



**As the Church finds its way forward, perhaps it should open itself to the women whose stories have gone untold, to the voices muted long ago.**

# UNHEARD OF

BY MARY KATHERINE TILLMAN

**I** am a lifelong practicing Catholic. I love the Church in all its worldwide diversity and unity. But some historical facts sadden me — facts that reinforce the feelings of many women and girls that, as females, they are invisible and do not matter much in the Church.

Given such cumulative discouragement, many wonder why so many thoughtful women, and even feminists, remain in the Catholic Church. I love Catholicism's living spiritual traditions, its intellectual heritage and its 20 centuries of myriad ministries all over the world. I am particularly drawn to its universal and comprehensive vision of the dignity of the human person.

There are other fundamental reasons: because it is Jesus Christ who is "the place of God," and who founded the Church, which is His body; because of the Church's rich sacramental life, especially in the Eucharist and in the Sacred Liturgy, which mediates the Scriptures to us; because of Catholicism's enduring conversation about

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ART BY LUBA LUKOVA

profound and universal human questions; because of the social teachings of the Church and its remarkable contributions worldwide and across centuries in medical and educational endeavors and in every manner of alleviating poverty and injustice; because of Catholicism's splendid artistic and aesthetic heritage in image and music, in stone and in paint; and, most especially, because of the communion of saints — that is, the people of God, women and men, living and dead, who edify and inspire by the luminosity of their faith and the radiance of their example.

Still, institutionalized traditions and practices of exclusion deserve scrutiny and could be remedied without any major doctrinal or ecclesiastical issues. Three places to look are the *Lectionary*, the diaconate and Church leadership.

## THE LECTONARY

The *Lectionary* is one of the two large, red books used at Mass. It contains the Scripture readings selected for each day. The other book is the *Sacramentary*; it contains the liturgical prayers said at Mass.

You may have assumed that the *Lectionary's* three-year cycle of Sunday Scripture readings (and the two-year cycle for weekdays) fairly well covers the essence of the Bible, providing for the proper celebration by name of the many recognized saints of the Catholic Church. The truth is that many readings, or portions thereof, are made "optional," or are completely omitted, and these include many passages that refer to women.

In addition, many of the important passages featuring women are not read on Sundays, when most Catholics attend Mass. Examples are many, and I am indebted to other scholars for pointing out some of them to me. In reviewing them, it's essential to remember that Sunday sermons are to be based on the Scripture readings of the day. If women's stories are omitted from the readings, they are not likely to appear in homilies.

Consequently, we don't learn that, at the end of his *Letter to the Romans*, St. Paul commends "Phoebe our sister, who is a minister [*diákonon*] at Cenchreae." And after Phoebe, he mentions many more women by name, greeting them each as "fellow workers in the church." In *Philippians 4:3* he describes Euodia and Syntyche

of Philippi as coworkers who "struggled at my side in promoting the gospel." We do not recognize the names of these evangelizing women because they are never proclaimed at Mass.

From *The Acts of the Apostles*, Lydia and Priscilla, who minister alongside Paul and Peter, are heard of only on weekdays, so we are unfamiliar with their names, too. *The Gospel of Luke* tells us that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and many other women accompanied Jesus and ministered with him in Galilee, yet this reading appears on only one Sunday every three years.

One of the few stories found in all four gospels covers the anointing of Jesus by a woman. Because we read twice — in *Luke* and in *John* — of the anointing of Jesus' feet (Luke says by "a sinful woman"), you may not recall the other versions of the anointing story, as told by Matthew and Mark.

At a dinner in Bethany, in the house of Simon the Leper and just before Passover, a nameless and silent woman enters and anoints Jesus' head from an alabaster flask of costly oil. It is a prophetic gesture, like anointings in the Old Testament. The disciples grumble about the waste, but Jesus rebukes them and then gives them an amazing instruction for all time. He says, "She has anticipated anointing my body for burial," then concludes, in *Mark*: "Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." This story is optional in the Palm Sunday Mass for Year B. Matthew's version never appears in the *Lectionary*.

As this woman proclaims his death and burial, so Mary Magdalene is commissioned by Jesus to proclaim his resurrection. In *The Gospel of John*, after Mary recognizes her risen Lord in the garden, he says, "Go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" This important commissioning is marked as optional for the readings of Easter morning, and is included only on Easter Tuesday — when the full community is not typically present.

Recognizing her role as the first to give witness to the resurrection and, in his words, as a "true and authentic evangelizer," Pope Francis recently raised the

liturgical rank of Mary Magdalene's "memorial" to "feast," a designation as high as the Twelve Apostles and higher than any woman but the Mother of God. Francis prefaced his formal decree with the title "Apostolorum Apostola," female apostle of the apostles. Nonetheless, the story of her commissioning by Jesus is not read on a Sunday.

In the reading from *Luke* for the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple on February 2, old Simeon is right there with his famous song, *Nunc Dimittis*, but marked optional is the part about the 84-year-old widow, Anna, identified by Luke as a prophetess who "never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer." She "gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem." The story of her widespread evangelizing is also optional for the Feast of the Holy Family during the octave of Christmas.

The most glaring example of an omission may be in a reading from *Exodus 1:8-22* that excludes the captivating story of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh commands the midwives to kill all the newborn male babies, which these courageous women will not do. When Pharaoh questions them, they say: "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are robust and give birth before the midwife arrives." This edifying story of life-saving resourcefulness and valor is excised. It is not even optional.

Another wonderful *Exodus* story omitted from the *Lectionary* is the passage in which Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, and identified as a prophet, leads a joyous liturgy of thanksgiving after her people's dry crossing of the parted Red Sea.

One of the oldest extant texts in the Bible is the Song of Deborah, found in *Judges 5*. Deborah is also identified as a prophet and as the only female judge in Israel's deep history. She advises her people, plans a military strategy against the Canaanites, appoints a general, leads the battle — which she wins — and then sings her victory song. In the *Lectionary* we hear nothing of this.

Similarly absent is the delightful story from *Numbers 27* wherein Zelophehad's five intrepid daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, persuade the mighty Moses and other elders to alter



the age-old inheritance law so that they, without brothers, husbands or sons, are bequeathed the lands of their father.

Also cut is the full story of the mother of the seven martyred Maccabee brothers in *2 Maccabees 7*, the Sunday reading of which stops short of praising her great fearlessness, characterized in the Bible as “most admirable and worthy of everlasting remembrance.” Two other Hebrew women, Esther and Judith, are recognized for their stereotypical “feminine” attributes of physical beauty and piety, but not for their bravery and heroic strength in risking their own lives to save their people.

An unambiguous example of gender stereotyping is the editing of *Proverbs 31* for Sunday reading in Cycle A, which excludes verses praising a woman’s initiative, business acumen, dignity and wisdom: “Like a merchant fleet she secures her provisions from afar. . . . She picks out a field and acquires it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard. . . . She makes garments and sells them. . . . She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs at the days to come. She opens her mouth in wisdom and kindly instruction is on her tongue.” All omitted.

Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican

Council’s groundbreaking first document, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, mandated a revision of the *Lectionary* that aimed “to achieve greater lay participation.” This welcome revision, which came in 1969, was put into use by the bishops of the United States in 1970, then was slightly revised multiple times, most recently in 2011. But these revisions have kept intact the options and omissions I have cited.

In 2008, the Vatican assembled a Synod of Bishops entitled *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*. For the first time in history a synod of bishops discussed at some length the need to restore women’s stories to the liturgy. But in the 10 years since that synod, there has been no further revision or follow-up in this regard.

## THE DIACONATE

The permanent diaconate is a distinct ordained ministry, entirely separate from that of the transitional diaconate, which, since the fourth century, has been a step toward the ordained priesthood. Pope Benedict XVI explained the difference between priests and deacons this way: “Those who are constituted in the order of the episcopate or the presbyterate (priesthood) receive the mission and capacity to act in the person of Christ the Head, whereas deacons are empowered to serve the People of God in the ministries of the liturgy, the word and charity.”

In 1967, Pope Paul VI implemented the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council to restore the age-old permanent diaconate, which today numbers about 45,000 men worldwide — including about 20,000 men in the United States — and no women.

And yet, from overwhelming historical evidence, it is indisputable that there were ordination rites for women deacons from at least the third to the 12th centuries. Passages from Paul’s *First Letter to Timothy* detail the qualifications and duties of both male and female deacons — essentially, to be upright of character and virtuous and to care for the practical needs of the local church. In the early third century, we find the existence of male and female deacons attested to by abundant official records and liturgical directives.

A third-century document, the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*, gives practical

rules for male and female deacons, and presents an interesting typology comparing the bishop to the Father, the male deacon to Christ, the female deacon to the Holy Spirit, and the presbyters or priests to the apostles. Reinforcing this document is a late fourth-century manuscript called *Apostolic Constitutions*. The ordination ritual for women deacons is spelled out there in detail.

From that manuscript and an eighth-century Byzantine document, the Barberini Codex, we see that the ordination of men and women deacons took place in the sanctuary during the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The bishop would publicly declare his intention of ordaining the deacon, calling him or her in relation to the needs of his diocese. The rite included the laying on of the bishop's hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

of these anointings to be sacraments.

The ordination of women as deacons gradually declined and then disappeared during the 12th and 13th centuries. One cause may have been the progressive disappearance of adult baptism, so the particular role of women attendants was not as necessary. Then, too, the meaning of ordination began to change, becoming narrower and more specialized. Ordination came to mean only the consecration of men for the Eucharist: priests.

Popes of the 11th and 12th centuries, as well as the Lateran Councils convened late in that period, which mandated priestly celibacy, spoke out against women as women — that is, as impure by nature, defiled by the flow of blood in menstruation and childbirth. The influential writings of some of the early church fathers, including their untoward views on the inferiority

that this has been “the Church’s constant and universal tradition.”

The main reasons that have been given over the centuries and even today for not ordaining women as deacons or, for that matter, as priests, are these: that Christ freely chose to call 12 men as his priestly ministers and successors; that women cannot physically act *in persona Christi* or as *imago Christi* and therefore cannot be sacramental signs of Christ; that the order of creation and the order of nature point to the naturally lower estate of women for serving in such an elevated role; that the Blessed Virgin Mary was not ordained (she who first could say: “This is my body, this is my blood”); and that a female diaconate would be a slippery slope toward women wanting to be priests.

A more positive, but no less discouraging reason for not ordaining women as

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It is clear that bishops and popes considered deaconesses and often abbesses to be as ordained as any other cleric, despite continuing opposition to that role by some church officials. All along there were conciliar and episcopal condemnations of women’s participation in the diaconate, as at the First Council of Nîmes in 396. But as late as the 11th century, Pope Benedict VIII wrote a letter granting permission “in perpetuity” to ordain bishops, priests and male and female deacons, a permission renewed by Pope John XIX in 1025.

Just what, historically, did ordained women deacons do? Any practical thing that a bishop wished for his local church. They evangelized and catechized, led liturgies and read the Gospel, preached, distributed communion and assisted with the modest anointing of adult women undergoing baptism by immersion. Ordained women deacons anointed the sick and the dying — some bishops considered some

of women, and, later, the Aristotelian writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, contributed a one-sided and misogynistic expression to the views of the Church. By the 1230s, women deacons were largely unthinkable in the West, although the Eastern Rite churches, which today serve some 16 million people in full communion with Rome, have continued the tradition of women deacons from the earliest centuries.

What does Rome say today? In 1976, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) issued *Inter Insigniores*, a declaration against the admission of women to the priesthood — but not against women as deacons. This document was reinforced in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, a 1994 apostolic letter by Pope John Paul II “on reserving priestly ordination to men alone.” Again without mentioning women as deacons, this letter concludes that “the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women.” and

deacons is that women are already doing work that exceeds a deacon’s — participating in the liturgy, religious education, running homeless shelters, soup kitchens, hospitality houses and hospitals — so why ordain them?

In May 2016, at an international assembly of 900 major superiors of women’s orders, Pope Francis was asked about women deacons. “My answer,” the pope said, “was, ‘Yes, why not?’” He then established a study commission to look into the matter, the first gender-balanced papal commission in history. Among its 12 members — six men and six women — are highly qualified experts in patristic theology, ecclesiology, Christology, spirituality, anthropology, philology and philosophy, as well as in administrative and pastoral ministry. In 2002, a theological commission overseen by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then-prefect of the CDF, concluded that it “remains only for the Church’s ‘ministry

of discernment' . . . to pronounce authoritatively" on reconstituting the diaconate for women. Phyllis Zagano, a leading authority on the diaconate, and the only American member of Francis' commission, interpreted that report to mean that "the topic is open for discussion."

## OTHER LEADING ROLES

In his new book, *Happiness in This Life*, Pope Francis devotes a chapter to "The Blessings and Challenges of Womanhood." He has called for "a profound theology of women," and a more "incisive female presence in the Church." Since women today make up 80 percent of parish ministry, perhaps it is the hierarchical Church that especially needs this female presence in its thinking and doing.

Many Catholic women theologians — scholars, specialists and prominent authors — have written extensively and thoughtfully on the theology of women in the church. Yet in the 2014-15 Synod on the Family, only three women religious were invited, along with 10 major superiors from men's religious orders. The synod appointed 279 voting bishops and priests and welcomed 90 experts and delegates from other Christian churches who were invited to participate in discussions. Yet on this crucial subject of marriage and the family, the reported 32 Catholic women who attended were barred from participating in the discussion and remained non-voting auditors — a pitiful absence of women that one commentator described as "breathing with one lung." When a synod auditor asked one of the priest delegates about women's voices, she was told to "write a book," which she and many of her colleagues proceeded to do. *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, now in its fifth printing, includes the voices of 44 practicing Catholic women representing 16 countries.

Another compelling book, *Power of Sisterhood: Women Religious Tell the Story of the Apostolic Visitation*, presents another sad tale of the omission of women's voices. Starting in 2009, some 50,000 religious sisters in almost 350 congregations underwent a controversial six-year investigation at the initiative of the Vatican. In detailed questionnaires and through visits to many communities, examiners scrutinized the sisters' communal lives.

During the process, there was no dialogue, only silence from Rome. Representatives of 15 communities of sisters were then summoned to Rome to provide the Vatican with further clarifications, and "to report on some areas of concern."

The lone Vatican voice to speak out in dismay was the Redemptorist Archbishop Joseph Tobin, then secretary of the Vatican's congregation for consecrated life, who commented that Rome must acknowledge the "depth of anger and hurt" the review had caused, and initiate a "strategy of reconciliation." As a result, he was sent from the Vatican to Indianapolis in 2012. In 2016, having been made a cardinal, he was reassigned by Pope Francis as archbishop of Newark, New Jersey.

At the same time, Rome conducted a doctrinal assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about 80 percent of sisters and nuns in the U.S. Led by three appointed bishops, the process included a review of the organization's statutes, programs and publications. Despite the Vatican's final, effusive praise for the sisters' work, these intrusive investigations embittered many Catholics worldwide against what was perceived as Rome's heavy-handed and humiliating tactics.

Furthermore, the Curia of the Catholic Church ("curia" meaning an assembly, council or court) is a huge complex of many institutions of governing administrators who carry on Church business. Within the Curia are some 25 dicasteries and departments — policymaking committees. Hundreds of men, mainly bishops and priests, serve in these dicasteries. The prefects or heads of all of them are cardinals. The presidents are cardinals and archbishops. The secretaries and undersecretaries are mainly bishops and priests. Although hundreds of women now fill various roles in the Vatican, such as archivists, art historians, office heads and journalists, no women hold leadership positions among the prefects, presidents or secretaries of the dicasteries.

A small handful of highly qualified women have been appointed undersecretaries. Rosemary Goldie, an Australian lay theologian and one of two women auditors at the Second Vatican Council, was the first woman executive in the Curia, serving as undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for the Laity from 1967 until she

was replaced by a priest in 1976. Why not appoint more women as prefects, presidents and secretaries in appropriate dicasteries, such as the Curia's new Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life, or the Congregation for Catholic Education, or the Secretariat for Communications?

When Francis' pontificate began in 2013, the cardinal-electors gave him a mandate to reform the Roman Curia, thus inviting him to continue work that Pope Benedict XVI had begun.

The first step toward reform was the appointment of a council of nine cardinals charged with advising the pope in the governance of the church and, particularly, in the reform of the Curia. The Council of Cardinal Advisers now emphasizes the principles of subsidiarity and collegiality, rather than the centralization of authority. It urges the examination of the offices of the Curia with the goal of "simplification and streamlining."

Most significantly, the pope has called on the Curia to be more inclusive, and for more people from outside the clergy to work in the upper echelons of the Church. When it comes to curial officials, he said, "the catholicity of the Church must be reflected in the hiring of personnel from throughout the world," adding, "It is fitting to provide for the hiring of greater numbers of the lay faithful, especially in those dicasteries where they can be more competent than clerics or consecrated persons."

The pope has specifically stated that "the development of the role of women and lay people in the Church and their appointment to leading roles in the dicasteries, with particular attention to multiculturalism, is furthermore of great importance." Last June Cardinal Anders Arborelius of Stockholm suggested that the pope officially create a College of Women to parallel the Council of Cardinal Advisers to the pope.

I await these critical reforms, as well as the work of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life. The few practical changes I have suggested would go a long way toward making women more visible in the Church. They would help the hierarchy make the mission of the Church more evident to both women and men today. □