stand as sacramental presence of the God who gathers the outcast ... We long for a church which creates and celebrates whatever form of ministry liberates the whole community; a church in which all work together in true co-discipleship for the empowering reign of Sophia-God in our world.73

It would be a long vigil. As the institutional resistance to discussion of the issue apparently deepened and penalties were applied to any of those in official positions who spoke out, feminists who remained in the church made choices. Some found it prudent to drop the issue of ordination and to throw their weight behind the development of other roles for women in the church: ‘lay ecclesial ministries’, where theological discussion on a renewed model of ministry was open and vibrant. Others chose ordination by another route, in other denominations. Internationally, Catholic women were ordained in underground or clandestine networks by sympathetic bishops, most famously the ‘Danube Seven’ in 2002.74 Almost immediately, they were excommunicated by Rome. In May 2008 Osservatore Romano carried front-page news of the general decree that excommunication was automatic for anyone attempting to ordain a woman, and for any woman attempting to be ordained; and in July 2010 the Vatican tightened strictures further including this ‘crime against the sacraments’ in a list of most grave offences.75 The women have ignored what they regard as an unjust law and continue to exercise their ministry and claim the Roman Catholic denominational label.

In September 2011, WATAC hosted a visit by Bishop Patricia Fresen as keynote speaker to a conference around the theme ‘Illumination in the Darkness’. Ordained as a priest in 2003 by two women bishops who had themselves been ordained by a male bishop in Rome who will not be identified until after his death, she was then consecrated a bishop in 2005 by the same male bishop. So, provided the Roman objection that ordination cannot apply to a woman is ignored, Fresen’s ordination is in apostolic succession.76 Her address at the conference on ‘Passion of the Prophets’ called for prophetic obedience, a stance of attentive listening to experience, to the signs of the times, and for the stirrings of the Spirit.77 The process echoed the resolutions of WATAC in the early 1980s, and it seemed the conference re-kindled energies for change. The vision of communitarian structures and servant leadership, of a renewed priestly ministry remain alive.

The hope for a renewed priestly ministry is also strong in those who support, accept, or just do not protest against the teaching of the Magisterium. While Catholics might disagree on their hopes for the priesthood, with models ranging from the most cultic of mediators to the least differentiated of presiders as well as through an orthodox middle ground, all reframe the priesthood according to a vision of church. At rock bottom, here is the Catholic common ground: no church, no priesthood, no priesthood, no church. Put more positively this is the view explored increasingly since the pontificate of John Paul II, that the priesthood of all believers and the priesthood of the ordained exist because they participate in the priesthood of Christ. Or, as Thérèse of Lisieux recognised, within the Body of Christ all vocations are interdependent and mutually indwelling: one vocation calls forth the other. The ordained priesthood is not an end in itself, as the church is not an end in itself but exists to enable God’s mission, the transformation of the world. It is, as Stephen Bevans reminded an Australian workshop of church leaders in 2009, the mission that has a church, and the mission that has ministers, not the other way around.78

The mission has ministers

Framed by her commitment to the mission of the church, one more story sheds light on why the writings of Thérèse of Lisieux continue
to resonate. In 1933 Pius XI received a petition from hundreds of people, including 342 bishops, to name Thérèse as a doctor of the church. The title is reserved to a short list of those whose teaching is judged to be of universal benefit, whose thought is helpful to the whole People of God. In 1933 no woman held the title and the Pope replied simply that the time was not right because ‘obstat sextus’: her sex was an obstacle. Her devotees stopped collecting signatures. The matter rested there until in 1970 Paul VI expanded the list of 30 doctors, adding Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena to Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas and the others: these women were theological teachers, clearly women could be doctors. At the celebrations for the centenary of Thérèse in 1973 Hans Urs von Balthasar urged theologians who had ‘never integrated’ the teaching of women to pay attention to ‘the message of Lisieux’, and in 1997, in events marking 100 years since her death, John Paul II declared Thérèse also a doctor of the church. Objections, and there were some, had nothing to do with her sex, but rather with how little she had written and in a sometimes cloying style. She was a surprising choice – but that was part and parcel of the spirituality that had made her famous. Paradox is her home territory. When Thérèse wrote in her vocational turmoil, that she wanted to be priest, soldier, missionary, martyr, and doctor, as well as spouse of Christ, she had no sense that any of this was likely and no courage to continue except what came from her radical trust in God. It may sound too way simple, but in that bedrock she found freedom. That freedom is the ringing conviction she continues to offer to a struggling and suffering church: simply, paradoxically, painfully, that in God ‘all is Grace’.

Notes


5 Thérèse, Oeuvres complètes, 1102–03. Story of a Soul, 192 (Manuscript B).


For example, Sydney Morning Herald, 24 July 1889, p. 5. Later, on the ordination of Winifred Keik, Register, 14 June 1927, p. 11, and with reports on her ministry West Australian, 15 April 1936, p. 6; on proposals in the Church of England, Advertiser, 28 March 1928, p. 17; Courier Mail, 6 July 1948; or in the Methodist ministry, Advertiser, 24 July 1934; Argus, 31 October 1931, p. 19; or in the Presbyterian church, Mercury,
15 May 1946; through interpretation of Paul in the Letters pages of the 1950s Sydney Morning Herald, 16 October 1951, p. 2 and on to the double page spread canvassing a range of positive views in the Australian Women’s Weekly, 28 September 1977, p. 6.


12 Goldie (1998), From a Roman Window, p. 218.


14 The phrase is Mavis Rose’s title Freedom from Sanctified Sexism: women transforming the church, Allira, Brisbane, 1996.

15 Tobin (1986), ‘Women in the Church Since Vatican II’.


18 Goldie (1998), From a Roman Window, p. 106.

19 Goldie (1998), From a Roman Window, p. 106.

20 Goldie (1998), From a Roman Window, p. 106.


27 Advocate, 1 November 1973, p. 15. Pilar Bellosillo was a member of the Commission on Women, one of five who sought changes in its approach and eventually published a minority view. Bulletin 108 of Pro Vita Mundi, see Goldie (1998), From a Roman Window, p. 211.


33 Butler (2007), Catholic Priesthood and Women, p. 76.

34 Inter Insigniores, 6, 1.

35 Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, 2 citing the 1977 address.

36 Inter Insigniores, 6, 7.


38 The group’s newsletter always carried the full title in the banner.


40 Editors’ Introduction (1987) Women-Church, 1, p. 3.

41 Editors’ Introduction (2007) Women-Church, 40, p. 3.


OCW Pamphlet 1994.

Editors' Introduction (1994) Women-Church, 15, p. 3.


Women-Church (1987) 1, p. 36.


Files of Janet Scarfe.

OCW Newsletter, 1 (1) 1994, p. 2.


'the hour has come', Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church, pamphlet 2, 1998.

'the hour has come', Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church, pamphlet 2, 1998.
