We all have beautiful stories of how we came to be a part of this woman priest movement. Intertwining our lives with one another, we weave a tapestry of love, peace, hope, and faith. We embody womanhood and stand together as a voice for the marginalized. Through our different communities, now spread across continents, we practice these beliefs. The Holy Spirit guides us as we take on this challenge of equality for all. Sometimes we still pinch ourselves, in awe that we’re part of this historical movement to address the injustices before us. Our work is important and is the beacon of light for all those voices who cannot speak publicly as we do.

I am the Reverend Annie Cass Watson, and I am the assisting priest at St. Stanislaus Polish Catholic Church in St. Louis, Missouri. I have been serving this church for the past four years under my mentor and friend, Fr. Marek Bozek. This inclusive Catholic parish serves all God’s children.

This church and Fr. Marek were excommunicated in 2005, under the watchful eye of Cardinal Raymond Burke. Shortly afterwards, a lawsuit was filed because the Archdiocese of St. Louis insisted on securing the physical and financial assets of St. Stanislaus. It ultimately failed. Pope Benedict subsequently stripped Fr. Marek of his clerical status. For more information about the history of this congregation, see:


The last four years have been full of wondrous adventures. My ministry as an assisting priest in a parish like St. Stanislaus has been a humbling experience. Being the first woman priest there has given me the opportunity to promote, encourage, and affirm women. I hope that my faith has impacted the parish’s faith, and that we have grown spiritually as we journey together. I firmly believe like Mary of Bethany: I was affirmed by Jesus as doing the right thing in sitting at his feet and becoming a true disciple.

Diversity in leadership within the Catholic Church is necessary for authentic discipleship. Without this we have nothing. If women were celebrated, empowered, and given freedom to exercise their gifts, imagine what the global church would look like! We would be a glorious and vital church full of love and peace for all.

At St. Stanislaus, we practice this ideal. We have a beautiful church and an exciting congregation. It is amazing that through all of our hardship we practice an extravagant welcome and provide a sumptuous table for all to partake. As an inclusive Catholic congregation, the future of St. Stanislaus looks bright, because it serves the needs of historically undervalued and underrepresented communities in the greater St. Louis area.

Annie Cass Watson is an Assisting Priest at St. Stanislaus Catholic Church in St. Louis, Missouri. A former Special Education teacher and advocate for special needs children, she is married to Dr. Jimmy Watson, a United Church of Christ pastor in Ferguson, Missouri. Together they have five children and five grandchildren. When not engaged in ministry, Annie and her husband enjoy traveling, spending time with family and friends, and communing with nature.

Explore Secret Gospels about Jesus and Their Meaning for Today

by: Bridget Mary Meehan

Have you heard of the secret gospels about Jesus, hidden in jars and buried in an Egyptian desert for centuries? These ancient documents, discovered in 1945, are not in the traditional New Testament.

Here are a few striking spiritual insights found in A New, New Testament by Hal Taussig.

In the 114 sayings of the Gospel of Thomas, which some scholars date earlier than Matthew, Mark or Luke, Jesus is a teacher of wisdom who said that the realm “is not a place and event in time. It is within and without you. When you come to know yourself, then you will come to know that you are children of God.” (Thomas 3).

Another gospel, The Gospel of Truth, emphasizes the indwelling of the Divine in beauty and in the goodness of life overflowing everywhere. “The good news of truth is joy.” Here Jesus, portrayed with a cosmic role, reveals new things while speaking what is in God’s heart. (Taussig, Gospel of Truth, p. 228)

The Gospel of Mary, discovered in 1896 in a fifth century papyrus codex, is the only known gospel whose main figure, Mary Magdalene, is a woman and leader of the disciples. Her spiritual authority is based on her close relationship with Jesus. (Taussig, p. 217)

These newly discovered ancient gospels reveal a fuller picture of the early Christian community’s understanding of Jesus. They illuminate his teaching about divine presence and fullness of life within and without everywhere in the cosmos. They also offer inspiration for women in leadership roles in the Church today. As women, in particular, grow in consciousness of diverse early Christian communities, they find much to ponder about a prophetic and mystical call to live equality, justice, and inclusivity as the Christ Presence in the world today.

People’s Catholic Seminary is hosting a course on this topic entitled “A New, New Testament.”

Leading is pleased to welcome back Contributors Lynn Kinlan and Tee Kasper and to spotlight Annie Watson.

Our theme for this issue is “Leadership through Diversity.” This was modeled powerfully by our Savior, as Lynn Kinlan so deftly traces in her column about Jesus as refugee and fugitive. Deb Trees draws a sharp contrast between the sisters Mary and Martha, finding room for both of them in our spiritual lives. Bridget Mary Meehan offers for our consideration the secret gospels unearthed in Qumran in 1945, including The Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

The lived experiences of Ann Harrington and Annie Watson illuminate what diversity in leadership looks like today. On a fictional level, Maureen McGill introduces us to Margaret Atwood’s The Testaments, as a guidebook to a potential future. And, finally, Tee Kasper offers us a lovely meditation. Who knows, it just might introduce us to our next assignment in leadership through diversity!

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New News
By Ann Harrington

In 2013, Free Spirit Inclusive Catholic Community celebrated our first Eucharist on Pentecost. For six years, our average number of attendees was eight. We were like a tender shoot from a tree stump, as described in Isaiah 11:1.

Beginning in 2019, we had some fresh life, and that shoot, though still tender, had a growth spurt. This is the story of how our new friends arrived at Free Spirit and what they received from Her.

Alice joined us for our 2018 Christmas Eve liturgy. She had learned of us while reading the Unitarian calendar. Alice has been a member of that Unitarian church for 20+ years. She started to feel a longing for something more. Alice likes the intimacy and authenticity, warmth and true friendship she experiences here, even as she continues to attend the Unitarian services.

Shortly after Alice showed up, Barbara joined us. She was raised Catholic and tasted the revitalization of Vatican II when she lived in Detroit. Upon moving to Philadelphia at the height of the AIDS epidemic, Barbara found the Catholic response lacking in compassion. After serious study and reflection, she came to the conclusion that the Church was a vehicle and not a destination. Life brought Barbara to North Carolina, and here, too, she experienced inner turmoil and disappointment in not finding a home in which to express her core values and beliefs. She connected with the local Unitarian Church and found a haven for her spirituality. One day, in prayer, Barbara experienced profoundly the clarity of something she always knew, that the Catholic Church is a sexist institution. Around this same time, she learned there was a woman priest in Greenville and decided to attend Free Spirit liturgies. Barbara says, “I came to the realization and accepted that I cannot change the institutional Church, but I can be part of the future of the Church.”

Elaine appeared on the heels of Barbara. She had been aware of the women’s priest movement from its beginning. After extensive pastoral training in the Northeast, she moved to North Carolina in 2003. Elaine continues to be active in ministry in the traditional Church and found Free Spirit through a Facebook post. She experienced us as a warm and welcoming community, noting, “My family was experiencing the beginning of a challenge at the time, and I immediately benefited from another safe haven in which I could openly pray, share, and engage in mutual support.”

Most recently, Bill has found a home with us. While he has spent most of his life outside a specific religious tradition, Bill has had many mystical experiences. He first encountered a woman priest in Ocala, Florida and experienced something profound at communion. Once again, Bill had a deep experience of God when by accident he tuned into a televised Catholic Mass. In 2008, he was received into the Catholic Church and felt an “awesome euphoria.” He is active with a Catholic parish in Charlotte, North Carolina, where his centering prayer group studied Cynthia Bourgeault’s book, The Meaning of Mary Magdalene. This challenged him, and he checked the internet to see if there was a woman priest in his

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Meditation
The Big Whisper
By Terese Rigodanzo-Kasper

Sparkling air with sea-hued sky
Courtyard gently beckons to bench time
Inviting me to give perspective
In solitude to stress, strain.

The rustle of wind-blown leaves
Whispers my relaxation mantra
Making way for the bigger whisper.
The one for which my soul longs.

I hear Spirit Sophia
Gently guiding me, laying my path
For the next moment; the only time
That is truly important.

Tee Kasper, mother and grandmother, deacon and priest, has been ARCWP’s treasurer and part of the website team and consensus process implementation.
The Testaments by Margaret Atwood
Book review by Maureen McGill

The Testaments is not a sequel to Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, although a case can be made that it is. Readers have already been introduced to the nation of Gilead in the earlier novel and so The Testaments does follow chronologically.

It is set about 15 years after the conclusion of The Handmaid’s Tale. By this time, Gilead is a failing system. The nation, which is composed of parts of the former United States, is corrupt and is experiencing the results of uncontrolled climate change and farming methods that utilize unregulated pesticides. The unfortunate result is that the fertility of the population is severely compromised. Healthy children are not being born on a regular basis.

Men have complete control of everything in Gilead: money, credit, and all activities of women. Those who are thought to be able to reproduce are either Wives or Handmaids. A group of people called The Eyes spy on the entire population. Gilead’s system is said to be religious and ritualistic. For example, there are catch phrases that seemingly come from the Bible and must be used when greeting another person or in dealing with Commanders, men who are effectively in control of various aspects of community life. Girls are taught by the Aunts, a celibate group of women who must prove themselves worthy to instruct the girls. Their lives are eerily reminiscent of Catholic nuns before the Second Vatican Council.

The Testaments gives hope to the civilization through the intricate lives of three women. The first is Agnes Jemima, who was reared as the daughter of a Commander and his Wife, Tabitha. When Tabitha dies, the Commander remarries another Wife, Paula, who wants Agnes Jemima to marry a very powerful Commander. Agnes Jemima resists, and she is successful in avoiding marriage, claiming that she has a higher calling: to become an Aunt.

The story of the next woman we meet takes place in Canada where a significant resistance group works in conjunction with Mayday, a resistance group in Gilead. Her true name is a mystery, and her real identity will not be revealed until later in the novel. One hint I will give to potential readers is that the authorities in Gilead want to return from Canada a child known only as Baby Jessica. I will leave it to the reader to determine if this young woman is that child. The third woman we meet is Aunt Lydia, who seems on the surface to have adopted the Gilead philosophy and religion. Has she? The Testaments implies that she was a lawyer who was forced to embrace the Gilead system in order to survive. I leave that also to the reader.

The Testaments is of interest to the Roman Catholic women priests because it shows that women working together even in covert ways can bring about disruption and maybe downfall of a corrupt and unjust system.

Maureen McGill was ordained a priest in January 2014. She was a founding member of St Francis Ecumenical Catholic Church in St Petersburg, Florida. 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.

The Testaments is not a sequel to Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, although a case can be made that it is. Readers have already been introduced to the nation of Gilead in the earlier novel and so The Testaments does follow chronologically.

Jesus as Refugee and Fugitive
by Lynn Kinlan

More people today have had to leave home and loved ones behind than at any time in history. Neither the worldwide displacement of 11,000,000 after World War II nor the forced transfer of 12,000,000 Africans into worldwide slavery comes close to the scourge of today’s migration (Stone 1, In Motion 2005). War, climate change, governments unable to ensure public safety, and persecution of minorities have swelled the world’s refugee/asylum seeking population to 29,000,000. Another 41,000,000 are forcibly displaced to temporary refuge in distant parts of their own countries (Kevin White 2019). We pray and protest on their behalf, and some countries take in a fraction of the dispossessed. Yet, it seems not nearly enough, for world homelessness and suffering are increasing with each year.

For Christians, there is a poignant relevance between today’s surge in refugees and the life of Jesus who was himself a refugee, a migrant, and a fugitive from the law. His life was spent on the road and on the run. Our modern world marginalizes refugees and asylum seekers as criminals and terrorists, just as Roman and Jewish authorities saw Jesus as a troublemaker and a security threat.

Nothing about the cozy nativity scene of a swaddled baby Jesus prepares us for what comes next. Dreams and angelic messengers warn of Herod’s threat to slaughter male babies in Bethlehem, so Joseph and Mary flee with their newborn to Egypt rather than return home. They remain in Egypt for several years and, even after the death of Herod, settle in Galilee to avoid the rule of Herod’s son in their homeland of Judea. Our hearts break for those who today live as the young Jesus did; prophetic witnesses to fortitude and sorrow in the face of persecution and prejudice.

Something about that early life prepared the self-possessed Jesus to feel at home as he journeyed throughout Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. Meeting a Samaritan woman at the well of her ancestors, Jesus offers the glory of “living water” and asks her to tell her people the good news of Yahweh. He takes in equal measure the adulation of crowds and the anger of mobs who look to stone him for the preaching they misunderstand. Jesus remains fixed on his goal of service even as those around him are scared to death by his message and indignant at his behavior. Again and again, the authorities plot to capture and kill Jesus, but he eludes them, changing his travel plans and hiding out because his time had not yet come. His is the life of a fugitive, branded not only as foreigner but as criminal.

Today’s seeker of asylum by raft on the Mediterranean or by foot through the Sonoran Desert of Arizona stands in the shadows of the young Jesus’ treatment. Our communities and nations are at fault for not accepting the refugee as the image of the Christ who faced persecution and prejudice in his own time.

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Martha and Mary, Women for Our Time
by Debra E. Trees

As we round out this series on women of the early Christian church, we concentrate on the sisters Martha and Mary. Jesus continues to show himself as anti-misogynist as he questions society’s assumptions in so many ways. Each of these women is a close friend, almost family member of Jesus. They help to clarify one of the main tenets of Jesus’ message: each person is important. We are created by a loving and holy being, and we are equal in God’s eyes.

In Beyond Belief, Elaine Pagels notes that some early Christian communities and leaders were shocked that women would participate in the activities and learning of the church, just like men. In fact, women taught, preached, and baptized. Martha and Mary were some of the first to engage in these actions.

Martha and Mary have two stories apiece in the New Testament. The Lukan story appears to be used as a discourse to remind Martha and other women where their place might be and to reduce their interest in “serving,” in the formal sense, in the early Christian movement. Barbara Reid discusses what the story means as a message to women. She contends that women in those days were not meant to serve. Women should be quiet and listen. Mary’s place as a complacent and adoring listener at the feet of Jesus has been used to highlight the contemplative life as more desirable than the active life. Bridget Mary Meehan discusses this in Praying with Women of the Bible. In reality, Jesus may not have chastised Martha. Early Jewish-Christian communities may have fabricated this episode as they grappled with understanding his message.

Then, in another encounter, Martha confronts Jesus about where he was when her brother died. Dr. Meehan points out that Martha, an outspoken woman, leaves her funeral guests to confront Jesus. She takes a major leap of faith in chiding him that her brother would still be alive if Jesus had come sooner. Her proclamation and the witness of others around her, like her sister Mary, combine to draw attention to a Jesus who is special.

According to Dr. Meehan, Mary is possibly the woman who anointed her sister Mary, combine to draw attention to a Jesus who is special. When her brother died. Dr. Meehan points out that Martha, an outspoken woman, leaves her funeral guests to confront Jesus. She takes a major leap of faith in chiding him that her brother would still be alive if Jesus had come sooner. Her proclamation and the witness of others around her, like her sister Mary, combine to draw attention to a Jesus who is special.

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According to Dr. Meehan, Mary is possibly the woman who anointed Jesus’ head shortly before his death. This is the exact opposite behavior from listening quietly: pouring oil on Jesus’ feet and wiping them with her hair. A woman driven to do this is a sign of proclamation and prophecy.

As Dr. Meehan notes, the stories of Martha and Mary in both Luke and John suggest a community where women serve as deacons, preachers, and Eucharistic providers. Indeed, Martha’s and Mary’s stories show us women who are apostolic. Moreover, Martha’s and Mary’s actions and proclamations are over the top. Their devotion to Jesus points to him as an extraordinary human; one who obviously loves them and allows them to express themselves as equal and courageous beings in a dangerous time.

The diversity of Martha and Mary in the Jesus story gives us hope and helps us to see that we, too, have a place in their story. We each can be prophets in our own way and in our time, and indeed we must be.

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

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

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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.

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LEADING Staff

Editor .......................................... Nori Kieran-Meredith
Assistant Editor ............................... Joan Taitte
Graphic Designer ............................ Ever Juarez
Website ........................................ arcwp.org
Comments .................................... newsletter.arcwp@gmail.com
Blog ............................................. bridgetmarys.blogspot.com

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