

# Leading

Leading is the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests' publication to introduce the general public to who we are, what we do, and why.

"We are not leaving the Church; we are leading it."

Bishop Bridget Mary Meehan

WWW.ARCWP.ORG

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## Spotlight on Michele Birch-Conery

(as told to Marg McCaffrey Piche)

I start with a passage from a work I am composing that includes my earliest recollections. It was in the foster home of David and Mary Woodman, where I began my young life.

My favorite activity with Foster Nana was preparing for the Mass every Saturday afternoon at our neighborhood Roman Catholic parish. I felt very at home with her in St. Francis Church. Nana would lay out the cloths in the sanctuary, along the altar rails, and on the credence table. I would help her unload the flowers out of their pail. Together we would arrange them in vases, and she would put them where she thought best. Then we would ascend the stairs to the choir loft. She would choose a number of songs for choir practice that night, and I would help her lay out all the choir books for the coming Sunday Mass. When we were finished, Nana would stop at the corner store, and I would be treated to a twin orange or strawberry Popsicle. I believe that the memory of those early experiences speaks of my growth as a child and a complete opening into the mystery of divine presence in my life.



Michele Birch-Conery

I was born in 1939, the year of the escalation of the whole world into World War II. In my foster home, there was an extra suite on one side of the house. At the time I lived there, it was rented to a Japanese woman (a single parent) and her daughter, who was about the same age as I was. There was a protective gate which I was not permitted to climb. It was a lattice construction that had just the right size indentations to fit my feet. I was probably 3½ or 4 years old the first time I clambered over the gate and into the suite. There I was introduced to chicken gumbo soup, and I became friends with the little girl and her mother. As for my gate climbing, I received a light punishment – two little swats with a flyswatter – and I knew with a thrill that we would be able to come and go freely between the two suites. I have no further memories around this story except that I have always felt very openhearted towards the migrant, the homeless, and the poor. And, ever since, I have had a thirst for justice for justice's sake. The memories are like good fertilizer that nourishes the soil of my soul.

I believe that any call to priesthood that I felt over the years was mysteriously buried so deeply that I would not have found it in my spirituality. Writers such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Cynthia Bourgeault, and Mary Daly sharpened my feminist perspectives on the possibility for ordained women in the Church. And thus, I gradually opened to the idea. When seven women appeared on the Danube in 2002, I knew our time had come. I immediately wrote to them stating that I would support them in any way possible, not expecting them to respond by inviting me to join them as clergy. Consequently, I was ordained a deacon eight months later on the Danube River. In 2005, I was ordained a priest on the St. Lawrence River in our first North American ordinations. My ordination as a bishop occurred in 2015 at a Quaker Retreat Center in Philadelphia.

No matter what part of our movement we identify with, we could not have imagined the enormous challenge or commitment asked of us. It is truly a walk with the Holy Spirit and Her back-up plans to find our way to contributing effectively to the fragile time that surrounds us still. And so, I conclude with a promise of continued prayers and joyous hope for ARCWP's stability and forward movement. ♦

*Michele Birch-Conery is one of ARCWP's bishops. As she is struggling with significant health issues, she cannot write this column herself. Marg McCaffrey Piche, former physical therapist, hospital chaplain, counselor, university sessional instructor, and library employee is now retired and is doing what she can to help others.*

## Irish Women in Leadership – A New Beginning

Bridget Mary Meehan



Bridget Mary Meehan

After three years of seed planting in Ireland, we have reasons to celebrate a breakthrough including a new community of Friends of ARCWP.

From 2017-2019, Mary Theresa Streck and I traveled to Ireland to meet with women discerning a call to priesthood. We spoke with individuals and groups, celebrated a yearly liturgy sponsored by members of We Are Church Ireland, participated in media interviews, and consulted with Tony Flannery and Roy Donovan, priest advocates for women's ordination.

This year we met with Catholic academics and leaders interested in women leaders in our inclusive model of church supported by contemporary theologies. Here are seven highlights:

On September 14, 2019, ARCWP sponsored a panel in the Dublin area featuring an open, interactive dialogue with Irish theologian Angela Hanley. Mary Theresa, Angela, and I agreed that new models of ministry are needed and that patriarchy has never been a viable option. From the comments of the audience, it is evident that the Irish people have rejected clericalism. Angela affirmed our model of inclusive and empowering leadership and signed up to be a Friend of ARCWP. See our slide presentation on ARCWP, YouTube: [https://youtu.be/9716xzTs\\_DE](https://youtu.be/9716xzTs_DE).

During our panel discussion, Myra Noonan, a teacher in the Dublin area, shared testimony on the impact of a People's Catholic Seminary's (PCS) interactive course offered online through Blogger and Zoom. Last year, Myra completed a course with ARCWP candidates on women in scripture and the mystical tradition. She signed up to be a Friend of ARCWP and is now creating a new PCS course, beginning in January 2020, on Visionary Women Leaders in Christianity. This course will be based on Irish Theologian Mary T. Malone's book, *The Elephant in the Church*: <https://pcs306coursedescriptions.blogspot.com/>.

Over 12,000 readers viewed the article on our movement entitled "US-Based Female Bishop

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**From the Editor** For the first time in my tenure, the columnists and I sought out a central theme for the newsletter. As it happened, “Women Leading the Way” was best suited to our purposes.



Nori Kieran-Meredith

Deb Trees offers us a provocative column on Mary of Nazareth, the prototype of courageous women throughout all time.

Mary Magdalene, more so than possibly any other saint, has emerged these last few decades as a model for Christian women everywhere. Maureen McGill shows us how this happened.

On an up-to-the-minute basis, Ann Harrington sketches for us her exciting and fruitful ministry.

On a different note, the voice of Michele Birch-Conery, our Canadian bishop, rings out with joy and hope through the Spotlight column, though she is incapable of penning it herself.

Bridget Mary Meehan offers a thrilling column on Irish women in leadership. Over 12,000 readers viewed her column calling for Irish women ready to make a difference. The Holy Spirit is on the move, and She will not be stopped! ♦

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*Nori 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 a fire lookout atop Strawberry Peak in her beloved San Bernardino mountains.*

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## New News

By Ann Harrington

One of the dynamics of life that has become more noticeable to me since ordination is synchronicity. Answering God’s call opened up a wonder-filled and creative energy that I had had some experience with but now is a constant in my life. I would like to share one experience that has had a big impact. Clearly, God loves to weave greater life from our chance encounters.

I have for about 15 years attended retreats in Raleigh, North Carolina, the capital city 80 miles from my home. In 2013, some of my friends invited Maryknoll Priest Roy Bourgeois to give a presentation on his work with the School of the Americas and the women priests movement. I first “met” Roy through Maryknoll magazine many years ago and considered him a hero. I requested five minutes with him. I was told to meet him at the home where he was staying and asked if I could drive him to the venue. I was overjoyed when the answer was yes! The home, it turns out, belongs to a delightful couple, former Catholic priest and former sister who were very active in the peace and justice movement, Rod and Sylvia O’Conner. In the course of our conversation, Sylvia and I discovered we were from the same town and were members of neighboring parishes. Her sister was best friends with my fifth-grade teacher. Peace activist Patrick O’Neil was also there. He asked me if I knew Sister Mary Ann in Tarboro, a town 30 minutes from my house. She was the director of a homeless shelter. At that time, I was going to Tarboro every week, and I dropped in one day. She was not there, but I left my contact information, and we connected later. She was immediately supportive of my path to priesthood and we planned to meet and to discuss the ARCWP movement.



Ann Harrington

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Mary Ann Czaja, a Sister of Saint Agnes, entered community in 1961. She moved to Tarboro in 1983 to help with the homeless population there. What began as a soup-and-sandwiches ministry developed into Tarboro Community Outreach (“TCO”). A building was constructed and dedicated in 1989 for shelter and food programs. There is room for 20 men and 7 women. They serve 160 meals a day and distribute food 6

days a week. The men and women who live in the shelter and others who receive help there unload the food trucks and assist with the distribution. Along with many volunteers, they help prepare the meals and do the work associated with maintaining the shelter.

Upon my ordination in July of 2014, Mary Ann invited me to create prayer experiences there. Every Friday morning, I lead either Eucharist, Bible study, drumming, singing, anointing, sacrament of reconciliation, memorial services, and/or whatever Spirit leads me to do. We have anywhere from 5 to 20 in attendance. There are a few regulars but, as the residents find more stability and move away, they rarely return.

Recently, we learned about Sister Thea Bowman, whom Mary Ann knew personally. Thea was a Roman Catholic religious sister, teacher, and scholar who made a major contribution to her brother and sister African Americans through her ministry. She is famous for many things. Among them is her address to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops shortly before her death. We claim her as our patron saint.

During our last Eucharist, we talked about the Communion of Saints, and I invited each person to name one of their beloved departed. Most of them mentioned their mothers. I also invited them to think of one question they would like to ask their loved one. Some were “How are you?”, “What’s it like there?”, and “Are the streets paved with gold?” The discussion following these questions centered around heaven as beyond what we can imagine, our loved ones as very, very well, and our being in for something awesome when we die.

My friends at TCO have been instrumental in teaching me how to be a priest. Gathering with them is one of the highlights of my week. The positive energy is palpable and we feed one another’s souls.

Now, back to that fifth-grade teacher who died since I’ve been a priest. She would not have approved of my call, so I never made contact with her. However, during my formation, a memory of fifth-grade religion class came to me. Right there in the religion book, it said we were to follow our conscience. I raised my hand and asked for clarification because I had never heard about this exception to the many rules I had learned through the years. Mrs. B. said yes, it meant you must follow your conscience. A seed was planted that day in Our Lady of Hope Catholic School in Dundalk, Maryland, the roots of which continue to spread new life and healing to my little section of the world. ♦

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*Ann Harrington, wife, mother, grandmother, and ARCWP-ordained priest, is pastor of Free Spirit Inclusive Catholic Community. Her ministries include spiritual direction, interfaith dialogue, centering prayer, retreat leader, frequent letter-to-the-editor writer, and coordinator for the Greenville Advocacy Team.*

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## Book Review

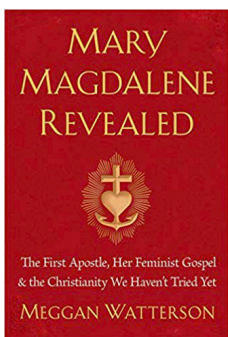
### Mary Magdalene Revealed

by Meggan Watterson

A book review by Maureen McGill

This is not an easy book to read or to review. Nor is it a page turner. Instead, it is a book to which the reader will refer many times. In addition, the reader will come to learn more not only about Mary Magdalene but the author, Meggan Watterson, as well.

I am certain that most Christians have been told that Jesus expelled seven “demons” from Mary Magdalene. Meggan Watterson’s approach restyles the demons as seven “powers”: Darkness, Craving, Ignorance, Craving for Death, Enslavement to the Physical Body, The False Peace of the Flesh, and Compulsion of Rage. Indeed each section of her book lists, describes, and analyzes each power, while each chapter begins with a quote from the purportedly lost *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.



To date, a complete *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* has not been found. However, three copies of this gospel have been recovered. One is in Coptic and the other two are in Greek. Each version is missing the beginning pages and four more in the middle of the Gospel. Unfortunately, Mary’s Gospel has been labeled “Gnostic,” and this label has a troublesome history with the organized Church.

According to the author, there never was an organized cult of Gnostics. Rather, there were different forms or ways of practicing Christianity. Although Mary’s Gospel was not among the writings discovered at Nag Hammadi, those writings spoke of a feminine side of Christ and of Mary Magdalene’s importance. They also point to a definition of salvation as an inward act of personal transformation. This theme continues throughout the book, as the author goes on a physical journey to learn more about Mary Magdalene and to experience personal transformation.

Many people believe that Mary Magdalene wound up in Southern France. Whether this is legend or fact is unknown. As the story goes, Mary arrived there in approximately 42 AD to escape persecution after she testified in the Court

of Tiberius Caesar as a witness to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. At the conclusion of her testimony, Tiberius noticed that she was holding an egg. He scoffed that no one could be resurrected, just as that egg could not turn red. And so, the egg immediately turned red! This may be how Mary became associated with an egg, and she has been depicted in icons holding a red egg ever since.

The author debunks the notion that Mary was a prostitute. Watterson points out that, in the fourth century when the Church was becoming male dominated, any writings that explored Mary Magdalene having a leadership role and a special relationship to Jesus such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary, and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, were declared heretical. Then, Pope Gregory’s Homily 33 declared that Mary was a penitent prostitute despite any substantiating evidence whatsoever. That sealed Mary’s fate in history.

I recommend this book to all who dig deeper into traditional beliefs. Mary was with Jesus during every significant event in His adult life. She was the first witness to the resurrection and clearly was the Apostle to the Apostles.

As an aside, I was reading this book on my way home from vacation in upstate New York. A woman who was also waiting for a connecting airplane looked at me and stated, “Wow, I am so interested in Mary Magdalene. Can we talk?” Usually, I am somewhat reserved and reluctant to talk to strangers, but this time I said, “Of course we can talk.” This book provoked quite a conversation. I urge you to read it and see where it leads you.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells readers that she found experiences of God in every faith tradition which she explored and to which she introduced her students. In fact, the author recognized in



Maureen McGill

*Irish Women, continued from page 1*

Wants To Hear from Irish Women Who Are Ready To Lead.” Our message of gathering women interested in leading inclusive communities that welcome all resonated with readers. See article and 27 comments: <https://www.thejournal.ie/women-priests-meeting-dublin-4807255-Sep2019/>.

On September 15, we celebrated a liturgy at St. Andrew Community Center in Rialto, Dublin. Our friend Tony MacCarthaigh, founder of the Community of 72, a group that supports women called to ordination, coordinated with us the publicity and planning of this liturgy. During our sharing, Colm Holmes, the spokesperson from We Are Church Ireland, expressed his support of ARCWP as a significant movement for justice and equality in the Church. Professor Amanda Dillon, a theologian from Trinity College, as well as other leaders from We are Church Ireland, attended both panel and liturgy: [https://bridgetmarys.blogspot.com/2019/09/association-of-roman-catholic-women\\_15.html](https://bridgetmarys.blogspot.com/2019/09/association-of-roman-catholic-women_15.html).

Mary Theresa and I met with Sister Mary and Sister Rita from Solas Bhride Spirituality Center, one of Ireland’s most popular Catholic retreat/conference centers. We presented a request to use the center’s facilities for a one-day retreat. Our request was approved, and we will present a program in August 2020. See our visit to St. Brigid’s Well: <https://bridgetmarys.blogspot.com/2019/09/ireland-today-we-visited-solas-bhride.html>.

On Sunday, September 22, we celebrated a house Church liturgy for our new Friends of ARCWP. Four women attended: a chaplain, a Brigidine nun, two local woman leaders and teachers affiliated with We Are Church Ireland. We rejoice that we now have nine Friends of ARCWP in Ireland: <https://bridgetmarys.blogspot.com/2019/09/arcwp-home-church-liturgy-for-25th.html>.

Before we left, Mary Theresa and I submitted an application for ARCWP to be recognized as a religious body in Ireland which can authorize wedding solemnizers. In order for a minister or priest to function in Ireland, one must be listed on this registry. On October 21, I received an official letter rejecting our application in part because “ARCWP does not have its own system of beliefs but very much wishes to co-exist as a renewed model of the Roman Catholic Church.” On October 23, I submitted an appeal listing our specific beliefs in our Constitution.

Since returning to the U.S., Mary Theresa and I have collaborated with our dynamic group of Friends of ARCWP in Ireland on Zoom about the 2020 retreat in Kildare, the upcoming course on visionary women, future gatherings with women called, and our annual liturgy in Dublin. Our new friends in Ireland provide an enthusiastic network of support for the growth of

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# Team Paradise

## Mary of Nazareth

by Debra E. Trees

The relationship of women and men of faith with Mary of Nazareth is a complicated one, impacted by our upbringing and the desired effect that controlling the image of the Mother of Jesus would have on our lives. Over the past two thousand years, Mary has become the least of the servants, demure, gentle, virginal, and compliant. Women are expected to emulate her.



Debra E. Trees

But what if Mary's memory has been slowly and methodically changed over the thousands of years since she was here on this planet? What if, because of our collective blindness to the true images, recollections, and writings of her time, we are not yet aware of her amazing impact on Christianity and on our own psyches? How can we recapture her essence for our lives?

Ally Kateusz, in her book, *Mary and the Early Christian Women, Hidden Leadership*, notes that, "our false imagination of the past, that is, what we think we know about the past, can make it difficult to see what was actually there." Many scholars who are looking at archeology, images of women presiding, and writings that have been deleted or not given import are pointing to women that were active leaders in the early Christian Community. Mary of Nazareth is one of the most important of these women.

Mothers are the first teachers of their children and Mary is no exception. She is the person who taught Jesus about inclusion and taking care of the poor. Jim Marsh, an ARCWP priest, asked in a homily, "What else is the Magnificat but an example of the first teaching of the tenets of Jesus' way of life? Jesus learned this from his mother."

Bridget Mary Meehan's chapter on Mary, Mother of Jesus, in her book *Women of the New Testament*, notes that Mary is a good practicing Jewish woman following the rules of her day in relation to her family. Mary takes Jesus to be baptized and presents him at the temple, traveling to Jerusalem during times of celebration with her community and participating at the synagogue. She supports him as he will allow, follows him to the cross and grave, and leads prayer with the disciples and new communities of The Way after his death and resurrection.

In Mary's time in Greek and Roman cultures, women were not allowed to be around men without an escort. Women were confined in their homes, whether heads of households or slaves. They actually had a shorter lifespan than men, according to archeology. The influence of these cultures, including the early New Testament manuscripts written in

Greek, would underlie many of the assumptions of the day. Present-day scholarship and analytics show how wording has changed over time, based on these assumptions: that women were second-class citizens, that women were not worthy of leadership, that the stories of women presiding, leading prayer, and baptizing could not be true and should not be included in the "official" Christian texts.

What does this mean then for Mary? She was a leader and teacher. Her legacy has lasted for two thousand years, in spite of the cultural oppression of women throughout this time. May we continue to learn, love, and follow Mary of Nazareth! ♦

*Debra Trees is working on her Masters in Ministry through People's Catholic Seminary and Global Ministries University. She is a wife, mother, and professional audiologist for the past 35 years.*

### Irish Women, continued from page 3

our movement there. Along with progressive Catholics who have affirmed our prophetic vision over the years, our friends offer major assistance to our ongoing mission of ordaining women called to a renewed model of priestly ministry in a discipleship of equals. ♦

*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.*

### Book review, continued from page 3

herself a Holy Envy which she described as "spiritual shoplifting." There is more than that. She comes to realize that, although the study of other faith traditions has been helpful, the beauty lies in giving one an ability to reflect what is beyond them. ♦

*Maureen McGill was ordained a priest in January 2014. She was a founding member of St. Francis Ecumenical Catholic Church in St. Petersburg, FL. Maureen is a retired attorney. She served as General Magistrate in the First Judicial Circuit of Florida and as Guardian ad Litem Circuit Director. Maureen is married to Gerald McGill, an admiralty and maritime attorney. They have 2 adult daughters and 5 grandchildren.*

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The Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests consists of 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.