

# **‘Baptised into Christ’**

## ***From Paul to WATAC<sup>1</sup>***

Address to the WATAC NSW Conference  
Function Centre, Canterbury Park, Sydney  
2 May 2009

### **Introduction**

Approximately 2000 years ago the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians:

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (3:27-28)<sup>2</sup>

This is the Year of Paul.<sup>3</sup> Our prophetic task is clear. It is more urgent than ever. As Catholic women we must persist in calling for ecclesial reform so that we can participate as fully in the Church as in the Pauline churches.<sup>4</sup> This task means, above all, changing the imagination of those in the Church who have the power to stop the continuing exclusion and oppression of women caused by what I see as sinful, discriminatory structures and practices. I am arguing, in other words, that our baptism must be taken seriously,<sup>5</sup> as seriously as Paul took it.

---

<sup>1</sup> This address is an adaptation of the one given to the Catholic Bishops and Congregational Leaders of Aotearoa New Zealand, at Waikanae, 6 March 2006. I was invited to give the original address at the 2007 WATAC Conference. However, events overtook me, namely a cardiac arrest. My experience then of the God who can bring life in the most hopeless situations gives me added reason to hope for the change I seek. A reflection on my experience, ‘Easter: Always and Everywhere’ is available at <http://www.welcom.org.nz/?sid=426>. A later reflection ‘Nearly a Holy Soul’ is available at <http://www.welcom.org.nz/?sid=709>

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict chose this quote in his first General Audience (2/07/08) at the start of the Year of Paul. Available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20080702\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080702_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> The Year of the Priest begins 19 June 2009. At this stage I can think no topic providing a more telling contrast. Paul’s decision-making power came through baptism which he lived out fully. Even though he describes his preaching as a ‘priestly’ work – a sacrificial offering (Rom 15:16), Paul was never ordained. And what a legacy the layman has left! I am asking that women be given the same chance to live out their baptism.

<sup>4</sup> In a very carefully argued chapter in support of women’s ordination, the late Old Testament scholar Carroll Stuhlmueller (1978) suggests that the interaction of religion and culture in Old Testament times, which resulted in Israel adopting leadership institutions from outside, such as judge, king, prophet, elder, priest and sage, can direct the Church today. He claims:

At this hour when women have proven their effective leadership in many parts of the secular sphere, the Church is obliged by biblical precedent to open leadership roles to them and to await the wonder and the surprise of such a move. (p. 29)

Let me make it clear at the outset that what I offer comes from my perspective as a Pakeha woman religious in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2009. I do not claim to speak on behalf of all women everywhere nor on behalf of women religious at this conference, let alone the rest of the world. I am not speaking on behalf of the Sisters of Mercy, nor am I speaking on behalf of the Wellington Catholic Education Centre. I am quite certain, however, that many Catholic women wherever they may be will identify with my position. Let me also make it clear that I am not arguing for women's ordination in the current understanding of priesthood. I am arguing that our baptism be taken seriously.

While there are many ways<sup>6</sup> to explore the conference theme *Futuring Now*, I have taken up Pope Benedict's challenge (28 June 2008) to find out what 'Paul wants to speak to us

---

<sup>5</sup> As early as 1980 New Zealand Cardinal Tom Williams (2004, pp. 54-55) emphasised the importance of a renewed understanding of baptism for the future of the church:

I am as committed now, as Archbishop, to the concept of lay ministry as before. Not because there are now fewer priests engaged in pastoral work! I refuse to accept the diminished number of priests as reason for encouraging lay ministry. I do recognise, however, that perhaps God has blessed us by not calling as many as before to the priestly ministry and so providing an occasion for rediscovering lay ministry and coming to understand the theology of Church and mission which underlies and gives purpose and scope to ministry. Seeing lay ministry as the solution to the priest shortage tempts us to setting it in the context of expediency. We will end up trying to fill gaps and maintain obsolete models of pastoral care. Seeing lay ministry as an expression of mission arising from baptism and confirmation leads us to setting it in its proper theological context. We will begin transforming our structures and methods of evangelisation, and establishing new, more relevant and effective models for pastoral care. *From 'Lay ministries', a presentation given at a seminar on lay ministries, at the Pastoral Centre, Palmerston North, 20-22 June 1980.*

<sup>6</sup> A very fruitful way would be to explore the theme of leadership expressed in tomorrow's Gospel (John 10:11-18). Traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday, the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter is a day when the Church highlights the need for authentic leaders. When Jesus speaks about the authority of leaders, he uses the shepherd image. In fact, the sheep and shepherd image for Church is the most common image used in the New Testament. In many ways it is the most challenging to appreciate today because 1) we don't like to think of ourselves as sheep in need of a shepherd, 2) the image is very masculine, 3) the shepherd is the one with power over the sheep (Baima, 2008, p. 336). But Jesus makes an extraordinary claim: as the good shepherd he is willing to lay down his life for his sheep! This radical statement really upends the Old Testament understanding of the leadership metaphor. Jesus contrasts his own behaviour as the good shepherd with that of others put in charge who run away at the first sign of trouble (vv. 7-13). They don't really care about the sheep. Jesus cares very deeply. He knows them, he is intimately related to them. This relationship is based on the relationship he has with his father which he speaks about in today's gospel (John 14:7-14). 'If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him' (v. 7). Furthermore, as Thomas Baima (2008) points out, in the Book of Revelation the shepherd himself is a sheep, the Lamb of God. This image actually merges with the doctrine of the incarnation, reminding us that the one who shepherds has first fully identified with us by becoming one with us. And it was Paul who pretty quickly understood the enormity of this self-emptying and spelled it out in that magnificent hymn we heard on Palm Sunday (Phil 2: 6-11). So when Jesus handed over the responsibility and authority to shepherd (to feed and look after the flock) to Peter at the end of the Gospel of John, he did so against the requirement of the shepherd to, firstly, be a sheep and, secondly, to be prepared to lay down his life. As well as Thomas Baima, Bernard Lee (1995), Henri Nouwen (1989), and David Ranson (2004) also explore the shepherd leadership image in ways that address the conference theme. Barbara Reid, Carolyn Osiek and Ronald Witherup (1996) provide essential background material on the biblical and pastoral-liturgical tradition of shepherd. (In Aotearoa New Zealand, however, a country with 40 million

– today.’ The Paul who demonstrated over and over again with utter conviction, ‘I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal 2: 20), challenges us to live out of that same conviction today. I will spend the next hour suggesting some of the implications of this.

### **Brief outline**

After noting my social location, I will:

1. remind us of the Spirit’s presence,
2. identify Church documents giving us a mandate to seek reform,
3. examine the meaning of ‘prophetic’,
4. set out my present concerns,
5. list some signs of hope,
6. explore Galatians 3:27-28,
7. remember some of the women.

### **Social location**

I have been a Sister of Mercy since 1978 and involved throughout that time in the teaching ministry. Apart from study periods at Boston College and at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, I have lived my religious life in Wellington. It is from there that I view the world through a feminist Catholic lens. I live in a country where women have featured prominently in many leadership roles (Prime Minister, Governor General, Chief Justice, Speaker of the House, CEO of the largest company, mayor of Wellington, the capital city, etc). I work in a building in Wellington which houses many Catholic diocesan offices as well as several national offices. It is located across the street from Parliament, next door to the Catholic Cathedral and the Archbishop’s residence, two doors from the Anglican Cathedral and Archbishop’s residence and a two-minute walk from the Reserve Bank, the Prime Minister’s residence, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and many other Government Ministries. My office looks out at Parliament Buildings. Thus I am in the middle of an area in which important social, economic, political and religious decisions are made every day.

Women are able to make decisions at the highest level in all places except the Catholic Church. Why? In a nutshell, because decision-making in the Church is linked to ordination rather than to baptism and at this point in our history the institutional imagination is unable to conceive of women as images of Christ when it comes to presiding at Eucharist. So I will be arguing throughout this presentation that our baptism be taken seriously and, in this Year of Paul, as seriously as Paul himself took baptism.

A challenge indeed! But as our former Prime Minister Helen Clark said in a radio interview (8/04/09) about taking up her new position as head of the United Nations Development Programme, ‘What’s life without a challenge?’ So let us begin!

---

sheep and only 4 million people, the biblical shepherd imagery is always problematic. The farmer on horseback/farm bike with his/her dogs leads the huge flock from behind. Perhaps it is suggestive of lay leadership: the sheep with a communal mind of their own setting the pace and choosing the way down from the high country.)

## **The Presence of the Spirit**

We need to remind ourselves of the Spirit's presence among us at this gathering<sup>7</sup>. And we can be sure that this Spirit is poured out on all of us, not just some, for we have that wonderful passage from Acts (2:14-21) where Peter quotes from the prophet Joel (2:28):

'It will come to pass in the last days,' God says,  
'that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh.  
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your young men shall see visions,  
your old men shall dream dreams.  
Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids  
I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days,  
and they shall prophesy.'

We know that we cannot control the Spirit. The Gospel of John tells us: 'The Spirit blows where it wills' (3:8). And it is this very Spirit who will lead us into all the truth (16:13).

So we need to be alert to the signs of the Spirit, bringing newness, bringing hope, bringing a new vision here among us at this conference. Theologically, of course, the only way the Spirit can act to bring about newness is through human agency, and that means through you and me, through all of us here today.

Paul<sup>8</sup> reminds us today, as he reminded the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:2), that we are holy because God dwells in us through the spirit bestowed on us in our baptism. He asks rhetorically, 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Cor 3:16).

Paul also reminds us: 'Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances' (1 Thess 5: 19-24). The Spirit can effect more that we can ever hope or imagine. As theologian Richard Lennan (2009a) observes:

Although the Spirit will never invalidate what have been life-giving and authentic 'channels of grace' in the past – God is not arbitrary – not every such channel is efficacious in all ages of the church; *the Spirit can open new paths* for the

---

<sup>7</sup> Theologian Elizabeth Johnson (2002, p.140) points out that there is ultimately only one source of authority for the Church, the Holy Spirit, and that women are gifted in three ways with the Spirit:

- Through their vocation as baptised persons that makes them into prophets, priests and leaders as part of the body of Christ;
- Through their actual experience of living the Christian life that gives them a growing wisdom in discerning the truth in love by the power of the Holy Spirit;
- Through their negative contrast experiences of suffering, that make them keenly aware of the power of sin and impel them to raise voices of resistance and hope in compassionate solitude with those who weep.

<sup>8</sup> While the role of the Spirit underpins all of Paul's letters he has only one extended treatment – Romans 8 (Stegman, 2008, p.16).

church's faithful discipleship in the present and future: the continuity of tradition, therefore, can express itself in discontinuity. [italics added]

### **Our mandate for reform**

That we have a mandate to seek reform is found in various Church documents, especially those from Vatican II. A key piece here, of course, is the prophetic statement from *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), which continues to give many of us such hope.

Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on *sex*, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as *contrary to God's intent*. (# 29) [italics added].

As theologian Elizabeth Johnson (2002, p. 51) reminds us, the theological term today for 'contrary to God's intent' is sin. What the Council taught is that discrimination against women on account of their sex is sinful.

Another important statement in which we can locate a mandate for seeking reform comes from the 1971 Synod document *Justice in the World*:

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognises that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself. (# 40)

But prior to this, there is a very strong reminder about the need for reform in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism (1964):

Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated – to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself – these can and should be set right at the opportune moment. (# 6)

The safety net here, of course, for those wishing to maintain business as usual, is the 'deposit of faith', commonly understood as the 'teaching of Jesus Christ as found in Scripture and in the apostolic tradition' (Dallavalle, 1995, p. 409). However, this 'deposit' is not an uninterpreted, objective body of knowledge which fell from on high. It came originally through the minds and pens of men out of their experience upon which they had reflected.<sup>9</sup> The process of inspiration did not neutralise the human tendency to

---

<sup>9</sup> Theologian Lieven Boeve (2003, pp. 15-35) examines the notion of the Christian tradition (the content and the handing on) and suggests several ways to conceptualise its development, e.g., recontextualisation.. This basically means that our particular context challenges us to give shape in a contemporary way to the message of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ.

impose a particular view. Since then this ‘deposit of faith’ has been and continues to be officially interpreted solely by men, some of whom, according to their lights at the time, sanctioned slavery, the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the death penalty, among other atrocities, and wrote, preached and taught the most horrendous lies about women.<sup>10</sup> These men sincerely believed that they were being faithful to the Tradition.<sup>11</sup> We now know, of course, that they lacked the institutional imagination to see that other truths were indeed possible.

Theologian Nancy Dallavalle (1995, p. 409) calls the ‘deposit of faith’ ‘an inexhaustible treasure of which the Church is the trustee’. Often it seems as if the treasure has been exhausted with nothing more to explore. Thus, the Church has spoken on the ordination of women and the matter is closed. However, the ‘deposit of faith’ or the ‘storehouse of revelation’ (*Lumen Gentium* #10) is not the property of the magisterium but rather it is entrusted to the Church as a whole under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (*Dei Verbum* #10). Furthermore:

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, *so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood* and set forth to greater advantage. (GS #44) [italics added]

The Church guards the heritage of God's word and draws from it moral and religious principles *without always having at hand the solution to particular problems*. (GS #33) [italics added]

Promulgated in 1964, *Lumen Gentium* states:

---

<sup>10</sup> Among some of the more well-known statements are the following:

- ‘You are the she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, which is man. On account of your sin, even the Son of God had to die.’ (Tertullian)
- ‘The woman with her husband is the image of God in such a way that the whole of that substance is one image, but when she is assigned her function of being a helper, which is her concern alone, she is not the image of God; whereas in what concerns man alone he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the woman is joined to him in one whole.’ (St Augustine)
- ‘a defective male,’ ‘a misbegotten male’ (St Thomas Aquinas)
- ‘Among all savage beasts, none is found to be so harmful as woman.’ (St John Chrysostom)

<sup>11</sup> Lennan (2009a) quotes from a number of well-known theologians, e.g., Rahner, Dulles, Johnson, Power, pointing out what it means to be faithful to the tradition. He quotes from Pius XII (1949):

The Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, like the physical members who constitute it does not live and act in the abstract, out of touch with the constantly changing conditions of time and place; it is not and cannot be segregated from the world around it; it always belongs to a particular age, it advances with it day by day and hour by hour, constantly adapting itself in manner and attitude to the society in which it must exercise its influence.

The laity have the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their spiritual shepherds the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the word of God and of the sacraments. They should openly reveal to them their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ. They are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and *sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church.* ( #37). [italics added]

So we have a mandate to seek reform, which is found in Church documents.

Canon Law also supports our call for change:

The Christian faithful are free to make known to the pastors of the Church their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires. (Can. 212.2)

According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons. (Can. 212.3)

What we have then in these documents and in Canon Law is, I believe, an invitation, at the very least, to raise questions concerning the full participation of women in the Church today by virtue of our baptism.

It seems to me that we must be allowed to talk about the issue and that the talk must not be an institutional monologue. We need to have a genuine conversation in which the *question* is in control, not the conversation partners, neither of whom can predetermine the outcome (Himes, 2005, p. 29). Both partners need to keep the Gospel in view, to listen with humility, not with the conviction of the rightness of their positions.<sup>12</sup> Both partners really need to ask how the structures and processes of the institutional Church can best serve the truth of the Gospel.

And as theologian Michael Himes (2005, p. 29) points out, we have in our tradition good models of the Church learning from the world<sup>13</sup> rather than teaching the world, first, in terms of slavery<sup>14</sup> and, second, in the adoption of the language of human rights in

---

<sup>12</sup> Thus, since I stated at the outset that I believe women are being sinfully discriminated against by the institutional Church, it would be difficult for me to accept that my conviction is wrong.

<sup>13</sup> It must be remembered, however, that the western 'world' was permeated with the biblical tradition.

<sup>14</sup> Irish Capuchin Owen O'Sullivan (2003, p.41) notes the Church's earlier teaching on slavery as follows:

Catholic social teaching. In both of these cases the Church did not teach the world, rather it had to learn from the world.<sup>15</sup> These examples should encourage us to hope that the Church will eventually learn something from the 'world' regarding the rights of women. But for this to happen we need to be prophetic.

### **Sharing in the prophetic task**

We all share in Christ's prophetic role as outlined in *Lumen Gentium*:

The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to His name. (#12)

Christ, the great Prophet, who proclaimed the Kingdom of His Father both by the testimony of His life and the power of His words, continually fulfils His prophetic office until the complete manifestation of glory. He does this not only through the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority, but also through the laity. (#35)

The *prophetic, priestly and royal* condition is common to all the People of God (cf. *LG* #9, 10, 34, 35, 36).

In *Religious and Human Promotion* (1978) we were reminded that to accomplish the mission of evangelisation

...the Church must search out the *signs of the times* and interpret them in the light of the gospel, thus responding to persistent human questions. (Introduction)

One of the signs of the times that John XXIII identified in 1963 concerned women. In *Pacem in Terris* we read:

[I]t is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life. This is happening more rapidly perhaps in nations with a Christian tradition, and more slowly, but broadly, among people who have inherited other traditions or cultures.

---

*The truth about the Church's doctrine being unchanging:* consider, for example, the following teaching on slavery: 'Servitude itself, considered in itself and absolutely, is by no means repugnant to the natural and divine law, and there can be present very many just titles for servitude, as can be seen by consulting the approved theologians and interpreters of the canons ...' (from *Instruction no. 1293 of the Holy Office*, (the predecessor to the CDF), in reply to questions from the Vicar Apostolic among the Galla (of Ethiopia), on 20 June 1866).

<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, theologian Paul Lakeland (2007, p. 82) argues that the church is not monolithic, but dynamic and evolving. He claims:

The weight of the historical evidence would strongly suggest that it is quite appropriate to ask how democratic sensibilities might have something important to offer the church today, and that it is entirely probable that the church will evolve, willy-nilly, to incorporate some genuine role for the voice of the whole community into its structures of governance.



Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as inanimate objects or mere instruments, but claim both in domestic and public life, the rights and duties that befit a human person. (#41)

Note, however, that it is **women** who are identified as becoming more aware of their own human dignity. It's not that **men** are becoming more aware of women's dignity, let alone institutions.

We can all 'search out the signs of the times' and we can all read them. To my way of thinking many of them are writ large and clear, but the question is, whose interpretation counts?<sup>16</sup> At this point in our history, my interpretation and that of numerous women like me throughout the world counts for very little. If it did there would be no need to argue that our baptism be fully acknowledged. We would have a Church operating, not just in theory but in practice, as 'women and men equally created in God's image, equally redeemed by Christ, equally called to be disciples, equally entrusted with Christ's mission, and equally endowed with Spirit' (Reid, 1996, p.10).<sup>17</sup>

In *Redemptionis Donum* (1983), we were again reminded by Pope John Paul that all the baptised share in Christ's prophetic role:

The universal mission of the People of God is rooted in the messianic mission of Christ Himself – Prophet, Priest and King – a mission in which all share in different ways. (#7)

However, a document which refers specifically to women religious and the prophetic nature of religious life is *Vita Consecrata*, the (1996) Synod document. It is the sections below which give me the authority as a religious to claim what I am claiming, i.e., that we need a change in the institutional imagination:

Certainly, the validity of many assertions relating to the position of women in different sectors of society and of the Church cannot be denied. It is equally important to point out that women's new self-awareness also helps men to reconsider their way of looking at things, the way they understand themselves,

---

<sup>16</sup>I find Lennan's position here both helpful and hopeful: 'The church reads the Scripture, in relationship with the 'signs' of the times', with the expectation that it will be led by the Spirit to encounter in new ways the God who is always greater' (2009a).

<sup>17</sup> New Testament scholar Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (1996, p. 290) points out that it is in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 that we find the first and only explicit defence of the complete equality of women in the New Testament:

Paul overturned the traditional argument from the chronological priority of the male in the creation narrative by pointing out that the chronological priority of women in the birth narrative is just as much part of God's plan for the order of his creation. This elementary argument functions as proof for the principle, 'As Christians, woman is not otherwise than man, and man is not otherwise than woman.' Equality is the issue here, not complementarity.

where they place themselves in history and how they interpret it, and the way they organise social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life. (#57)

As we saw in *Pacem in Terris*, here once again it is ‘women’s new self-awareness’ that is bringing about changes in how **men** understand **themselves**, **their** place in history, **their** interpretation of it, and the way **they** organise social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life. The male is still the norm. There is no hint here of the God-given equality of women and men. At the same time, however, the document does urge women religious to use their experience as women in the Church to proclaim prophetically the gospel message of equality:

Having received from Christ a message of liberation, the Church has the mission to proclaim this message prophetically, promoting ways of thinking and acting which correspond to the mind of the Lord. In this context the consecrated woman, on the basis of her experience of the Church and as a woman in the Church, can help eliminate certain one-sided perspectives which do not fully recognise her dignity and her specific contribution to the Church's life and pastoral and missionary activity. Consecrated women therefore rightly aspire to have their identity, ability, mission and responsibility more clearly recognised, both in the awareness of the Church and in everyday life. (#57)<sup>18</sup>

All of these documents call us to be prophetic. As Barbara Reid (2009, p. 10) points out, prophets need the support of one another, hence our gathering today. What then is the task of the prophet?<sup>19</sup>

It was the biblical prophets who engaged in extravagant, wild imaginings: the lion and lamb would lie down together, swords would be beaten into ploughshares, dry bones would come to life. They dared to imagine the impossible. That is our task today.

New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders (2000, p. 138) argues that prophecy is not about telling the future. Rather ‘it is about telling what time it is, what it is time for, in the present’. She uses the work of Rabbi Abraham Heschel (1962) and Old Testament

---

<sup>18</sup> Of course what the following paragraph recommends can never be totally achieved until our baptism is fully recognised:

It is therefore urgently necessary to take certain concrete steps, beginning by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves. (#58)

<sup>19</sup> In my original presentation I explored the role of the prophet Miriam whom the prophetic tradition recalls as the equal of Moses and Aaron representing the people before God (Micah 6:3-4). I argued that Miriam offers us hope in our quest to bring about a change in the institutional imagination because she:

- Took the initiative to bring life when death seemed the only option
- Created a song and dance beyond clerical control
- Asked the hard question despite the cost.

scholar Walter Brueggemann (1978) to explain that there are three requirements for the prophet:

1. The ability to see and hear the human experience from God's point of view.
2. The ability to:
  - a. lament<sup>20</sup> publicly, i.e., to declare to both the oppressor and the oppressed that all is not right with the present situation.
  - b. recall God's promises and thereby give hope for an alternative future.<sup>21</sup>
3. The willingness to suffer and even die<sup>22</sup> for the sake of the newness one is called to proclaim.

With this understanding of the prophet's task as background, and in the light of various Church documents calling us all to be prophetic, what then does it mean for us here and now?<sup>23</sup> As I said at the beginning, this ultimately means changing the imagination of

---

<sup>20</sup> Regarding our biblical mandate to complain Dianne Bergant (1999, p. 241) points out that the book of Lamentations is filled with complaints from beginning to end! Job, too, was a great complainer and many psalms are grumbles writ large. However, complaints can actually be statements of faith because they acknowledge God's power to alleviate suffering and they demonstrate confidence that God will intervene.

<sup>21</sup> Schneiders notes that engendering hope can be extremely difficult because:

Those who control the system do so by paralysing the imagination of the oppressed through the control of language, because what cannot be said cannot be thought or sought. The prophet is one who has a fund of language that does not come from the system. It comes from the Word of God. With this new Word of promise the prophet can seed the imagination of the oppressed with images that subvert the conviction of inevitability and the divine legitimation of the system and engender hope for a better world. (p. 142)

<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to recall that Paul commends Prisca and Aquila 'who risked their necks for me' (Rom 16:4). And of course Jesus refers to himself as the 'good shepherd' who 'lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11) in tomorrow's gospel.

<sup>23</sup> Brueggemann (2001, p. xvi) acknowledges that while God can raise up prophets anywhere and at any time, some social environments are more favourable than others. He speaks of prophets being naturally in sub-communities that stand in tension with the dominant community. Perhaps Catholic women could be identified here as sub-communities. Brueggemann claims that such a sub-community is likely to be one in which:

- there is a long and available memory that sinks the present generation deep into an identifiable past that is available in song and story;
- there is an available, expressed sense of pain that is owned and recited as a real social fact, that is visibly acknowledged in a public way, and that is understood as unbearable for the long term;
- there is an active practice of hope, a community that knows about promises yet to be kept, promises that stand in judgment on the present;
- there is an effective mode of discourse that is cherished across the generations, that is taken as distinctive, and that is richly coded in ways that only insiders can know.

Furthermore, this sub-community has committed itself for the long haul to be in tension with the dominant community which responds to the sub-community 'at best as an inconvenience, at worst as an unbearable interruption'. Do we as women experience ourselves as, or are we viewed by the institutional Church as, 'at best an inconvenience, at worst an unbearable interruption'?

those in the Church who have the power to stop the exclusion and oppression of women caused by what I see as sinful, discriminatory structures and practices.<sup>24</sup> So what are some of these structures and practices? I turn now to the institutional problem as I see it.

### **My present concerns**

As I understand it, the Church teaches today what it hasn't always taught, namely, that women are fully and equally made in the image of God. It still has problems with whether or not women can image Christ (Johnson, 2002, p. 57). At my baptism (which called me into the Church<sup>25</sup>, not out of it) I was anointed to be priest, prophet and king in the same way as everyone else in this room. I became a new creation, baptised into Christ. It is from this Church that I will one day be buried in a liturgy that like the baptismal one will affirm that I am as equally *in Christ* as Benedict XVI. This is where the real shift in the institutional imagination has to come. At the moment we have cause for despair.

These are the reasons why:<sup>26</sup>

1. While the Church has addressed and continues to address the first two areas of division named by Paul (Gal: 3:28), i.e., that between slave and free person and between Jew and Gentile, it still refuses to address the issue of sexism in the Church.
2. While the Church is called to preach a Gospel of divinely-willed equality, liberation and justice in society, it maintains structures which guarantee women's inequality.
3. While the Church is unable to find any mandate in Scripture for its claim that God willed that women be denied full access to the sacraments, it claims it has not yet received from God any power to change this man-made teaching.
4. While the Church rightly insists that because women are human, women have full and equal human rights and responsibilities – politically, economically, socially,

---

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Radcliffe OP (2009, p.4) calls for 'institutional creativity so that lay people, especially women, acquire a voice.'

<sup>25</sup> In a public response to the Bishop of Auckland, Patrick Dunn, I have previously stated (Julian, 2003):

Women like me will never leave the Church – our baptism calls us into it and we love it too much. The issue of women's equal participation in the Church will not go away – not in this country where women have proved time and again that they can effect monumental change in the male imagination. Women like me are the inheritors of a tremendous sense of vision, passion, energy, initiative and hope that we would be foolish to forget. Kate Sheppard lives on in all of us!

<sup>26</sup> This list is by no means exhaustive and omits any mention of the Trinity, in whose image we are made as a communion and in which subordination is absolutely impossible. Lisa Sowle Cahill (2004, pp. 127-149) has a very helpful and fuller development.

culturally, and ecclesially – it always insists upon ‘a proper or special nature’ which prevents women from realising these rights.

5. While women’s rights are always circumscribed by their ‘special nature’, men’s rights are never circumscribed by their nature.
6. While our local bishops do ensure that their own documents are inclusive, they continue to allow into the country Vatican documents in exclusive language, an inexcusable practice since it is no longer normative in western society.<sup>27</sup>
7. While the Church can be loud in its call to other institutions to treat women as full human beings, it refuses to do this internally.
8. While the Church teaches authoritatively that baptism is more fundamental than holy orders, and that the mission of the Church belongs to all of us, years of clericalism marginalise and exclude women.
9. While God is neither male nor female, we are forced to pray in public to a God imaged overwhelmingly and almost idolatrously as male.
10. While God’s merciful forgiveness is freely available sacramentally, it can be mediated only through a male cleric.
11. While the Eucharist is **the** sacrament of unity, many women experience it as sacramental exclusion.
12. While the importance of Eucharist as source and summit of our lives is stressed, the Church’s one-dimensional imagination allows people to be starved of Eucharist, rather than admit that God’s eucharistic presence and grace cannot be so confined.
13. While women, precisely as women and not in spite of being women, are able to do what Christ did: bleed, feed, and give life to others, male clerics have to institutionalise ways to do this.
14. While God freely chose to take up a home in the body of a woman and Jesus put his earthly existence into women’s hands and allowed a woman to anoint him, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Osiek (2006, p.6) points out that when we meet masculine plural titles in the New Testament we should not always presume men to the exclusion of women. We know that both grammatically and in terms of social custom women were included with and embedded in men (as we still are in Vatican documents). Yet when it comes to leadership roles we assume that any references are to men only! So when we read, ‘God has established in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers’ (1 Cor 12:28) most people assume these groups consisted of men only.

- body of the resurrected Christ has somehow ended up exclusively in the hands of men.<sup>28</sup>
15. While Mary is the only human being who could really say of Jesus, ‘This is my body, this is my blood’, the Church decrees that only males can do this.
  16. While women and men can equally image Christ through martyrdom,<sup>29</sup> and women and men can re-present Christ’s own love in Christian marriage, and the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (#7) makes it clear that Christ is present in the gathered community of both women and men and that when anyone baptises (woman and man) it is Christ who baptises, half of humanity is deemed incapable of imaging Christ in the Eucharist.
  17. While the Church can affirm that a humble piece of bread represents Christ and actually becomes the Body of Christ, it cannot imagine how a woman priest could be a valid re-presentation of Christ.
  18. While the **Gospel** teaches that the image of Christ resides most clearly in the poor and the suffering, both women and men, e.g., Matt 25:31-46, the **Church** continues to be fixated on sexual similarity to the human male Jesus when it comes to imaging Christ as presider at Eucharist.<sup>30</sup>

Theologian Elizabeth Johnson (2002, p. 57) expresses this paradox particularly well:

---

<sup>28</sup> In a fascinating study, *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, Harvard historian Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek have brought together from a very comprehensive range of sources, the historical evidence relating to the ordination of women as deacons and presbyters in the early centuries until the sixth century (approx).

<sup>29</sup> A very clear example of this is when Paul is asked: ‘Why do you persecute me?’ (Acts 9:4), the ‘me’ is not the historic Jesus but rather the body of Christ, the Church which, of course, consists of both women and men. Similarly in his homily (28 June 2008) announcing the Year of Paul, Pope Benedict noted that the ‘me’ is the Church.

<sup>30</sup> Cardinal Levada the Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is reported to have explained in a homily why a homosexual priest makes it difficult for people to see the priest as representing Christ, as follows: "I think we must ask, 'Does such a priest recognise how this act places an obstacle to his ability to represent Christ the bridegroom to his bride, the people of God? Does he not see how his declaration places him at odds with the spousal character of love as revealed by God and imaged in humanity?'" It would seem that Levada is confusing the **symbolic** with the **real**. Christ is not a **real** bridegroom, nor is the Church a **real** bride. If Levada were to follow his logic through, he would have to ask, how is it that men can be images of the Church as bride, while women cannot be images of Christ as bridegroom? (CathNews 28/02/06).

In another example, spiritual writer and priest Daniel O’Leary (2209, p. 10) uses the image of a midwife to describe his priestly ministry. Again the question is raised, if a priest can image a midwife, can a woman image Christ as presider at Eucharist? Paul tells the Corinthians (women and men) to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 11:1). He also reminds us that the Spirit confers on us all (women and men) the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16; see Phil 2:5). Clearly, for the Vatican at present the mind is not sufficient.

The ambiguity of recent vintage regarding women's capacity to be images of Christ is truly unfortunate, for it has no basis in doctrine and in fact contradicts the central teaching of the church. Created women, baptised women, martyred women, sinful and redeemed women, holy women of all varieties: all are genuinely *imago Dei, imago Christi*. Anything less distorts God's good creation and shortchanges the theological truth of women's identity in Christ.

So having named some of the abusive structures and practices, is there any cause for optimism?

### **Glimmers of hope**

There are some positive signs. And as the author of 1 Peter advises, 'Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you' (3:15).

Here then are four hopeful signs:

1. When asked about the place of women in the Church, Pope Benedict said that women:

'...will know how to make their own space. And we will have to try and listen to God so as not to stand in their way but, on the contrary, to rejoice when the female element achieves the fully effective place in the Church best suited to her...' (19 August 2006, *The Tablet*)

2. At last October's Synod in Rome on 'The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church', for the first time ever, there were more women than men among the official 'observers'.<sup>31</sup> At the end of the Synod the 253 members (all bishops and leaders of men's religious orders) submitted 55 overwhelmingly approved proposals for the Pope to base his follow-up document on. The most controversial proposal was #17. Here the bishops suggested that 'the **ministry** [emphasis added] of lector be opened also to women so that their role as announcers of the Word may be recognised in the Christian community'. Why is this so significant? Don't women already read at Mass? Yes, we do and have done since Vatican II. That is, we are allowed to perform the 'function' of reader at Mass, but officially this is only a 'temporary' measure; we cannot be **ministers** of the Word in the same way that men can.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Thousands of women throughout the world had campaigned to ensure that the voice of the other half of the Church was heard. While they were not allowed to vote, the observers could attend all synod sessions, take part in the working groups and had an opportunity to address the entire synod assembly. Pope Benedict also allowed six women biblical scholars to be among the 41 resource people available to the synod members.

<sup>32</sup> Under current Canon Law (#230), the **ministry** of lector (i.e., reader) is technically open to males only. 'Lay men' can be installed 'in the **ministries** [emphasis added] of lector and acolyte', while 'lay persons' (including women) can 'fulfill the function of lector' by 'temporary deputation'. This is mainly for historical reasons. Prior to 1972 the office of lector was one of several 'minor orders' leading to priestly ordination. However, Pope Paul VI abolished these orders but retained lector and acolyte as **ministries** and opened them to laity. The catch was that he insisted they be for men only. Some of the 45

Whether or not the Pope grants the bishops' request doesn't really matter. What is important is to recognise the monumental shift in the institutional (i.e., male) imagination and the overwhelming willingness by the present bishops to heed (deliberately or not) the prophetic statement from Vatican II quoted earlier (*Gaudium et Spes*, # 29).

3. In his homily during the Mass in Dublin in May 2006 to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Mercy by Catherine McAuley, the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, said:

You are called to re-imagine her vision in our time, to re-evaluate structures and to reconfigure yourselves in light of changing realities. Through being authentic towards her charism, you are called to *change and purify the Church* in our time. [Italics added]

4. That the Pope set in motion a whole year honouring Paul is evidence, I believe, of the Spirit at work. Bishops throughout the world have been urged to get to know the Paul in whose churches women played such very prominent roles and who proclaimed so boldly that we all have equal dignity before God through our baptism in Christ. As New Testament scholar Ronald Witherup (2008, p. 13) observes, the real challenge is to apply the remarkable vision set forth in Galatians 3:27-28 to the Church today:

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

So what then does this extraordinary text mean? What might it say to us today?

### **Examining the text**

New Testament scholar Carolyn Osiek (2003, p. 192) points out that there are at least five different ways of interpreting these exceedingly difficult verses. One way is to understand the passage as a baptismal formula for new Christians. Because I am trying to argue for our baptism<sup>33</sup> to be taken seriously, this is the interpretation I shall explore.

We need to begin with the Greek text of the first creation account in Genesis: 'So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created; male and female God created them' (Gen 1:27). The 'male **and** female' that Paul uses probably reflects the Genesis verse. (Note **and** instead of **nor** as in the other two pairs.)<sup>34</sup> Now in

---

bishops who voted against the current proposal feared that opening the **ministry** of lector to women (and not just the function, as it is now) could eventually lead to opening other higher ministries.

<sup>33</sup> Étienne Nodet and Justin Taylor (1998) both of whom teach at the École Biblique in Jerusalem, explore the origins of Christianity's two basic rites, baptism and eucharist which they link together. They argue that Christianity emerged from among the Essenes and that contact with the Gentiles brought about a profound transformation.

<sup>34</sup> Another New Testament scholar Frank Matera (1992, p.146) points out two other examples in the Pauline material that contain the first two groupings of Galatians 3:28 (Jew and Greek, slave and free),



Paul's time the creation narrative was understood to be a metaphor for the makeup of the human person. In that metaphor, the dividing of human being into two genders signalled the start of the internal separation of the person into rationality (symbolised by the male principle) and sensation (symbolised by the female principle). As a result conflict would soon follow, which is what happens in the Genesis account. So, when Paul uses the phrase 'male and female', it is in the light of this understanding of the human condition. The baptismal formula he quotes suggests that division and conflict in human nature can be overcome through baptism.

So where does that leave us? Does this mean then that sexism and all forms of discrimination are therefore ended? Osiek (2003, p. 192) states, 'If we believe that biblical texts can be prophetic beyond the vision of author, time, and place, there is some validity to this approach.' However, some would argue that other passages in Paul suggest that he does indeed sanction inequalities among Christians. For example, passages that say that women should keep silent in the churches and be subordinate (1Cor 11:2-16, 14:34-36<sup>35</sup>) indicate that Paul did not intend to abolish gender roles between men and women. Nor did he intend to abolish slavery – those who were slaves when they were called to Christ should stay that way (1Cor 7: 21); and the Gentiles would always be a wild olive branch grafted onto the tree of Israel (Rom 11:24). But as Raymond Brown (1996, p. 480) points out, Paul is working out of an apocalyptic mindset. For Paul the death and resurrection of Jesus meant that all were now living in the endtime. There was little time to change present social structures. So Galatians 3:28 is not primarily a statement about social and political equality – legally and socially Jews and Greek, slaves and free remain what they are. Rather the statement is about equality through Christ in God's plan of salvation – they all have equal standing in the Christian community.

Paul says that the Galatians have entered into a new form of life, a life in Christ through baptism. Men and women symbolised this by putting on a white robe during the baptismal ceremony, hence Paul's reference to putting on Christ: 'As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.' (3:27). For Paul then baptism means being clothed in Christ. Baptism is the moment when Christ, like a

---

but not the third, i.e., male and female: 1) In a later letter Paul writes, 'For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit' (1 Cor 12:13). 2) Although probably not written by Paul we read in the letter to the Colossians (later still), 'In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col 3:11) However, Matera suggests that two other Galatians texts help to explain 3:28: 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Gal 5:6) and 'For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything' (Gal 6:15). In these texts Paul points out that it is not outward marks that distinguish a person before God but rather it is faith. Distinctions of race, class and sex have been dissolved by the new creation that has taken place in Christ.

<sup>35</sup> Murphy O'Connor (1996, p. 290) is definite that Paul did not write verses 34-35 but that they were added by a later pen to bring them into line with the non-Pauline 1 Timothy 2:11-14. Barbara Reid (2008, p. 3) provides a brief summary of various proposals for dealing with the verses 34-36 e.g., to see them as a dialogue in which verses 34-35 are the voice of the Corinthian men while verse 36 is Paul's response.

garment, envelops the believer. The robe was an outward sign of inner transformation. Racial, class and gender discriminations have been erased because social distinctions have been reinterpreted so that they do not benefit some while disadvantaging others. In Paul's society, where the male was the norm and consequently a woman enjoyed privileges only through her connection to an adult male, this was a radically new departure. Baptism erased the privilege that came with gender. Men and women are equal members because they share in Christ through the same baptism. Paul is saying that it is Christ who has restored the original purpose of creation, i.e., to make humankind in God's own image, male and female. In Christ people are 're-created'. Christ has established a totally new reality.

So what did this mean in practice for Paul? Throughout this paper I have been arguing that our baptism needs to be taken seriously. How did women in the early Christian communities actually live out their baptism?

### **Remembering the women**<sup>36</sup>

As Jerome Murphy O'Connor (1996, p. 289) points out, Paul took it for granted that women were ministers of the church in the same way as men were. He recognised the diverse gifts of both women and men as fruits of the Spirit:

To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes. (1Cor12:8-11)

We find evidence of what the women in the early Christian communities do by virtue of their baptism at the end of arguably the most important New Testament document outside the gospels, the letter to the Romans:

I commend to you our sister **Phoebe**, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well.

Greet **Prisca** and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who was the first convert in Asia for Christ. Greet **Mary**, who has worked very hard among you. Greet Andronicus and **Junia**, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

---

<sup>36</sup> Avery useful website in this regard is [www.futurechurch.org](http://www.futurechurch.org)

Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. Greet those workers in the Lord, **Tryphaena** and **Tryphosa**. Greet the beloved **Persis**, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his **mother**—a mother to me also. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who are with them. Greet Philologus, **Julia**, Nereus and his **sister**, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. (Rom 16:1-16) [emphasis added]  
<sup>37</sup>

Here Paul lists twenty-six individuals, including ten women. As Brendan Byrne observes (1996, pp.450-451) these women bear more than half of the descriptive phrases denoting service and labour on behalf of the community and the Gospel. Because time constraints prevent me from examining all ten women I will describe the first two only, Phoebe and Prisca.<sup>38</sup>

Phoebe is of particular significance.<sup>39</sup> As a deacon (*diakonos*)<sup>40</sup> of the Church at Cenchreae in eastern Corinth she is obviously one of the most prominent women in the

---

<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to note that Paul entrusted this letter to a woman, the deacon Phoebe. Jesus entrusted the news of his resurrection to women, in particular, Mary Magdalene. While neither Phoebe nor Mary Magdalene would have realised the significance of their tasks, they did what they were commissioned to do (even though we may struggle to hear about it!) As I write this (11/04/09) I am sadly aware that the beautiful encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus (John 20:11-18) does not appear in the Sunday lectionary during the Easter season. Romans 16:1-16 appears nowhere at all in the lectionary. Regina Boisclair (1994, p. 118) points out that only two early church women feature in it: Mary the mother of Jesus and Chloe, both of whom are named in passing. Consequently we never hear about Mary the mother of John Mark, Rhonda, Tabitha, Lydia, Prisca, the four prophet daughters of Philip, Mary of Rome, Junia, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, the mother of Rufus, Julia, the sister of Nereus, Euodia, Syntyche, Apphia, Nympha, Eunice, Lois and Claudia. Boisclair claims, furthermore, that the Sunday lectionary emulates the silence the Vatican contends is an integral part of women's nature:

In the Sunday Lectionary the readings from Acts and Paul barely whisper about women. It is interesting to juxtapose this fact with the following words from "The Role of Women in Evangelization of Peoples," a document issued in 1975 by the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples: "Women are capable of giving themselves without counting the cost...the church can never thank them enough....Silence and contemplation, for which women are suited by nature, should find expression in liturgy and para-liturgy." (p. 120)

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Castelli (1998, 1999), Gillman (1992), Margaret MacDonald (1999), Carol Meyers (2000), Carolyn Osiek, Margaret MacDonald with Janet Tulloch (2006) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (2003) are some of the scholars who provide much valuable evidence about the participation of these women in the early church.

<sup>39</sup> Carolyn Osiek, and Margaret MacDonald with Janet Tulloch (2006, p.216) discuss the various schools of thought concerning whether or not Phoebe was a frontrunner for Paul's plan to evangelise Spain.

<sup>40</sup> Only here in the New Testament is an individual called a *diakonos* of a particular Church. Reid (2008, p. 1) suggests that it is best translated as 'minister' or 'servant' but the term can also entail financial ministry.

early church. She heads the list of co-workers to be welcomed and greeted by the Church in Rome to which she is being sent as an official minister, one who preaches and teaches. Paul uses the same word (*diakonos*) to describe himself (1 Cor 3:5, 2 Cor 6:4). Paul also acknowledges that Phoebe has been a *prostati* (benefactor or patron)<sup>41</sup> of many, including himself (Rom 16:2). This meant that she used her resources to support the missionary work of Paul and others, perhaps paying their expenses and ensuring connections were made to other wealthy patrons. It also meant that she was able to direct operations – choosing where missionaries were to go and what points they were to include in their message. As a patron her house would have been available for the community's Eucharistic celebrations and she probably presided over them (Reid, 2008, p. 2). Paul also calls Phoebe 'our sister' (*adelphē*). He frequently uses the masculine equivalent of the term, i.e., 'brother' when referring to his very important missionary collaborator, Timothy (e.g., Phlm 1; 2 Cor 1:1; 1 Thess 3:2). Thus it is a title that bestows much respect. Phoebe's importance is also borne out by the fact that Paul recommends to the Romans (Rom 6:2) in the same way as he recommends Timothy to the Corinthians (1 Cor 16:10). Osiek and MacDonald with Tulloch (2006, p. 216) argue that it is likely that 'Paul is not just commending Phoebe to a new group but is participating in some greater plan, which may have been instigated not by Paul but by Phoebe.'

Another prominent woman is Prisca who, like her husband Aquila, is a co-worker (*synergos*) (Rom 16:3). Paul is grateful to the missionary couple because they have risked their lives for him.<sup>42</sup> In fact all the Gentile churches are grateful. Her high esteem is borne out by the fact she is named first in four of the six times the couple is mentioned in Acts and the Pauline letters. Like Paul they are tent-makers and would have used these skills to support their missionary activity. In Ephesus they instructed the great missionary Apollos – perhaps about a baptismal matter since Luke tells us that Apollo knew only of the baptism of John (Acts 18:25).

Prisca and Aquila have a church in their house in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome (1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:5). Several women were heads of house-churches where the early Christians gathered for Eucharist and preached the good news. According to Acts (17:4, 12) women were among the wealthy and prominent converts and would have had a significant role in founding, sustaining and promoting such house-churches (Schüssler Fiorenza, 2003, p. 209). For example, Paul greets Apphia 'our sister' who with Philemon and Archippus was a leader of a house-church in Colossae (Phlm 2).<sup>43</sup> There is a church in the house of Nympha of Laodicea (Col 4:15), while a prayer meeting took place in the house of Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). The business woman Lydia offered

---

<sup>41</sup> Reid (2008, p. 2) also translates it as 'leader'. Fiorenza (2003, p. 212) goes further and concludes that Phoebe had a position of great authority within the Cenchræ community and that her authority was not limited to that community only.

<sup>42</sup> Paul demanded self-sacrificing love of his followers. Why? Because Jesus had shown what self-sacrificing love looked like. Jesus had lived the ideal.

<sup>43</sup> Paul may very likely have been asking her consent to his request about the runaway slave Onesimus, which of course suggests her influential status.

her house to the Christian mission (Acts 16:14). As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, there is nothing to suggest that women were excluded from the leadership of these house-churches and from presiding at their eucharistic celebrations.<sup>44</sup>

### **Conclusion**

So even with this very brief look at two of the women named by Paul at the end of his letter to the Romans there is much evidence to suggest that being ‘baptised into Christ’ for them meant something different from what it means for us today. Women were able to participate fully in the early Christian communities. Decision-making did not require ordination. I have argued throughout this address that our Catholic tradition gives us the mandate to seek reform. We must continue the struggle for our baptism to be taken seriously. Paul is still saying to us:

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (3:27-28)

And he assures us:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:38-39)

Elizabeth Julian RSM

---

<sup>44</sup> Byrne (1996, p.451) suggests that Junia and her husband Andronicus also had a church in their house. Junia is not just an apostle but prominent or outstanding among them (Rom 16:7).

## References

- Baima, T. (2008). Biblical images of the church in *lumen gentium*. *Chicago Studies*, 47(3), 328-347.
- Baima, T. (2008). Biblical images of the church in *lumen gentium*. *Chicago Studies*, 47(3), 328-347.
- Bergant, D., & Fragomeni, R. (1999). *Preaching the new lectionary: Year b*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.
- Boeve, L. (2003). Tradition and its development (B. Boyle, Trans.). In *Interrupting tradition: An essay on Christian faith in a postmodern context* (pp. 15-35). Louvain: Peeters.
- Boisclair, R. (1994). Amnesia in the Catholic Sunday Lectionary: Women -silenced from the memories of salvation history. In M. A. Hinsdale & P. Kaminski (Eds.), *Women and theology*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- Brown, R. (1997). *An introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday.
- Brueggemann, W. (1978). *The prophetic imagination*: Fortress Press.
- Brueggemann, W. (2001). *The prophetic imagination* (Second ed.). Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Fortress.
- Byrne, B. (1996). *Romans* (Vol. 6). Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press.
- Cahill, L., Sowle. (2004). Feminist theology and a participatory church. In S. J. Pope (Ed.), *Common calling: The laity and governance of the Catholic church* (pp. 127-149). Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Castelli, E. (1998). Romans. In E. S. Fiorenza (Ed.), *Searching the Scriptures: A feminist commentary* (Vol. 2, pp. 272-300). New York: Crossroad.
- Castelli, E. (1999). Paul on women and gender. In R. S. Kraemer & M. R. D'Angelo (Eds.), *Women and Christian origins* (pp. 221-235). New York: Oxford University Press.
- CathNews. (2006). Levada urges gay priests to remain in closet. Retrieved 28 February, 2006, from <http://www.cathnews.com/news/602/158.php>
- Dallavalle, N. (1995). Deposit of faith. In R. McBrien (Ed.), *The HarperCollins encyclopedia of Catholicism* (pp. 409-410). New York: HarperCollins Publisher.
- Gillman, F. (1992). *Women who knew Paul*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.
- Heschel, A. (1962). *The prophets*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Himes. (2005). The world and church in conversation. *New Theology Review*, 18(1), 27-35.
- Johnson, E. A. (Ed.). (2002). *The church women want: Catholic women in dialogue*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.
- Julian, E. (2003). Why women cannot be priests - or can't they? *Tui Motu InterIslands*, June, 14-15.
- Lakeland, P. (2007). *Catholicism at the crossroads: How the laity can save the church*. New York, London: Continuum.
- Lee, B. (1995). *The future church of 140 BCE: A hidden revolution*. New York: Crossroad.
- Lennan, R. (2009a). *Ecclesial affirmations: Handout given to NZ Bishops and Congregational Leaders*. Paper presented at the Conference Name|. Retrieved Access Date|. from URL|.
- Lennan, R. (2009b, 23-24 February). *Christian identity and tradition*. Paper presented at the CLCANZ, Waikanae.
- Levine, A.-J. w. M. B. (Ed.). (2004). *A feminist companion to Paul* (Vol. 6). London/ New York: T&T Clark International - A Continuum imprint.
- MacDonald, M. (1999). Reading real women through the undisputed letters of Paul. In R. S. Kraemer & M. R. D'Angelo (Eds.), *Women and Christian origins* (pp. 199-220). New York: Oxford University Press.
- MacDonald, M. (1999). Rereading Paul. In R. S. Kraemer & M. R. D'Angelo (Eds.), *Women and Christian origins* (pp. 236-253). New York: Oxford University Press.

- Matera, F. J. (1992). *Galatians* (Vol. 9). Collegeville, Minnesota: A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press.
- Meyers, C. (Ed.). (2000). *Women in Scripture: A dictionary of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books, and the New Testament*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Murphy-O'Connor, J. (1996). *Paul: A critical life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murphy-O'Connor, J. (2008). Paul the pastor. *Thinking faith*. Retrieved 15 April, 2009, from [http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20080829\\_1.htm](http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20080829_1.htm)
- Nodet, E., & Taylor, J. (1998). *The origins of Christianity*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.
- Nouwen, H. (1989). *In the name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian leadership*. London: Darton Longman and Todd.
- O'Leary, D. (2009, 18 April). A delight in company. *The Tablet*, p. 10.
- Osiek, C. (2005). The Study of Women in the early church. *The Bible today*, 43(5), 277-282.
- Osiek, C., MacDonald, M. Y., & Tullock, J. H. (2006). *A woman's place: House churches in earliest Christianity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- O'Sullivan, O. (2003). Where are the priest-prophets? *The Furrow*, 54(1), 37 - 42.
- Pope Benedict VI. (2008). Celebration of first vespers of the solemnity of the holy apostles Peter and Paul for the opening of the pauline year. Retrieved 15 April, 2009, from [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20080628\\_vespri\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20080628_vespri_en.html)
- Reid, B. (2008, 10 November). Women and Paul. *America*.
- Reid, B. (2009, April). Four prophetic women. *Tui Motu InterIslands*, 10-11.
- Reid, B., Osiek, C., & Witherup, R. (1996). Shepherd. In C. Stuhlmüller (Ed.), *The Collegeville pastoral dictionary of biblical theology* (pp. 905-909). Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.
- Schneiders, S. (2000). *Finding the treasure: Locating Catholic religious life in a new ecclesial and cultural context*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Schussler Fiorenza, E. (2003). Women in the pauline churches. In J. M. Soskice & D. Lipton (Eds.), *Oxford readings in feminism* (pp. 203-226). Oxford: OUP.
- Soskice, J. M., & Lipton, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Feminism & theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stedman, T. (2009). Called to be holy: Life in the Spirit according to Paul. *The Pastoral Review*, 5(2), 16-21.
- Stuhlmüller, C. (1978). Culture, leadership and symbolism in the Old Testament. In *Women and priesthood: Future directions* (pp. 25-45). Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.
- Williams, T. S. (2004). *In his own words: A tribute to Cardinal Thomas Williams*. Palmerston North, New Zealand: Dunmore Press.
- Witherup, D. (2008). Paul and women. *The Pastoral Review*, 4(6), 10-13.