We in Ottawa CNWE are trusting that we will see many of you in Ottawa at CNWE’s National Conference and Annual General Meeting. We are doing our best to make it an energizing experience.

As you will by now know, we have engaged Sister Christine Schenk as our keynote speaker. I have known of Christine for a long time – as founder of FutureChurch in the USA (which saved many parishes from demise), as promoter of devotion to Mary of Magdala, and as one of the stars in the film Radical Grace. In Philadelphia at the 3rd Women’s Ordination Worldwide Conference (2015) she spoke in detail – at times excitedly – about her archaeological research about the roles of women, including leadership roles, in the early church. There’s so much more that can be said about Christine. Do go to radicalgracefilm.com/chris.bio for more. In this edition of The Seed Keepers, you will find a very interesting article contributed by her (pages 2 and 3). We are so happy to be welcoming Sister Christine to a CNWE conference.

Yes! We plan to give a report on the progress of The Dialogue Project at the upcoming conference. At this point, we can tell you that this initiative, originally meant to actualize CNWE’s mission and give life to our core value of dialogue, has almost taken on a life of its own. We have not only had helpful and meaningful dialogue with clergy – including with Archbishop Paul-André Durocher – but in response to our call to all members of CNWE to write letters to Pope Francis, we’ve received lots of letters. The letters received thus far are published in this edition of The Seed Keepers. Thanks to all the letter-to-Pope Francis writers for your thoughtful submissions. (One of our current undertakings is to discover how to get the letters right into the hands of Pope Francis.)

As the 2017 Conference registration form indicates, we do have a fine list of presenters for both panel and break-out sessions. Though no one can be absolutely sure, everyone should find more than enough of interest in accord with our conference theme ‘Honouring the Past; Keeping Faith in the Present; Shaping the Future.’

Please do come! Please note: if you plan to stay in the Saint Paul University Residence, book now. If I sound a touch officious my defence is only that the residence managers have given us a firm deadline. (We are given to understand that the demand for residence accommodation is heavy in Ottawa due to Canada’s 150th anniversary and other events.)

Please keep sending in your thoughts. Tell us what you are up to. If you want to write to Pope Francis again or for a first time, please feel free. Happy reading!
Sister Christine Schenk, CSJ* on
Women’s Ministries in the Ancient Church

In just over three centuries, Christianity grew from an obscure sect in a Palestinian backwater to the official religion of a far-flung, if decaying, Roman Empire. This rapid growth was due in no small measure to the ministry and patronage of women who welcomed early Christian missionaries, both male and female, into the complex social network of Greco-Roman households.

From the first century, we see a repeating pattern of prominent women exercising significant initiative and authority in the growth of Christianity. Women founded and led house church communities (Lydia, Prisca, Nympha, Mary of Jerusalem, Tabitha), prophesied (Philip’s daughters, Corinthian women), taught male evangelists (Prisca), functioned as apostles (Junia, Mary Magdalene), benefactors and envoys (Phoebe) and probably led communities in Philippi as episcopoi and diaconoi (Euodia and Syntyche). These women along with many men, expanded access to the ubiquitous Greco-Roman social networking construct called patronage.

In their fascinating book, A Woman’s Place, Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald write extensively about women patrons in late antiquity. Patronage was foundational to Greco-Roman society and an important factor in the growth of Christianity. In this system, honor accrued to a patron such as Phoebe, Lydia, or Nympha who provided hospitality, goods and services to clients of lower social status including many early Christians, perhaps even Paul himself. The patronage function was an essential ingredient in the life of house churches, which were frequently located in the homes of women with status.

Through the house church, early Christians gained access to social networks that brought them into contact with people from diverse social classes. When a female head of household, perhaps a wealthy widow or freed woman, converted to Christianity, Christian evangelists such as Prisca or Paul gained access not only to her domestic household, but also to her patronage network. This meant that her slaves, freed persons, children, relatives, and patronal clients would often convert. Thus, when Paul converted Lydia, he automatically gained entry to a broad swath of social relationships and a potentially wide audience. From these domestic communities, new Christians, especially Christian women, evangelized slaves, freedpersons, stewards, and clients in other households. Thanks to this informal grassroots network, over the next three centuries Christianity spread rapidly, albeit not without resistance, throughout the Roman Empire.

Many ancient churches and catacombs in Rome began as private house churches and cemeteries owned by women patrons. The catacombs of Priscilla, Domitilla, Commodilla, Lucina, and Balbina are named for women who provided burial space for Christians who had no other final resting place. Other women’s names associated with the catacombs are Thecla, Basilla, Agnes, and Felicitas. Of the twenty pre-Constantinian titular churches in Rome, twelve are named for women. There is good reason to surmise that over half of Rome’s early house churches were founded and hosted by women patrons.
When worshipping at a house church, the head of the household such as Prisca, Aquila, Lydia, Tabitha, or Titius Justus would normally preside at the meal and offer the blessing over cup and bread. According to the Didache, a second century liturgical manual, if an itinerant prophet or apostle were present, he or she would “conduct the sacred meal and Eucharistic thanksgiving ‘in the Spirit’” as they saw fit. New Testament women prophets who may have led such worship include Phillip’s four prophetic daughters who, according to the church historian Eusebius, evangelized much of Asia Minor (Acts 21:9).

Early Christian evangelists, both male and female, spread the gospel message primarily in urban settings of the Roman Empire such as Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Carthage, Corinth, Alexandria, and Athens. These cultural settings were far removed from the agrarian roots of the Galilean Jesus movement whose subsistence communities valued and integrated women’s work in the struggle to survive.

Paul’s affirmation of celibacy in light of his expectation of an imminent Parousia would, in later generations, come to be valued for its own sake - especially by women. Undoubtedly many women pursued a celibate path out of spiritual devotion; however, freedom from the demands of patriarchal marriage and the household code ideal of wifely subordination seems to have been an added inducement.

Christian virgins sought to forego marriage altogether, younger and older widows chose not to remarry, and some women chose to divorce their non-believing spouses, often because of the double standard that existed over sexual fidelity. Such decisions were a constant source of tension between early Christian communities and the broader Roman culture, and would have far-reaching consequences over many centuries. They would also transform patriarchal marriage.

In the early Jesus movement, women exercised significant ecclesial authority as patrons, itinerant prophets, evangelists, apostles, teachers, and missionaries. They founded and presided over house church worship in most urban centers; and held titles such as diakonoi and probably episcopoi as these roles were understood in the first century. Yet, the public leadership of women was unsettling to the mainstream culture. Based as they were on gendered understandings of public and domestic space, hierarchical Greco-Roman household codes eventually became normative—not only in families but also in church structures.

From the early second century to the early fifth century, male church leaders repeatedly cited Timothy’s admonishment: "Women are to be silent in the churches" as justification for curtailing women’s exercise of ecclesial authority. Yet women persisted in teaching, evangelizing, baptizing, and presiding at Eucharistic meals despite official sanctions.

On February 14, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI made the rather remarkable statement that in the early Christian communities, “[T]he female presence was anything but secondary.” This observation from, arguably, the most erudite of contemporary popes, is another way of saying that the ecclesial influence of early Christian women was either primary or equal to that of Christian men.

The most significant difference made by women’s ministry in the early church is the transformation of Roman society from a predominantly pagan to a predominantly Christian culture. While much necessary scholarly ink has been spilled tracking the decline of women’s public leadership authority in early Christianity, what is easily overlooked is that Christianity’s rapid expansion is largely due to the domestic networking and evangelizing efforts of women.

* Sister Christine Schenk will be keynote speaker at the upcoming CNWE Annual Conference. For more detail on Christine, please go to the editorial on page 1.
Dear Pope Francis,

The Catholic Network for Women’s Equality (CNWE) became inspired by the words of Paul-André Durocher, Archbishop of Gatineau, Quebec. Specifically, we noted the words he wrote in a letter to L’Osservatore Romano: “Let us accept Pope Francis’ invitation to elaborate in our churches a true synodality in which all voices are heard, those of women too...” (The Catholic Register. Feb. 21/16) What you will find on the following pages are letters written by women, members of CNWE. They were written at my suggestion as editor of The Seed Keepers: the CNWE newsletter. As you will see, all are thoughtfully assertive — constructively critical and purposefully demanding changes in the status quo of the Roman Catholic Church. As well, many of the letter writers generously disclose their personal circumstances; in other words, they ought give reason for pause on the important issues they bring forward.

I want you to know that not all responded to my request to write to you. Some have not written out of fear of reprisal - e.g., losing a paying job in the church or becoming subject to endless questioning by religious and ecclesiastical authority. As well, I know that some haven’t bothered because they are tired of raising their voices and not having been granted an opportunity for meaningful/real conversation with ecclesiastical authorities.

It is also important to tell you that on listening to your words regarding women and ordination to the priesthood, I myself wonder if there is any way that that door you say has been closed (on the question of women’s ordination) can be opened. If it remains closed the operant patriarchy in the Roman Catholic Church will be safeguarded and thus remain in place. Respectfully, some basic points about patriarchy need to brought to the fore:
- Patriarchy makes for oppression of women everywhere - including within the church
- Patriarchy in the church means that males form the hierarchy where decisions are made
- Dispensation of sacraments is dictated in accord with patriarchal parameters
- Patriarchy does not respect the fact that women in the church are adult and baptized
- The dictates of Jesus (e.g.: “Do this in memory of me.”) are blocked for women by patriarchy.

You recently pointed to St. Pope John Paul’s Ordinatio Sacerdotalis as confirmation against women’s ordination. Again, with respect, it is necessary to point out that history shows us that many teachings by saints and others have been found to be mistaken. I hope you will look again at Ordinatio Sacerdotalis and find it a patriarchal (i.e., oppressive) document.

With profound respect, I propose that you use the key that has been granted to you as pope to unlock that door you say is closed. Unless you do, your words about women doing things better than men (e.g., Malmo, Sweden - Nov. 2016) and your words at other times about giving women greater space within the decision-making process within the church will not effect those positive changes. At the same time, I pray for you and I pray that you will make the changes so that in the church women can fully participate.

Sincerely,

Virginia Lafond
Ottawa, Ontario  Canada.
Dear Pope Francis:

First, I’d like to express my gratitude for the ways in which you have opened the windows of the church to allow the breath of the Spirit to blow through more freely. By both preaching and modelling the gospel values of compassion, forgiveness and simplicity, you call us to grow more fully into the kind of community that Jesus envisioned.

You have shown yourself to be a leader who is capable of listening. May I respectfully request that you now begin to listen more attentively to voices in the church which are often ignored, contradicted, trivialized or dismissed. Those voices crying out to be heard are the voices of women – faithful, discerning, questioning women who, in their own journey of faith, embody gifts which the church has all too often undervalued. Equally with men, women are created in God’s image and called to discipleship. Sadly, their efforts to fully live out that call have often been thwarted by the church.

The institutional church has much to gain from listening with open minds and hearts to the voices and experiences of women theologians, scripture scholars and spiritual writers, social justice activists and community leaders. They have much to teach us as we – women and men – struggle to live out our commitment to gospel values amid the daunting challenges of our contemporary world. On a practical level, one good starting point could be the expansion of the diaconate to include women.

Who knows towards what unexpected pathways the God of surprises is beckoning us? Rather than fear or resistance, what is required of us, both clergy and laity, is a humble willingness to be receptive to new ways of thinking, new ways of being church. Now is the time to open another window!

Peace, Krystyna Higgins   Guelph, Ontario Canada

Dear Pope Francis,

You have generated much hope in an increasingly cynical world, challenging systemic corruption and oppression wherever you see it, especially within the Church. Yet, you do not see the systemic oppression of over 50% of the world’s population - women - perpetuated by the Church in its insistence on the distinct nature of women based on our reproductive capacities. This not only prevents women from sharing our giftedness with the Church, more devastatingly, by insisting on the ‘otherness’ of women and supporting like-minded organizations in the United Nations, it condones and perpetuates the systemic violence and impoverishment experienced by women around the globe. In my lifetime, I hope to see the Church promulgate a doctrine of the full humanity of women, equally made in the image and likeness of God.

Sincerely,

Becky Lee   Toronto, Ontario Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

As I have grown older and, hopefully, a little wiser - though you still have a few years on me - I have come to understand from my perspective the grave issue of injustice to women around the world caused when women are not respected as equal to men in the sight of God. We are not equal but different. We are equal, period.

The theory of complementarity espoused by the male leadership of the Church has served only to deprive the people of God of the fullness of the wisdom, leadership and service of women which comes from the full range of their experiences which men simply do not have. We need “both/and” leadership in our Church and faith communities – men and women working together to witness to the fullness of the Gospel message.

To move the Church to one that promotes justice for women by its actions as well as words, I would like to see the following changes happen in the Church in my – and your – lifetime:

- Recognize and acknowledge the injustice to women around the world caused by the sins of sexism and misogyny, and by patriarchy and hierarchical clericalism. How can the Church be a credible advocate for social justice for women when we do not live justice for women in our own house?

- Increase autonomy for local Bishops’ Conferences to meet the needs of their social and cultural region. The Church lives its mission in the contemporary environment. Not every country's needs are the same for pastoral leadership to serve God's people.

- Accept married priests and women priests who can bring the dimension of real life to the ministry of the church and the decision making process. God can and does call women as well as men, married as well as celibate, to priesthood. Listen to the movement of the Sacred Spirit in the hearts of God's people calling such people to service.

With prayers for a wider vision of the role of women in the church that would be a great blessing for all of God’s people.

Jane Kryzanowski
Roman Catholic Woman Priest
Regina, Saskatchewan Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

It is both a pleasure and honour for me to have been asked to write this short note to you by a co-
member of “Catholic Network for Women’s Equality”.

I would like to tell you about the way I, as a Roman Catholic woman, feel about the duality in the
doctrines and dogma in our Church — mine and yours. I would like to say that I feel like Jesus, as
he was spoken to by the Pharisees and the scribes, for example, in today’s (Feb. 7/17) gospel in our
liturgical calendar (Mark 7:1-13). Jesus was questioned: “Why do your disciples not live according
to the tradition of the elders…?” And, Jesus replied to them: “You have a fine way of rejecting the
commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!” Is not this an example of how the Church
has dealt with women, holding them back, not treating them as equal, all because of our old
patriarchal tradition? To me, this is what this scripture is trying to explain to us — that we all have
a right in all places in society; both in the Catholic world and in the secular one.

Norman Mailer states: “Every moment of one’s existence one is growing into more or retreating
into less.” To be able to see women be made equal in the roles that only the men occupy in my
Church would be a truly warming conversion - a gift. In my struggle for this change I need to have
some hope that there is the possibility of my Church becoming transformed by the possibilities of
new beginnings that would allow women to feel and be full participants, just as they are in the eyes
of our God and Saviour. You see, as a woman in the Catholic faith, I want be able to move on and to
grow into the more that is meant to be. Amen!

Blessings to you!

Yours in Christ,

Laureen Bureau  Gatineau, Quebec Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

May God bless you in your incredibly important leadership position. Thank you for your positive energy and attitude and courage.

I am 55 years old and spent 20 years in the Canadian military working as a medical doctor including in the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Wherever I have lived and worked, I have been active in parish life, mostly leading music and youth (including full-time volunteer for seven years).

Many things have been unacceptable for me in the Catholic Church for decades but I kept telling myself, "Just try to follow Jesus' example. The things I can't accept are not from Jesus." I took theology courses, doubled down and worked harder, led regional music camps for kids, service projects with youth (including taking them to work at the Food Bank farm), working with youth through meaningful activities. For many years, I was hanging on by the fingernails because of the archaic view of women in the Church. My fingers let go last year. I have not returned to mass since then (as it only infuriates me), except to accompany my 91-year-old father, at his request, to memorial masses for my mother. For me, leaving the Church was a very painful "divorce" - why should I be the one to have to leave my beloved community and sacred space when it is the Church who is the alienator?

You have stated in your first press conference in July 2013 that "we need to develop a profound theology of womanhood". I profoundly disagree. We already have what you are seeking: at least 40 years of excellent feminist theology, brilliantly summarized by Dr. Rosino Gibellini in chapter 14 of his La teologia del XX secolo (1992) and including theologian Dr. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's remarkable work In Memory of Her (1983). Dr. Schüssler Fiorenza is deeply committed to the Church, to making it a place of wholeness as well as holiness. Her theology presents a balanced worldview (vs exclusively male) which the Church needs to read, listen to, and adopt. This worldview is the next step which the Church must take to grow and become healthy again.

The Church's use of "essence" and "complementarity" pretends to be feminist but is reductive to reproduction-determined roles and to woman being complementary "to man". Jesus called every person, especially the oppressed and the bent-over, to "straighten up", stand tall and be everything they could be, free of the Law and human constraints, and follow the call of God. The Spirit blows where it will.

The Church needs to stop saying "man" when it means "human beings". It needs to stop saying "he" where there is no "he" (God, the Spirit). Yes, part of the problem is grammar and language, but the major problem is the selected and constructed imagery and vocabulary of a male God, a Father God, even "he" for the Spirit. If we really mean what we say, that our transcendent reality is beyond gender, then we will not say "he" but we will say "it". This is fundamental for the inclusion of the enormous constituency which feels alienated.

Please, please read the feminist theology mentioned above, and include these scholars in your inner circle of consultation. Then you will see we do not need a "theology of womanhood".

God bless us all. Thank you for your life of service.

Sincerely,
Marianne Savard
Ottawa, Ontario Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

Your concern for the development of a theology of women is most welcome. Women's position as beings incapable of theological discourse was accepted by the Catholic Church until 1959 when women were accepted into theological courses at universities. Since that time theological scholarship has thrived in the minds of women who have published works of recognized academic merit. To name two of the eminent theological scholars published in recent years, I list: Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*; Elizabeth Johnson’s *She Who Is*. In another style, there is Rosline Miles’s *Who Cooked the Last Supper: The Women’s History of the World*. There are many more theological works by women written by recognized scholars in Catholic theology.

Recent conversations with Catholic clergy have revealed an aversion to the word, “feminist”. A church that loves women as much as it loves men should rejoice at the gains for women who have, as feminists, brought about improvements for women in the workplace, in government in Canada and elsewhere, as well as in the minds of average citizens in North America. In my opinion, the word “feminist” has come to mean “whoever cares about women.”

Recognizing that you do care about women, I am asking you to realize that Roman Catholic Christianity has presented a male triumvirate as the Godhead, constructed a patriarchal structure as “church,” and installed men only as custodians of the faith and Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist.

I hope and pray that you will consider the works of eminent feminist theologians in developing your “Theology of Women.”

Sincerely,

Jo Young       Stittsville, Ontario  Canada

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Your Holiness, Dear Pope Francis:

Don’t you think that it is high time to cancel the censoring of so many of our best Roman Catholic theologians world-wide?

Sincerely,

Gertrud Jaron Lewis

Toronto, Ontario Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

I would like to see a Church that truly and really lives like Jesus did. I would like to see a Church where all are welcome, regardless of where they come from or what they believe, because they feel welcome. As far as I can tell by my reading of the gospels, Jesus did not take attendance when the crowds gathered to hear him speak. He did not ensure they belonged to the club before he began to speak. He did not ensure his audience was exclusively Jewish or male or heterosexual or baptized in order to receive his word or his sacramental touch, nor did he specify these qualifications in his disciples and those who were to follow him in perpetuity.

I believe it is our obligation and our privilege as followers of Jesus to welcome all to the gathering, to hear the Word and to partake at the table. I believe it is for God to read hearts, not us. I believe it is the mandate of the Church to present Jesus to whoever comes in search of God, and to be the bearer of Jesus in Word and in sacrament, without judging worthiness. We as Church should be providing the nourishment of faith, without taking on the unassigned responsibility of deciding who is worthy. We give God to all, and if/how they receive is between the individual and God.

Your compassion and mercy inspire me and give me hope.

Respectfully,

Katherine Cameron

Regina, Saskatchewan Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

I was born in 1938 and grew up in a world where women were discounted. I was the first in a family of five born over a five-year period. The middle baby – the only boy - died shortly after birth. My mother never got over it. Later, she adopted two boys. I grew up feeling guilty for not being a boy.

I also grew up with an uncanny ability to discern what didn’t make sense. My grade one reader had a story about a boy named Pierrot who swallowed a few drops of water while brushing his teeth before going to Mass. He couldn’t go to communion because he broke his fast – if he had, it would have been a mortal sin!

I made my first communion at midnight mass when I was six. At my grandparents’ home before mass, everyone was eating. Several times I was offered food but I refused. Everyone went to communion except Aunt Marion who wasn’t a Catholic. When we got home I asked my mother why everyone had eaten and then went to communion. They ate before midnight! All that food in their stomach when they received Jesus! It didn’t make a bit of sense!

When I graduated from high school in 1955, I came first in the province-wide Catholic school exams. Because of the cost going to Marianopolis College in Montreal was out of the question. My father never told me that one of his bosses had offered to pay my fees to Bishop’s College in Lennoxville. His twin brother, my uncle Ken, had studied at Macdonald College of McGill University. It was OK for him to study in a non-catholic institution and it was OK for him to do post-secondary studies, but not for me.

Years later, I went to Macdonald College to take a Master’s in Microbiology. There, it didn’t matter that I was a religious sister in habit. And it didn’t matter that I was a woman! I was edified by Dr Blackwood, the chairperson and my research director. He truly demonstrated what it means to be “catholic” with a small “c.” I met students from all over the world, from many religions. As a woman, I was treated as an equal.

The same happened for my PhD studies at the University of Alberta and in postdoctoral research. But in the real world, away from an academic setting, a woman was less than a man, especially so if she was married. It was impossible to find a job. Luckily there was a desperate need for a high-school physics teacher at a francophone school in Edmonton! So I became part of the francophone community and I have been a member of a francophone parish since 1975!

You may wonder why I left my religious community in 1973. The lack of priests had something to do with it. It was easy when you got up at 6 AM, meditated, went to mass in the chapel or across the street to the parish. That changed when there were no longer enough priests. No early parish masses. No mass at the convent. Like for laypersons who hold a job, commute, have evening commitments, for me mass, community life, prayer became impossible to fit in. It would have made a big difference to have woman-priests!

While my husband was on a sabbatical in Seattle in 1987-88, I attended Seattle University, a Jesuit university, and obtained a master’s degree in Pastoral Ministry. We women studied the same courses as men preparing for the priesthood, as non-catholic women preparing to be pastors but we were not able to be ordained and we were not even eligible for some ministries non-ordained men perform.

One of my instructors was a former priest who had married and had a young daughter. She proclaimed at Mass one day that she would be a priest just like the celebrant. Her father left the Catholic Church that day and became a minister in a church where his daughter could one day officiate at the altar if she so chose.

In Seattle, two women doctoral graduates of the Institute of Theological Studies each served full-time in parishes where they did everything - including the homily – but could not consecrate the bread and wine. Did this really make sense?

Does it make sense today not to ordain women? It doesn't! It's time to recognize women as equal.

Cecily Mills
Edmonton, Alberta Canada
Dear Pope Francis

Women and men in the Church are hurting from the lack of equality and mutual respect between the sexes in our communities. This is an old injustice as many women have testified through the ages. But in our time it is a pressing problem diminishing love among the faithful for one another and distorting the witness of the Church to the need for justice in the world.

Male or female, every human person is created by God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit. But women are largely excluded from leadership and decision-making in the daily life of the Church with the result that the witness of women and their gifts in the Spirit are not fully available to the mission of the Church. Of equal importance, the sacramental ministry of the Church is always performed by male clergy so that women always receive the sacraments from men and men never receive the sacraments from women. These realities set up a dynamic of male superiority and female inferiority which betrays the promise of baptism that we are all equal in Christ.

I will add one further injustice which in my opinion is really detrimental to Christian community. Scripture and its interpretation has nearly always been written by men. Yet we know that God makes God’s self known to both women and men in their human experience. Theology is reflection on the presence and discovery of God in human experience; we read Scripture in the light of our experience; and above all, we worship with hearts and minds informed by our experience. Only recently have women had opportunities to study theology, have found ways to articulate and share their spiritual experience and begun to write theology from women’s lives. Women theologians are supported by women’s studies in every field of knowledge and learning.

When leaders in the Church gather, the glaring absence of women is a gap ever more apparent. But try as we may, women have not been able to persuade the men of the Church to listen, to taste and see that it is good, to hear what women have to say. Good for women, good for the community of men and women, good for the witness and mission of the Church in our time. It is the movement of the Spirit breathing over the waters of our world.

Please Holy Father, use your authority to encourage clergy and bishops to listen to lay people, especially women. Please lift the penalties and encourage honest dialogue in Church communities on issues of ministry including the ordination of women. Equally, we need dialogue between clergy and laity on issues of gender difference, sexual identity, reproductive freedom, physical and spiritual intimacy in marriage and so on, from women’s perspectives as well as men’s. Bishops and clergy have isolated themselves from the lived experience of the mystical body of Christ which is the Church. The People of God are hurting.

Sincerely,
Alexina Murphy
Victoria, British Columbia Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

I am writing to let you know how inequality for women in the Roman Catholic church has affected me and my children. By inequality I mean that in the RC church women, unlike men, only have 6 out of the 7 sacraments to choose from; that women, unlike men, cannot preach or lead a congregation; that women, unlike men, are not permitted to consecrate the Holy Eucharist; that women, unlike men, cannot baptize or preside at the marriage of the faithful; and all of this simply because they have different body parts - not because of talents, skills, education, disposition, or call from God.

This has affected me and my family deeply. When studying theology, I and the women with me could not even entertain the idea of answering a call to priesthood, while all the men around us could. I, who live in a country that fights for equality for women, have to stand by ashamed and accept being in second place in my faith community, when that faith community should be out there leading the fight. It means when I read theologians like Elizabeth Johnson, who show the direct connection between the abuse of women and the inequality of women in a sexist church with exclusive language and only male images for God, I, in supporting that church, feel responsible. And that feeling of responsibility contributed to my decision to withdraw my money from the church. It means my children, who have been brought up and educated in a church community that discriminates against women, wondered why discrimination was wrong if it’s permitted in the church. It means that when my three children finally were old enough to decide for themselves how they wanted to practice their faith they all decided they couldn’t stay in such a church. They tell me they want respectful equality for their wives and daughters. And I can only agree with them, ashamed.

When priests say, as they so often do, “Women are equal but not the same”, I cringe. That’s what was told to women before they got the right to vote and before women could study in universities. Women are different but both women and men are made in the image of God and it’s time the church recognized the full sacredness of those words. Continuing with the usual arguments is like burying your head in the sand. It’s time to allow the Holy Spirit to blow where it will and to use women’s talents and vocations fully for the good of the church community and the world.

May God continue to bless and protect you as you carry out her/his work for the church. May she/he enlighten you and all the clergy and grant you the courage to change a tradition that continues to abuse and embarrass women.

Sincerely in Christ,

Catherine Walther, Hospital Chaplain

Toronto, Ontario Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

Although I am writing to you as a member of the Catholic Network for Women’s Equality (CNWE), I write to you today, less from a place of ideology and more from a ‘place of the heart’ as your sister in Christ. The editors of our CNWE newsletter invited our members across Canada, as an expansion of their ‘Dialogue Project’ with local clergy, to write to you with changes we would like to see in our church in our lifetime. From what I have read of your teaching, I think we both share a belief in the maxim ‘ecclesia semper reformanda’ as an essential aspect of the dynamic of Christian conversion.

Having grown up in Canada I am very aware of the unearned privilege I have had to live in an affluent country that is not at war and has given me opportunities for education, work, health and the freedom to express my opinion and my religion. I am aware also, largely through my formation in Catholic social teaching that war, poverty, environmental degradation, globalization and the fallout of colonialism, and oppressive political regimes have caused much suffering in our world – and that Jesus calls us to respond, as in the Gospel of Matthew - to ‘feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and be in solidarity with all who are imprisoned’.

Together with my CNWE sisters, I am especially concerned for the lives of women in so many parts of our world. Our local CNWE group in Toronto has an annual vigil to raise awareness about the horror of human trafficking and I know that you also share this concern. CNWE also supports and is inspired by the many initiatives women are taking, sometimes in small but effective ways, to improve their situation. This often involves getting together with other women and supportive men to stand up against unjust laws and violence, to collaborate in various cooperatives to earn a living and support their families and to create access to health and education that offers hope for a brighter future. I believe the overwhelming empirical evidence that giving women opportunities to participate and lead in all aspects of economic, social, political and religious life in society is the best way to lift families out of debilitating poverty.

Given this concern and the imperative of the Gospel, I believe that the change that is most urgently needed in our Church is to open wide the doors of ministry and leadership in our Church so that the gifts of women and men are celebrated in all of their God given fullness. Simply put, if we are to teach that women deserve equal opportunities in society, we must model it in our church. We have heard from male clergy over the many decades of our work that this issue is about ‘women wanting power’ or that ‘women have separate but equal roles in the Church’. Respectfully we find these ideologies that exclude or idealize women rooted more in patriarchal and sexist models of power than they are in the genuine respect for the equal dignity of women that we see reflected in Scripture. I ask you, Pope Francis with every fibre of my being, “What human is to judge who can image Christ?” It is a call and an imperative open to us all.

I urge you, brother in Christ, in your continued good service in our Church, to courageously reflect on the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, that we may all work to build a church that in our words, our actions and our structures reflects the whole people of God. For, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Sincerely,
Mary Ellen Chown
Oakville, Ontario   Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

I have three granddaughters ages 15, 17 and 20 who continue to practice their Catholic faith. They are now facing so many open doors re: university and career opportunities but they are devastated that the Catholic Church closes its doors to them as women. They feel that they have received the sacraments - been faithful altar girls - sung in the choir and have enjoyed an emotional attachment to religious liturgy. They are now feeling betrayed as they realize that the Catholic Church clearly does not see them as equal persons, denying them equal opportunities. At a time when they are being asked to make serious decisions in their lives, they question why they have no decision-making power in the church. I am afraid that I can only totally agree with them. I grieve that both my grandchildren and my church will be denied the huge blessings that each has to offer.

Marie Carver
Toronto, Ontario  Canada
Your Holiness:

I write this letter as an active, committed Catholic who appreciates the ways that you encourage and challenge us to listen to each other and to the working of the Holy Spirit in the Church. I believe that openness to each other’s views and entry into dialogue with each other is the best way to discern God’s will for the Church and for the world. I hope that my points of view will be helpful in the dialogue about the role of women in the Church.

I want to introduce myself as I think it helps to explain what formed me. I am a “cradle Catholic,” raised to respect the social justice teachings of the church. I have been active in lay ministry since I was a teenager, and I accepted the challenges of Vatican II to engage in full, active participation by participating in lay ministry development, theology and scripture courses throughout my adult life.

My life’s experiences have marked my mind, heart and soul. These include my role as a mother; the pain of the loss of my first marriage, which was compounded by the deep sense that I no longer had a place in the Church; the hurt, and the healing, of the annulment process; remarriage outside of the Church and the blessing of my marriage within the Church; nurturing young people I did not give birth to and creating family out of bonds of love, not blood. In my professional life I am a chartered accountant, and have spent much of my career focused on governance and risk management. These experiences are part of my faith journey and my world view.

I sincerely want the Church, the people of God, to flourish and to reflect “the face of Christ” in creation. I have come to believe, very strongly, that in order to preserve what is beautiful and good in the Church, and to resolve the systemic issues that bind us, we require the full and active participation of women in the governance of the Church. As you know, governance consists of three dimensions: authority, decision-making and accountability. Women must be included in all three of these dimensions, in all areas and at all levels of the Church.

Why do I focus on governance? Because the evidence shows that any organization that includes women in its governance becomes healthier, and is better able to achieve its purpose. They “perform” better – based on whatever measures are important to them – and they address issues better, too. As a result they make fewer of the mistakes that result in tragedies – and crimes – such as the cover-up of pedophile priests, residential schools, and financial mismanagement. Institutional sins such as these blacken the soul of the Church and they would not happen in a Church where authority, decision-making and accountability was shared between men and women.

Why would the inclusion of women make such a difference? I believe it is due in part to brain physiology, and also life’s experience. Because of these factors our “knowing” is not just the knowledge of canon law or theology – although it includes all of that – it is the “knowing” that comes from the heart/brain connection that is different for women than for men. God created us unique and for a purpose; our gifts are as essential as the gifts of men to the health of the Church.

The authors of sacred scripture seemed to acknowledge importance of the divine feminine when they describe God as nurse and mother, but the Church does not seem to recognize the implication: some of the gifts that are essential to God’s purpose are reflected primarily in the human female. We are not “a deviation from the norm” – the norm being men – we are a distinct manifestation of God’s creativity, genius, passion and love. Failure to engage women obstructs the discernment of God’s will in the Church and in the world. The whole cannot be healthy – nor God’s purpose fulfilled – without us.
How might this reality play out in the governance of the Church? Women may view situations differently, and in so doing help to shine new light on a situation. For example, Church leaders today speak of “sins against the Holy Spirit” when they describe why the ordination of women is out of the question. However, a woman will tell you sexual abuse of a child is a sin against the Holy Spirit, because it damages the soul. This damage impedes the working of the Holy Spirit in a child’s life, affecting their capacity to realize the glorious potential that God created in them; mothers do not need theology or canon law to see the sin against the Holy Spirit in this scenario!

To take the example further: the “logic” of the Church leaders that were involved in covering up the crime of pedophile priests was that they were “protecting” the institution of the Church. This “logic” would have fallen apart under the scrutiny of mothers; the viewpoint of these decision makers would have been broadened if women had been included in the process, and I am confident that different, better decisions would have been made. Women would not have allowed pedophile priests to be reassigned; and in protecting the children, they would also have protected the Church against the shame and scandal that plagues us.

Holy Father, I understand that my ideas may be threatening to some because they require shared authority and power; however, we know that the “command-and-control” model came from the Roman Empire, not from Christ! That model has failed all over the world; we see it in religious extremism, in the actions of Donald Trump – the list goes on. I know that you are a man who encourages us to set fear aside, and to step forward in faith. I implore you to consider my request. I would be happy to work to make it a reality!

In his peace,
Jeanie McKibbon
Calgary, Alberta Canada

Sources:


• Scaling up: why women-owned businesses can recharge the global economy, EYGM Ltd, 2009; Global Gender Gap Report 2014, World Economic Forum.


• The Credit Suisse Gender 3000: Women in Senior Management, Credit Suisse Research Institute, August 2012; Global Gender Gap Report 2014, World Economic Forum.
Dear Pope Francis,

When I attend Mass on Sundays I always feel that something is missing. I feel sad when I think about the fact that women are not represented as priests or deacons. Inside I am screaming for fairness. I am not represented. I can’t help but feel that the Catholic Church is not for me as my gender is not represented on the altar. I think about leaving the Catholic Church EVERY DAY. The only thing keeping me with the Church is the fact that my husband is a practicing Catholic. How long I can continue with this hollow, lost feeling inside I don’t know.

The Catholic Church needs to recognize the wrongness, the unfairness of the treatment of women if its numbers are to stop dwindling away. Jesus recognized women many times while He lived on earth. Our Catholic Church needs to follow Jesus’s example or it should NOT be calling itself Christian!!

Sincerely and with great sadness and a huge weight on my shoulders,

Mary Lou Hamilton
Lyndhurst, Ontario Canada

Dear Pope Frances,

I do not believe that—in my lifetime—women will be treated by my Church as equals and I am finding it difficult to keep on hoping.

However, in general, I’d like to see that the topic of men’s and women’s roles in this Church will become a priority in updating the Church structure; that women will be treated as half of the population, not to complement men, but as partners. After all, I believe that each of us is meant to become a full human being. I do not think that when we were created, God divided talents by masculine and feminine.

I am finding it a bit ridiculous that in this century a group of men is making decisions about what a woman will be allowed “to do” in our Church. Maybe you can start by replacing each cardinal as he retires with a woman, until half of the cardinals are women. And, please, do not talk about tradition.

In spite of my not-so-hopeful mood, I wish you well. I care about this Church that has been a life-giving thread throughout my life and has been hurting me for a long time.

Marie Cerny
Toronto, Ontario Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

I am so grateful that you are our current pope because of all you are doing to bring about important changes in our Church. I pray for you often and wish you God’s blessing. I know you are getting a lot of opposition from Curia members and others and this must be very difficult for you.

I am writing about women in the Church. Thank you for calling together a group to look at women deacons. But I feel that you need to do more than that, although that may be a first step. I believe women should be allowed to be ordained. But even before this decision comes, I believe women need to be given the right to preach and break open the Word of God on a regular basis in our parishes, and they shouldn’t have to be deacons to do this. It should be sufficient that they have an up to date knowledge of scripture and an awareness of current theology. Women are allowed to preach in care homes with the elderly, but not at Eucharist. A woman’s insight and understanding of the Word of God is crucial to full faith development and should no longer be denied. Women don’t just preach from their heads, but also from their hearts wherein dwells the Spirit, and this can add wonderful new dimensions to understanding God’s word and how to live it in our lives. This is an important step which you could implement regardless of what decision is made re. female deacons. We cannot continue to tie God’s hands. There are women who would be wonderful preachers but do not feel called to be deacons. There is no need for these two ministries, these two calls, to be joined.

I submit these thoughts with deep respect for you and deep love for you. I hope all these letters will receive you deepest attention. Blessings on yourself and your ministry to God’s holy people.

Judith Pellerin

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada
Dear Pope Francis,

Please lift the penalty of latae sententiae excommunication that has been imposed on Catholic women who have been ordained to the priesthood (contra legem).

We are women who have chosen to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5, 29) by following a call of the Holy Spirit, recognized in us by members of the People of God, to serve the People of God. We love our church and want to maintain it alive and vibrant by ensuring that the Eucharist, “fount and summit of the life of the church” continues to be celebrated in communities where it is being lost for lack of a priest.

As theologically literate, spiritually mature and pastorally sensitive priests, we offer a companionship of empowerment to the members of our emerging communities. But we strive first and foremost to be faithful disciples of Jesus the Christ, bringing the Good News to the poor – that is ministering to those who find themselves on the margins not only of society but also the church.

For the sake of the Gospel and the survival of the church, please initiate an update to the Code of Canon Law and change C. 1024 to read “only a baptized person can be ordained...” and do justice for women in the Roman Catholic church.

Marie Evans Bouclin, Bishop
Roman Catholic Women Priests of Canada
Sudbury, Ontario  Canada
Your Holiness:

I write to you with a humble entreaty to allow women and men equal access to the Priesthood. As many have already pointed out, this is not only a matter of equal rights for women but also a matter of human rights in this Year of our Lord, 2017.

As an ordained member of Roman Catholic Women Priests, I can assure you that we demand the highest stands from our candidates and furthermore, that we have many capable, fully qualified candidates with graduate degrees from accredited education institutions, outstanding in their fields of endevour, and knowledgeable in both their theology training and ministry experience. These are devout women, dedicated to Catholicism and to God’s Call. These are brave women, following their conscience to do what they believe is right in the eyes of God. I know because I have been privileged to meet and work with many of them. I am one of them.

If ever this world needed priest-leaders, it is now. There are so many needs it is impossible to meet them all, but one of the most urgent is a lack of trained priests. In North America, as you know, the Church is importing priests from Latin America and Asia to fill parish vacancies. I have heard complaints from parishioners that these priests are difficult to understand. Assuredly, school children find their accents hard to understand. Worst of all, this practice depletes their country of origin of the priests they require at home.

It saddens me to witness the Church being accused of misogyny, or that the hierarchy, especially the Curia, simply refuse to let go their grip on power. I would suggest that it does not matter whether this is true or not: what matters is public perception. It is this perception that has caused many Catholics to walk away from the Church. Some have moved to reform movements such as ours, others have turned to liberal Protestant churches, while others have left religion altogether. It is dangerous to generalize but usually it is the mother who encourages her children to attend church, accompanying them, and assisting in church ministries. She sends her children to attend Catholic schools but a disenchanted mother will not, does not, do that. As a result, many families have walked away from their Catholic roots; certainly, that is tragic for the Church and for the people of God, lost to their beautiful, important and immaculate tradition. I beg you to take my plea into consideration on behalf of many, many sincere but disillusioned Roman Catholics. Please forgive my impetuous petition but I write only because of my deep concern. It is because I admire you as a dedicated Pope working for social justice that I appeal to you to resolve this situation before more Catholics as are lost to the Church. Presumptuous as it may be, I pray that you may have the strength to overcome the opposition challenges you face.

In God’s Service,

Rev. Roberta Fuller, B.A., Hons., B.Ed., M.T.S., BCUS., RCWP
Church of the Beatitudes c/o P.O. Box 63, Bethany Ontario L0A 1A0 Canada
Pope Francis speaks:

– As reported by The Guardian (Nov 1/16):

“Saint Pope John Paul II had the last clear word on this [the ordination of women] and it stands, this stands,” Francis said in his initial response, referring to a 1994 document stating that women could never join the priesthood.

“But for ever, for ever? Never, never?” the reporter asked in a follow-up question, as the papal delegation flew back to Rome from Sweden on Tuesday.

Francis replied: “If we read carefully the declaration by St John Paul II, it is going in that direction.”

(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/01/pope-francis-women-never-roman-catholic-priests-church)

– On Feb. 17/17 at the Roma Tre University

Pope Francis spoke “from the heart” about the treatment of migrants fleeing from war and hunger. Asked about migrants threatening Christian culture, he responded: “I ask: How many invasions has Europe had? Europe was formed by invasions and migrations.” He went on to explain that he himself comes from a country that is comprised of migrants—that 80% of Argentinians have foreign roots. When asked for his opinion on “medicines” to counteract the world’s violence, Pope Francis stated: “No one today can deny that we’re at war. It’s a war fought in pieces, but a war. We need to tone down the rhetoric. There are many medicines against violence. First of all, the heart. Before arguing, dialogue.”

(https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2017/02/17/pope-says-)

CNWE’S VISION

Justice and equality for all persons manifested in word and action in the Catholic church and throughout the world.

CNWE’S MISSION

As a Canadian organization, we connect, support and represent people who seek justice for all the baptized within the Catholic church, for women throughout the world and for all of creation.

CNWE’S CORE VALUES

Inclusivity
Creativity
Celebration
Compassion
Solidarity
Collaboration
Dialogue
renew

your

CNWE membership

You will find the renewal form in this newsletter, so don’t delay, lift your pen and renew right away! You can always check with our registrar, Christine Gebel, about your membership status: christinemgebel@gmail.com

Mary of Mandala

What say you, Magdalen?
Fellow traveler, Jesus’ friend,
Courageous companion
Who accompanies
Death’s bitter-shroud end.

No prostitute you,
A Woman Jew
And Apostle.
Denigrated, despised
by jealousy, fear, and more.

Betrayed by your brothers,
whose spin control
requires you go from
WomanWitness to Whore.

And besides, it would still be alright.
(Unlike many a man-creature,
you well understand the
odd God ways of the Teacher.)

Did you blame yourself, my sister,
for their failure to comprehend
All of Love’s bold claims
for Newborn Jesus-Way?

Mary, WomanWitness, WomanFriend,
What have you to say?
Only
“Rabbo.ni!”

Christ comes again.
Amen, Alleluia, Amen.

Christine Schenk csj 6/5/98
For more information about the Catholic Network for Women’s Equality (CNWE) and information about registering for the upcoming CNWE NATIONAL CONFERENCE and Annual General Meeting, go to:

cnwe.ca

or:
find and ‘like’ us on Facebook

We’ve also a Twitter Account

We think you know that you’ve power in your hands. PLEASE! Think about sowing some CNWE Seeds - yes, the ones you hold in your hand right now.
For just $12 a year, you can have The Seed Keepers sent to someone - someone who needs to know about CNWE and its mission, someone who knows it and wants to know more, maybe someone in the media or ....
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All members receive the hot-off-the-press issues of The Seed Keepers, the CNWE newsletter.

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_____ $50.00 annual CNWE membership
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_____ $25.00 (students and those unable to pay the full annual membership fee)
_____ $60.00 annual international membership
_____ optional additional donation of $ _____

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CNWE,
Box 19594,
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To facilitate networking, CNWE sends out the membership list once a year, to members only. We do not otherwise release membership information. If you would prefer not to have your name on the membership list, please check this box ☐. Thanks!
COME!

The Catholic Network for Women’s Equality
National Conference and AGM
FRIDAY, MAY 26 TO SUNDAY MAY 28, 2017
at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, ON
All are welcome!