



The Seed Keepers

A Publication of the Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE)
Réseau Catholique pour l'égalité des femmes

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Life happens. As I write this editorial (November 11th), and as I wrap up this edition of TSK, I am mighty mindful of the privilege I have of serving CNWE. But, also I remember well Mary Ellen Chown coming to Ottawa to film some members of Ottawa CNWE as we celebrated Eucharist at Mary Joy's place. When Mary Ellen asked what we each found found to be grateful for in CNWE, I enthusiastically called out, "Friendship". I would offer that again and again. Certainly, we have had, do have and will have differences. But isn't that the case when we honestly show ourselves and get down to the nitty-gritty and work to achieve the best outcomes?

You'll find in this edition of TSK some excellent pieces. These include three book reviews - so compelling that I've already made book orders.

Another piece is written by Jacquelyn Frolick who at one point states:

"I have had to transcend the institutional structure of the Church to deepen my spiritual growth and my relationship with God."

Well, honestly, her statement summed up and affirmed my own stance *vis-à-vis* the Roman Catholic Church. Of course, many have questioned my continuation to attempt to be a strong catalytic poke in this area. My easy answer swells up: 'Because the RCC is one of the most powerful old boys' clubs on the planet, committing the sins of patriarchy every day, and not even recognizing that — and this hurts us all including, importantly, the most vulnerable.' (Did I ever let you in CNWE know that one female patient disclosed to me that a priest in the confessional scolded her about the birth control medication she was obliged to take to be part of a scientific study: "Your discomfort is the Holy Spirit telling you not to take birth control.")

Janet Speth offers a memorial on Ellen Leonard and points us to another in the *Toronto Star*. We have a letter on violence against women by Monica Cullum. And, thanks to Vikki Marie, one about the needs of old growth forests in British Columbia.

Good reading, everyone!

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Virginia Lafond,
Editor

virginialafond@gmail.com

Book Reviews ...

A recently written piece by H el ene Polnicky

The Wisdom of the Beguines: The Forgotten Story of a Medieval Women's Movement.

Laura Swan.

NY: BlueBridge, 2016.

Laura Swan is an author of numerous books and articles with a special interest in restoring the stories of women to history. She is also an adjunct professor of religious studies at Saint Martin's University in Washington State and a Benedictine Sister and former prioress of St. Placid Priory. The beguines were a Christian religious movement of laywomen that began in the twelfth century, spread across Europe and existed until very recently (2013). These were women who did not fit into the mold of cloistered nuns. Since 1980, scholars have become interested in uncovering the life and values of the beguines as an independent women's movement. Swan is convinced that beguine wisdom which she seeks to explore in her book has much to add to today's world.

The book begins with an introduction describing Swan's first exposure to the history of the beguines and then the influences that shaped her interest including her feisty great aunt and her own experiences as a Benedictine Sister. Following this introduction, there are nine chapters which focus on diverse aspects of the beguines and their lifestyles. For example, chapter one, "Who Were the Beguines?" reveals the beguines as women from all walks of life and as young as fourteen years old living in self-governing communities called beguinages. Single or widowed, the beguines were self-supporting and led celibate lives modelled on the first apostles (*via apostolica*). Living independently, they relied on commercial ventures to support themselves. Swan shows that the beguine lifestyle was a way women could lead independent and spiritually rewarding lives without being subservient to others, especially husbands, priests, and bishops. It was also a safe haven for women who had nowhere else to turn.

Chapters two to four are similarly detailed, describing the spread of the beguines across Europe, the beguinages where they lived, and beguine ministries.

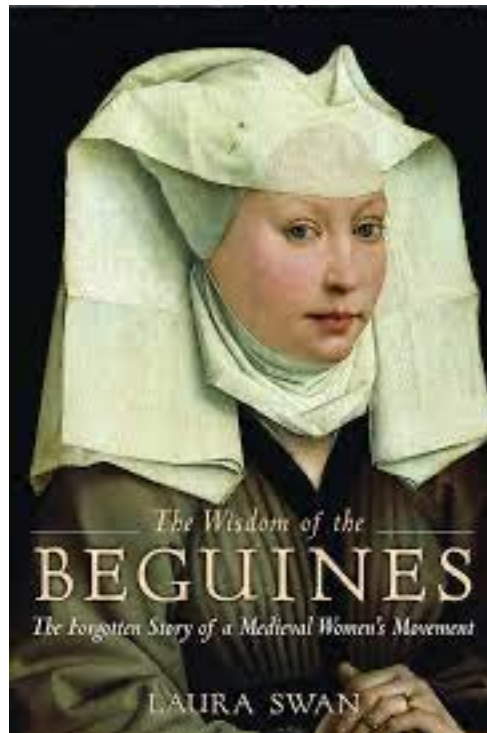
Chapter two is also a model for chapters five to nine in which historically significant beguines are highlighted in terms of the theme of the chapter. These themes are beguine spirituality, compassion, preaching and performing, literary abilities, and heresies, respectively.

The book ends with a concluding chapter in which Swan states: "**Beguines showed great strength and persistence and collaboration with fellow seekers, tolerated diversity, and raised difficult questions; they exercised both communal and personal wisdom and freedom to follow God as they felt called.**" As well as these qualities, some of the other qualities of the beguines which stood out throughout

the book were their resourcefulness in business, their religiosity and authenticity, and the spiritual impact they had on the lay people in the surrounding communities. Additionally, the beguines were persistent in carrying out the ministry of Jesus in the face of resistance or lack of support from a patriarchal society and Church whose main objection was that they could not control the beguines.

Swan's research is comprehensive and touches on many important aspects of the beguine lifestyle particularly through the examples of medieval beguine mystics. She cites two hundred twenty-seven English reference sources in the bibliography. Swan also mentions that there are many publications in other languages which have not been listed. Not surprisingly, given the subject area of the book, most of the references are historical or

biographical in nature. Rather than present her work according to a historical timeline, Swan has chosen to focus on specific aspects of the beguines and then present the relevant research. This evidence-based approach makes a clear and strong case supporting Swan's assertion that beguine wisdom has something important to offer us. The downside is that it challenges the reader to understand the beguines in



the larger historical context and to keep track of the timeline of the various beguine developments.

The most strongly emphasized aspect of the beguines was their religiosity reflected in their spirituality, evangelizing zeal, and pastoral care as emphasized in chapters five to nine. This is not surprising given the beguines were a religious movement so religiosity was at the core of who they were. Swan places this religiosity in an even better light by comparing the beguines to a Church hierarchy that was suffering from corruption and a greater interest in politics and power than the needs of the people.

The biographical information about significant beguines mentioned in the book was generally presented in terms of the good things they did. The one exception is Na Prou Boneta whose "spiritual message was sliding into the realm of heterodoxy or outright heresy." The result was a very positive portrayal of the beguines which served to support Swan's purpose for the book but introduces a touch of hagiography. The presentation of mainly positive facts also obscures the harsh realities of beguine life, minimizing their heroic character. One example is Juliana of Mont Cornillon who was forced out as leader of her community in a struggle over leadership and finances. Years later, she was vindicated and

returned to her leadership role only to be forced out again in another power struggle. Dealing with these kinds of struggles takes a special strength so it was a missed opportunity to explore an important side of the beguines.

I first heard about the beguines on a Saint Paul University study tour for a course on the spirituality of medieval women mystics led by Dr. Susan Roll. Visiting a beguinage in Belgium, I came away impressed by their spirituality, independence, and everything they did for their community. Swan's book was an opportunity to delve into the rich history of the beguines and I was completely amazed how these women were empowered to lead spiritual lives, be evangelists, and to do so much pastoral ministry in the communities around them without being nuns or part of the clergy. Swan has certainly proven that the beguine way offers an extra dimension to our Christian path that should be embraced. I would certainly recommend this book to anyone, especially those interested in exploring the spirituality and contributions of women to our understanding of being true followers of Christ.

* H  l  ne Polnicky is an active member of Ottawa CNWE.

*Susan Roll*excitedly shares her Wisdom*

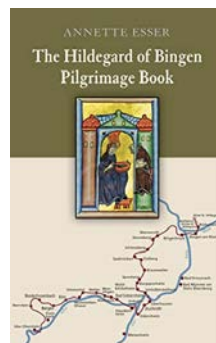
The Hildegard of Bingen Pilgrimage Book.
Annette Esser.
Collegetown MN. Liturgical Press. 2022.



Even if you never have a chance to visit the region of Germany where Hildegard of Bingen lived, you will find in this book more than enough immersion in her life, her thought, her divinely-inspired visions, and most importantly, the land that nourished her genius, to feel your roots growing deeper in her unique and powerful spirituality.

The editor of this rich collection of Hildegard's writings, the colourful depictions of her visions, and a wide range of commentary and poetry, holds a doctorate in feminist spirituality. She founded the Scivias Institute to further an awareness of Hildegard through workshops and creative work by contemporary artists, theologians, musicians and therapists. (Full disclosure: I am a member of the academic advisory board of the Scivias Institute.)

This book for pilgrims, including armchair pilgrims, follows the tracks of the Hildegard Way, a



walking path of 187 kilometres in the region of the Nahe and Rhine rivers, marked by 27 tableaux explaining the significance of each station in the life and times of Hildegard. Each section of this book begins with a blank page for a pilgrim to think about and write responses to a few questions for reflection. The book is divided into ten stages or geographic portions of the Hildegard Way, each linked to some portion of Hildegard's life and work, her times, and central concepts in her work such as creation and the cosmos, Christian theological concepts, Scripture, natural medicine, sacraments, symbols and even a small section on beer. (Hildegard recommends it.)

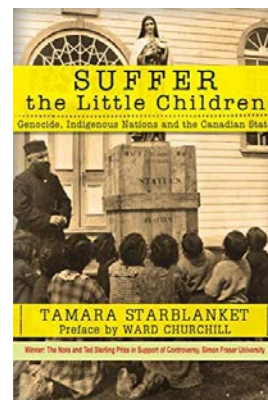
This book should be savoured in a comfortable chair with a cup of tea (or beer) for an engaging introduction to Hildegard's life, her brilliant insights, her courage, and the breadth and depth of her wisdom today.

*Susan Roll is an active member of Ottawa CNWE.

Gertrud Jaron Lewis on her gleanings*

from Tamara Starblanket's book

***Suffer the Little Children:
Genocide, Indigenous Nations and the Canadian State.***
Tamara Starblanket.
Clarity Press. 2018.



An Amnesty International webinar in October 2021 introduced its 1700 participants to the author Tamara Starblanket, a descendant of the 19th century Cree Chief Star Blanket. We were told her book was based on her thesis for a Master's in Law, on which she had spent 7 years of research. Proof of her meticulous research appears in the more than 200 endnotes that accompany each chapter of the book. Starblanket writes in an angry, provocative style, presumably wanting to shock her readers into comprehending that Canada is guilty of genocide of the Indigenous peoples in this country.

The word “genocide” was coined in 1944, and most people would connect the term with the Holocaust. However, Starblanket’s research discovered the reverse: **Hitler intended to imitate what had happened during the colonial invasion of Turtle Island. That is, Hitler apparently took the elimination of Indians in North America as a proof that a people can indeed be destroyed.**

But why mention a book that was published four years ago? Presumably since 2018 the general public — at least those who are interested — has become more knowledgeable. Beginning in May 2021, the media informed us in great detail about the discovery of hundreds of unmarked children’s graves on the sites of former residential schools. The July 2022 papal “penitential pilgrimage” to the Indigenous peoples in Canada was a further occasion to let us know of the horror that had happened in these institutions. The word “cultural genocide,” of course, had been used already in 2015 by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And it has since been repeated often. But Starblanket wants to go further. Based on the definition of the United Nations Genocide Convention (UNGC), she explains that the residential schools do not precisely fit the criteria of this international law (published in 1948), even though an estimated 25% of

children in residential schools died. According to John A. MacDonald, Canada’s first Prime Minister and in 1883 the founder of the residential schools, the aim of these institutions was to “kill the Indian in the child.” The original idea had been to create white people out of Indigenous children. But the estimated 150,000 Indigenous who were forced to spend their formative years in these schools did not develop a **new self** — the graduates instead were left with **no self at all**. The experience of these schools was then the cause for “collective traumas, suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, as well as traumatized parental patterns.” Removing children from such harmful surroundings seemed necessary, except that the children ought to have remained in an Indigenous community, instead of being forced into the white Canadian child-welfare system. And the “forceful transfer of children from their parents” is listed as one of the definitions of genocide by the UNGC.

At the time of Starblanket’s writing, she documented a continuing crime: “80 % of children in care are aboriginal, yet they make up only 5 % of the total population.” The author shows that foster care is worse than residential schools, because *no* connection is left to the Indigenous community, often for life. Adoptees are on their own in an unknown white world, unable to share with an Indigenous fellow sufferer. The author adds that this genocide is still often casually referred to as “the sixties scoop.”

In a slowly shifting situation, when the statistics it cites may be becoming dated, why review and indeed recommend this book? Because it teaches us about a negative side of Canadian history that may help us understand and even sympathize with the complaints and demands of the Indigenous in our country.

* Gertrude Jaron Lewis is a long-standing member of Toronto CNWE.

A Letter ...

Jacquelyn Frolick writes a stellar piece to the Vatican*

Sr. Nathalie Becquart
Under-Secretary for Synod of Bishops
Via della Conciliazione 34
00120 Citta del Vaticano
Email: n.becquart@synod.va



Re: Input to the synod process:

Context: I am a cradle Catholic nurtured in the Roman Catholic tradition, a widow, a mother of four loving sons and their spouses, and grandmother of nine wonderful grandchildren. Diversity is a special gift of life. Educated in Philosophy and Religious Studies, I have served the Church and the People of God as a Religious Education Coordinator in Public Schools, a Catechist, a Liturgical Reader, a Eucharistic Minister, and as Presider at Liturgies of the Word with Holy Communion. I have worked as a Parish Pastoral Assistant and as a Facilitator of workshops and retreats on spiritual growth.

My Faith is central to my life and, at one time, I felt at home in the Church. While I remain grateful for my foundation in faith, I am no longer at home there. The institutional Church has left me. I have had to transcend the institutional structure of the Church to deepen my spiritual growth and my relationship with God. My journey of faith has been one of discovery, disillusion, sadness, risk, trust, and joy.

While I personally do not feel called to the role of priesthood, I am called to love, equality, justice, and full inclusion in church and society as I walk humbly with God. The continued emphasis of the institutional Church on a male God, male Saviour, male priesthood, male scriptures, and male language, exclude me as a female. There is little or no education about our reference to the presence of the Feminine Divine. While God is beyond gender, language shapes our thinking and our thinking is shaped by language. Our images of God need to expand. Balance is necessary. Furthermore, adherence to patriarchal, Roman empiricism and some damaging traditions no longer speak to me or enhance my faith experience. As Saint Cyprian is reported to have stated, "Tradition without truth is simply error."

My Questions for this Synod:

- ~Why baptize females into a community of faith, centered on the life and actions of Jesus, and then exclude them from official leadership/service/responsibility and decision making?
- ~Will the serious issues of clericalism, sexism, spiritual and sexual abuse, exclusion and division, power and control, transparency, and accountability, be discussed and resolved?
- ~ When will we see mutual respect, understanding, compassion, truth, balance, harmony, healing, surrender, unconditional love, and joy as Gospel values?
- ~Church attendance is declining, partly because of irrelevance and self-serving attitudes, but who is listening?

These questions reflect some of the current needs of the Church in this twenty-first century. But, in my humble opinion, this synod could be a fruitless adventure if it doesn't respect, accept females as equals, and include the 'other half of humanity' in full participation and leadership. Any church must be relevant to the people it serves! There is hope during this coming Lenten season as we reflect, individually and communally, on how Holy Mystery is calling us forward to conversion and transformation.

As for me, now in my seventies, I know I live and move and have my being in God. The Incarnation, along with my experience, assures me of the Divine Presence in all of humanity, nature, and the cosmos. God lives and acts in and through me. Love is what really matters if we are to confidently journey forward together as a synodal Church.

Respectfully In Christ,

Jacquelyn Frolick
Sault Ste. Marie, ON, Canada

April 10, 2022

*Jacquelyn Frolick is a longstanding member Algoma CNWE.

Letter...

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN – a Topic For Discussion

Oct. 29, 2022

The Inquest Jury in Renfrew County, Ontario — which delved into the deaths of three women by a former partner of each of the women — released its report in July 2022. No less than 86 recommendations for change were made, 79 directed to the Provincial Government and 6 to the Government of Canada. This was not the first such report but efforts should be made to ensure that it is the last.

Violence against women — sometimes referred to as Domestic Violence, Gender Based Violence or Intimate Partner Violence — is a product of an unequal society emanating from discriminatory social structures, attitudes and beliefs about subordination of women to men, discrimination and patriarchy. Gender Based violence includes any act of violence, abuse or harassment and including online violence that can result in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering. To speak the obvious: Violence against women, nationally and internationally, is not new and it continues to warrant our attention. We owe it to ourselves to become advocates for change. Who's up for the challenge?

Monica Cullum, Ottawa ON

Editor's Note: Would a new CNWE circle be the way forward on this work?

Did you hear?

The Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research has submitted revolutionary proposals to the Synod on Synodality, a worldwide consultation of Catholics kick-started by Pope Francis on the theme of a more participatory church. The Institute proposes that the Catholic Church adopt a Constitution that would underlie its ecclesiastical laws. The Constitution would revolutionise the present structure of the Church.

According to Prof. Mary McAleese, former President of Ireland, now Chancellor, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland: ***“This proposed Constitution is the best idea the Catholic Church has had in centuries. It gives due respect to the God given dignity of every member, puts Christ front and centre, loosens the strangling, controlling grip of imperialism and clericalism and lets the Church breathe again, love again, include again. We need this Constitution. It is our bridge to the future”.***

The constitutional text is the result of a year's work by an international, interdisciplinary working group of 25 academics, coordinated by the Wijngaards Institute. ...

The full text of the proposed constitution can be read at [Proposed Constitution – Wijngaards Institute](#).

Submitted by Marie Bouclin, Sudbury, ON

[CNWE's Summary Report to the Vatican Synod on Synodality](#)

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:b9c0e1a7-029b-3203-8057-fbf106f95210>

Clicking on the link above will connect you to CNWE's Summary Report to the Vatican Synod on Synodality. It is based on conversations that CNWE members engaged in during spring 2022. It was gratefully received by the Vatican Synod Office and the office of Synod Undersecretary, Sr. Nathalie Becquart.

In Case You Missed It

From Vikki Marie's letter (Oct. 13/22) to CNWE and RCWP:

"BC Old Growth forests need your help. Lovely to be able to reach out to you about an initiative that I think you will want to support. It is a rally/march in Victoria on Nov. 26th (see below) to protect what is left of old growth forests across BC including a declaration, which importantly was crafted and endorsed by the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, three environment NGOs and Elders for Ancient Trees. The declaration outlines how governments need to support indigenous communities to move away from logging the few remaining old growth stands and instead provide them with resources and support needed to develop alternate economic development strategies.

The organizers are trying to make this rally a very note worthy occasion...with as many people as possible at the event and the declaration signed by 100's of community, faith-based, environmental and social justice organizations. I am so hoping you will spread the word about both the event and the declaration to your networks so there will be many more people who come to know about the event and who might be interested in attending, making a donation and/or reaching out to organizations who could provide an endorsement."

Further from your *TSK* editor:

"Did you see this recent put-down of forest defenders, coming from no less than Premier Horgan himself in his speech to the UBCM conference in September? 'Some do-gooder comes in with a Tilley hat and says, 'You're all bad people. The government needs to do this, the government needs to do that.'



Will that kind of dismissal slow us down from defending old-growth forests, something the Premier himself promised to do? Nope. We'll keep pointing out the government's hypocrisy and the lack of meaningful action to protect all remaining old growth."

(See **Sep 17/22 Terrace Standard**, [Premier tells BC municipal leaders not to expect 'lolly,' stresses collaboration.](#))

In Memory of Ellen Leonard, csj, CNWE founding member

*by Janet Speth, csj**



As we lovingly celebrate the life of Ellen Leonard, we are especially grateful for her passion for women's equality that gave birth to a vision of a women's reform movement in the Catholic Church still active today as CNWE.

I was going to write an article commemorating Ellen for this edition; however, another opportunity arose. My congregation was approached by a reporter, Tracey Tong, who wanted to do a piece on Ellen for the Toronto Star's Sunday, 'Together', section called *Remembrance*. Of course, we were delighted. Tracey did extensive research, interviewing some of the sisters close to Ellen and others, including her sister Anne, Mary Ellen Lawless and Mary Ellen Chown. The article was featured in the Oct 2, 2022 edition. It was so well written that I did not think I could offer anything better.

Those of you in the Toronto area may have already read it; however, a second reading may only deepen our gratitude for Ellen and the amazing woman she was.

Many of us knew her personally as family, as a co-sister in the congregation, through CNWE or having her as a professor during studies at Toronto School of Theology. I remember her gentleness and her wonderful laugh. She had a great sense of humour which likely kept her sane in the face of the long struggle for women's equality in the Church. She was a brilliant academic and declared her special love for all her women students, encouraging them to boldly find their voice. And she loved having fun – we travelled many a ski trail together. Take a moment to bring to mind the special memories you may have of her.

During this Thanksgiving season we also remember, with gratitude, Alexina Murphy, Bernadette McMahon and Judy Maier who, together with Ellen, actualized the vision in 1981. They were among the first women to study theology in Canada and Ellen was among the first women to teach at the Faculty of Theology at St. Michael's in 1977.

Let us give Ellen the final encouraging word to us all:

When she was asked what she was most proud of she quickly answered: *"Working with women students"*. In a lecture Sister Ellen had this to say to women:

"We need to claim our space, to find our voice — not only because it is a matter of justice — which it is but even more because the Church cannot really be faithful to its mission, to be a sign of salvation, unless the experience of Church is one that is inclusive. It is by accepting our call to ministry and discipleship which flows from our baptismal call that we challenge the Church to become a better sign of the Kingdom of God's world, which is for everyone, but especially for the poor and the powerless." (Personal file notes/ csj archives).

May Ellen's guiding presence be with us as we look to CNWE's future and may the current synodal process bring her vision and ours a little closer to reality.

*Janet Speth serves on CNWE's National Work Group.

Editor's notes:

~ Picture used with the permission of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Toronto

~ To see the Toronto Star article written by Tracey Tong, search for **Ellen Leonard, Toronto Star**.



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

The Seed Keepers

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The Seed Keepers' Publication Team:

Virginia Lafond

Jocelyn Rait

...

National Work Group (NWG)

**Louise Dowhan,
Winnipeg, MB**

**Shaunagh Gravelines,
Sault Ste. Marie, ON**

**Janet Speth,
Toronto, ON**

**Denise Wiggins,
Elliot Lake, ON**

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Yahoo e-list: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cnwe>