Living on the Edge  by Bridget Mary Meehan

In his Sunday meditation, “Mystics and the Margins,” Richard Rohr, OFM, writes about ordinary Catholics who “take their small and sufficient place in the great and grand scheme of God by living on the edge of the inside.” They build on solid tradition (“from the inside”), but from a new and dynamic stance (“on the edge”) where they cannot be co-opted by a need for security, possessions or the illusions of power.” (Sunday Meditation, Sept. 27, 2020)

From its beginning, when seven courageous women were ordained priests in 2002 on the Danube River, to today with over 275 members, the Roman Catholic Women Priests’ movement offers hope to 1.3 billion Catholics who comprise Church membership. These priests are a visible expression of women’s equality, now a reality, in an ordained ministry on the inside edge of the community of faith.

Even though the women priests’ initiative is sidelined by the condemnation of the institutional Church, its members accept living on the margins so as to provide women the opportunity to realize their call to ordination. The movement offers a renewed model of priestly ministry rooted in the solid foundation of the prophets and mystics who have gone before.

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Lessons from the Garden  by Ann Harrington

When I was three years old, my mother read me a story. I have no recollection of its title, but I remember one picture. A kitten was scratching open seed packets for a family to plant. They must have been new to gardening, as they were puzzled as to what the mixed-up seeds would become. When the vegetables appeared, they enjoyed the surprise.

Something similar happened to me this year. For three decades or so, I composted our kitchen’s scraps. Occasionally, I spread them in my flower gardens. (I don’t plant vegetables as they are too high maintenance and readily available at the local farmers market.) My compost is the “cold” kind – no manure to heat the ingredients and kill any seeds lurking in it. Occasionally, something sprouts. Late in the summer, a vine appeared, possibly a cucumber or a cantaloupe. Over the weeks, healthy yellow blooms appeared, and I cleared space for it to spread out. I watered and watched. Flowers kept appearing and appearing, more and more flowers.

Then one day, what to my wondering eyes did appear but a bulbous green growth five inches in diameter. It was definitely not a cucumber, possibly a cantaloupe or maybe even a pumpkin. I thought, oh how wonderful to have a home-grown pumpkin for Halloween!

I began to watch my mystery fruit carefully and to debate: was this a cantaloupe or a pumpkin? It started to get squiggles on its skin, so I thought cantaloupe; then I noticed a bump at its top, and I thought pumpkin; and then ridges appeared, and I thought definitely a pumpkin. Upon closer inspection one morning, I saw, to my horror, slugs feasting on my pumpkin’s skin. Off with you, brutes, to the gutter you go! We’d had several days of rain – just what my baby needed. But either it was too much rain, or the slugs had damaged it beyond recovery. I was quite disappointed and briefly guilt ridden, that I had failed to protect my mystery garden visitor. I studied the seeds it left, and they resembled cantaloupe seeds, but that bump sure looked like a pumpkin.

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It’s hard to imagine what we have never seen.
If all we ever observe in religious art and in role models elevated by the Church are women who are silent and submissive to male authority figures, then it’s hard to imagine a different way of being a woman of God. Can we even relate to this version of Mary portrayed by the Church?

Mary is lauded as a virgin and a mother. How exactly can Catholic women be virgins and mothers at the same time? And what about women who are not called to motherhood? Is their only choice to join a religious order? And does that somehow make them less than?

Over the centuries, virginity was held up as the preferred route to holiness for women. But aren’t we all called to holiness? Aren’t we all supposed to bring about the kin-dom of God here on earth in the every-day moments of our lives? Even those who never had children or who are no longer raising children? What role would the Church have us play?

And for those of us who are mothers, is utter selflessness to be our aim? This idea leaves many of us feeling guilty for having our own goals and ambitions, even giving ourselves permission to have our own desires. Sometimes I feel guilty for buying crunchy peanut butter when the rest of the family wants creamy!

I visited Italy last year, soaking in all of that art (and pasta and wine, too). In every church and on many street corners, I saw portrayals of Mary. Over and over again, she had her eyes downcast, her hands holding Jesus or folded in prayer and her mouth shut in silent obedience.

Is that all there is to Mary?

Perhaps the reason there are so many distorted images of Mary is because the Church and our society have maintained a distorted image of women, according to Marian scholar Sally Cunneen. Religious art narrowly depicts Mary as silent and submissive, neglecting all the other dimensions of her character. Art typically does not portray her as fully human, as one who experiences the full range of emotions. She is not even allowed to age! Mary with grey hair? Unthinkable!

Mary was fully human. And we see this in the Magnificat in Luke’s gospel. The first part is filled with joy and praise about how God has blessed Mary.

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**PIETÀ MARY**
The earth is struggling, and so many are ignoring the impending disaster. Inspired by Michelangelo, *Pieta Mary* is seated with a dying earth on her lap. Notice where she and the children are touching the earth; there is the beginning of healing.

**COMPASSIONATE MARY**
Who doesn’t need to be wrapped in Mary’s compassionate embrace? I received divine notice that this painting was not for me but was created for a hurting world.

**VEIL OF ARROWS**
Inspired by Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ story about Mary wearing a shirt of arrows in Untie the Strong Women Soul, *Veil of Arrows* portrays Mary as a protector, shielding you from the arrows life throws at you.

**PROUD MARY**
Mary had to be a bold and confident leader of the early Church. And by then, she had gray hair! *Proud Mary* portrays a bold woman of a certain age who exudes wisdom and confidence. She stares out directly at the viewer with arms crossed in defiance. Don’t mess with this woman!

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**Why Reimagine Mary?**
*By Mary Coffey*

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**BARBED-WIRE MARY**
Inspired by Piero della Francesca’s Madonna della Misericordia, *Barbed-Wire Mary* spreads apart barbed wire to allow immigrants to enter under the protection of her cloak. She looks at you as if to ask what you are doing about this situation.
But then, the hymn turns radical. The words capture a strong yearning for a transformed world, a longing for the fulfillment of God’s promises of justice and peace, of full bellies and liberated bodies, of uplifting the lowly and dismantling oppressive regimes.

These strong words are not sung by the gentle, tender, dreamy young girl I saw in all the Italian artwork. This version of Mary is passionate, proud, and enthusiastic about the new beginning, about the hope for a transformed world. This is Mary who has seen the injustices of her people and is ready to take a stand, to speak up, and maybe to flip a table or two.

Why is it important to see Mary as fully human? To see her as a woman who experienced all the feelings? To realize that she had emotional reactions, like anger and impatience, that may not have been considered "lady-like" then or now?

If we can see Mary as angry, then we can give ourselves permission to be angry. If we see Mary as joyfully singing and dancing, then we can give ourselves permission to find joy and sing loudly at the top of our lungs. If we can see Mary as troubled by unjust circumstances, then we can tap into our troubling feelings and turn our negative emotions into positive fuel to fight against injustices.

We need to re-envision Mary with images that liberate her, images that are empowering, images that depict Mary as angry at the injustices of the world – just the way she sounds in the Magnificat.

Liberating portrayals help us to understand Mary as a sign of what we can be when we are aware of the divine presence in the world and, most importantly, in our very souls. I have painted a series of nine images that reimagine Mary and, by extension, all women, so that we can see what it looks like to be strong, empowered, confident, and assertive, all while living out God’s invitation to be holy. Here are my paintings with a bit of my inspiration for each one.

For more details and progress pictures, be sure to watch the recording of the Reimagining Mary Art Show available on YouTube at: https://youtu.be/Twun2qxCeAc. You can view and order paintings and prints in my gallery space on my website at https://artfulspirituality.com/gallery/.

Mary Coffey, ARCPW, is a self-taught artist who likes to play with acrylics, watercolors, collage fodder, and mark-making tools. She is currently obsessed with painting expressive faces. A certified spiritual director, she has a master’s degree in theology, a law degree, and is the 2020 winner of the Tyrian Network Artist Award.

Besides playing with color, she loves hiking to waterfalls, snap-chatting with her four grown children, and reading in her pjs.
This book, the third in the Flowering series, transports the reader to the mid 21st century. Jahanara is an Arabic name which means “flowering,” and this describes the series, the main character, and indeed all of the characters in the series. Although it is possible to read Jahanara without reading the first two books, I advise against it. The theme, flowering, is best seen by following the development of all of the characters in Jahanara’s life.

In the first book, Flowering, the reader is introduced to Aubrey, who later becomes adoptive father to Jahanara, the title character. Aubrey is an African American nurse, who spent several years in Thailand. When he returns, he reconnects with an old friend, Cecily. She is a successful realtor and travel agent who lives with her dog, Romeo, in Seaside, a small town on the Pacific Northwest coast. Cecily is not a romantic interest for Aubrey; nevertheless, she plays a significant role in helping him out of a very difficult situation. Recognizing that there is no romance between the two friends, Aubrey begins a long distance internet relationship with Aida, a landscape artist, whose family background is Iranian. Throughout the series, the writer skillfully blends cultures.

The theme of water becomes evident when a tsunami strikes the Pacific Northwest. Cecily’s waterfront house is destroyed. Her livelihood is threatened, as is Aubrey’s employment. This is clearly a crisis for all involved, especially for Cecily.

Aubrey and Aida marry, and Aubrey adopts Jahanara, Aida’s niece, the daughter of her homeless, drug-taking sister. They settle in the town in Tennessee where Aida, a landscape artist, works. Eventually, they add a son, Seamus, and a daughter, Jasmine, to their family. Unfortunately, tragedy visits them, and Cecily comes back into Aubrey’s life to help him cope.

In the second book of the series, entitled Cecily, her life is explored in more detail. She has experienced much heartache. At age 16, she was profoundly affected when she gave birth to a child. She believes that the child was taken from her by an arrangement that her parents devised. Cecily blamed them for deceiving her into allowing Bobby’s adoption. Suddenly, the boy, now a young man of 20, discovers his birthmother. Cecily is confronted with serious decisions regarding Bobby and her relationship with her parents. As her life enfolds, she begins to flower. She is reconciled with her parents, and she moves back to her home town in Oklahoma. She and Nicco Rainbird, a friend from her childhood, rediscover each other.

Book 3, Jahanara, continues by weaving the characters from books 1 and 2 more deeply into the plot. Even when she was a small child, Jahanara would visit animals in shelters. Her love for them flowers during vacations to visit “Aunt Cecily” in Oklahoma. All of the characters who play significant roles in Jahanara’s life love animals. Animal rescue is frequently mentioned.

Even as a small child, Jahanara picked up on adult concerns about the coming climate crisis. These synthesize to the point where, by age fifteen, Jahanara knew she wanted to be a veterinarian. She receives a scholarship to Tufts University in Massachusetts. On Jahanara’s train ride to college, the water theme expressed throughout the series becomes clear. The older lady with whom she shares a seat keeps pointing out that the scenery is beautiful. Jahanara knows that the rising water table, although producing beauty, is demonstrating a gloomy future for the climate of the earth.

Jahanara reaches her goal; she becomes a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. Her first employment in that capacity is with Francis Day, DVM. During her interview, she is called upon to deliver a foal. Doctor Day is amazed at her ability and promptly hires her.

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Living on the Edge  by Bridget Mary Meehan

Grounded in this faith, women priests follow the example of Jesus who called both women and men to ministry at the extravagant feast of divine love. On the inside edge of Catholicism, the women priests’ movement is deconstructing medieval practices and reconstructing sacramental rituals that are meaningful for contemporary Catholics. For example, the entire assembly is often invited to share in the homily and to pray the Eucharistic Prayer in inclusive liturgies. In the celebration of baptism, parents take an active role, which may include pouring water over their child's head as the priest prays the formula. When the community gathers around a sick person, a loved one anoints forehead and hands with sacred chrism, as the entire group prays for healing and wholeness. At ordinations, the bishop lays hands on the ordinand; so does the community.

There are no punishments, excommunication, or man-made laws that will stop this Spirit-filled movement for equality in the Church. As women priests advance with love and faith, they are moving mountains in a holy shakeup that will reverberate through history for centuries to come!

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.

Lessons from the Garden  by Ann Harrington

How clever of God to hide the Paschal Mystery in my garden!

Fruit and vegetable peelings, egg shells and coffee grounds, moldy bread and peanut shells make compost a source of new life, drawing us into nurturing and caring and loving. We make plans, we see visions of the future, and then that life unexpectedly dies. Or does it? The seeds are still out there. Maybe next year they will sprout and mature . . .

This thought surprised me. The fifth anniversary of my son’s passing was November 4. Perhaps he whispered this in my ear.

Ann Harrington, ARCWP, wife, mother, grandmother, and 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.

Jahanara  by Lorraine Sharpe  reviewed by Maureen McGill

Eventually, Jahanara marries Jack Day, the son of Doctor and Mrs. Day. Jack is also a veterinarian who initially specializes in research. Jahanara and Jack continue their veterinary practices by seeking out injured and threatened animals. In time, the younger Days give birth to twins, a boy and a girl, who they hope will continue to work for the betterment of the planet.

Throughout book 3, the growing climate crisis becomes clear. Although this is a work of fiction, the author attempts to delve into the years 2045 to 2070. The loss of animal species, the rising water, and fires are obvious. Could this be the future of the planet?

Despite all the losses caused by climate crisis in the 21st century, Jahanara’s story reminds us of the beauty and grandeur of this earth that is worth fighting to save.

Before her ordination to the priesthood in 2016, Lorraine Sharpe, ARCWP served most of her 82 years as nurse to people with leprosy and other chronic illnesses and as hospital chaplain. Now, as a writer, her goal is the use of fiction to prod us forward, to protect, and to love the magnificent gift of life that we all, humans, animals, and plants, receive every day from our God.

Maureen McGill, ARCWP, 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 two adult daughters and five grandchildren.
From the Editor by Nori Kieran-Meredith

Leading is very pleased to announce that Diane Burroughs, ARCWP, has assumed the role of graphic designer for the newsletter.

Diane has a bachelor’s degree in studio art with an M.A. in pastoral theology. Additionally, she holds graduate certificates in spirituality and spiritual direction.

Diane has served as retreat master, novice iconographer, and on numerous arts councils. The exhibits of her artwork include one for the National Catholic Conference of Bishops.

We are honored to have Diane join our staff, and we anticipate a long and fruitful relationship!

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 a Southern California Dignity chapter and in multiple capacities within ARCWP.

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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.

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

Galatians 3:28