

Feminine, Faithful and Free?

Speech by Emmy Silvius*

Spirituality in the Pub – 9 July 2012 – Jamberoo (near Kiama NSW)

First of all I'd like to thank you for inviting me to be with you this evening.

I would like to start with a prayer:

*Loving Creator
Moved by a compulsion of the Holy Spirit
we cannot remain ignorant
of this injustice in our midst.
We long for all humanity
to be acknowledged as equal
particularly among your community of the Church
so we pray grieving for the lost gifts
of so many women.
We ask you, God of all peoples
to bring insight and humility
to all those in positions of dominance
and an understanding that
You have called us all to act
doing Christ's work here and now.
We ask this of you
God our Creator
Jesus our Redeemer
Spirit our Sustainer*

(Adapted from Catholic Women's Ordination prayer¹)

The title of our conversation is **Feminine, Faithful and Free – Question mark**

We could easily discuss each of these words separately over three evenings and still not cover everything. However, I will do my best to bring some perspective into what they express in relation to our faith in general and our Church in particular.

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¹ <http://www.catholic-womens-ordination.org.uk/> Accessed 1/07/12

I will narrow the focus down to the topic of women's ordination. Not because this is the most important subject of discussion regarding issues of controversy in the Church today – or even that relating to women perhaps, but because, in my view, the handling of this issue mirrors the Church's response to all matters it feels uncomfortable with.



The title of this talk was suggested to me when I was approached by Marie to address you this evening. Initially I hesitated, because the word 'feminine'² didn't sit very comfortably with me. Why? Traditionally, the word feminine has mostly been used by males to indicate what is opposite to them, thus we have masculine versus feminine. However, we

are now also very much aware that both male and female exhibit masculine and feminine traits. In fact, some suggest that it is the masculine traits that distinguish feminine from feminist.

Feminism on the other hand is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal opportunities for women – politically, economically and socially. And a feminist is an advocate or supporter of the rights of women. There are even men who because of their strong support of women's rights consider themselves as feminist – or as they sometimes like to be called 'pro-feminist'.

The role of women – or should I say: the **lack** of role of women – in the Church is an issue close to my heart. Mind you, this was not always so. It is common knowledge that we are products of our culture. As such, our thoughts and attitudes very much reflect that which we are used to absorbing from our parents, schooling, and social environment. I remember quite well the first time I heard someone mention the possibility of female priests. It literally stopped me in my tracks – the thought had never crossed my mind – it seemed an absurd assumption. The first image that came to my mind was of a woman dressed in priestly robes standing with her arms spread out wide behind the altar, and the sense I had at the time was: "Nuh, that's not really a good look". I recall my own reaction every time I am confronted by people who respond in a similar way as it reminds me how we all need time to let go of old habits and adjust to change. But we also need to make time to study, observe and reflect on the issues relating to these changes. We need to make them our own, be grounded, honest and open enough to not fear letting go of old beliefs if they no longer fit the mould of what we know today.

² While the defining characteristics of femininity are not universally identical, some patterns exist. Gentleness, empathy, sensitivity, caring, sweetness, compassion, tolerance, nurturance, deference, and succorance are behaviors generally considered feminine.

This then is what we are on about tonight. The Church hierarchy aims to hold vast to the category of feminine for females – the category of humanity they see as weaker, submissive, more fragile and dependent upon their male counterparts for survival. This, I believe, very much paints a poignant picture of our current situation.

The Magisterium states that it has received no authority from the Lord to ordain women. I would like to know in what way they expect to receive this authority or any kind of authority for that matter. More importantly, what kind of authority was, for example, given them to turn away people with a same sex orientation or divorcees?

Is it not the case that God passes on messages through prophets and other witnesses to the Truth? Those bold people brave enough to speak out on these issues, to tap into their consciences and question the Teachings of the Church unafraid of the consequences. The arguments put forward in Church decrees fade into the ridiculous when put under what, I call, the *Jesus microscope*. Let's look at a couple of these arguments:

1. Jesus did not ordain women

Well, He didn't ordain men either! Ordination came later in the Church's history. In fact, priesthood and Eucharistic worship as we know it did not come about until the 4th Century AD. The twelve apostles appointed by Jesus represented the twelve tribes of the restored Israel. This category of "The Twelve" was not continued by the early Christian communities when worship often took place in the homes of women, with both men and women providing leadership. The style of worship was prophetic and charismatic, which was in keeping with what the first followers of Jesus had known of Him and his mission.

It is important to note that there was a cultural assumption that in Jesus' time he had an inner circle and an outer circle – the inner circle being open to men only. When you look closely at the public ministry of Jesus, however, particularly as portrayed in the gospels of Luke and John, all are simply called followers. Followers were people Jesus healed, or revealed himself to, or dialogued with, and these were both men and women. "The Twelve" were men, but they did not constitute an inside track; in all four gospels they are counterbalanced by an opposite and equal presence designated collectively as "the Marys."³

As with any genuine spiritual master, then or now, participation in the inner circle is determined not by gender but by the degree of understanding and commitment. All four gospels infallibly place Mary Magdalene within that inner circle. Let us not forget that she has the title of "Apostle to the Apostles" as she was the first to witness to the resurrection and the one who commissions the others to go out and announce the good news of the resurrection. (John 21:1-18)

Thus the Congregation for Doctrine has made clear that it considers Jesus Christ Himself as the origin of the tradition of not ordaining women in the Catholic Church. They claim that by not making a woman a member of the apostolic team Jesus set a permanent norm, which the Church

³ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene – Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications Inc, 2010. P 15.

will not be able to change.⁴ Later pope John Paul II and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have moved their rejection of the ordination of women into the realm of faith by declaring that:

“Though the declaration itself is not infallible it has been decreed by the universal infallible magisterium and so anyone who disagrees is no longer in full communion with the Church.”⁵

In his book *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church*, John Wijngaards explains in great detail that “it is not God who decreed the exclusion of women, but pagan sexist bigotry which squashed the true Christian tradition of women’s call to ministry.”⁶ Roman laws – which were hostile towards women – not only formed the basis for law codes of most Western countries, it shaped much of Church law in the Catholic Church.⁷ Roman law was based on the principle that

the father of the family had complete authority both over the children and over his wife. She was his property and was completely subject to his disposition. The inferior status of women was so much taken for granted that it determined the way Latin-speaking theologians and Church leaders would look on matters relating to women.



It appears that the origins of this way of thinking derive from philosophers such as Plato (427-347 BC), who clearly ascribed to the inferior status of women in his writings, and Aristotle (384-322 BC) whose views were very much adopted by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) – the leading theologian of the Middle Ages.

The following gives us a glimpse of Aristotle’s views on women:

The reason for women's inferiority lies in a defect. "Women are defective by nature" because they cannot reproduce semen which contains a full human being. When a man and a woman have intercourse, the man supplies the substance of a human being (the soul, i.e. the form), the woman only the nourishment (the matter).⁸

Aristotle’s views on slaves were just as disturbing and we all know how long it took for the Church to finally condemn slavery – after initially justifying it.⁹

⁴ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration On The Question Of Admission Of Women To The Ministerial Priesthood, *Inter Insigniores*, October 15, 1976, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Paul06/p6interi.htm> Accessed 3/7/12

⁵ *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Apostolic Letter by Pope John Paul II on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, 22 May 1994.

⁶ John Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church – Unmasking a Cuckoo’s Egg Tradition*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2001, 6.

⁷ Wijngaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church*, p 51.

⁸ http://www.womenpriests.org/traditio/infe_gre.asp Accessed 4/07/2012

⁹ For more than 1500 years Church leaders upheld as Catholic teaching that slavery was a legitimate institution which was actually willed by God. By 1866 slavery had been abolished in Great Britain, USA, Austria, France,

Even according to Jewish law, the only people who can officially function as apostles are those who are capable of acting in law. They must not only be accepted as legally competent by the person sending them, but also be acknowledged as legally competent by those receiving them. Jewish society of the time, however, did not recognise the legal competence of women; whether they were undeveloped, or very gifted and capable, made no difference.

Yet, Jesus went out of His way to include women among His disciples. We know Jesus called the woman at the well to be the apostle to the Samaritans (John 4:1-42). In Corinthians we are told that there were many other women appointed as apostles by the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:6). Despite this, a patriarchal tradition was inserted into the Church by the culture of the times that men alone could be priests and the stigma against women remains to this day.

One of the other reasons put forward against women's ordination is that:

2. Jesus was a man

It has been claimed in Church writings that “men, thanks to their natural resemblance enjoy a capacity for closer identification with Christ than do women.”¹⁰ This means that men alone are able to represent Christ fully. Women's physical embodiment becomes a prison that shuts them off from God, except as mediated through the christic male.

In her book *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson gives a well-grounded explanation that in theory such a statement ultimately means women's salvation is implicitly put in jeopardy.¹¹ This kind of thinking casts women and men as polar opposites – each bearing unique characteristics from which the other sex is excluded.

Considering the societal status at the time, Jesus of Nazareth could not have been a woman. Remember he came into the world a Jew and in Jewish tradition only males could teach.

Feminist hermeneutics have made it clear that it is futile to use the Gospel story of Jesus to justify patriarchal dominance in any form. His teachings and inclusive life-style were the actual things that brought down the rage of religious and civil authority on his head. We now know that if Jesus had been a woman preaching compassionate love and enacting a style of authority that serves in a patriarchal culture, she would most certainly have been greeted with a colossal shrug as this was expected of women anyway. But it was a **man** who acted and preached in a way that totally went against the norm and that is why he was silenced.¹²

Prussia, Russia, Chile, Ecuador, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela and most other civilised countries – yet the Congregation for Doctrine still upheld that “Slavery itself is not at all contrary to the natural and divine law.” (There are documents from 1907 with similar statements. Source: Wingaards, *The Ordination of Women in the Catholic Church* 8.

¹⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood” (*Inter Insignores*), Origins 6/33 (1977).

¹¹ Elizabeth A Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, New York: Crossroad, 1992, 153.

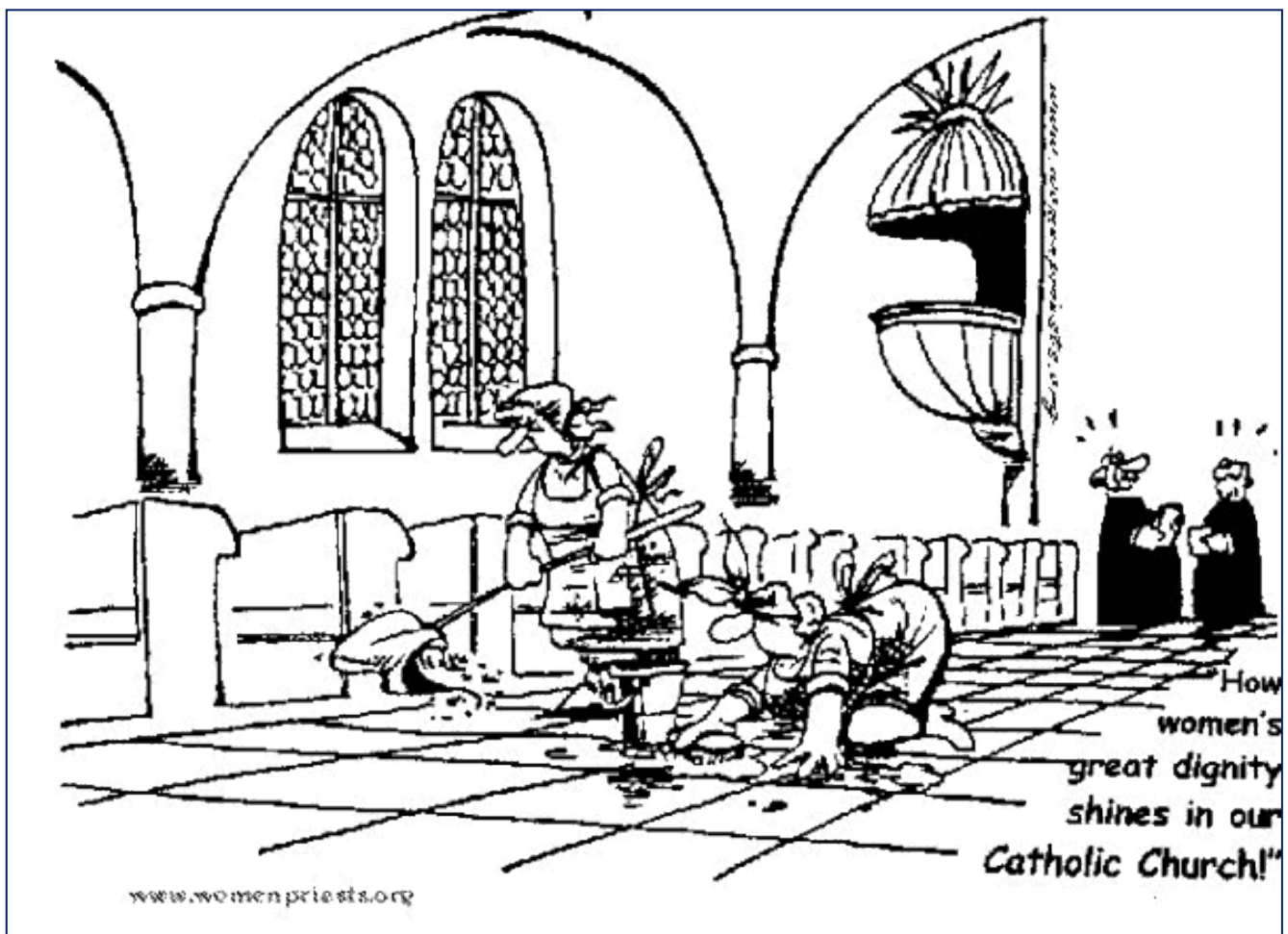
¹² Johnson, *She Who Is*, 160

Bernard Häring writes: “Surely, anyone who wants to overemphasise Christ’s maleness in order to establish prerogatives of males (“priests”) over females has not understood Jesus as the liberator of all people, men **and** women, and has not understood the way he liberated us.”¹³

In fact, the problem is not that Jesus was a man, but that more men are not like Jesus! Jesus the Christ’s ability to be Saviour does not reside in his maleness but in his loving, liberating history in the midst of the powers of evil and oppression.

Thus what we know of Jesus does not justify the Church’s response to women’s ordination. Even without all the hard facts and strong arguments, we know deep within our hearts that something is not right.

St Paul tells us that all Christians, both male and female, share in and make up **Christ's risen body, not by *imaging* the maleness of Jesus, but by *participating* in the paschal mystery through Baptism** (Galatians 3:28).



Within the walls of the Catholic Church women are not accorded the freedom that Jesus promoted. So why do many women remain faithful to an institution that clearly discriminates when they are free to walk away?

¹³ Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, p 139.

By nature women are strong and determined and instinctively they realise that their pain is not an individual pain. If one person suffers, we all suffer. It is our sense of duty, care and desire to keep the basic message of Jesus alive that spurs us on. We cannot and will not be silenced or bullied into leaving. Whether within the Church or within society it is at times of trouble (war, famine, etc) that women seem to hold everything together. Women are the glue of unity within all sorts of diversity. Women's caring, compassionate and loving nature is not a weakness but a strength and these qualities will triumph over the spiritual abuse carried out by the Vatican. We know that our Church is so much more than the Pope and his red army. It is more than the people who focus on appearance and power. More importantly, it is OUR Church – not of those who think they can dictate how we are to behave if we want to remain a member. Sometimes I think one can compare their radical patriarchal behaviour to interacting with children: “Do as I say, not as I do”. And when asked why things are as they are, the answer is: “Because I say so.” Just like with any child, this answer wears off quickly and one determines for themselves what is right and just. I don't wish to over-simplify the complexity of the issue but this kind of comparison shows how patronising some statements actually are.

Many of us were born into the Catholic Church – others deliberately chose to join the Catholic family later in life. Just as in any family there are disagreements but as long as there is honest and open discussion, satisfactory outcomes can be achieved. However, each member needs to know that they are respected for who they are and the gifts they bring. In his book *Joshua: A Parable for Today*, Joseph Girzone writes:

The Church has to get away from the role of universal moral policeman and judge of human behaviour. She must learn to guide by inspiring people to noble ideals and not by legislating human behaviour. The sheep will always flee when shepherd try to bully them. Human behaviour must be free if it is to be pleasing to God.¹⁴

Where to from here?

Given the distortions in the present theology of the church on women, it is imperative that we listen carefully to those women here and abroad who have an innate desire to priestly ministry. Sadly, the institutional Roman Catholic Church continues to ignore and sometimes belittle and insult women who believe they have a Spirit-inspired vocation to the priesthood. This leaves many women feeling disappointed, saddened and filled with a sense of emptiness. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit moves where She will and, being the Sophia-Wisdom that She is, will find a way through this impasse.

Canon Law states that:

"Christ's faithful have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the church." (Canon 212, par 2)

¹⁴ Joseph F. Girzone, *Joshua: A Parable for Today*, (Blackburn: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992 – Third Edition), 214-15.

So in conforming to this ‘right and duty’ we do not give up. Just as gentle waves are capable of restructuring rocks, so can our words and actions restructure the Church. With consistency and clarity we say: We, who make up the body of the Church, want our experiences to be heard, honoured and absorbed. We want our Church to be affirming to all and welcoming to those currently excluded. We want women in leadership roles and we want women to be able to choose to be ordained. It is absolutely vital that we move away from the pyramid structure of the Church of pre-Vatican II and claim a Church where all participate equally in truth and love whilst exercising our rights as a priestly people. It is imperative that the Church constantly debates and learns how to respond to new situations while coping with differing opinions in its own ranks. The importance of informed lay critique within the Church cannot be underestimated as we know all too well that Church authorities make mistakes.

There is no shortage of vocations if we count everyone who experiences a call to priestly ministry. There are numerous women and men, both single and married, who feel called to the priesthood, but not necessarily to celibacy. It is a hopeful sign for the future of the church that women and men from England, Ireland, Belgium, Australia, Germany, France, Canada, the USA and the Netherlands have organised to work for women's ordination. This issue will not disappear — throughout the Catholic Church a certain restlessness with the current position has set in. Many Catholics feel deep within their hearts that women should not be refused ordination.

Even though I have been focussing on the issue of women's ordination, it can be claimed that in order to celebrate the full sacramental Eucharist, ordination is not necessary at all. Indeed, we are all participants in God's priestly ministry. However, as with all vocations, we each have a unique calling and for some that calling is an innate desire to serve a community as a priest – whether they are male or female. Perhaps the better question to ask is whether this can be done at all within the current patriarchal structure. Even if women were suddenly granted permission from the Vatican to be ordained, it cannot be denied that many women feel hurt over past injustices. Also, women must be allowed to operate theology in their own way. Though men can be sympathetic to it, the specific feminist contribution can only come from women. In my view, the only way this can be achieved is by first reforming the power structures in the Church. We are certainly living in a significant time within the history of our Church. The wheels may be turning slowly but they are turning. It is up to all people of good will to make sure the wheels are on the right track — the track that Jesus mapped out for us.

You know what? I still can't picture a female in priestly robes behind the altar. You know why? I believe a female priest would conduct a Eucharistic celebration in a totally different manner to what we are used to experiencing. I imagine a woman priest would very much work in with her community when coming together. I believe the focus would be on the sharing and not distinguishing the priestly from the community by the clothing she wears. This doesn't diminish her status of teacher or leader. Jesus didn't feel the need to change clothes either.

I would like to end with an excerpt from a speech by Sojourner Truth – an anti-slavery speaker – made in 1851 whilst speaking on the equal rights for women:

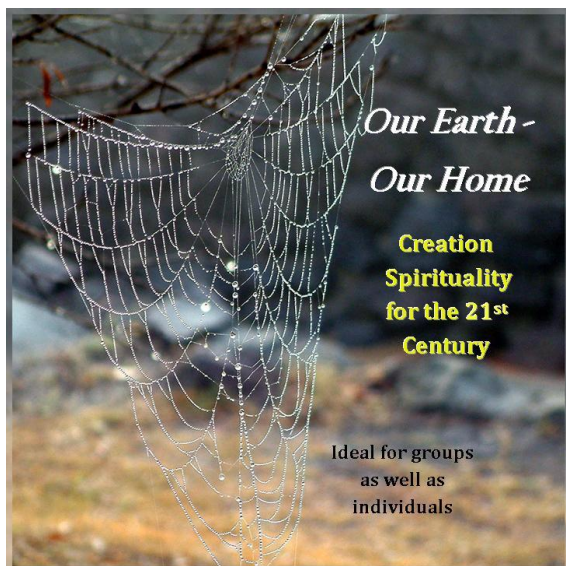
Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.¹⁵

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<http://oznatureshots.com/other-news-2/>

¹⁵ Sojourner Truth – *Ain't I A Woman?* <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>
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