

A Longing for Wisdom
One Woman's Conscience and her Church

Wisdom sings her own praises,
before her own people she proclaims her glory;

In the assembly of the Most High she opens her mouth,
in the presence of his hosts she declares her worth:

From the mouth of the Most High I came forth,
and mistlike covered the earth.

In the highest heavens did I dwell,
my throne on a pillar of cloud.

The vault of heaven I compassed alone,
through the deep abyss I wandered.

Over waves of the sea, over all the land,
over every people and nation I held sway.

Among all these I sought a resting place;
in whose inheritance should I abide?...

Sirach: 24: 3-7

The truth we possess is a humble thing; no more, in fact, than the mirroring of the real world about us. When we substitute the product of our minds for the products of God's mind, we fashion a world of fancy to replace the world of things as they are; by this, we cut ourselves off from the truth, retiring from the real world into one of our own making, isolating ourselves in solitary confinement.

From the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, Dominican priest, philosopher, theologian, Doctor of the Church, 1225-1274

Preface

Although I come from the Roman Catholic faith tradition, women from other denominations will recognize many of the issues upon which I touch or dwell in this collection of my poems, stories and essays:

the uniqueness of women in terms of their talents and particular burdens;

the failure of the hierarchy of mainstream churches to recognize the contributions of women disciples in the history of the Church;

the widely accepted relegation of women to peripheral, rather than central, roles within churches;

the unexamined “dis-ease” (unease) the hierarchy and some priests exhibit toward women’s sexuality, contributing to church, and sometimes wider, societal ailments such as:

- women’s subordinate status in the Church;
- the proscription against birth control, despite the prevalence of wide-spread, birth-related female suffering and death, especially in poor countries;
- pervasively high infant mortality rates in poor countries;
- the failure of my church to recognize that abortions decline dramatically when birth control is permissible and means are accessible;
- the vacuum caused by the near total exclusion of women’s voices from the pulpit;
- the hollow ring of certain advice emanating from an all male hierarchy and clergy who have not known, or returned, a woman’s love or the joys and pains of fatherhood;
- the tragic history of pedophilia among certain priests, and the secrecy surrounding their crimes.

For years I kept many of the poems and narratives in this book in a folder with other unpublished work. I didn’t realize, till recently, that there was a unifying theme, that of my growing discomfort with certain aspects of the church into which I was baptized and confirmed, into which my ancestors were baptized, the church under whose auspices I was educated through university, the church in which I was married, the church in which my son and grandchildren were baptized and confirmed, the church I still dearly love.

Why write this book now? As a seventy-year-old woman, I've had a lifetime of interactions with the clergy and hierarchy who represent my church. The examining I do now was influenced years ago by the Jesuits at Marquette University who reminded me that a questioning attitude toward my faith was necessary if I were to be strengthened in it. They spoke of that mysterious entity called "conscience," and that I should act in accordance with it, as long as it was "informed." I could be wrong, but if I acted in good faith, God would still look kindly on me.

So, in this book, I probe my conscience and make public its contents, especially in regard to women and their diminished role in the Church. I've known many splendid women, some of whom remain my most trusted friends. They've raised children by themselves; struggled to support them; cared for disabled husbands and children; known bouts of intractable loneliness and insecurity; and they prevailed, becoming stellar professionals in education, law, medicine, business, and some have entered the religious life, becoming sisters. These last women possessed all the qualifications needed to become exemplary priests--a calling, dedication, compassion, love for their church and preaching skills-- but they lacked the one physical characteristic that would have made them eligible for the priesthood: a penis. Because these faithful and accomplished women lacked the organ considered the *sine qua non* for ordination, the Church rejected their calling. The Church fathers and their successors denied and continue to deny that an all loving God would ever bother to call a woman to become a priest or deacon.

The knowledge of what life is like for poor women, not just in the United States, but, most especially, in the poorest countries on this planet also agitates my conscience in regard to my church. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Peru, and later, while doing research in other Latin American countries, I witnessed women who go hungry in order to feed their children. If they were Catholic, birth control was forbidden, and their husbands' virility was frequently gauged by the number of children (especially boys) they produced. Birth control is against "natural law," said the hierarchy, but they conveniently ignored the maternal and infant mortality rates and the wretched poverty that precludes even adequate breast milk for the new infant.

These valiant women inhabit my conscience, the conscience that was fed at St. Anne's grade school in Milwaukee while reading about the saints and how they were persecuted because of their faith, compassion and love for one another and their enemies. I believe the unacknowledged dove-tailing of cultural and ecclesiastical patriarchy in a nation anchors women to an inferior status within the Church and in the wider society.

The book is divided into sections that correspond with five primary themes: "Madonnas," "Neither Male nor Female," "Impure Places," "Lamentations" and "Hope." Within each section there may be poems, stories, novel excerpts and essays that relate to the theme. Readers will move through different *genres* in each section. I have also included a free-standing essay on abortion.

On January 12, 2010, just as I was finishing the book, an earthquake struck Haiti. Horrifying images of death and destruction poured out of the country. Two, in particular, struck me: one of a couple who had just lost their fourteen month-old baby to dehydration and one of a mother clutching a doll to her breast. The two poems I wrote that were inspired by those images are included in "Lamentations." Except where otherwise noted, all the writing is my own.

Although I end with the theme of "Hope," my own hope has been muted of late when I see subtle changes in the Mass, signifying a return to the old ways. Although I can still recite the *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei* in Latin with the most fluent, I fear the return of the time when priests

faced the altar rather than the people as well as the banishment of women from the altar area. My husband and I live in Pensacola, Florida for eight months of the year. There we attend a healthy, vibrant parish that must be one of the most integrated churches in the nation. We have female altar servers, and they give me hope, as do the women lectors and Eucharistic Ministers. In our summer home in North Carolina, however, we attend a parish where all the altar servers are boys, where Latin is returning to the Mass, and where the bishop's injunctions, as relayed through the pastor, have less to do with morality than the bishop's conservatism and distract from my experience of a merciful God. I don't know what I would do if my church were to further exile women in a return to the "old order."

As I write, a new translation of the Roman Missal, the prayers used at Mass, is being written apparently because the more inclusive and accessible language of the existing one weakens the liturgy and diminishes our respect for tradition. At the same time, the Vatican is undertaking a sweeping evaluation of the formation, values and lives of women in certain women's religious orders in the United States. While the Vatican downplays the significance of this study, many sisters fear that it is part of an effort to control their spiritual and personal lives.

Also perturbing, is the recent avenue created for disaffected Anglicans (Episcopalians in the United States), to become Roman Catholics. Through this opening, those Anglican groups unhappy with the ordination of women as priests and bishops, the elevation to bishop of an openly gay man and the blessing of same sex unions may retain their worship traditions and their married priests within the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Benedict XVI recently approved the ecclesiastical mechanism through which the transition would occur: the Personal Ordinariate.

Although conservative Anglicans, as individuals, have been converting to Catholicism as a result of liberal changes within their church, this new Roman Catholic provision, in my mind, will further marginalize women while it announces to the world that it is theologically appropriate to do so. The fact that the Roman Catholic Church welcomes married, sexually active Anglican priests, while denying the sacrament of marriage to its own, seems embarrassingly unjust. Furthermore, according to John Allen, writer for the *National Catholic Reporter*, there are twenty-two Eastern Rite churches that are already in communion with Rome. These churches, too, preserve their traditions and have married priests.* After reading my poem, "Burqa," the name for the garment that covers many Moslem women from head to toe, my sister-in-law remarked that, perhaps, Christ's bride, the Church, is wearing a burqa of its own making.

Recently, while at a party, a woman who had read my novel, *The Mourning of Angels*, informed by the two years I lived and worked in Peru as a Peace Corps volunteer, exclaimed: "I don't know how an intelligent woman [like you] can still be Catholic." I was taken aback and took her strong words as criticism, a challenge and an undeserved blow. I think I said something like, "I'm sure you didn't mean your comment to be as offensive as it sounded." Then I responded something like this: "I believe that my church is not dependent upon the men who sit in authority. They come and go. The people are the Church. I can tolerate practices with which I disagree because I know they're temporary and that, in time, corrections will be made, but my church still draws me. I still love it. I still need the Eucharist. I still shed tears when I see the procession of frail humanity as they await the reception of the host at communion". In retrospect, I'm grateful for that new friend's question, although I don't think I'll ever fully answer her question because I admit to the intangible forces of mystery and faith.

Do I have doubts about this undertaking? Yes. I look up at the crucifix during Mass and

ask myself if I'm not "committing the sin of pride," a sin of which I was once accused in the confessional. Am I worthy and qualified to pronounce judgment on those who have affected two thousand years of tradition? Will I cause scandal and hurt those I love in this beloved church in which I now kneel? I worry more about them and the dear pastor who ministers to us than I do about reactions to my writing by the wider church.

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Pensacola, FL April, 2010

*John Allen, "All Things Catholic," *National Catholic Reporter*, Oct. 29, 2009.

Except where otherwise noted, all the Scriptural references in this book are taken from *The New American Bible for Catholics*, 1991.