Spotlight: Forgiveness, Unity in Spirit, and Love

Miriam Picconi and I met in Montgomery, Alabama in 1981. We ministered together with local youth and became good friends. But everything changed for us in 2008, when Miriam and four other women were unjustly fired by a bishop who believed women should not be in parochial leadership roles.

After moving to Florida, we were at a loss. How would we share our faith when we had no friends or community? We met with Bridget Mary Meehan, Bishop of ARCWP, found ourselves at an ordination, and knew that we were home. Seeing women and men together at the altar was amazing! This is what “Church” should be. Later, we spoke with Bridget Mary and shared our stories. As youths, each of us felt a call to be a priest. When we quickly learned that was impossible, we let the desire go. Bridget Mary invited us to discern with her our calling to priesthood since it was now feasible.

In God’s time, we became excited about being priests. If Miriam had not been fired, we would never have considered ordination. God indeed makes good come out of bad for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose. We were ordained in 2012 and awaited the Spirit’s guidance as to how we would use our priestly gifts. We continued to teach the Adult Ed class at our local Episcopal church and started the Cupcake Ministry of Gratitude at local police and fire stations. We initiated a theology discussion group, started a faith group, and presided at home liturgies. And we now have two new ministries!

One day, friends invited us to go to Castle Ottis in St. Augustine. They wanted us to experience this sacred space. As we walked over the threshold, we sensed the presence of our loving God. At the worship service, we were told this was the minister’s last day. We wondered if this was one of those “God coincidences.” After the service, we talked with Rev. Lisa Manalisay, in charge of the worship preparations. We left agreeing we would all discern if we should preside at worship at the Castle.

In November 2013, we started a monthly liturgy there, one in which everyone is welcome at the table. This has continued to the present day.

When we were ordained, we thought we would be ministering to Catholics who no longer went to church. What we have discovered is that a lot of people come to our services from all denominations or no affiliation. Many tell us that it is the first time in a long while that they experienced the presence of God. “I have been looking for a service like this,” said one person who is now a regular. One woman understood the Eucharist’s healing power for the first time, when she was finally able to forgive a relative for sexually abusing her. We give thanks and praise to our loving God for touching and healing in so many ways.

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Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan

Join the Holy Shakeup

The Vatican is guilty of cover-up for decades, not only in the McCarrick case but in thousands of other cases of sexual abuse. It is time for major reforms, no more band-aids on gaping wounds. Apparently, the Vatican has no moral compass. To protect the hierarchy and clergy is the Vatican’s main agenda. Its growing consciousness was spurred on by the outrage of ordinary Catholics in the pews – mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and friends of survivors – and by $3 billion in U.S. civil lawsuits.

Catholic social justice affirms the rights of all people and the primacy of conscience. It is time to stand up for the truth about the sexual abuse crisis and discrimination against women and LGBTQ individuals in the Church. Yet, at the recent synod in Rome, both were hot-button issues that were patented ignored.

One example: the topic of women was on the agenda, but women were barred from voting. Does that make any sense in our world today? What young person is going to support a church that treats women and LGBTQ individuals like second-class citizens? All the baptized are equals and should be represented in decision making, not just the hierarchy, the clergy, and some laymen.

We, the people, are the Church. It is up to us to renew and transform the Church we love. If we don’t, who will?

Bridget Mary Meehan, ARCWP bishop, is an author of 20 books on prayer and spirituality. She is dean of Global Ministries University’s Doctor of Ministry and Master of Divinity programs and co-founder of People’s Catholic Seminary.

“With my mouth, God says, I kiss my own chosen creation. I uniquely, lovingly, embrace every image I have made out of the earth’s clay. With a fiery spirit I transform it into a body to serve all the world.”

Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179

Wanda Russell is a spouse, mother, and ARCWP priest ministering in ecumenical services at Castle Ottis in St. Augustine, St. Christopher Community in Titusville, and home services in Palm Coast, Florida. In ministry, she believes what Carlos Coretto wrote, that “love must transcend all truth.”
From the Editor

My seven years in seminary went by in a heartbeat, but one memory I’ll never forget. For my Intro to Theology class, we were to write a two-page paper on what theology meant to us. I jotted down thoughts of one sort or another and grabbed *The Divine Milieu* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., which I had read 15 times and absolutely adored. Not surprisingly, it was a treasure trove of what theology meant to me – for that matter, what pretty much anything meant to me. I assembled Teilhard’s thoughts in what I deemed to be the proper order, credited him for his ideas, and started typing.

Out of the blue, I sensed a presence in the room, a friendly presence. It wasn’t Abba God, or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. So who could it be? My eyes filled with tears when I realized it was the debonair Frenchman whose ideas I was so freely poaching. He was reading his own words over my shoulder. I was a part of his legacy to the world.

When I was asked to be editor for this newsletter, I pondered what I should bring to it. Was it my favorite Jesuit who answered the question for me? Was it he who suggested a column on the saints who paved the way for us? Certainly they are with us now, not watching over us in some floating mist, but actively participating in our work. I have found my patrons to be Teilhard, the great Edith Stein, and the magnificent Hildegard of Bingen, whose ringing cry, “I am outraged,” still resounds through the ages.

Let’s not turn up on the other side of eternity without acknowledging who is guiding us there. It is my hope that the Team Paradise column will inspire us to identify the saintly ancestors kibitzing over our shoulders.

My Mountain Meditation by Tee Kasper

Thomas Keneally wrote *The Place Where Souls Are Born* about Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. Having once read the book, I exclaimed, “I’m so there!” By chance, I was three short weeks away from a temporary relocation to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Three months into this relocation, I consider myself duly entrapped.

*Come, join me now so our souls may be born as one …*

Rounding the bend heading west on Highway 40 into Albuquerque, I inhale excitedly with my first view of the Sandia Mountains. I exhale with wonder at Spirit for having called me here. The mountains’ dusty-green dry presence beckons to me.

*“Come, stay with me, breathe …”*

The first opportunity I have finds me hiking the foothills. Friendly bikers and fellow hikers share the trails. The higher and deeper into the mountains I climb, the higher and deeper I am called to go.

*“Come, stay with me, breathe …”*

February’s 13 inches of snow block the scenic parks leading up to Sandia Crest. I am one of the first to get my fix of winter, I and the skier hitching a ride to the top so he can enjoy the glide down. Grinding on sand-covered snow and ice, we gasp at every magical wonderland vista of pristine snow-covered landscapes while our minds begin to quiet, orchestrated as only a newly fallen snow can.

*“Come, stay with me, breathe …”*

Peaceful walks along the Rio Grande River count as mountain time since the easterly view is that of the Sandias. Gentle paths meander through cottonwoods and yellow-blossoming brush with occasional chirping of birds and the quiet gurgling of the river as it rolls into rapids. I am fully embraced by nature.

*“… stay with me, breathe …”*

The Jemez Mountains with their red rock cliffs and outcroppings are of a different variety. How I loved my first exploration to its spring through piñon and other pine-scented forests! This adventure was rewarded by the strong rush of mountain water teasing the senses and tingling the bare toes dipped in.

*“Come, stay with me, breathe …”*

Light – a feature for which New Mexico is well known. Artists, photographers, movie makers covet this unique aspect of the 47th state. As for me, I simply love the lightness of heart that being here brings me.

*“Come, stay with me, breathe …”*


*“Come, stay with me, breathe …”*

My soul has been born anew here in This Place where I re-learned to breathe. Whether I come or go, part of me will remain with the mountains. Thank you for sharing my meditation.

*“… breathe!”*

Tee Kasper, mother and grandmother, deacon and priest, has been ARCWP’s treasurer and part of the website team and consensus process implementation.

*Nor Kieran-Meredith, M. Div., mother and grandmother, is a member of the ARCWP on the ecumenical front. She serves as a supply priest for Southern California Dignity chapters; as pianist, organist, and substitute preacher for a local Methodist Church, and as an aide in the local school district with special needs kids.*
The Shack
by William Paul Young

Clearly this is fiction; nevertheless, there is a lot more significant content than usual for the reader.

Mackenzie Allen Phillips (Mack) is the father of five children. Some are grown, others are in the process of approaching adulthood, but Missy is special; she is the youngest child. Mack takes three of the children on a camping trip at the end of one summer. Missy is last seen wearing a red dress and drawing in a coloring book. Now no one can find her. She is missing. Her disappearance is the center of what Mack refers to as The Great Sadness. Evidence shows that Missy may have been brutally murdered in a shack in the Oregon woods. Mack questions why a loving God would allow this to happen. The question tortures him.

A few years later, Mack is overcome by The Great Sadness. One day, a note from someone by the name “Papa” arrives. Mack experiences an encounter that will change his life forever. Mack meets Papa, also named Elousia, an African-American woman. He also meets a Middle-Eastern man about 30 years old. Mack asks if his name is Jesus or maybe the Trinity. After wrestling with these thoughts, he finally asks, “Which one of you is God?” They answer in unison, “I am.”

Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu lead Mack through a series of experiences during a weekend at the same shack where evidence of Missy’s murder was found. Whether this encounter is real or something else, I will leave to the reader to discern.

The Shack is part murder mystery, part story of a person’s struggle with evil. It is definitely a page turner. The reader will be unable to put the book down. I was riveted to every word, even the second time I read it. The Shack will challenge the reader’s imagination and theology.

Heaven in the Here and Now

The creed of the Church states that Jesus “came down from heaven” and later “ascended into heaven.” Tradition imagines heaven somewhere distant, most likely above the clouds and beyond the stars. Yet, our earliest bishops fostered the idea of heaven (or paradise, as it was called) as present in creation all around us and accessible through faith. Contemporary scholarship is returning to this earliest idea of heaven in the here and now.

Where we locate heaven in relation to ourselves isn’t academic. If heaven is above us, then earth is a remote outpost, consigned to a lesser realm. In this vision, intimacy with the Holy One requires covering a serious expanse of imagination and mileage. How much easier it is to luxuriate in the infinite love of God if we can see ourselves as worthy of being close—not only because we are made beloved in the divine image—but also because God is everywhere and our natural world is sacred. As realtors say, it’s all about location, location, location!

Early church leaders welcomed paradise within human reach. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) wanted us to cherish “that which is divine in ourselves so as to be united with the heavenly choir of paradise in daily life.” Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 310-386) spoke of Eden at baptisms and welcomed followers to “the brighter and more fragrant meadow of this present paradise.” Bishop Ambrose of Milan (ca. 339-397) wrote a book called Paradise. In it, he imagined heaven to be found either in our present spiritual state of grace or, possibly, at the sites of biblically significant rivers. Pastoral scenes of paradise decorated the central worship space of churches in early centuries; even catacomb paintings highlighted the glory of Eden rather than crucifixions.

Somewhere along the way of Church history, heaven got transplanted. We, the people, became sinful suppliants seeking mercy. Heaven became a promise after death in a place beyond our earthly station.

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The Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests are women and men committed to a renewed model of ordained ministry in an inclusive community of equals in the Roman Catholic Church. We seek equality for women in the Church that includes decision making and ordination.

“In Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28

In 2002, on the Danube River, seven women were validly ordained Roman Catholic priests. The principal consecrating Roman Catholic male bishop, who ordained our first women bishops, is one with apostolic succession in communion with the Pope within the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore all qualified candidates who are presented to our bishops for ordination are ordained in apostolic succession by the laying on of hands. According to man-made canon law, the Church may consider us illicit, but our ordinations are valid.
Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179

Years ago, an atheist friend gave me a most unusual Christmas present—a lovely boxed book/CD set of Hildegard’s visual and musical arts. She composed over 70 musical compositions with original poetic text. The music is very beautiful, and I urge you to listen to some of it. It is highly melismatic, which means one syllable may move over several different notes. This music soars!

In addition to composing, Hildegard wore a lot of other hats: abess, artist, author, mystic, pharmacist, poet, preacher, and theologian. Her mystical experiences began at the age of three. At age 42, she had a vision that instructed her to write them down. Apparently, she resisted until Pope Eugene III learned of them and gave them his approval. She describes seeing humans as “living sparks” of love emanating from God, much like daylight comes from the sun. Another theme, one that all mystics experience, is the harmony and unity of creation. Everything is connected and inseparable from God. The fruits of this understanding are her guides to nature and healing. Her groundbreaking works in this area are *Physica* and *Causae et Curae*.

As independent thinkers and actors, we in ARCWP can thank Hildegard for giving us strong examples of speaking truth to power. As an abess, Hildegard had authority to preach to the other nuns in her monastery. She preached in Germany in 1160 to both clergy and laity, denouncing clerical corruption and calling for reform. By whose authority did she expand the conventions of that time? As a woman passionately following the Spirit, it must have been another example of her obedience to God. She ignored the monks when they opposed her moving her monastery to Bingen. She challenged Emperor Frederick Barbarossa for supporting three anti-popes. And she dared to allow the burial of a young man on hallowed ground who had been excommunicated. For this, her monastery was placed under interdict, which forbade the celebration or reception of the Eucharist. This lasted from 1152 to 1162 and was lifted shortly before her death. I find myself wondering if these nuns heard the voice of Christ Sophia encouraging them to celebrate Eucharist themselves.

The other evening, after working on this article, I turned off the electric lights, lit a candle and listened to her music. I was tired and I fell asleep. When I woke up, I blew out the candle which was flickering against images of Mary Magdalene and Our Lady of Guadalupe. I had an overwhelming sense of how wonderful Catholicism is and how happy and honored I am to be part of its renewal. And I now know I have a kindred spirit and companion in Hildegard of Bingen. I too, experience more and more that everything is holy and infused with the Divine. Welcome, Hildegard, to my personal communion of saints. Of course, you were there all the time!

Pope Benedict XVI canonized Hildegard in 2012. She was also named a doctor of the Church. She is the patron saint of the excommunicated. Her feast day is September 17. 

Shelly Gilchrist has approached ARCWP for ordination. In Minnesota, she was active in an inclusive congregation, and in Winter Park, Florida, she was encouraged to become an Episcopalian deacon. After requisite classes and having her vocation acclaimed as “impeccable,” something did not feel right. Her home parish was warm and welcoming, but her internship parish denied marriage to same-sex couples.

Enter Diane Dougherty who introduced her to Miriam Picconi and Wanda Russell. Shelley loved their home liturgies and Bible studies.

A meeting was arranged with Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan. Shelley applauded her knowledge, passion, wisdom and experience. This was a good fit.

One day, Shelley will be “received” into the Catholic Church. But not at the expense of her Episcopal heritage. Another day, please God, ARCWP will ordain her to the “Church the Spirit has shown.” As Shelley puts it, “This feels absolutely right in every way!”

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Our most recent request is to preside at a Catholic liturgy at St. Christopher’s Community in Titusville, Florida. The community was started over 20 years ago by a married priest who had been approached by many couples who were divorced and remarried. They longed for the Eucharist, and the community was begun. Over time, three married priests ministered to the community; however, one is no longer able to assist. They reached out to Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan and asked for help. We are now presiding twice a month.

We believe forgiveness, unity in spirit, and love are the important gifts God wants us to share. And we do this best when we acclaim that all are truly welcome at the table! We thank God for leading us to minister Her unconditional love to all who gather.

Heaven…, continued from page 3

Moving away from a mystically accessible paradise emphasized fear of the final judgment over the saving grace of a loving God who created a world of beauty for God’s beloved children.

Elizabeth Johnson and Richard Rohr have mined scripture to find our earthly lives as divinely melded to heaven. Rohr points to the epistle to the Ephesians, where Paul calls us “adopted heirs” to all that is divine; Johnson recalls the earthy ministry of Jesus that talked of mustard seeds, tiny sparrows, and glorious lilies of the field. Others are looking anew to the gospels in which Jesus states, “the reign of God is already in your midst.”

Re-welcoming the kingdom of heaven into daily life is in keeping with our oldest traditions. A mystical oneness, with heaven everywhere in our cosmos including Earth, is an invitation to live in the sacred. We are a breath of the Spirit away from those who have gone before us, entwined and embraced by love of the divine in a paradise that is also ours for the taking.

Lynn Kinlan is a retired educator who enjoys writing spiritual poetry and meditations. She and her husband have raised three sons and are restocking their empty nest by caring for a grandchild part-time. Lynn co-presides at Upper Room liturgies in Albany, New York, and in additional sacramental ministry for friends and family.