

RE-IMAGINING TRADITION: WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY *IN* THE
ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	2
The Roman Catholic Institution	4
Tradition and Memory	8
Re-Claiming <i>Our</i> Tradition	10
<i>Chapter 1: Reconstructing the Church, Including Women’s Wisdom</i>	12
Alternative Pathways to Reclaim Women’s Authority	16
<i>Chapter 2: Mary the Magdalene. A Ruined Reputation</i>	20
Mary the Magdalene in the New Testament	21
A Pattern of Anti-Woman Rhetoric	27
Diminished, Discredited, Disgraced	29
Non-Canonical Literary Evidence	33
Mary Magdalene Today	36
<i>Chapter 3. Prisca. Where Did the Women Go?</i>	38
The Legacy of Prisca	45
Material Evidence of Women’s Leadership	49
Apocrypha & The Controversy of Women Apostles	54
<i>Chapter 4. Thecla. An Ancient Female Hero</i>	59
The Cult of Thecla: Literary & Material Evidence	64
The Male Response to Women’s Agency: Household Codes, Canon Laws	68
<i>Conclusion</i>	71
<i>Bibliography</i>	77
<i>Works Consulted</i>	82

Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church's idea of the actual, God-given role of women - virginity, motherhood, and martyrdom¹ - contributes to the secondary status and treatment of women worldwide. The voices of feminist scholars have called into question the validity and practicality of this view. And yet, even with established scholarship and material evidence of women's leadership in the early church, why does this not translate to real change in the current Church's hierarchy?

Born and raised as a Roman Catholic in a working-class family, my parents' efforts to provide for us perfectly exemplified a partnership of equals. While my father worked several blue-collar jobs with twelve-hour days, my mother worked midnights as the head nurse of the emergency room at St. Francis Hospital in Trenton, New Jersey. Being raised by a strong, educated, and hard-working mother with an equally supportive father, I questioned the traditional gender roles presented by society, especially the Church's idea of women's roles. Throughout my adult life, working in male-dominated fields such as finance and audit, I never fully accepted the Church's argument against women in leadership and authority within their hierarchy. When I realized their two main reasons were 'tradition' and *in persona Christi* (Latin for -"in the person of Christ"- the Church's view that only a man could image Christ), I knew I had to research what these meant in order to dismantle them. I had to understand the Church's history, positions, and arguments, as well as research the influential women of *our* Tradition to prove that women were vital to the early Christian movement and the shaping of our Church.

¹ Pope John Paul II, "*Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Apostolic Letter on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone" (1994), accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va, 3.

With a women-centered, feminist approach to history and biblical/literary interpretation, and by “reading against the grain of [the Bible’s] patriarchal rhetoric,”² I will argue that “women were there,”³ active participants in the evangelizing, preaching, and teaching *alongside* men, as disciples, prophets, and teachers within the early Church. In order to put this into context with the current controversy of women’s authority in the Roman Catholic Church, I will briefly discuss the history of papal proclamations over the past fifty years and their theological definition of Tradition and memory. In “Reimagining *Our* Tradition,” the absence of women within the tradition is a glaring problem that will be addressed with possible solutions in Chapter 1, “Reconstructing the Church, Including Women’s Wisdom”. I will explain the most recent adjustments to the Code of Canon Law and the contradictory statements that have evolved from one Pope to the next. Even though Canon laws still prohibit women from male-ordained orders, I will offer some alternative pathways for women to join the decision-making process, where their influence could be inserted to effect real change.

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4 I will provide persuasive evidence from *our* Tradition of feminine faith, genius, and leadership in early Christianity with the examples of Mary the Magdalene, Prisca, and Thecla. Mary the Magdalene represents a popular female leader whose reputation was forever tarnished through misrepresentation and misinterpretation. I will discuss her prominence in all four gospel accounts and examine recent scholarship on scribal redaction that effectively diminished her authority. Next, the chapter on Prisca will present the story of a woman teacher and leader in the early house churches, who is virtually ignored or unknown by

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 23.

³ For a discussion of women’s participation and agency in early Christianity, see Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, “Gazing Upon the Invisible: Archaeology, Historiography, and the Elusive Wo/men of 1 Thessalonians”, in *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonike: Studies in Religion and Archaeology*, eds. Laura Nasrallah, Charalambos Bakirtzis, and Stephen J. Friesen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2010), 73-103.

most Catholics today. I will argue that Prisca was essential to the proliferation of the ideas of the early church movement by following her activities mentioned in the Letters of Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, and in literary and material evidence. Lastly, Thecla's story represents women-centered alternatives in *our* Tradition that were eventually diminished over time as folklore or ancient legend. Thecla's narrative was a counterpoint to the traditional Greco-Roman lifestyle for women by refuting familial and empirical authority. In this chapter I will assess conservative and feminist discourses on the *Acts of Thecla*, and follow the trail of her legacy over the centuries. Included in each of these chapters I will quote the views of ancient critics of women, their minds & bodies, which included early church theologians, philosophers, and politicians – to highlight a pattern of anti-woman rhetoric which has continued through to modern times. I will also provide an analysis of apocryphal texts and non-canonical literary evidence such as ancient sermons, letters, canon laws and pronouncements, that point to women's activities and actions that have unsettled androcentric authorities.⁴

The Roman Catholic Institution

The all-male hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church defines the accepted roles of women as virgin, mother, and martyrs, ultimately reducing us to our sexuality. I believe this is due to their history of ingrained, sexist beliefs of the feminine. Ancient Greco-Roman, cultural and societal attitudes and norms supported derogatory and misogynistic ideas about women's bodies, minds, and souls. From the Classical Greek philosophers to early church theologians, the prevalent thought process maintained the inferiority of the feminine. My research suggests that ancient scholars and scribes attempted to systematically replace the authority of female leaders in

⁴ My historical reconstruction of women's leadership in early Christianity follows the steps of Shelley Matthews' methods for feminist biblical criticism, see Shelly Matthews, "Feminist Biblical Historiography," *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement* (SBL: 2014). 233-48.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va, 3.

the early church with their male counterparts, replacing the holy feminine spirit/wisdom-Sophia with the masculine Logos. This can be documented through review of the sermons and councils that debated such issues as the Holy Trinity, conflicts with women at the altar, concerns with veiling, and the activities of women outside the cultural norms of Roman society. A methodical process of scribal redaction, erasure, and the silencing of women persisted in our sacred texts over the centuries.⁶

Contemporary debates on the authority of women in the Roman Catholic Church continue to follow this misogynist mindset. In order to reimagine Tradition, we need to expose the silencing and erasure of the feminine narrative from early Christianity. The male-dominated interpretation of theological doctrine could be reinterpreted and revised through feminist biblical criticism, reclaiming the presence of women who shaped our Church. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states “the biblical texts themselves are not misogynist, the texts have been patriarchalized by interpreters who have projected their cultural androcentric bias onto the biblical texts”⁷. I would like to employ a feminist revisionist strategy to change traditional mindsets, reshape biblical interpretation, and promote women to liturgical and authoritative positions within the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

In order to pursue the feminist lens of women’s leadership depicted in the New Testament scriptures, compared to and complemented by non-canonical texts, some background information is needed to place these issues in context with the current deliberations on women’s authority in the Roman Catholic Church. Scholars and theologians have questioned, debated, studied, chronicled, resisted, dismissed, and relentlessly pursued issues involving women for the

⁶ For an in-depth example of scribal redaction and erasure of markers of feminine apostolic leadership, especially as it pertains to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, see Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women ~ Hidden Leadership*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2019.

⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 23.

past 2,000 years. With the initiatives put into place by Vatican II⁸ in 1964, the Roman Catholic Church admitted its need to address the modern world and to “refresh” the customs and practices for their congregations. Coinciding with this time period, the second wave of the feminist movement was in full force, with more female scholars entering the arena, particularly in theology. Feminist biblical criticism highlights misogynist and patriarchal interpretations of the bible, but also highlights decisions authorities have made with respect to women’s participation and leadership within the Church.

Since 1969, the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches had been working to overcome their historical differences and unify the two churches. Modern discussions on equality and respect for women prompted the Anglican Church to make a statement on their position on the ordination of women. In 1975, they issued a statement that debated the idea of tradition as it is interpreted in Christian dogma and noted that the reasons for refusing women in leadership positions in the church are not universally accepted.⁹ After its General Convention of the Episcopal Church in September 1976, the Episcopal Church began ordaining women; each year thereafter, other Anglican churches followed suit. They concluded that “women in ministry demonstrated that they were as effective as men and that fears about the feminization or sexualization of the church that would result from the ordination of women were unfounded

⁸ For more information on the relative authority of church and papal pronouncements in the Roman Catholic tradition, see Helen Hull Hitchcock, “The Authority of Church Documents”, *Adoremus* 8, No. 6 (September, 2002). <https://adoremus.org/2002/09/15/the-authority-of-church-documents/> Apostolic constitutions and decrees issued by popes are at the top of the hierarchy of authoritative documents. Documents from the Second Vatican Council, along with the Code of Canon Law (1983), have binding authority on the entire Church.

⁹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation, "Statement on the Ordination of Women," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, originally released October 1975), <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/ecumenical/anglican/ordination-women.cfm>.

prejudices”.¹⁰ While the Roman Catholic Church sees a problem and a disruption to tradition, the Anglican Church views the inclusion of women to the Holy Orders to be a gift of the Holy Spirit.

With the Anglican Church regularly ordaining women, discussions and debates persisted in Roman Catholic circles. In response to the rising demand for ordaining women, Pope Paul VI issued in 1976 the Papal Declaration, *Inter Insigniores*, which gave two primary reasons why women could not be ordained as priests. The first reason was Tradition. According to the synoptic Gospels and the Book of Acts, Jesus called only men to be his Apostles. The early church Fathers believed that women should not be entrusted with the priesthood so as to uphold the Tradition supposedly set by Jesus himself. This Tradition has been safeguarded by the Roman Catholic Church throughout the ages. Emphatically asserted, this was the Vatican’s most important reason to bar women from ordination and positions of authority: the gender of the historical Jesus and his choosing only male apostles. The Vatican’s second reason for barring women was the belief that the minister conferring the sacrament must be in the image of Christ, *in persona Christi*, “for Christ himself was and remains a man”.¹¹ They argue that the priest must be “recognizable by the faithful”¹² and their male-centric theology does not provide the possibility that women can image Christ. These two misogynist positions were reinforced in 1995 in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, which maintains the Church’s view that the teachings “are not open to debate”.¹³

¹⁰ Peter Sherlock, ("Theophilus), "Female Bishops in the Church of England: How Theology Has Changed the Church," *The Conversation*, January 25, 2015. <https://theconversation.com/female-bishops-in-the-c-of-e-how-theology-has-changed-the-church-36708>.

¹¹ Cardinal Franjo Seper, *Inter Insigniores*: "Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood", October 15, 1976. Accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va, 5.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Concerning the Reply of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Teaching Contained in the Apostolic Letter 'Ordinatio Sacerdotalis'*, October 28, 1995. Accessed April 2020, Vatican.va.

Tradition and Memory

A clarification is needed of what exactly is meant by the term “tradition” and with the Roman Catholic Church, Tradition with a capital T. In order to substantiate their argument for a male-dominated hierarchy, the Vatican continues to proclaim Tradition as defined by the gender of Jesus and his appointment of supposedly only male apostles. Yet, as per the New Catholic Encyclopedia, “Tradition is the communication by the living Church of the Christian reality and the expression, either oral or written, of that reality.”¹⁴ Oral Tradition is considered divine revelation, from God through the prophets – as seen in the Hebrew Bible - but also through memory of the actual spoken words of Jesus to his followers, and through the scriptures. The Gospels document several incidents of Jesus preaching and instructing the women who followed him (i.e. Mary Magdalene, Salome, Joanna, Susanna) as well as acknowledging their faith and loyalty (i.e. Martha and Mary of Bethany, the unnamed anointing woman, the Canaanite woman). And most importantly, women were the first to see the resurrected Christ and proclaim the good news to the apostles. In several of the Apocryphal texts, Jesus specifically identifies his female followers as his disciples (details to follow in the Mary Magdalene and Prisca sections of this paper). The male-dominated Catholic church dismissed these noncanonical accounts as heresy, an effective tool to silence the voices of women and those that did not conform to the party platform. Yet these narratives had a life of their own, representing oral tradition shared throughout the various communities of the early Church movement. If Jesus himself specifically called his female followers, how is that not considered divine revelation? The conservatives and gatekeepers of the Church’s Tradition abuse its true nature; it is not something that is rigid and

¹⁴ J.A. Fichtner, “Tradition (in Theology),” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Detroit, MI: Gale Books, 2003), 133-138.

fixed. “Tradition that is living and dynamic must, by the law of life itself, undergo change.”¹⁵ Change, which is desperately needed in the Roman Catholic Church, should not be feared and suppressed.

We know that *women were there*,¹⁶ actively involved in his ministry, and equally responsible for the evangelization and support of the early Christian movement. Their authority and memory has been diminished and erased; for the Roman Catholic Church to utilize *in persona Christi* as a means to exclude women represents centuries of misogynist bias. The early Church Fathers grappled with the concept of Jesus the man, the risen Christ, and their relationship to God. The metaphors of “The Father” and “The Son of God” became reality for Christians, no longer metaphors but the true, dominating force thrusting men to the top of the social and church hierarchies, mimicking Roman society. However, their androcentric theology is skewed. Yes, Jesus was a man, but not the typical Roman view of the manly man.¹⁷ The historical, human Jesus was compassionate, healing, nonviolent, promoting love for each other, helping the poor, the oppressed; he was pierced, crucified. In Greco-Roman thought, because the male is the superior being, next to God, the penis is a sign of power and control, used to dominate and penetrate their inferiors,¹⁸ which included wives, slaves (male and/or female), young boys, and conquered victims. To be on the receiving end of this penetration was to be the “lesser”, equal to females and effeminate males¹⁹. Jesus represented everything the stereotypical Roman elite male was not: caring, compassionate, and a healer, who reached out to the poor and to women, the outliers of society. And throughout the Gospels, Jesus is associated with the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For a discussion of women’s participation and agency in early Christianity, see Johnson-DeBaufre, “Gazing Upon the Invisible”, 73-103.

¹⁷ Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces In and Around the Bible* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 140.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 140-141.

Feminine attributes of God: Sophia/Wisdom, Alitheia/Truth, Elpida/Hope, and Agape/Charity (or Love). Jesus' humanity encompasses both male and female attributes, Logos and Sophia, the Word of God and the Wisdom of God, in one pure human being.

Jesus' identity as a man in his human capacity does not, and should not, transcend into a "male" Christ. According to the baptismal formula we are *all* one in God and Christ: "there is no longer male and female" (Gal 3:28). We need to deconstruct our terminology, our language of God, to highlight and define the holy feminine within the Trinity. We need to reclaim Sophia as a divine symbol, acknowledging the feminine in God in addition to the masculine, how God and the Christ and the Holy Spirit are both male/female, all of the same substance, representing all of humanity. Elizabeth Johnson argues "at a foundational level, anthropology must be envisioned anew to overcome the gender dualism that haunts traditional interpretation of Christ...by telling the gospel story of Jesus as the story of Wisdom's child, Sophia incarnate; by interpreting the symbol of the Christ to allow its ancient inclusivity to shine through."²⁰ I argue that it is heretical that the Roman Catholic Church uses the maleness of Jesus to preclude the involvement of women by elevating and identifying with his human form and using androcentric language to protect patriarchal privilege.

Re-Claiming *Our* Tradition

As you will see throughout this paper, Tradition was shaped by men through their synods, edicts, and pronouncements. Men systematically changed and altered the true intent of the teachings of Christ to fit their agenda. Through the establishment of their canon laws and ordinances, through scribal redaction and "correction" of the canonical texts, through book burnings and condemnation of apocryphal texts that highlighted women in authority in the early

²⁰ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 10th Anniversary Ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 163.

movement; women were scrubbed out, replaced, and silenced. If Tradition is truly defined as ordered by the spoken words of Jesus and the risen Christ, to exclude women in leadership and authority in the Church is, by their definition, to blatantly defy divine revelation. And of course, we know that *women were there*.²¹ Historians, theologians, archaeologists, and feminist scholars alike, all attest to this most basic of assumptions: women were present in all forms and all places, as apostles, disciples, deacons, leaders of house churches, and evangelists.

Women were there.²² Women are specifically named in all four canonical gospels, acknowledged in the undisputed Pauline epistles, glimpsed in the Acts of the Apostles, commented on in sermons and literary correspondence, and highlighted in several apocryphal texts. Women went to the tomb to anoint the body of their friend and teacher. Women spoke to the risen Christ, were the first to understand its significance, proclaiming the Christological message. Women were the first witnesses; they were the backbone of this early movement and they saw themselves as shapers of the Church. The denial of women's presence in Tradition as defined by the Roman Catholic Church can be overturned through consistent pressure from women scholars, feminist theologians, and through education of the laity. Reimagining *our* Tradition by rediscovering the stories of women who shaped our Church,²³ women such as Mary the Magdalene, Prisca, and Thecla.

²¹ For more discussion of women's participation and agency in early Christianity, see Johnson-DeBaufre, "Gazing Upon the Invisible", 73-103.

²² Ibid.

²³ For more information on feminist, revisionist biblical interpretation, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways, Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Orbis Books, 2001) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Beacon Press, 1992).

Chapter 1

Reconstructing the Church, Including Women's Wisdom

The Divine Feminine emerges in the Hebrew Scriptures as *Ruach*, *Shekhinah*, *Hokmah*, or translated *Spirit*, *In-Dwelling/ Divine Presence*, *Wisdom (Sophia)*. They are the Breath of God, the Holy Spirit, and Wisdom, all of which have been with God since the beginning of Creation. These Feminine names for God represent an inclusive view of God, the possibility of what God “is.” The Holy Spirit represents the all-encompassing, powerful, feminine traits of God who ever-creates and renews, an advocate and helper.

Though well-known to the ancient Jews, Jesus and his followers, and those in the early Christian movement, the feminine aspect of God was diminished to the point of non-existence in theology and doctrine of the Orthodox Church. The great thinkers of the early Church could not reconcile the greatness of the Holy Spirit/Wisdom with the inferior, insignificant, weak idea of anything related to the feminine. Elizabeth Johnson notes, “...one of the key if unarticulated reasons for tradition’s forgetfulness of the Spirit lies precisely here, in the alliance between the idea of Spirit and the roles and persons of actual women marginalized in church and society.”²⁴ The Divine Sophia, represented in her feminine presence, may have been a difficult concept for the early Church fathers to accept due to their androcentric cultural and societal attitudes. Proliferated throughout the centuries, these norms supported derogatory and misogynistic ideas about women; their bodies, minds, and souls.

Change is slow, but change can happen. Following the intent of the Second Vatican Council, a revision of ecclesiastical laws from the *1917 Code of Canon Law* was announced by John Paul II and the *1983 Code of Canon Law* for the Latin Church was instituted. These

²⁴ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 138.

revisions were made to Canon Law to address the obligations and rights of *all* Christ's faithful, which includes all baptized. In the commentary on the Code of Canon Law, the status of women is specifically addressed, with the Vatican II Council quoting Paul's equality for "all in Christ" from Galatians 3:28 and noting "...every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's interest."²⁵ However, while this new code permits women, both religious and laity, to serve in tribunals as judges (c. 1421),²⁶ to preach in churches (c.766),²⁷ and called to exercise pastoral care of local communities (c. 517),²⁸ it still excludes women from the ordained orders of bishop, priest, and deacons based on the theological groundwork of Tradition determined by *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*²⁹. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's official reply to *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* written by Cardinal Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict), reiterates their argument of the gender of the historical Jesus and his choosing only male apostles. Ratzinger also references the disputed Letters of Paul as support, 1 Tim. 3:1; 2 Tim. 1:6; Tit. 1:5.³⁰ Though these specific passages do not reflect gender in the requirements for

²⁵ James A. Coriden, Thomas J. Green, and Donald E. Heintschel, *The Code of Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 140.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Apostolic Letter on Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone, (May 22, 1994) accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va. This letter by Pope John Paul II repeats the mantra that Christ and his choosing of male Apostles is consistent with the teachings of the Church, and Tradition holds that women should be excluded from the priesthood "in accordance with God's plan for his Church". Because there has been much debate by scholars and theologians, Pope John Paul II felt the need to further explain the reasons for this teaching. Jesus chose 12 men, and the Apostles did the same when they chose their followers, all men. He further points out that Jesus did not choose his mother to be part of the apostolic mission, and that women's holy vocations as "martyrs, virgins, and mothers of families" maintains that the "hierarchical structure of the Church is totally ordered."⁽³⁾ He closes with the formal declaration that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women..."⁽⁴⁾.

³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Concerning the Reply of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Teaching Contained in the Apostolic Letter Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, accessed April 2020, Vatican.va. Cardinal Ratzinger brought Pope John Paul II's letter to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith to vote and approve the position that "the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women..." He wrote this letter as an affirmative response to the *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. The position of using Tradition maintains the Church's view, and the teachings are not "open to debate". He repeats that the exclusion of the mother of Jesus

bishops and deacons, they have been interpreted to apply only to men. One may ask whether this argument is valid given the literary and material evidence of women apostles such as Mary the Magdalene, Prisca, and Thecla. And, wouldn't recognition of the Divine Feminine in God, which is scriptural "divine doctrine" only further support the authority and leadership of women in the Church?

In 1992, the Canon Law Society of America created a committee consisting of both men and women to study "the canonical implications of ordaining women to the permanent diaconate".³¹ In particular, they debated the validity of the ancient institution of deaconesses in both the Byzantine and Latin Churches, which existed well into the twelfth century.³² In consideration of their research, the committee concluded that there was no obstacle canonically or doctrinally to reinstating the order of the female diaconate; yet the Vatican refused to approve any changes to canon law on this issue. Contradictory statements over the past twenty-five years continue from papacy to papacy, although some are more optimistic with the current Pope than

from the ministry of the Apostles proves that they are not discriminatory against women, there is a "diversity" of mission between men and women. Jesus called only men, and the Apostles did the same; (here he references 1 Tim 3:1, 2 Tim 1:6 and Tit 1:5). Ratzinger also refers to the current times, that the Church "while attentive to the world in which she lives and for whose salvation she labors, the Church is conscious of being the bearer of a higher fidelity to which she is bound". Therefore, Tradition (as defined by the all-male hierarchy) will hold.

³¹ James Matthew Pampara, "Fundamental Rights and Duties of Women in the Catholic Church," *Journal of Dharma*, 41, no. 4 (2016), 389-414.

³² For more information on the controversy over female ordination throughout the centuries, see Gary Macy, *The Hidden History of Women's Ordination: Female Clergy in the Medieval West*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). In 1997, at an address to the Catholic Theological Society of America, historian Gary Macy recounted that during the Middle Ages women were involved in ceremonies of the Eucharist, consecrating bread and wine during communion. He was accused of supporting the idea that women were ordained, something he had never questioned or entertained. Being a historian, he investigated this myth, and came out with evidence that indeed women had been ordained from the times of early Christianity up until the 12th century. Macy details the history of women in the Church and the various writings that discuss women and leadership over the centuries. He notes justifications from various theologians and scholars that argue about the inferiority of women, the inadequacy of their minds, the disgusting emissions from women's bodies through menstruation and childbirth. It continues with defining masculinity at the expense of degrading femininity, misogynist interpretations of the NT scriptures to support their views and erasure of the history of women ordained between the 4th and 12th centuries. Macy uncovered the historical trail of women's ordination, the uncomfortable debates that ensued on whether or not they truly existed, and the propaganda campaign during the 12th century that erased any evidence of women leadership in the Church.

they were with his ultra-conservative predecessor, Pope Benedict. In an interview in 2013, Pope Francis expressed the need to include women's wisdom in the decision-making processes of the Church, "to work harder to develop a profound theology of the women".³³ He expanded on this in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 103:

"...we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because the female genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures."³⁴

Upon pressure from various women religious orders and scholars, Pope Francis formed a study commission in 2016 to determine the historical and theological precedent of the ancient female diaconate.³⁵ This commission consisted of both men and women, theologians and scholars, and their results were presented to the Pope in 2018. Their conclusion was decidedly favorable to ordaining female deacons; however, no consensus was achieved due to digression on whether the ordination of women deacons was considered "sacramental" as it was for male deacons. Pope Francis presented it as, "They worked together, and they found agreement up to a certain point. But each one of them has their own vision, which doesn't accord with that of the others."³⁶ He noted studies will continue on this topic, but no one is certain if the commission will continue in official capacity as a Vatican body.

³³ Antonio Spadaro, S.J., "A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview With Pope Francis," *America, The Jesuit Review*, September 13, 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis>.

³⁴ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va, 103.

³⁵ See Phyllis Zagano, *Women Deacons? Essays with Answers*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016). As a member of the 2016 Commission on Women Deacons, she has been one of the main voices petitioning for reinstating the female diaconate.

³⁶ Joshua J. McElwee, "Francis: Women Deacons Commission Gave Split Report on Their Role in Early Church," *National Catholic Reporter* May 7, 2019. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-women-deacons-commission-gave-split-report-their-role-early-church>.

The reluctance to ordain women as deacons is twofold; I surmise the main reason is it could open the possibility for women to be ordained as priests and bishops, and that would be inconceivable for this generation of Vatican officials and conservative clergy. The second reason lies in statements the Pope has made with respect to “protecting” womanhood from the dangers of clericalism. As it directly applies to the Roman Catholic Church, the U.S. Association of Catholic Priests produced a white letter in June, 2019 that describes clericalism as "an expectation, leading to abuses of power, that ordained ministers are better than and should be over everyone else among the People of God."³⁷ Why do women specifically have to be protected from clericalism? If clericalism “lead[s] to abuses of power,” why is it tolerated for and by men? Perhaps having women in authority with decision-making power would help resolve some of the clericalism that has run rampant in the all-male hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope’s ideas expressed in *Evangelii Gaudium*, to include “women’s genius” within the church, are just hollow words without the affirmative action of decision-making authority.

Alternative Pathways to Reclaim Women’s Authority

If the Pope is serious about including the female genius within the Church, he can begin with his own inner circle. There are positions women can hold that have significant authority and where ordination is not necessary. A cardinal is one such role where it is theoretically and theologically possible as they are not ordained into their ministry: cardinals are not doctrinally defined but man-made. Established in the twelfth century, cardinals are appointed by the Pope and serve as his trusted assistants and advisors. They also are the only ones who vote to elect the

³⁷ Association of US Catholic Priests, "Confronting the Systematic Dysfunction of Clericalism," ed. Fr. Kevin Clinton and Donna B. Doucette (2019). <https://www.futurechurch.org/sites/default/files/Model%204%20A%20-AUSCP%20White%20Paper-Systemic%20Dysfunction%20Clericalism.pdf>.

next Pope in a secret enclave and they usually have key positions in the Roman Curia. According to the *1917 Code of Canon Law* (canon 230-241),³⁸ it became obligatory for a cardinal to first be a priest or bishop to serve in this position. However, the system appears to have a varied history, as different Popes have made changes as to whom and what constitutes a cardinal. Prior to the *1917 Code of Canon Law*, the College of Cardinals included both clergy and laymen, so it is possible for the current Pope to pass reform in this area to include religious women and laywomen within this inner circle. The Pope could call on feminist/womanist theologians such as Sr. Elizabeth Johnson (Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theology at Fordham University), Dr. Phyllis Zagano (Senior Research Associate-in-Residence and Adjunct Professor of Religion at Hofstra University; she was also a key member on the 2016 Commission for Female Diaconate), and M. Shawn Copeland (Professor Emerita of Systematic Theology at Boston College), to name a few.

Another way to dismantle clericalism and include the feminine genius within the Church would be to add women as voting members in the Synod of Bishops. Created in 1965 by Pope Paul VI, the Synod was designed for bishops to provide information and advice to the Pope on topics of concern for the greater Catholic community. The bishops are chosen from various parts of the world, and as per regulation II in the 1965 *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, “they will enjoy the power of making decisions when such power is conferred upon it by the Roman Pontiff”.³⁹ In regulations V (General Sessions) and VI (Extraordinary Sessions) of this same document, it discusses other participants who could attend and have voting rights. Specifically, it names ten religious from the Roman Union of Superiors General to represent the clerical religious institutes

³⁸ Pope Benedict XV, *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1917), accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va

³⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo* (1965), accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va.

for General Sessions and three religious, respectively, for Extraordinary Sessions.⁴⁰ This would enable women religious to participate in the decision-making processes for major issues confronting the Church. These synods discuss and vote on issues such as marriage and the family, vocation and mission of the laity, addressing the youth in faith and vocation, and most recently, the shortage of priests in the Amazon and ordination of the female diaconate. In Regulation IX, it requires that “great attention should be paid not just to the general knowledge and wisdom of individuals, but also to their theoretical and practical knowledge of the matter which the Synod is to take up.”⁴¹ Regulation X states, “The Supreme Pontiff may, if he so chooses, increase the number of members of the Synod by adding bishops, or religious...or clerics who are experts...”⁴² These regulations would thus provide for the inclusion of women religious who have extensive knowledge from working on the ground with communities in crisis throughout the world. However, the egalitarian nature of this document was revised to not only reflect the changes to Canon Law in 1983, but also to reflect changes made by Pope Benedict in 2006. Regulations V and VI noted above were changed to ten *men*-religious, three *men*-religious, respectively.⁴³ This updated document repeats *men*-religious throughout all sections dealing with participants, with the exception of the non-voting participants. Women thus are relegated to attending by invitation only, able to speak, but not included in voting or decisions made. Does the Vatican fear that with voting power and the ability to counter patriarchal decisions, women religious would choose to allow more women to become involved, and give

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Synodal Information (2006)*, accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va.

sway to feminist/womanist ideologies? The Pope has the power to change this exclusionary process and recognize the authority of female religious superiors.

Despite the systematic exclusion of women from Church positions, *our* Tradition shows that women have been an influential part of the Catholic Church from its beginnings. The following discussion on Mary the Magdalene, Prisca, and Thecla will provide examples of women who shaped *our* Tradition. I will apply a feminist lens on women's leadership depicted in the New Testament scriptures, compared to and complemented by non-canonical texts. I will question scribal redaction of women's authority, the insertion of orthodox markers of female subordination, and include banished texts that validate women have *always* been there, active in society and representative in liturgical leadership. By review of ancient letters written in response to women's actions with the need to maintain patriarchal domination, the stories of Mary and the other women leaders, along with the archeological proof of women's leadership and involvement in the early church traditions, cannot be disputed. More and more this reality of women in leadership in early Christianity is not so extraordinary, as feminist scholars have led the way out of the androcentric past by exposing the censorship and redaction of the sacred texts.

Chapter 2

Mary The Magdalene, A Ruined Reputation

Mary the Magdalene has been the most mischaracterized, misinterpreted and misunderstood woman in biblical texts, ancient sermons, and contemporary representations. Throughout the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has consistently presented the ideal roles of femininity and womanhood as virginity, motherhood, and martyrdom which “maintains that the hierarchical structure of the Church is totally ordered.”⁴⁴ First and foremost women are expected to emulate Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus - an unattainable option as one cannot be both virgin and mother. The next most popular woman in the gospels is Mary the Magdalene, the “penitent whore.” The extreme versions of these two women, holy perfect Christian woman versus wanton sinner, represent the distorted image of what men thought (and think) of women and their need to control them. Women’s bodies and their sexuality have been weaponized against them, utilized by the authoritative hierarchy of the Church to keep women in their “natural” place, subordinate to men.

In this chapter I will examine the mentions of Mary the Magdalene in each of the New Testament Gospels in comparison to her role in the noncanonical texts such as *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Dialogue of the Savior*, and *The Gospel of Philip*. Reading from our twenty-first century lens, we easily may miss the significance of women being named in the New Testament gospels. I argue, however, that Mary the Magdalene’s presence in all four gospels accounts and the noncanonical texts suggests that she was a known and recognized leader in the early Christian movement. In this chapter I will analyze these texts in order to highlight the controversy of the true leader amongst the apostles: the competition between Peter and Mary

⁴⁴Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, accessed April 21, 2020, Vatican.va, 3.

Magdalene⁴⁵. Mary represents *our* Tradition of feminine faith, genius, and leadership in early Christianity.

Mary the Magdalene in the New Testament

The Letters of Paul, the earliest writings in the Christian canon, affirm Mary's apostolic authority. Paul includes two main conditions for "apostolicity and legitimacy":

- 1) witnessing an appearance of the Risen Christ and
- 2) receiving a divine call or commission to proclaim Christ's message.⁴⁶

By analyzing her actions and relationship to Jesus in the New Testament, I argue that Mary the Magdalene satisfied the criteria for apostolic authority. The Gospel of Mark specifically names Mary Magdalene as among the women watching the crucifixion from afar. The gospel writer notes that these women were followers of Jesus and provided for him, an indication of their wealth and independence (Mark 15:40). As the women go to the tomb to anoint the body, they are greeted by an angel who tells them to proclaim the resurrection to the other disciples and Peter. The extended version of the Gospel of Mark (16:9) has the resurrected Jesus appear to Mary Magdalene; when she tells the male disciples, they do not believe her. The author of the Gospel of Matthew locates Mary Magdalene with other women at the crucifixion (27:55), who "had provided for him" (again, wealthy and independent women). Then in 28:1-10, the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and he tells them to go and tell the others. In both of these gospels, Mary is witness to the risen Christ and commanded to go forth and evangelize.

⁴⁵ See Jane Schaberg with Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood* (New York: Continuum, 2006). This book is a condensed version based on Jane Schaberg's book *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene* (New York: Continuum, 2003), with combined input by Schaberg and Johnson-DeBaufre. Their feminist criticism of the New Testament gospels involving Mary the Magdalene and the other women illuminate Mary as the "prophetic successor to Jesus" and highlight the patriarchal decisions made by the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴⁶ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, Harvard Theological Studies, 51 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

In the Gospel of Luke, women accompany Jesus and the apostles and “provide for them out of their resources” (8:1-3), naming Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna; all were women of means, with no mention of husbands, brothers, or fathers among them. Once again we are reminded of wealthy women patrons, possibly wealthy widows, who had the education and resources to actively participate in the early church movement. The Gospel of Luke tends to downplay the authority of Mary Magdalene. Here, she is not identified by name but is presumed to be among the group of women watching the crucifixion from afar and among the terrified women who found the empty tomb with “two men in dazzling clothes” who told them that Jesus had risen (Luke 24:1-9). In the following paragraph, the author of Luke finally, specifically names Mary Magdalene as one of the women reporting the resurrection to the disbelieving male apostles. In Luke, Peter is actually given the credit for receiving the appearance of the risen Lord (24:34). This may be the author’s attempt to diminish the status of Mary Magdalene and highlight Peter as the true leader of the apostles and Christ’s mission.⁴⁷

We see a different narrative in the Gospel of John, which tends to slant favorably towards Mary Magdalene. She appears at the end of the Gospel, John 19:25, 20:1:3, and 20:11-18, which all describe Mary Magdalene as the one who remains faithfully at the cross, goes alone to the tomb, and alerts Peter and another disciple about the missing body. She then speaks with the resurrected Lord and tells about his imminent ascension. Mary is the first to see the risen Christ, and is instructed to go and tell the other disciples. She understands what the men cannot; her faith and love are greater, which is why several theologians, including St. Thomas Aquinas, gave her the esteemed title of “the Apostle to the Apostles.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Schaberg and Johnson-DeBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, 142.

⁴⁸ Diane Montagna, “Mary Magdalene, ‘Apostle to the Apostles,’ Given Equal Dignity in Feast,” *Aleteia*, June 10, 2016, <https://aleteia.org/2016/06/10/mary-magdalene-apostle-to-the-apostles-given-equal-dignity-in-feast>.

Feminist scholars have debated the roles of women in the Fourth Gospel⁴⁹, particularly the attention given to Mary of Bethany in the beginning of John, and Mary Magdalene appearing near the end. But what if John actually identified Mary Magdalene as the prominent woman throughout the entire Gospel? Biblical textual critic Elizabeth Schrader theorizes that Martha was inserted into this Gospel as a way to diminish the authority of Mary Magdalene. Schrader examined Papyrus 66, the oldest codex containing only the Gospel of John which dates to the late second or early third century, and compared it to “over one hundred of our oldest extant Greek and Vetus Latina witnesses.”⁵⁰ Schrader discovered that of the 450 scribal corrections to the Gospel, P66 contains the most instability around the names of Mary and Martha, particularly in verses 11:1-5. In some cases it was as simple as changing the Greek *iota* (Maria) to a *theta* (Martha). However, Mary’s name is crossed out twice in the papyrus and at one point a single woman’s name was scratched out and replaced with the plural “sisters.”⁵¹ Schrader has argued that scribal redaction and the insertion of Martha in place of Mary Magdalene “removed the Christological statement from Mary’s lips”.⁵²

The inconsistencies in New Testament sources - including the various editing, redacting, and standardizing processes on biblical texts – have contributed to the marginality of women. This form of censorship effectively silenced and eliminated women out of the texts and thus, out of history. Decisions made by scribal editors to “correct” Mary Magdalene’s authority and prominence within this gospel became the standard for our sacred texts. Regrettably, the earliest

⁴⁹ For examples of feminist biblical interpretations on Mary and Martha, see Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, “Mary of Bethany and Mary of Magdala: Two Female Characters in the Johannine Passion Narrative,” *New Testament Studies* 41, no. 4 (1995), 564-586 and Mary Ann Beavis, “Reconsidering Mary of Bethany,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 74, no. 2 (2012): 281-297.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Schrader, “Was Martha of Bethany Added to the Fourth Gospel in the Second Century?”, *Harvard Theological Review*, 110, no. 3 (2017): 360-392.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

evidence of Mary Magdalene as a leader within *our* Tradition was manipulated to reduce her importance because scribal authorities would not portray a woman in this capacity.

Even with the textual instability surrounding Mary Magdalene, in all four gospel accounts she met the criteria for apostolic authority: she had witnessed the risen Christ and received a divine call to evangelize. The gospel authors give Mary different distinctions and descriptors, showing that she was important to Jesus and his ministry. She was named a loyal and faithful follower; she provided for him, stayed with him during his darkest hour, and prepared to anoint his body after death. With Mary's prominence in the gospels, the apocryphal texts, and included in many sermons by the early Church fathers, the followers of the early church movement would have disputed these accounts if she had been purposely left out.

However, some of the gospel texts have led many to insinuate that Mary was a prostitute, a myth that has propagated throughout the centuries and is still believed by many today. These texts in question, Mark 16:9 and in Luke 8:2 name Mary as the one "from whom seven demons had gone out". Yet there is no direct link between demons and prostitution in the New Testament; in all four gospels, demons were cast out by Jesus, with no reference to prostitution or adultery. Instead, demon possession was associated with those that were suffering from a sickness or some ailment, and occurred in men, women and children. Also, the ancient writers of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament texts were not shy about calling someone a whore or prostitute. In fact, "whore" is used 41 times in the Hebrew Bible, five times in Revelation (i.e. "The Great Whore of Babylon"); "prostitute" is used 43 times in Hebrew Bible, eight times in New Testament (Matthew, Luke, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and James); "adulteress" is used nine times in the Hebrew Bible and one time in Romans. Mary Magdalene is not referred to by any of these words in any canonical text.

Even early literary sources outside the canonical texts do not imply an inappropriate, sexual reference to Mary Magdalene. For instance, Origen defends Mary against Celsus, a second century Greek philosopher who opposed Christianity. Celsus disparages the resurrection account based on the fact that the main witness, Mary Magdalene, was a “half-frantic woman”⁵³; not a prostitute, not a whore, not a woman of ill-repute. Origen argues that Mary was not a prostitute, calling it “a statement which is not made by history recording the fact, but from which he took occasion to charge the occurrences with being untrue...”⁵⁴ In Sermon 88 on the Gospel of Matthew, St. John Chrysostom (349–407 CE) positively acknowledges the actions of Mary Magdalene and the other women at the crucifixion, noting their steadfastness and courage at such a dangerous time, “...And mark how great their assiduity...and these first see Jesus; and the sex that was most condemned, this first enjoys the sight of blessings, this most shows its courage,” he writes.. “And when the disciples had fled, these were present.”⁵⁵

St. John Chrysostom’s statement on Mary reflects the view held by many of his male contemporaries, that women were the “most condemned” sex as daughters of Eve and most blameworthy for the fall of humankind. Several ancient scholars such as Tertullian, Ambrose, and Augustine identify Eve with lies, seduction, and the downfall of man. And yet, they provide no accountability for man’s/Adam’s part to play in this offense. These ancient theologians assaulted the image of Eve in their sermons and writings, blamed her for the origination and curse of sin, and condemned all women by association of their sex. Tertullian writes, “...And do you not know that you are each an Eve?...*You* are the devil’s gateway, *you* are the unsealer of

⁵³ Origen, "Contra Celsum, Book 2, trans. Frederick Crombie, revised and ed. Kevin Knight, New Advent, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04162.htm>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homily 88 on Matthew*, trans. George Prevost and revised by M.B. Riddle, revised and ed. Kevin Knight, New Advent, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200188.htm>.

that forbidden tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law...on account of *your* desert - that is, death - even the Son of God had to die.”⁵⁶ Throughout Western Christian history, many theologians and church leaders have used the creation story of Eve (Genesis 2) to propagate the consensus on the inferiority of the feminine. Even today, the patriarchal Roman Catholic Church justifies women’s subordination to men by claiming it is their “natural” place as more bodily, sexual beings.

However, to the Patristics, Mary Magdalene, through her piety and love for Jesus, and being the first to witness his resurrection, represented new life, “a new Eve.” St. Augustine references her in his sermon 232.1-2: “Because man has fallen through the female sex, man has been restored by the female sex... By a woman came death, and by a woman came life.”⁵⁷ In St. John Chrysostom’s sermon, he praises the women’s fortitude and faith; they administered to Jesus’ needs, provided for him from their own resources, they did not abandon him at the cross: “Seest thou women’s courage? ...Their noble spirit even unto death?... *Let us men imitate women*; let us not forsake Jesus in temptations.”⁵⁸ Those would have been very shocking words for men to hear in the fourth century, especially as Greco-Roman thought attested to women being inferior in mind and body. St. John Chrysostom continues along this controversial vein with Sermon 85 on the Gospel of John, acknowledging the courage of Mary Magdalene and the other women, “But the women stood by the Cross, *and the weaker sex then appeared the manlier (ver.25); so entirely henceforth were all things transformed.*”⁵⁹ It appears that early Christian theologians had high praise for Mary Magdalene, recognizing her elevated status as a follower of

⁵⁶ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, Bk. 1, chap. 1, trans. S. Thelwall, revised and ed. Kevin Knight, New Advent, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0402.htm>.

⁵⁷ Cited in Esther de Boer and John Bowden, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up: The Sources Behind the Myth* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 111.

⁵⁸ John Chrysostom, *Homily 88 on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Emphasis mine.)

⁵⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homily 85 on the Gospel of John*, trans. Charles Marriott, revised and ed. Kevin Knight, New Advent, 2020, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/240185.htm>. (Emphasis mine.)

Jesus in her own right, despite being a woman. Perhaps St. John Chrysostom's statement, "henceforth were all things transformed," is a reference to an emerging egalitarian Christianity he and his contemporaries witnessed.

A Pattern of Anti-Woman Rhetoric

The Catholic Church has historically aligned itself with the patriarchal ideas about the inferiority of women and the domination and superiority of men, themes that were prevalent in the Greco-Roman world from the ancient Greek philosophers to early Church theologians. Early medical journals,⁶⁰ political correspondence, and philosophical treatises propose the idea that to be female is to be soft, both physically and mentally. Women were thought to be emotionally unstable and intellectually incapable of understanding business, politics, and the world outside of the household. For example, Plato who believed in the reincarnation of the soul, held that souls were placed in a male or female body based on the strength of character. Weaker souls were placed in female bodies. However, Plato did suggest that through education women could gain wisdom and that virtue/identity comes from the mind/soul, not the body.⁶¹ His student, Aristotle, disagreed and posited that the female body was deficient; therefore, the female soul and mind were also deficient. Women were no better than a "mutilated male."⁶² Aristotle's conclusions on men and women were most influential in the Hellenistic period; subordination of women was a moral issue, enforced by social and legal codes. In his work *Politics*, Aristotle declares, "...the temperance of a man and of a woman, or the courage and justice of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a

⁶⁰ For an analysis of ancient medical and philosophical attitudes and theories on women's bodies, see Lesley Dean-Jones, "The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science", in *Women's History & Ancient History*, ed. Sarah B. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 111-137.

⁶¹ Nicholas D. Smith, Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (1983), 467-78.

⁶² Ibid.

woman in obeying. Silence is a women's glory."⁶³ These damaging, misogynist concepts about women have proliferated through the centuries and continue to influence church authorities today.

Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher (c. 50 CE), connects the well-being of the city with the stability of the household. Women must remain within the house, to care for it as "the governor of the greater is assigned to men...that of the lessor (household management) to women."⁶⁴ Josephus, a Jewish ex-soldier living in Rome defended Jewish law in his writing, *The Antiquities of the Jews*: "The woman, says the Law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to man."⁶⁵ Josephus falsely attempts to add merit to this statement by attributing it to Judaic law or scripture, but he is merely replicating Hellenistic attitudes shared by Greek and Roman men in his day.

The Christian scholar Origen, in his writings on 1 Corinthians, upheld the idea of women's natural inferiority, as he quotes 1 Cor. 14:35: "It is shameful for a woman to speak in church, whatever she says, even if she says something excellent or holy, because it comes from the mouth of a woman."⁶⁶ In his letters to the congregation in Smyrna, second-century bishop Ignatius attempted to persuade his audience to share the view of women's religious subordination.⁶⁷ He saw wealthy widows' patronage as a threat to a bishop's authority, and by

⁶³ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. 1, Part XIII, trans. Benjamin Jowett, The Internet Classics Archive, 2009 <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.1.one.html>.

⁶⁴ Philo, *The Special Laws* 3.169-75, in *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press), 32-33.

⁶⁵ Josephus, *Against Apion or on the Antiquity of the Jews* 2.102-104, in H. St. J. Thackeray, *Josephus: The Life, Against Apion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926).

⁶⁶ Patricia Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity Translations from Greek Texts* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 29.

⁶⁷ Katherine Bain, *Women's Socioeconomic Status and Religious Leadership in Asia Minor in the First Two Centuries C.E.*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 95.

associating women's religious status with their household status, Ignatius sought to manage their liturgical authority and their wealth.

This consensus of the inferiority of the feminine across the spectrum of the sciences, theology, and government has bolstered male domination and superiority throughout the centuries. It has been the basis for continued repression of women in authority and leadership, especially as seen in the Roman Catholic Church. And yet, these medical, theological, and political indictments against women actually point towards something more than just a description of their so-called weak minds and bodies. These texts insinuate women's active, influential roles in society and religious groups, a significant threat to those men that sought to maintain control and power. When the Empire embraced Christianity, Greco-Roman attitudes and household codes became part of Church doctrine. Not surprisingly, the church fathers and the critics of women and female leadership in the early church began to accelerate their claims.

Diminished, Discredited, Disgraced

Usher in Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 CE) who, during a sermon to his fellow brothers in Rome, forever tarnished the reputation of Mary Magdalene. Whether it was malice or an ingrained prejudice against women, Pope Gregory conflated the unnamed woman sinner from Luke 7:36-50 who kisses Jesus' feet, wipes them with her hair, and anoints him with a costly ointment, with Mary of Bethany, who anoints Jesus feet with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair, mentioned in John 11:1-2 and in John 12:1-8, and with Mary Magdalene, from "whom seven demons were cast out," as noted in both Mark and Luke. Pope Gregory theorized these three episodes constituted the significant immorality of one woman. Although not explicitly stated in the gospel, Pope Gregory assumes the unnamed woman sinner in Luke is a

prostitute. This unnamed woman is easily linked with Mary of Bethany who likewise has unbound hair and intimately anoints Jesus' feet. In ancient Jewish society, rabbinic writings view veiling as a sign of modesty, understood that "women's hair was inherently sexual, and that as her husband's property, she must always keep her hair covered in public spaces."⁶⁸ This could have led Pope Gregory to assume that the unnamed woman, and therefore Mary of Bethany, was immoral. Yet, there doesn't seem to be a hard consensus on the topic within the early Christian movement. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 11:1-16, he directly poses the question to the community in verse 13: "judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled?" He answers his own question in verse 15, that a woman's hair takes the place of any head covering, for "it is a woman's glory to have long hair." Paul's conclusion in 1 Cor 11:2-16 is encapsulated in one sentence: "*But if anyone thinks he should be contentious (about this); we have no custom, nor do the churches of God.*" So explicitly stated by Paul, veiling was not a practice in the early Christian movement, nor was not written about in any other book of the New Testament.

The anointing scene appears in all four gospels, though it remains unclear who the unnamed woman is. Both Mark 14:3-9 and Matthew 26:6-13 relate the anointing of Jesus by an unnamed woman with an alabaster jar, in the house of Simon the leper in the town of Bethany. And in both Gospel accounts Jesus defends her and says that she will be remembered (despite her name being unknown). Luke 7:36-50 further indicts this woman, labeling her a sinner who needs to be forgiven. Perhaps the authors of the Synoptic Gospels attempted to downplay the significance and obscure the identity of this woman whose actions reflect her acute knowledge of

⁶⁸ Tahmini Tariq, "Let Modesty Be Her Raiment: The Classical Context of Ancient-Christian Veiling," *Implicit Religion* 16, no. 4 (2013), 497.

Jesus as the messiah. Immediately following this passage the author calls attention to the character of the women travelling with Jesus (they were “cured of evil spirits and infirmities”), labeling Mary the Magdalene as demon-possessed (8:1-3). This disparaging characterization has led many to insinuate illicit behavior. However, as I noted in Chapter 1, there is no direct link between demon possession and prostitution in the New Testament. The author of Luke has effectively cast doubt on the reputations of these women disciples.

The anointing scene in the Gospel of John is directly attributed to Mary who lives in the town of Bethany, sister of Lazarus (11:2). Mary is described as the “one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair,” an intimate act substantiated by the love Jesus has for this family. This author provides further details of the anointing of Jesus by Mary, with only Judas as the critic, the apostle that ultimately betrays Jesus (12:1-7). The appearance of Mary the Magdalene at the end of the gospel, as the one who goes to the tomb, who weeps and speaks with the risen Lord (20:11), has led some scholars to draw similarities with Mary of Bethany who weeps at the tomb of Lazarus, and speaks with Jesus (11:33). In the Gospel of John, both Mary of Bethany and Mary the Magdalene are significant figures, but it is not entirely clear that they are two different women. Throughout the Gospels, the many “Marys” have caused some early theologians to blur them into one.⁶⁹ Scholar Mary Ann Beavis argues that while Mary of Bethany was represented as a distinct figure in the early church movement and in the Synoptic Gospels, she also seems to believe that the anointing Mary in the Gospel of John could be a fusion of Mary of Bethany and Mary the Magdalene.⁷⁰ These factors may have led

⁶⁹ Mary Ann Beavis, “Reconsidering Mary of Bethany,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2012), 281-297.

⁷⁰ Mary Ann Beavis, “Mary of Bethany and the Hermeneutics of Remembrance”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2013), 739-755.

Pope Gregory to conflate the women in his sermon; whatever his reason for doing so, it created lasting damage on the authority and reputation of Mary the Magdalene.

The three women of questionable status rolled into one “new” Mary Magdalene story. Adopted and propagated by the Western Church, this revised story was never accepted by the Eastern Church. However, Mary’s apostolic authority had been diminished and salacious stories abounded. Feminist biblical scholar, Jane Schaberg characterizes this “harlotization”⁷¹ of Mary Magdalene as a deliberate act to promote the legitimacy of the male apostles in Jesus’ tight circle of followers. And what better way to attack a woman and delegitimize her authority than to call her a whore? For those that are threatened by powerful women, the ultimate tool would be to attack and degrade them, reducing them to their sexuality. Interpreting Luke’s narrative on women in the New Testament, Gail O’Day notes “women in the early church cannot be portrayed in ways that would be embarrassing or threatening to men in the Roman Empire. Men occupied public leadership roles, not women.”⁷² I believe this is why we cannot ignore the pattern of anti-women rhetoric that has been institutionalized in our male-centered theology. The harlotization of Mary Magdalene is a pattern and mindset that has been reiterated over the centuries, and continues even today. In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church quietly acknowledged, in a revision of its missal, this penitent female “sinner” was in fact the first witness to the resurrection . However, Pope Gregory’s misidentification and mischaracterization of Mary Magdalene was not explicitly rejected. To reclaim *our* Tradition, we need to expose the mis-characterization of Mary Magdalene and highlight the other narratives about *women that were there*, present in all kinds of places, as the shapers of our church.

⁷¹ Jane Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene: Legends, Apocrypha, and the Christian Testament* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 9.

⁷² Gail R. O’Day, *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, Acts, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Louisville, Ky: SPCK; Westminster/John Knox Pr, 1992).

Non-Canonical Literary Evidence

The Gnostic texts provide much more diverse perspectives with respect to women and female leadership in the community of the early Jesus movement than the androcentric interpretations of the canonical gospels. These early Christian, female leaders upset the male predominance in the emerging church hierarchy, as Bishop Epiphanius wrote in his *Panarion* (to refute women preaching and venerating Mary, Theotokas): “The female sex is easily mistaken, fallible, and poor in intelligence. It is apparent that through women the devil has vomited this forth.”⁷³ The early church’s indictments against “heretical” sects, especially those that valued women’s leadership, sought to eradicate the diversity of thought within the growing Christian movement. For example, if the Acts 8 account had followed the Ethiopian eunuch instead of Cornelius into Rome, it is possible the story of Christianity would have been radically different. In the same way, how different might the present-day Roman Catholic Church be if powerful women were not erased from the early Christian movement?

There is an ancient text which historians have determined was written sometime between 80-180 CE - placing it in a similar time frame of Luke/Acts - known as the *Gospel of Mary*. Bought in 1896 on the antiquities market of Cairo, and included alongside several other previously unknown works designated as the Berlin Codex, the *Gospel of Mary* offers a compelling illustration of the leadership role of women in the early Christian movement. Versions were in Greek and Coptic and appeared to be well-circulated in antiquity. In the text, the apostles are shown struggling with their own anxieties, fears, and societal expectations as they attempted to go forth and proclaim what Jesus had taught them. The text highlights political

⁷³ Epiphanius, “Medicine Box 49, 4th Century CE” in *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Ross Shephard Kraemer (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 86.

infighting for the leader of this new movement, having to deal with Greco-Roman patriarchy and the ever-present idea of male superiority. Although Mary is cast as the main receiver of knowledge from Jesus, this is not readily accepted by the men, the most vocal opponent being Peter. One exception is Levi; he not only comes to Mary's defense, he characterizes Peter as being quick tempered and arrogant. Levi offers a key question in the *Gospel of Mary*: "...if the Savior considered [Mary] to be worthy, who are you to disregard her?".⁷⁴ Though many people today consider her a "whore", "prostitute", or "fallen woman," biblical scholars such as Karen King, Elaine Pagels, Jane Schaberg, and Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre all believe that Mary Magdalene, an exemplary disciple and apostle, was the true successor to Jesus.⁷⁵

The preference for Mary over the male apostles is also illustrated in the Nag Hammadi Codex (NHC III), *The Dialogue of the Savior*. In this text, Jesus is having a conversation with Judas, Matthew, and Mary Magdalene about the higher cosmos, spirituality, and eschatology. The writer of the text notes Mary as "a woman who had understood completely"⁷⁶ and Jesus says to her, "You make clear the abundance of the revealer!"⁷⁷ The men struggle with these concepts, yet Mary engages actively in the conversation, assertively speaks her mind, and with the negative comments made by the male apostles, she defends the works of womanhood: "They will never be obliterated."⁷⁸ This text encourages a spirituality that does not prioritize male or female; it prioritizes knowledge and understanding beyond the material, bodily world. And it coincides with Paul's message in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave

⁷⁴ Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003), 17.

⁷⁵ See King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*; Schaberg and Johnson-DeBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood*.

⁷⁶ *Dialogue of the Savior*, trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, The Gnostic Society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library, 2020, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/dialog.html>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Thus, spirituality with Jesus eliminates distinctions such as ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

The Nag Hammadi Codex (NHC III) *Gospel of Philip* offers another example of the authority and elevated status of Mary the Magdalene. She is mentioned as one of the three Marys who accompanied Jesus, “There were three who always walked with the Lord: Mary his mother, and her sister, and the Magdalene, the one who is called his companion.”⁷⁹ She is equated with Wisdom, which could be attributed to her complete spiritual comprehension, similar to the narrative in the *Dialogue of the Savior*. Also, her favored status with Jesus is presented as a conflict amongst the male disciples, as noted in this passage:

As for the Wisdom who is called “the barren,” she is the mother of the angels. And the companion of the [...] Mary Magdalene. [...] *loved her more than all the disciples*, and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples [...]. They said to him “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The Savior answered and said to them, “*Why do I not love you like her?* When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the light, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.”⁸⁰

This gospel offers controversial issues that I presume the early church theologians wanted to erase: women in preferred positions and proximity to Jesus; Mary Magdalene specifically associated as his “companion” or “partner” (which could be interpreted as a spiritual partner, or as in shared liturgical leadership); and the love Jesus had for Mary over all of the disciples. She was his preferred apostle.

Lastly, another apocryphal text from Nag Hammadi, *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*,⁸¹ highlights Mary with a clear role, included as one of seven women and twelve men gathered to

⁷⁹ *The Gospel of Philip*, trans. Wesley W. Isenberg, The Gnostic Society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library, 2020, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gop.html>

⁸⁰ Ibid. (Emphasis mine)

⁸¹ *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, trans. Douglas M. Parrott, The Gnostic Society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library, 2020, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/sjc.html>

hear the savior after the resurrection but before the ascension. She is specifically named in the text and included in the conversation of Christ's elevated teachings. This identification of seven women disciples, which is also repeated in *First Apocalypse of James*, (NH 26:4-10)⁸² provides further evidence of women's authority and active participation in the ministry of this early Church movement. Noted biblical scholar Karen King argues, "These writings are of inestimable importance in drawing aside the curtain of later perspectives behind which Christian beginnings lie, and exposing the vitality and diversity of early Christian life and reflection."⁸³

Mary Magdalene Today

On June 3, 2016, Pope Francis elevated St. Mary Magdalene's liturgical celebration of her memorial day in the Roman Calendar, July 22, to the dignity of a feast day, equal to the same rank and celebration for the male apostles. Her title of "Apostle to the Apostles" recognizes that she was the first to see the Risen Christ, and the first to proclaim the news - the two main requirements for apostolic authority. In an article announcing the Pope's decision, Arthur Roche, Archbishop Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, explains the decision and "highlights the prominence given to Mary Magdalene for centuries in the Church's tradition."⁸⁴ Yes, Roche states, Mary was the first witness and the first evangelist, and the Western tradition has confused her identity for centuries (as a "whore"), thanks to Pope Gregory the Great's three-women-in-one theory. However, Roche is not straightforward about this misinformation; he does not hold Pope Gregory accountable for the slanderous defamation of her character and does not emphatically deny that Mary the Magdalene

⁸² *The (First) Apocalypse of James*, trans. William R. Schoedel, The Gnostic Society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library, 2020, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/1ja.html>.

⁸³ King, *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*, 157.

⁸⁴ Diane Montagna, "Mary Magdalene."

was a prostitute/whore/sinner. In fact, he quotes Pope Gregory's homily 25 on the negative Eve/Mary theme. In his own words, Roche explains the contrast between Eve in the Garden of Eden and Mary in the Garden of the resurrection; "the first spread death where there was life, the second announced life from the sepulcher, the place of death."⁸⁵ This passive-aggressive statement by Roche continues to blame women for the downfall of mankind through Eve, and continues to define Mary and all women through their sexuality. This is how the Roman Catholic Church continues to define Tradition.

Going forward we must reimagine and reclaim *our* Tradition, including women's voices and women's wisdom in the all-male hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, including the stories of our fore-mothers, *women who were there*, so that their presence and leadership is not denied. Saint Mary Magdalene: a leader, revealer, teacher; the true Spirit and light. She is *Pistis Sophia*, faith and wisdom.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 3

PRISCA: *Where Did the Women Go?*

As we have explored in the previous chapter, we have seen glimpses of women in the New Testament gospels. They are as well noted for their work and faith in Paul's epistles. However, women seem to all but disappear in the Book of Acts. Prisca, a female leader in the early Christian movement, is relatively unknown by most Roman Catholic congregants. In this chapter, I will tell the story of a woman's presence that has been ignored, a woman that was integral to the formation of our early churches, and how she was a major part of *our* Tradition. I will continue the conversation on the active involvement of women in the early Christian movement by exploring the Acts of the Apostles, apocryphal literature, and material evidence. While Acts provides the travel narrative for Paul, highlighting him as the missionary hero who incurs great adventures and adversities, I will focus on the mentions of Prisca/Priscilla in Acts 18:2, 18:18, and 18:26, and reclaim *our* Tradition through her. By "reading against the grain of its patriarchal rhetoric,"⁸⁶ I will argue that *women were there*,⁸⁷ active and participating in the evangelizing, preaching, and teaching *alongside* the men, as disciples, prophets, and teachers.

Where do we find Prisca and what was her role in the early Christian movement? In comparing all the mentions of Prisca in the Letters of Paul (1 Corinthians, Romans, 2 Timothy) and the Acts of the Apostles (chapter 18), we can summarize her activities as follows: Prisca and Aquila are always together, noted as a married couple and artisan tent-makers in Acts 18:2-3. They traveled throughout the Empire to evangelize, preach, and establish house churches in

⁸⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 7.

⁸⁷ For a discussion of women's participation and agency in early Christianity, see Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, "Gazing Upon the Invisible: Archaeology, Historiography, and the Elusive Wo/men of 1 Thessalonians", in *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonike – Studies in Religion and Archaeology*, eds. Laura Nasrallah, Charalambos Bakirtzis, and Stephen J. Friesen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 73-103.

Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus. In his letter to the Romans, Paul not only mentions Prisca and Aquila, he gives an enthusiastic acclamation of their activities Rom 16:3-4: "...who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles." Not only did Prisca and Aquila put their own safety and security at risk for Paul, they were well-known by the new Gentile converts. They are also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16:19 and 2 Timothy 4:19, identified by the formal version of her name, "Prisca." Scholars agree that the primary naming of Prisca four out of six times in these texts establishes her spiritual and evangelical authority over Aquila's. The diminutive form of a name is used in ancient Greek and Latin texts to minimize the importance of a person or to negatively represent that person to the audience. The author of Acts uses the diminutive form *Priscilla*, which could be a form of endearment had he known her personally. But since he did not, the use of the diminutive in Acts may instead signify "pity or contempt, as a way to belittle or disparage her, and thus downplay her role as a leader in the church."⁸⁸

Although the author of Acts is anonymous, the commonly-held tradition is to attribute both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts to the same person who specifically wrote for the Roman elite male. The author intended to convince those in Roman society that Christianity was a proper religion with ancient roots (i.e. the Jewish God), but also had its own identity, separating itself from Judaism, emphasizing the mission of the church to the Gentiles. With respect to women in Acts, the active roles of women in the early church are scarcely mentioned and minimized. After the ascension of Jesus, Acts opens with believers in the upper room, men and women, with the only woman identified by name: "Mary the mother of Jesus" (1:14). The

⁸⁸ William O. Walker, Jr., "The Portrayal of Aquila and Priscilla in Acts: The Question of Sources," *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 4 (2008), 479-95.

author establishes the priority of the original twelve apostles by naming the men and keeping the women anonymous. Even though women are noted as present in the upper room (1:14), during Pentecost (2:1-4), numbered as believers (5:14), and equally persecuted and imprisoned by Saul (8:3), the author contributes to the erasing of their existence. Erasing *our* Tradition, the author of Acts thus creates the template for the Roman Catholic Church to restrict authority and leadership to men only. Continuing with this narrative and conforming to the norms of Roman society, the author barely discusses women in the ministry of the word, teaching and evangelizing, and the ministry of prophecy. For example, Philip's prophetic daughters are mentioned in Acts 21:8-9, but their activities are not expanded upon. With the subject of Prisca, the author of Acts portrays this very well-known female leader and teacher by acknowledging her work with Aquila, but he does not expand on her leadership and authority. The author's main focus is Paul and the acceptance of this new religion in Roman society. He ignores the leadership roles held by women, as "women in the early church cannot be portrayed in ways that would be embarrassing or threatening to men in the Roman Empire. Men occupied public leadership roles, not women."⁸⁹

Joseph B. Tyson believes that the main objective of the author of Acts was to refute the Marcionite proclamation of Paul as the only true apostle, where Peter and the other disciples were declared "false apostles."⁹⁰ Apostolic authority is affirmed by the earliest writings in the canon through the Letters of Paul. Paul includes two main conditions for "apostolicity and legitimacy: 1) witnessing an appearance of the Risen Christ and 2) receiving a divine call or

⁸⁹ Gail R. O'Day, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Acts, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 393-402.

⁹⁰ Joseph B. Tyson, "Acts and the Apostles: Issues of Leadership in the Second Century," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016), 385-98.

commission to proclaim Christ's message."⁹¹ Based on this definition, many of the women followers of Jesus should be considered apostles. Did the author of Acts have access to Paul's letters, and if he did, why did he ignore them? I surmise that the author was attempting to downplay the question of authority that Paul addresses in his letters, as well as the prevalence of women leaders and co-workers acknowledged by Paul. With so much diversity in the early Christian movement, apostles were competing for the Jews, for the non-Jewish God-Fearers, for the pagans and others who worshipped various gods/goddesses. Paul's letters provide a much different account of the early movement than illustrated in Acts. "Paul claimed to be an apostle, he mentioned a number of other apostles, apostles who were thought to be authoritative leaders of Christian communities, there were diverse views about the criteria for apostleship, and there were competing groups of apostles," argues Tyson.⁹² The author of Acts promotes the unity of the "twelve" and their divine authority in the Acts narrative, and this narrative provides the basis for the Roman Catholic Church's definition of Tradition.

And yet, despite the efforts of the author of Acts to eradicate women from the apostolic narrative, Prisca's wisdom, her influence on the early house churches, and her legacy survive. One of the most important church fathers, John Chrysostom (349-407 CE), archbishop of Constantinople and recognized by the Roman Catholic Church as a Doctor of the Church, elevates the status of Prisca in one of his sermons. His homilies included an emphasis on caring for the needy and the poor, and his themes were practical, making the Scriptures easy to understand. His homily on the "Greeting to Priscilla and Aquila" in Paul's letter to the Romans 16:3-4, describes how Paul remembered this couple with great affection, associated them as

⁹¹ Ann Graham Brock, *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, Harvard Theological Studies, 51 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

⁹² Joseph B. Tyson, "Acts and the Apostles: Issues of Leadership in the Second Century," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016), 385-98.

fellow workers in Christ, as fellow tradespeople, and was not ashamed of their lowly class status.

Most importantly, Chrysostom highlights that Paul addresses Prisca *before* Aquila:

“He does not do this without reason, but he seems to me to acknowledge *a greater godliness for her than for her husband*. What I said is not guesswork, because it is possible to learn this from the Book of Acts..”⁹³

And he extends this observation to the women in the early Christian movement:

“Therefore such a one as *Priscilla was not alone, but there were all the others...* (they) sought one thing: how they might become partners of the apostles and share the same pursuit.”⁹⁴

John Chrysostom has brought to the forefront the main idea of this paper: Prisca was not alone; there were “*all the others*,” women who became partners and equals with the male apostles in the establishment and spread of Christianity. In this line of thought, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza advocates for

“a hermeneutics of liberative vision and imagination [that] seeks to actualize and dramatize biblical texts differently. Creative re-imagination employs all our creative powers to celebrate and make present the suffering, struggles, and victories of our biblical forefathers and foremothers...it retells biblical stories from a different perspective and amplifies the emancipatory voices suppressed in the biblical texts.”⁹⁵

To understand the proliferation of Christianity throughout the Empire, we have to consider how the early churches were structured. Did worship and community take place in the shops and private homes of their leaders, such as in the home of Prisca and Aquila? With respect to ethnicity, there were Jews and God-fearing Greeks in Corinth, as Paul is described in Acts 18:4 arguing in the synagogues every Sabbath. And yet, ethnic and social identity can be difficult to ascertain. The only information we have on the identity of Prisca and Aquila is in

⁹³ Catherine Clark Kroeger (trans.), “John Chrysostom’s First Homily on the Greeting to Priscilla and Aquila,” *Priscilla Papers* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1991). <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/john-chrysostom%E2%80%99s-first-homily-greeting-priscilla-and-aquila>. (Emphasis mine.)

⁹⁴ Ibid. (Emphasis mine.)

⁹⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 54-55.

Acts 18:2, which describes them as artisan tentmakers, included with the Jews who were expelled from Rome by Claudius. This clue brings us to the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome, burial grounds for the Acilius Glabrione family. The names Priscilla and Aquila have been found in Roman inscriptions as belonging to freed slaves.⁹⁶ Coincidentally, both Glabrione family names, Priscilla and Acilius (sometimes written as Aquilius)⁹⁷ are also the names of this famous missionary couple. Were they Jews or gentiles? Were they freed slaves or tradespeople who worked for this elite Roman family? Was the Glabrione family converted to this new movement, and were they patrons of Prisca and Aquila, enabling them to travel and spread the gospel?

What we do know is that the house churches were a mix of Jews and gentiles, very few elite/highborn, and mostly freed persons/ex-slaves, slaves, and the poor.⁹⁸ The dominant narrative of women's active roles in relationship to Paul is almost always argued through the androcentric interpretations of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (veiling of women and their subordination to men) and 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 (women should be silent in the church). In shifting our narrative lens to focus on women, we can reconstruct the lives of women in early Christian communities. To do this reconstruction, we need to understand the socioeconomic status of the women, whether they were elite, freeborn women, a manumitted person, or a slave. "The household base of the movement may have enabled women to turn community involvement into an extension of their roles as household managers," writes Margaret Y. MacDonald.⁹⁹ However,

⁹⁶ J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Prisca and Aquila: Traveling Tentmakers and Church Builders," *Bible Review* 8, no. 6 (1992): 2.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ For more information on social status and class structures in early Christianity, see Steven J. Friesen, "Poverty in Pauline Studies: Beyond the So-Called New Consensus," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 3 (2004).

⁹⁹ Margaret Y. MacDonald, "Reading Real Women through the Undisputed Letters of Paul," in *Women and Christian Origins*, eds. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

women assuming this high-level activity could be seen by the greater Greco-Roman society as scandalous, given the societal norm that men handled the public arena and respectable women stayed in the private domain. But this would apply to those in the elite strata of society; tradespeople like Prisca would be expected to be in the marketplace, as would slaves who joined the movement. Being an artisan, with Aquila as her companion, we can imagine Prisca travelling throughout the Roman provinces, spreading the message of this new movement from marketplace to marketplace, household to household, from house church to house church.

Through Paul's letters to the early Christian communities, one can trace the route that Prisca and Aquila travelled, from Rome to Corinth, Corinth to Ephesus, and eventually back to Rome. While in Ephesus, the author of Acts references the couple after hearing Apollos speak in the synagogue, "[Priscilla and Aquila] they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him" (Acts 18:26-27). Apollos is noted as a Jew who was "well-versed in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24), and yet the author of Acts presents him as deficient in his learning and showing no issue with a woman of tradesperson status instructing him on the gospel of Christ. Perhaps Prisca and Aquila are "the believers" who wrote on Apollos behalf to the other disciples. If we reconstruct this idea using what we know from Paul's letters and the limited information from Acts, we can surmise Prisca and Aquila were authorities on the message of Christ and were well-known by followers and leaders of early churches. Just as Paul recommends Phoebe to the congregation in Rome, Prisca and Aquila provide their recommendation of Apollo to Achaia, a province of the Roman Empire, near Corinth, where they spent some time with Paul instructing the early church community there.

The last reference to Prisca/Priscilla in the Book of Acts, as a teacher of the Gospel and authoritative figure, refutes those verses taken out of context by patriarchal authorities, such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-36: “women should be silent in the churches...they should be subordinate, as the law also says”; or 1 Timothy 2:11-15: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission...I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man.” Biblical verses such as these have been weaponized against women throughout the centuries, misinterpreted and used to maintain patriarchal domination. In exegeting 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, another scenario emerges: the chapter describes a discussion about those who have the gift of prophesying and speaking in tongues, the confusion by those who do not understand, and instructions on how to interpret both for the good of the entire church. If one skips over 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 for a moment, and continues with 1 Corinthians 14:37-40, the flow of this chapter is smooth and relevant, with Paul’s main concern for order and respect during services. Verses 34-36 are out of rhythm with the rest of the chapter, are off-topic, and appear to have been inserted for another agenda. After consulting three different bible commentaries (the Hermeneia, Oxford, and Women’s Bible Commentaries), I found that most scholars agree these verses were later inserted by theologians who expressed similar views as seen in 1 Timothy. The conservative agenda of the Church can be attributed to this awkward insertion of verse and the construction of the Pastoral epistles.¹⁰⁰

The Legacy of Prisca

Where did Prisca go? Did Acts suffer from scribal editing, redaction, and actual erasure of women’s activities?¹⁰¹ In his analysis of critical interpretation between Western and Eastern

¹⁰⁰ Scholars have called the disputed six letters of Paul (believed to have been written by someone who was influenced by Paul’s theology, and wrote in his name), include the Pastoral epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, 1 Titus), and Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians.

¹⁰¹ On scribal redaction and erasure of women’s authority in early Christianity, see Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); April D. De Conick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

manuscripts of Acts, Ben Witherington posits that “it appears that there was a concerted effort by some part of the Church, perhaps as early as the first century or beginning of the second, to tone down texts in Luke’s second volume that indicated women played an important and prominent part in the early days of Christian community.”¹⁰² As scholars reinterpret the biblical texts by reading “against the grain of patriarchal rhetoric,”¹⁰³ women who were prophets, teachers, and leaders reemerge. While we do not have actual written accounts of what happened to Prisca after her encounter with Apollos, the Roman Catholic tradition holds that she was martyred along with Aquila in Rome, possibly around the time of the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE.¹⁰⁴

It appears Prisca’s legacy continued forward as we witness the succession of “Priscas and Priscillas” in the second, third, and fourth centuries. In the mid-second century, Montanism, or the New Prophecy movement (also known as “Priscillians”) included one male leader, Montanus, and two female leaders, the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla. The Priscillians insisted on the religious equality of men and women, using Galatians 3:28 as their egalitarian argument for leadership in church offices. All three leaders claimed to be channels for the Holy Spirit, and the male and female prophetic voices that revealed God’s truth and predicted the future.¹⁰⁵ Many in the orthodox church were vehemently opposed to this movement, particularly due to the ecclesial activities of its women leaders, such as baptism and administering the Eucharist. Hippolytus, in his *Refutation of all Heresies*, writes, “But they magnify these

¹⁰² Ben Witherington, III, “The Anti-Feminist Tendencies of the ‘Western’ Text in Acts,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103, no. 1 (1984): 82-84.

¹⁰³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ “Sts. Aquila and Priscilla, Feast Day July 8,” Catholic News Agency, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/sts-aquila-and-priscilla-531>.

¹⁰⁵ DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, 90.

wretched women above the Apostles and every gift of Grace, so that some of them presume to assert that there is in them a something superior to Christ.”¹⁰⁶

In recording their complaints against the evolving Christian sects, information on women’s activities and authority as religious leaders come to light. In the late third/early fourth centuries, Epiphanius composed his *Panarion*, or Medicine Box, against heresies. The Priscillians are included, especially as their women leaders have ecclesial authority: “They acknowledge the sister of Moses as a prophetess as support for their practice of appointing women to the clergy....Women among them are bishops, presbyters, and the rest, as if there were no difference of nature. [They say] ‘For in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female.’”¹⁰⁷ The Priscillians use Galatians 3:28, the prophetic memory from the Hebrew Bible, and the prophesying daughters of Philip as their support for the abolishment of gender distinctions within the hierarchy of the church. However, men such as Hippolytus and Epiphanius use 1 Corinthians 14:34-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 to argue to keeping women subordinate to male authority. Even in modern times, when dealing with the issue of ordaining women, the Anglican Church focuses on bible passages that are positive for women, specifically Galatians 3:28. The Roman Catholic Church maintains their position of Tradition (i.e. Jesus called only men, and the apostles did the same) which are “not open to debate,”¹⁰⁸ as they reference 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus for support. Patriarchal and misogynist attitudes have perpetuated throughout the centuries.

¹⁰⁶ Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 8.12, in *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press), 263.

¹⁰⁷ Epiphanius, *Medicine Box* 49, in *Women’s Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 264.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Concerning the Reply of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Teaching Contained in the Apostolic Letter Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, accessed April 27, 2020, Vatican.va.

The New Prophecy gained momentum into the third and fourth centuries CE and was consistently vilified by theologians and church authorities, for, as Augustine laments, “they give such great positions of leadership to women that women even receive the honor of priesthood among them.”¹⁰⁹ Augustine’s assertion appears to have been a valid complaint, as an important Roman Catholic church synod was called in 396 CE, the Council of Nimes. The Council attempted, unsuccessfully, to condemn the Priscillianists, but it was successful in prohibiting the “female diaconate” who had backed the Priscillianists and passed seven disciplinary canons.¹¹⁰ However, even this reference is not entirely forthright as it downplays the significance of the actual female ministry in question. The original text for the Council of Nimes, Canon #2 of the 7, in Latin reads:

*Illud aetiam a quibusdam suggestum est ut, contra apostolicam disciplinam, incognito usque in hoc tempus, in ministerium faeminae, nescio quo loco, leviticum uideantur adsumptae; quod quidem, quia indicens est, non admittit ecclesiastica disciplina, et contra rationem facta talis ordinatio destruat: prouidendum ne quis sibi hoc ulta praesumat.*¹¹¹

Translated, Canon #2 of the 7, reads:

*Some also suggest that, contrary to apostolic discipline, and in a practice unknown to this time, women (we don't know exactly in which place) seem to have taken on the levitical (or priestly) ministry. Indeed, since this is indecent (or unseemly), ecclesiastical discipline does not allow it. May such an ordination - made contrary to reason - be destroyed. Thus it must be provided for, lest anyone presume even more than this.*¹¹²

The ministry in question is the female priesthood, which the Roman Catholic Church has vehemently denied ever took place. Yet it seems this “indecent” ordination only adds to the proof of suppression of female liturgical authority in the mid-fourth century. Tracking the many

¹⁰⁹ Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 53.

¹¹⁰ Francine Cardman, “Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity” in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 319-320.

¹¹¹ Ioannis Pauli PP. II and Promulgatus, “Condec Iuris Canonici” in *Conc. Nema Vsense A. 394/396CE* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1873), 50. (Emphasis mine.)

¹¹² Ibid., translated by Jesse Mann. (Emphasis mine.)

complaints by ancient theologians and church authorities provide us with the mindset of those opposed to women in leadership. Tradition, *our* Tradition, was changed by men through their synods, edicts, and pronouncements. It is no wonder that biblical texts have been edited and revised with male bias towards redacting women's authority and inserting orthodox markers of female subordination.¹¹³

Material Evidence of Women's Leadership

It is not just the biblical texts that have been interpreted through the androcentric lens of our Western scholars. Archaeological evidence of women in leadership in mosaics, paintings, tombs, coinage, et cetera, have been vigorously debated and even dismissed when the question of gender leans towards the feminine. A recent *New York Times* article on the excavation of Viking warrior tombs discovered in Sweden in 1880 tells of a skeleton buried with military weapons and a chess-like board game surrounding the bones. The researchers originally assumed the body was of a high-ranking male warrior; however, recent DNA testing has determined the skeleton to be that of a woman. Their research is now under criticism, accused by their peers of "wanting the woman to be a warrior...the emotional lure of the woman warrior is too strong for reasoned argument."¹¹⁴ The scholars behind the finding reject this, looking forward to disputing their critics in response papers. The article quotes historian Dick Harrison: "What has happened in the past 40 years through archaeological research, partly fueled by feminist research, is that women have been found to be priestesses and leaders, too...this has forced us to rewrite history."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ For more information on ancient textual redaction practices, see Ally Kateusz, "Collyridian Deja Vu, The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary's Liturgical Leadership," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016): 75-92.

¹¹⁴ Christina Anderson, "A Female Viking Warrior? Tomb Study Yields Clues," *New York Times*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/world/europe/sweden-viking-women-warriors-dna.html>.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Similar to orthodox theological interpretations, even archaeologists will argue for a male-centered narrative, despite evidence that *women were there*.

If we now return to the land and burial grounds of the ancient Glabrione family, also known as the Catacomb of Priscilla, this underground sanctuary purportedly holds the bones of their patroness, Priscilla, and the wealthy Roman family members of the area, but also of the holy martyrs. Could this be the final resting place for Prisca? Tradition holds that medieval pilgrims came to the catacomb to visit the holy relics of Prisca, and her bones rested there until the ninth century when Pope Leo IV translated them to a place now lost.¹¹⁶ What is most interesting about this catacomb is the various female-oriented frescos on the walls of the crypt. There has been much controversy over these frescos, which are dated to the third century. At first glance, this banquet scene below appears to include seven women seated at the table with seven baskets of bread. Is this a eucharistic celebration, led by a woman, a priest/ess? This scene was originally interpreted by the excavators as six men and one woman celebrating a eucharistic meal, as there is no other food on the table.

¹¹⁶ Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers the Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 123.



-“One fresco may depict women celebrating a Eucharistic feast – although the figures may also be celebrating a funeral banquet (Getty)”¹¹⁷

However, scholar Nicola Denzey has noted that the hairstyles, dress, and the upright sitting position of the figures indicate these are all women, not men.¹¹⁸ This interpretation continues to be aggressively debated, because if it is all women, how could it possibly be eucharistic celebration? Gender-prejudice critics contend that if the participants are actually all women, it must be a funerary banquet.

Another fresco in the catacomb depicts three scenes: on the right-hand side is a woman seated with a baby, on the left-hand side is a young woman holding a scroll with a young man to her left holding a piece of fabric, and an older man to her right, with his hand on her shoulder. The woman in the center is veiled and praying, in the position we most commonly see with the clergy. There are several debated interpretations of this scene, all involving anonymous people and situations, yet one possibility is that this fresco illustrates the life of Prisca.

¹¹⁷ Kim Martins, “An Ancient City Beneath Rome: Visiting the Catacombs of Priscilla.”

¹¹⁸ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers the Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, 120.



“A fresco that shows a female figure with her hands outstretched has been put forward as evidence of women priests in the early Church (Max Rossi/Reuters/Corbis)”¹¹⁹

Francesco Tolotti conducted extensive excavations in the cemetery of Priscilla and published his findings in 1970.¹²⁰ He suggests that the Greek chapel in this catacomb “held one body: that of an important female martyr by the name of Prisca or Priscilla.”¹²¹ If this fresco was about the life of Prisca from Acts and in the Letters of Paul, we can imagine the three scenes as this: the seated woman with the baby is her mother with Prisca as an infant. The young woman holding the scroll is Prisca as an adult, the scroll representing her knowledge and understanding of the scriptures, while the young man is Aquila, the cloth representing his skill as a tentmaker. The older man is Paul; his hand on her shoulder relays the intimate bond between them as they were missionaries together, living in Corinth and Ephesus. The outstretched arms of the woman in the center stands in the position of a priest/ess in mass, possibly representing Prisca as she preaches and teaches in the house churches. Nicola Denzey suggests the possibility as “[t]here, in that space, powerful female teachers still left a residue, a sacred vapor trail of sanctity.

¹¹⁹ Martins, “An Ancient City Beneath Rome.”

¹²⁰ Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers*, 120.

¹²¹ Ibid.

Prisca's bones were there, and the image of her sisters were almost as indelible as bone."¹²² We cannot conclude that this fresco is exclusively about Prisca, but possibly her legacy of teaching in the early house churches was passed on to future female preachers. Prisca may have vanished after chapter 18 in the Acts of the Apostles, but her life and her contributions to the early church were shared by those who venerated her: reimagined in a women's space, underground.

The dominant Christian tradition has led us to believe that missionary couples such as Prisca and Aquila were rare, and even the androcentric interpretation of the mission of the seventy presupposes these pairs were all men: "the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go" (Luke 10:1). However, what if these "pairs" were made up of couples like Prisca and Aquila or Junia¹²³ and Adronicus (imprisoned with Paul and "prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was" [Rom 16:7])? More pairs are mentioned in the Letter to the Romans 16:12-15: Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Rufus and his mother, Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his "sister." Or in the Letter to Philemon 1:2, Apphia is also introduced as "our sister." Were these women wives and actual sisters, or were they partners in missionary teams? Throughout the New Testament gospels, Paul's epistles, and the Acts of the Apostles, we catch glimpses of women in the background, women who evangelize, work, and financially support the efforts of the early church. But also, we glimpse women who owned their own homes and managed their households: women such as Chloe in 1 Corinthians, Lydia in Acts 16, and Mary the mother of John in Acts 12. This is corroborated by one of our ancient critics of women, Philo, who stated

¹²² Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers the Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women*, 124.

¹²³ For more on Junia and the debates on gender and women as apostles, see Yii-Jan Lin, "Junia: An Apostle before Paul," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139, no. 1 (2020): 191-209; Bernadette Brooten, "Junia—Outstanding Among the Apostles (Romans 16:7)," *Women Priests*, eds. Arlene Swindler and Leonard Swindler (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 141-144.

that the household management was assigned to women (“the governor of the greater is assigned to men...that of the lessor to women”).¹²⁴ I believe that without women in these missionary teams, the men would have had difficulty gaining access to the homes where they traveled. Women were necessary partners in missionary work, shapers of the early church movement.

Apocrypha and the Controversy of Women Apostles

This methodical process of redaction, erasing, and silencing women in our sacred texts over the centuries appears to have been a successful campaign. Apocryphal texts, such as the Pistis Sophia, the Acts of Philip, First Apocalypse of James, along with other buried writings that depict female-centered authority, highlighted the diversity of thought and beliefs in the late first to early second centuries. These writings were all but destroyed, deemed heretical, and yet were miraculously discovered in the 19th and mid 20th centuries, hidden in the deserts of Egypt. “Book burning decrees, such as the Gelasian Decree (492-496 CE), chose what was to be silenced, and the list of books to be burned was long.”¹²⁵ The book burning was also gendered, for even though their books were condemned by this decree, “a large number of books by Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria have nonetheless survived, yet *not one page* has survived of the many books written by the New Prophecy prophetesses, Priscilla and Maximilla”.¹²⁶

The Pistis Sophia/Belief Wisdom, from the third century, describes the ascended Jesus’ experience with the divine Feminine, and the audience is twelve *apostles*, which includes eight men and *four women*. Mary Magdalene is one of the women and is portrayed as the main speaker and interpreter of Jesus’ teachings. Peter is frustrated (and possibly jealous) of Mary’s dominance in the discussions and complains to Jesus about her involvement. In Pistis 72, Mary

¹²⁴ Philo, *The Special Laws* 3.169-75, in *Women’s Religious in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ross Shephard Kraemer, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 32-33.

¹²⁵ Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian*, 184.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 186. (Emphasis mine.)

says “My master, I understand in my mind that I can come forward at any time to interpret what Pistis Sophia has said, but I am afraid of Peter, because he threatens me and hates our gender...the First Mystery replied to her, ‘Any of those filled with the Spirit of light will come forward to interpret what I say: no one will be able to oppose them.’”¹²⁷ Although Peter denies Mary’s authority and intimidates her, the Pistis Sophia fully supports anyone, male or female, to experience the Spirit. This text supports the leadership and vision of women - particularly Mary Magdalene with her knowledge and power of light and that women were indeed included by Christ as apostles.

One of the apocryphal books, the Acts of Philip, is a narrative about the activities and eventual martyrdom of Bartholomew, Philip and Mary, who are sent out together by the risen Christ to evangelize and preach.¹²⁸ It opens with the Lord sending out the apostles to various cities, sounding very similar to the seventy in Luke 10:1. Because Philip is distraught over the city they were assigned, the Lord sends Bartholomew with Mary and Philip, specifically addressing Mary as the stronger of the two of them; she is “blessed among women”¹²⁹ and “the mentality of a woman has come over Philip, whereas a manly and brave mentality dwells in you.”¹³⁰ Mary is also instructed to change her clothing and hide anything that would signify her womanhood. This follows Judeo/Greco-Roman thought where masculine traits are superior to feminine, and to achieve the status of male is the ultimate goal. Mary and Philip are referred to as brother and sister, but these are not actual siblings; they were missionary partners in faith. This follows similar rhetoric in the Pauline epistles. Mary personifies Wisdom and proceeds to

¹²⁷ Esther De Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up: The Sources Behind the Myth* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 51.

¹²⁸ Interesting note: Bartholomew and Philip are also paired together in the synoptic gospels.

¹²⁹ De Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up*, 89.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

teach and baptize the women of the town, while Philip and Bartholomew teach and baptize the men. The townspeople attempt to slander her as adulterous, because she travels with men that are not her husband or family. All three are imprisoned and tortured;¹³¹ however, when the townspeople attempted to strip Mary to shame her, “a cloud of fire surrounded her so that they were completely unable to approach her or to look at the place where the saint stood, but all fled from her countenance.”¹³² The Acts of Philip highlights Mary as a strong and influential leader in the early church, not just on par with the men, she surpasses them.

In the First Apocalypse of James, NH 26:4-10, a non-canonical text included in the Tchacos Codex and found with the Nag Hammadi lost gospels, Christ and James are in a dialogue about his (James’) future suffering and martyrdom. The twelve male apostles are admonished for their false piety, and the seven women *disciples* are praised. Christ elevates the status of the women over the men and instructs James to be “persuaded by the testimony of Salome and Mariam and Martha and Arsinoe.”¹³³ In this text the women are specifically identified as disciples of Jesus, and their wisdom and knowledge is to be followed by James. The document is incomplete, with gaps in the text; however, Christ appears in one section to equate the seven women disciples with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.¹³⁴ These seven gifts can be traced back to Isaiah 11:1-3 and would have been familiar doctrine to the community in Jerusalem. The feminine divine, Sophia-Spirit, naturally associated with the women disciples of Christ, was also a familiar concept for the Jews and God-fearers. Texts such as 1 Apocalypse of

¹³¹ Ibid., 92.

¹³² Ibid., 93.

¹³³ *The (First) Apocalypse of James*, trans. William R. Schoedel, The Gnostic Society Library, The Nag Hammadi Library, 2020, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/1ja.html>.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

James, with depictions of the Lord's preference and naming of female apostles, disrupt societal expectations and traditional gender roles. Also, to circle back to the Pope's argument that Jesus only chose men as his apostles, texts such as these add evidence that *women were there*, active in his ministry, included and named as disciples. They illustrate women's active, influential roles in society and religious groups, posing a significant threat to those men that craved control and power.

In my examination of the extracanonical texts, I hear the voices resisting the hierarchy of the Roman Empire and its gendered violence, culture-of-war¹³⁵ influence on the Church. The multiple documents and texts which detail the early church theologians' arguments against the "heretics," the complaints about women and their activities, and the Councils that tried to deauthorize women's leadership held to create doctrine and prohibit actions by women in early Christian communities. Taken together, these efforts have left an androcentric trail that contemporary feminist/womanist scholars have followed and disputed. Their interpretations and findings have assisted my own quest to reclaim *our* Tradition and challenge the position of the Roman Catholic Church on their centuries-old prohibition on women's authority and their place in the clerical hierarchy. In my view, orthodox theology was built on domination, silencing those who questioned its authority, physically changing and rewriting the history of *our* faith, and simultaneously erasing the power of the Divine Feminine. If the Catholic Church can orchestrate and dictate the gender disparity within their institution, will they allow for actual change and embrace the genius of women within their organizational structure? I believe that Roman Catholic congregations lack a general knowledge about women in the scripture; women

¹³⁵ For more insight into the Roman Empire's culture of war mindset, Rome's origin myths that naturalize rape, and their justification for gendered violence with territorial conquest, see Celine Lilli, *The Rape of Eve: The Transformation of Roman Ideology in Three Early Christian Retellings of Genesis*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

such as Prisca are relatively unknown. If we reconstruct the narratives of women who shaped the early church, we could reclaim *our* Tradition, and reimagine women's leadership *in* the Roman Catholic Church.

Chapter 4

Thecla: An Ancient Female Hero

The apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* was popular among the early Christians. The text itself is dated to the mid-second century, though some scholars place the oral tradition as early as 70 CE,¹³⁶ a strong indication that the authors of the Acts of the Apostles and the Pastoral Epistles would have been aware of this narrative. This is the story of Thecla, an aristocratic young woman who forsakes her family and fiancé upon hearing the preaching of Paul. Thecla liberates herself from the traditional norm for women and endures many trials such as burning fire, wild animals, and attempted rape. She cuts her hair and dresses as a man, baptizes herself, evangelizes, and converts others. In her conversation with Paul, he agrees that she should “Go and teach the Word of God,”¹³⁷ and she engages in the missionary life of piety and preaching.

As I noted earlier, we see glimpses of women throughout the New Testament gospels, specifically noted for their work and faith in Paul’s epistles. However, women seem to all but disappear in the Book of Acts. The NRSV Bible dates Acts to the late first century, approximately 80-90 CE; although recently, historians and theologians have proposed it was more likely written between 110-135 CE,¹³⁸ nearer to 120 CE. While Acts initially focuses on Peter, it moves exclusively to Paul in the middle through to the end of the book. It provides a travel narrative for Paul, highlighting him as the missionary hero who incurs great adventures and adversities, and always manages to escape his persecutors. Paul’s theologies of eschatology, faith, and spirit over the flesh are repeated throughout his letters to several communities, but

¹³⁶ Hal Taussig, ed. *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 334.

¹³⁷ Cited in *Ibid.*, 343.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

these themes are not explored in the Acts narrative. Maintaining self-control and celibacy, controlling one's body in order to better serve God spiritually, putting the spirit over flesh: these are Paul's main concerns throughout his undisputed letters. For those who are already married, Paul instructs them equally to devote themselves to each other but also to devote time to prayer. For those who are single and cannot control their passions, they should marry, but it is highly preferable to remain single and "free from anxieties" of marriage, as your attention and devotion to God would be improved should you refrain from your bodily passions. Paul addresses these concerns to entire congregations, appealing to both men and women.

Where male-centered, dramatic stories such as those in the Acts of the Apostles are deemed sacred or divinely-inspired scripture, women-centered stories attributed to oral tradition and memory are diminished as folklore and legend. And yet, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* represent more closely the themes in Paul's undisputed letters -self-control, celibacy/chastity, and total devotion to God- more so than his adventures in the Book of Acts. It can also be read as an empowering treatise for women to defy the patriarchal hierarchy: women may refuse marriage and obedience to family and pursue a virtuous life as a follower of Christ.

Early Christian communities may have identified with this resistance to societal gender norms, reinforced by women storytellers. Scholar Stephen Davis observes that "the cult of St. Thecla remained closely linked with communities of women among whom Thecla's example was a source of empowerment and a cause of controversy."¹³⁹ A noted critic of the activities of women in the early Church is Tertullian, one of the leaders of the Church in Carthage, Africa (200 CE). In his treatise, *On the Prescription of the Heretics*, he rages, "These heretical women,

¹³⁹ Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), vi.

how bold they are! They dare to teach, to dispute, to perform exorcisms, to promise healing, perhaps even to baptize” (Chapter 41.5).¹⁴⁰ I believe literary evidence such as this serves to substantiate women’s leadership activities in the early church movement. Yet some scholars continue to diminish the importance of a text like *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, dismissing the reconstruction of women’s lives and their religious leadership authority in early Christianity as “feminist fantasy”.¹⁴¹ They disparage feminist scholars who believe second-century readers used Thecla’s story as a response to the constrictive edicts of the Pastorals. Shelly Matthews argues against these dubious judgments from modern conservative scholars, and I agree with her assessment that they possibly have their own agenda in mind.¹⁴² There are also some scholars who argue that women were used in biblical and apocryphal texts as literary devices.¹⁴³ While I believe there is some truth to this theory, I also believe that women did have sufficient leadership roles within the early Christian movement. Literary evidence such as the sermons and writings of second-century theologians and critics provide support of women’s agency during that time. For example, in *De Baptismo*, Tertullian directly accuses the writer of *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* as leveraging women to perform the duties of baptism within the church hierarchy:

But if certain Acts of Paul, which are falsely so named, claim the example of Thecla for allowing women to teach and to baptize, let men know that in Asia the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add of his own to Paul's reputation, was found out, and though he professed he had done it for love of Paul, was deposed from his position. *How could we believe that Paul should give a female power to teach and to baptize, when he did not allow a woman even to learn by*

¹⁴⁰ Angelo Nicolaidis, “Assessing Tertullian on the Status of Women in the Third Century Church,” *Pharos Journal of Theology* 97 (2016): 7.

¹⁴¹ Shelly Matthews, “Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (2001): 43.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 39-55.

¹⁴³ For a conservative discussion on women in the biblical texts, see Kate Cooper, *Band of Angels: The Forgotten World of Early Christian Women*, (New York: Overlook Press, 2013).

*her own right? Let them keep silence, he says, and ask their husbands at home.*¹⁴⁴

In this passage Tertullian acknowledges Thecla as a source of empowerment for women and then attempts to correct this unseemly behavior by referencing Paul's Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:34-36). Consistently through time, passages from the Bible and the Pauline Epistles have been taken out of context, misinterpreted, and used to dominate and subjugate women. However, unknown to the general public, these specific verses have been identified as a scribal interpolation, a fact that has been corroborated by recent scholars:

...either Paul is truly inconsistent here...or this passage is an interpolation into the letter by a later editor, one who took the opportunity of the surrounding context to introduce the restrictive ethos of the Pastoral letters...¹⁴⁵

...the fact that these verses correspond not to Paul's expressed views but to the views of the later church (1Tim2:11-12; 1 Peter 3:1-6) supports this hypothesis of a later addition.¹⁴⁶

The conservative agenda of the orthodox church can be attributed to this awkward insertion of verse, with early Church Fathers such as Tertullian appropriating these verses to support their androcentric views.

I have found that to apply passages such as these without taking into consideration the socioeconomic status of the people in these communities, the political climate of these ancient cities conquered by the Roman Empire, or to understand the Greek rhetorical methods used by Paul in his on-going correspondence with the communities he founded, is to gravely misinterpret the intent and ideas espoused by Paul. In his undisputed letters, Paul is much more egalitarian in

¹⁴⁴ Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, Cap. 2, ed. and trans. Canon Ernest Evans, 1964, transcribed by Roger Pearse, Tertullian.org, 2001, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/evans_bapt/evans_bapt_text_trans.htm. (Emphasis mine.)

¹⁴⁵ John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1130.

¹⁴⁶ Julette M. Bassler, "1 Corinthians," *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 411.

nature. For instance, in Romans 16 Paul salutes women who have worked beside him; he identifies them as teachers, benefactors, role models, and leaders. Or, in 1 Corinthians, Paul writes of prophesying women who were engaged in activities that presented them as conduits to God, taking on the role of leaders. The concept of the prophet as God's human communicator is represented throughout the Hebrew Bible; the prophet is a spokesperson for God. Prophecy, then, is inspired teaching.¹⁴⁷ Using a feminist historical lens, we can reinterpret Paul's undisputed letters as providing evidence for women's active involvement in the early Church.¹⁴⁸ I concur with feminist scholars that the Pastoral Epistles were probably written to correct the controversial gender views of Paul in his undisputed letters.¹⁴⁹ We know the oral tradition of *the Acts of Thecla* was circulating in various early Christian communities by this time.¹⁵⁰ It is quite possible that this story of a woman boldly refusing the societal expectations of her station in life—abandoning traditional female roles in order to baptize, evangelize and preach—galvanized the orthodox church to create the Pastorals and the other disputed letters of Paul.

For instance, the Pauline vision espoused in his undisputed letters of pure, spiritual commitment to God is contradicted by 1 Timothy, which promotes marriage as a means to control women's bodies and instill order within their community. Specifically, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission...I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man". Even today, the Vatican issues authoritative exhortations prohibiting women in its hierarchy by pointing to this passage. The overall message of 1 Timothy dictates

¹⁴⁷ Sherri Brown, "The Dialectic of Relationship: Paul and the Veiling of Women in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16," *Salesianum* 67, no. 3 (2005): 457-77.

¹⁴⁸ For a rhetorical analysis and recovery of women's agency in Corinth, see Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991).

¹⁴⁹ For a womanist interpretation of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, see Lucy Peppiatt, *Unveiling Paul's Women: Making Sense of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

¹⁵⁰ Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 13.

the highly regarded Roman values for virgins and young widows to marry, bear children, and manage their households. It espouses typical gender and cultural norms of ancient Roman times and addresses a community that may have been struggling with celibate Christian women as a new way of life, possibly young widows refusing to remarry as they enjoy the freedom that may come with running their own households, and not having to risk their lives by having more children. The *Acts of Thecla* offered a counterpoint to traditional Greco-Roman lifestyle by refuting familial and empirical authority. Our heroine Thecla's story represented women-centered alternatives in *our* Tradition.

The Cult of Thecla: Literary and Material Evidence

Moving forward into the fourth and fifth centuries, the legend of Thecla and her shrine in Asia Minor (Turkey) was a source of inspiration for women ascetics and well-known by pilgrims to the Holy Land, who passed on her story through memory and oral tradition. One such pilgrim was Egeria, a travelling female pilgrim who made a special trip to the Hagia Thekla where she met her friend, the holy deaconess Marthana. According to Egeria's diary, she said "a prayer ... at the shrine and the complete Acts of Saint Thecla was read."¹⁵¹ One of the great Cappadocians, Gregory of Nyssa, was influenced by his older sister Macrina whose path of virginity and piety originated with the family's devotion to St. Thecla. The cult of Thecla increased in popularity with more pilgrims visiting the shrine, and buildings expanded to accommodate the influx. In 444/8 CE, *The Life and Miracles of St. Thecla* was produced¹⁵², which was a collection of forty-six stories that occurred after her "death" (although legend has it that she never actually died; she escaped from her attackers and disappeared through a rock). Stephen Davis notes, "the Miracles

¹⁵¹ Egeria, *Diary of a Pilgrimage*, in *Women's Religions in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 237.

¹⁵² Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla*, 60.

represent a collection of oral accounts that were edited and redacted by a male writer, but there is compelling evidence within the Miracles that women played a significant role in the oral transmission of these stories.”¹⁵³ Ultimately considered a martyr, *The Life and Miracles* portray Thecla as someone with great power: the power to protect, the power to heal, and the power to instill faith. In both Egypt and Asia Minor, archeologists have uncovered caves, shrines, literary and material evidence honoring the memory of Thecla: Greek and Coptic papyri, parchment manuscripts, limestone grave stelae, wall paintings, textile fragments, wooden combs, terra cotta oil lamps, and pilgrim flasks.¹⁵⁴



Coptic pilgrim flask inscribed “St Thecla” from the Louvre’s collection, 4th-5th century¹⁵⁵

Literary evidence of Thecla’s influence includes sermons and writings by Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom, to name a few. Susan Hylen observes “The use of Thecla’s story as an illustration in sermons and treatises and the expansion of the

¹⁵³ Ibid. For more insight into the expansion of Thecla’s story and influence, see Susan Hylen, “The ‘Domestication’ of Saint Thecla: Characterization of Thecla in the *Life and Miracles of Saint Thecla*,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (2014): 5-21.

¹⁵⁴ Davis, *The Cult of Thecla*, 84.

¹⁵⁵ *Pilgrim Flask with St. Thecla*, 7th century, Musée de Louvre, Paris, France.

story in later retellings both suggest that for some Christians the *Acts of Thecla* was treated much like scripture...to the Fathers of the Church, Thecla had become a biblical figure and she was treated as such.”¹⁵⁶ This evidence of devotion spans from the fourth through seventh centuries, and was widespread in geography, from Asia Minor to Egypt, Italy, Germany, North Africa, Cyprus, and Syria. An example of this material evidence lies in the Grotto of St. Paul in Ephesus, Turkey. A fresco illustrating the conflict between Thecla and Paul with her mother Theocleia dates to the fifth/sixth centuries.



The Grotto/Cave of St. Paul, Ephesus, Turkey.¹⁵⁷

In this scene, Thecla is listening intently to Paul’s preaching, indicated by his raised fingers and the books/scriptures in his hand. Theocleia is in equal posture, with her fingers raised, representing the Greco-Roman socially-accepted teachings of familial duty, marriage, and Empire. It appears that the figure of Theocleia has been damaged, her eyes gouged and fingers burned. While this could be due to erosion or from subsequent layers of plaster, it could possibly have been damaged by those who either disagreed with her condemnation of Thecla or were opposed to a woman appearing in a position of authority with equal standing to Paul.

¹⁵⁶ Susan E. Hylen, *A Modest Apostle: Thecla and the History of Women in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 112.

¹⁵⁷ Ephesus Foundation USA, *The Cave of St. Paul*, March 30, 2020, Ephesus, Turkey.



Detailed view of the fresco of Thecla to the left of Paul in the center, with her mother, Theocleia on the right, in the Grotto/Cave of St. Paul, Ephesus, Turkey.¹⁵⁸

As I mentioned in chapter 3, the Catacombs of Priscilla in Rome represent more archaeological evidence of women in authority and leadership in the early Christian movement. Not only was this an underground tribute to women's religious devotion and memory of Prisca, it appears to also hold significance for the legend of Thecla as well. The majority of images were initially interpreted to be male-centered; however, as we saw with the frescoes of the women at the eucharistic feast and the Life of Prisca, there is another wall painting that is under debate. A lone figure dressed in a long garment is pictured with a lion resting at their feet. Originally thought to be Daniel in the lion's den from the Hebrew Bible, it seems out of place in this area that is dedicated to women. Typical images of the Daniel scene in catacomb artwork will show him either naked or clothed with only a loincloth, and standing between two lions. Upon closer observation, this figure appears to be wearing the Roman stola, the ancient dress of noblewomen, and the hairstyle of the figure is carefully arranged in a bun, similar to those seen on Roman women.¹⁵⁹ Nicola Denzey proposes that the figure is actually a woman, and specifically Thecla,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Nicola Denzey, *The Bone Gatherers: The Lost Worlds of Early Christian Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 106-107.

who in her trials faced wild animals and was eventually protected by a lioness. Her story had spread across the continent and was popular in Christian oral tradition and material evidence. The fact this mural was originally thought to be male-centered is consistent even with contemporary scholars' misinterpretations. "That the painting illustrates a scene from a book popular among female audiences but rejected by centuries of male ecclesiastics brings us a long way toward understanding why a nineteenth-century male Catholic viewer like Wilpert would so steadfastly see Daniel where ancient women viewers (and perhaps some modern viewers) would see Thecla. Women's iconography is invisible in a male world of symbols and meaning."¹⁶⁰

The Male Response to Women's Agency: Household Codes, Canon Laws

Most ancient writings in the Judeo/Greco-Roman world portrayed the prevalent themes of male domination and superiority. From political correspondence, philosophical treatises, and theological perspectives, to be female is to be inferior, soft, both physically and mentally. Women were understood to be emotionally unstable and intellectually incapable of understanding business, politics, and the world outside the household. And yet, these complaints against women actually point towards something more. They insinuate women's active, influential roles in society and religious groups, posing a significant threat to those men who craved power and control. When the Roman Empire embraced Christianity in 345 CE, the Pastorals and disputed letters were given Paul's name as a way to authorize the writings and were a way to impose Roman social standards and structure on this burgeoning religion. Emphasizing household codes, levels of conduct for men and women, the injunctions in these disputed texts shifted away from the more egalitarian style of the earlier centuries. The Letter of Paul to Titus (2:3-5) and Ephesians 5:22 both equate women's submission to their husbands to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 107-108.

being a good Christian, which connotes to being a good citizen. Colossians 3:18, “Rules for the Christian Household,” uphold Roman values of women’s submission to their husbands, slaves to obey their masters, keeping the ordered male-dominated structure in place. Female subordination equals upholding religious values and equals respect for civic responsibilities. To endorse the authority of women would go against God and state, risking eternal damnation of the soul and societal chaos.

Church authorities even went so far as to enact canon law to control the effect that Paul’s teachings and *The Acts of Thecla* had on women. The mid-fourth century Council of Gangra¹⁶¹ includes the following decrees directed at women:

- ❖ Canon 13 – If any woman, under pretense of asceticism, shall change her apparel and, instead of a woman’s accustomed clothing, shall put on that of a man, let her be anathematized as a heretic, and excommunicated, and cast out of the church.
- ❖ Canon 14 – If any woman shall forsake her husband, and resolve to depart from him because she abhors marriage, let her be anathematized as a heretic, and excommunicated, and cast out of the church.
- ❖ Canon 17 – If any woman from pretended asceticism shall cut off her hair, which God gave her as the reminder of her subjection, thus annulling as it were the ordinance of subjection, let her be anathematized as a heretic, and excommunicated, and cast out of the church.

The Pastoral Letters can be seen as a response to *The Acts of Thecla*, and to the active involvement of women who had authority and held leadership positions in the early Church. These patriarchal texts are used against women even today to limit their authority and leadership within the Roman Catholic Church and beyond. The Vatican has been known to invoke this passage when the question of female leadership within the clerical hierarchy is raised.¹⁶² On this

¹⁶¹ Holy Synod of Bishops, *Council of Gangra*, Early Church Texts, n.d., https://earlychurchtexts.com/mainsub/gangra/gangra_canons.shtml

¹⁶² Joseph Ratzinger, *Concerning the Reply of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the Teaching Contained in the Apostolic Letter Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, accessed May 1, 2020, Vatican.va.

point, Shelly Mathews argues that “[h]istory is written not in a vacuum but in a sociopolitical context. What is said, or not said, about women in early Christian history necessarily affects this contemporary context.”¹⁶³ This is unfortunately true, as 1 Timothy and other similar biblical passages have been misused by the early Church Fathers as well as current Church authorities who use it to validate traditional gender ideologies onto women. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, “A *hermeneutics of remembrance* seeks to move against the grain of the androcentric text to the life and struggles of women in the early churches. It seeks to reconstruct early Christian history as the history of men and women, as memory and heritage for women-church.”¹⁶⁴ I feel strongly that feminist biblical scholarship is vital for the on-going dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. Feminist interpretation of both literary and material evidence from the first through fourth centuries provides confirmation that women were there, active and communicative, shaping *our* Church. Thecla represents yet another narrative in *our* Tradition, one that I would like to use to recover the voices of our foremothers and reclaim our past.

¹⁶³ Mathews, “Thinking of Thecla,” 54.

¹⁶⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 62.

Conclusion

On New Year's Day 2020, Pope Francis offered mass in honor of the Solemnity of Mary, the Mother of God, Theotokas. He acknowledged that salvation came from woman, born of a woman, and "if we want to weave humanity into this our time, we need to start again from the woman."¹⁶⁵ Compared to previous Popes' and Vatican gatekeepers' sexist views, I believe Pope Francis recognizes the value of women in their work, their minds, and their physical existence. In his New Year's Day homily he continues, "[w]omen are givers and mediators of peace and should be fully included in decision-making processes. Because when women share their gifts, the world finds itself more united, more peaceful. Hence, every step forward for women is a step forward for humanity as a whole."¹⁶⁶ And yet, when men like Pope Francis are given the opportunity to put this vision into practice, they do not do so. There is a quote that captures this unfortunate reality, which has been attributed to many different people (from Thomas Edison to Albert Einstein, to a Japanese proverb): "Having a vision for what you want is not enough. Vision without execution is hallucination." This expression came to life with the most recent Synod on the Amazon, where there is a shortage of priests in the remote areas of Brazil. Women there have performed most of the liturgical aspects of mass and are leaders in their communities. These Catholic communities have been formed and run by women. In a formal request to the Vatican, these Amazonian religious women and laity asked to be recognized as ordained deacons. While there was widespread support for the female diaconate, the final result of the Synod -185 voting men- decided instead to keep the status quo and attempted to make it mandatory for priests only to be assigned to these remote locations.

¹⁶⁵ Pope Francis, *Holy Mass on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God*, accessed June 2, 2020, Vatican.va.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

The Catholic Church hierarchy is out of touch with the world and in dire need of reform in many areas. Church decrees on reproductive choice, family planning, and violence against women and children must include women in the decision-making processes, specifically, the appointment of women to leadership positions within the Church hierarchy and women's voices and votes in the decision-making edicts deigned by the Synod of Bishops. For too long we have tolerated the Church's prescribed doctrine of the inferiority of the feminine, doctrine which is based on their androcentric theology, formed from selected, edited, and redacted "sacred" texts. While attending Catholic middle school, my own daughters rebelled against these sexist dictates. Their young minds captured the subliminal yet persistent message that there was no place for them in the authority of the Church. Without the inclusion of women's wisdom in leadership in the Catholic Church, I fear the injustice of sexism will continue to prevail.

However, contemporary feminist theology and advocacy promoted by the women-church movement¹⁶⁷ has secured a foothold in pursuing a "discipleship of equals"¹⁶⁸ within the Roman Catholic Church. Several Catholic women's organizations such as the Women's Ordination Conference, Roman Catholic Women Priests, Catholic Women Preach, and Future Church¹⁶⁹ utilize these feminist ideas and strategies through websites, social media, and events; gathering voices and participants to effect real change in the Roman Catholic Church. These

¹⁶⁷ Mary E. Hunt, "Women-Church: Feminist Concept, Religious Commitment, Women's Movement" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25.1 (2009): 85-98.

¹⁶⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, 1995), 21. For more in-depth analysis of feminist biblical interpretation and the models used by feminist Catholic women's movements, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); see also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways, Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

¹⁶⁹ See Women's Ordination Conference at womensordination.org, ("the uncompromising feminist voice for women's ordination and gender equity in the Roman Catholic Church since 1975"); Roman Catholic Women Priests at romancatholicwomenpriests.org, ("a new model of ordained ministry in a renewed Roman Catholic Church"); Catholicwomenpreach.org ("Raising Voice, Renewing the Church"); and Futurechurch.org ("We seek changes that will provide all Roman Catholics the opportunity to participate fully in Church life and leadership.")

organizations, and the women that lead them, defy the patriarchal Catholic Church in the spirit of Mary Magdalene, Prisca, and Thecla. On various fronts these women and their members have converged their individual movements, committed to gender and social justice within the Catholic Church and society at large.

Similar to the ruined reputation and treatment of Mary Magdalene's memory, ordained women priests (and the bishops who confer the holy orders on them) are excommunicated -“*latae sententiae*”¹⁷⁰- and discredited by the Vatican. But this does not stop them. Dr. Catherine Keller notes: “[T]he divine call, the lure, invites an interactive process of interpretation, in which we own up to our perspectives even as we open them up to criticism and influence.”¹⁷¹ The Holy Spirit calls all of us in different ways, and these women are honoring that divine calling. In defiance of man-made rules and Canon laws, women priests are willing to risk their reputations and communion with the Roman Catholic Church, courageously reimagining and reclaiming *our* Tradition.

Another Roman Catholic women's organization inspired by the women-church movement is WATER.¹⁷² Their many programs, collaborative events, podcasts and webinars focus on feminist work in religion. If we can imagine Prisca's legacy as a teacher in the early house churches being passed on to future feminist teachers and preachers, WATER would belong in her tradition. Co-founded by Mary E. Hunt and Diann L. Neu in 1983, they gathered with thirteen women from various faith backgrounds and “created a place where women's

¹⁷⁰ See “Vatican Decree on Women's Ordination and Excommunication”, trans. John L. Allen, Jr., *National Catholic Reporter*, May, 2008. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican-decree-womens-ordination-and-excommunication/>

¹⁷¹ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 160.

¹⁷² Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), accessed June 2, 2020, waterwomensalliance.org (“religious feminists creating social and religious change.”)

religious needs could be met and women's creativity nurtured." Through their website, they provide access to monthly theological and spiritual talks, teas, rituals, meditations and counseling; build alliances; and share wisdom and support for feminist/womanist and social justice endeavors. For women in religious studies, I have found the career/survival manual, "A Guide for Women in Religion,"¹⁷³ incredibly helpful. Produced by WATER and their team of feminist theologians, this handbook shares their collective experiences and resources for navigating possible careers in the broad field of religion. These pro-active feminists reminded me of Prisca's efforts and the women who followed after her. To repeat the quote by St. John Chrysostom: "Therefore such a one as *Priscilla was not alone, but there were all the others...* (they) sought one thing: how they might become partners of the apostles and share the same pursuit."¹⁷⁴ Reimagining *our* Tradition to include religious and lay women, a tradition that illuminates a "discipleship of equals."¹⁷⁵

Thecla was so moved by the inspiring and spiritual words of St. Paul that she defied the expected conventional ideals for elite Greco-Roman young women and pursued a life of evangelizing and missionary work. Several women advocates come to mind that could serve as examples of a modern-day Thecla. However, one inspiring candidate would be Sister Simone Campbell, with whom I had the privilege of meeting when she spoke at the Drew Theological School's Tipple-Vosburgh Lectures in 2017. A Roman Catholic nun, lawyer, and social justice advocate, Sister Simone is the executive director of NETWORK¹⁷⁶ which lobbies in Washington,

¹⁷³ Mary E. Hunt, Kecia Ali, and Monique Moultrie eds., *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way From A-Z*, Revised Edition (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁷⁴ Catherine Clark Kroeger, trans., "John Chrysostom's First Homily on the Greeting to Priscilla and Aquila," *Priscilla Papers* 5, no. 3 (Summer 1991). <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/priscilla-papers/john-chrysostom%E2%80%99s-first-homily-greeting-priscilla-and-aquila>. (Emphasis mine.)

¹⁷⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, 1995), 21.

¹⁷⁶ NETWORK, 2020, accessed June 2, 2020, www.networklobby.org, ("Advocates for justice, inspired by Catholic sisters").

D.C. on issues such as economic justice, immigration, and healthcare reform including family planning. Her “Nuns on the Bus” group is involved in touring city to city, supporting the poor and marginalized. Similar to Thecla’s rejection of societal norms resulting in persecution by her family and government officials, Sister Simone and other women religious drew the wrath of the U.S. bishops in 2012. This was due to their lobbying efforts in support of the Affordable Care Act and for hiring speakers that encouraged women priests, birth control, and same-sex relationships. These religious women and their leaders were accused of subverting Catholic doctrine and promoting “radical feminism,”¹⁷⁷ incurring an investigation by the Vatican under Pope Benedict and risking the loss of their current authority. Thankfully, in 2015 Pope Francis rejected the U.S. bishops’ absurd and patriarchal assessment of the religious women’s pastoral work and ended the investigations and threats to the women’s autonomy. I believe the continuous pressure on the Vatican from these feminist groups along with Pope Francis’ vision of mercy and caring for the marginalized has led him to embrace women’s wisdom and address women’s influence and participation in the hierarchy of the Church.

Going forward, my goal is to establish a dialogue with the current authorities in our parishes to deconstruct the male-oriented discourse that has been imposed upon us. Utilizing feminist revisionist strategies on our biblical texts and educating our congregations: reinterpreting, reimagining, and remembering those women that shaped *our* Tradition. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us that “[I]n short, a feminist hermeneutics of remembrance has as its primary task to keep alive the *memoria passionis* of biblical women as well as to reclaim our biblical heritage.”¹⁷⁸ Beginning at the local levels we could educate our congregations in Bible

¹⁷⁷ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*, 2012.

¹⁷⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 20.

study classes in adult retreats, religious classrooms, and in the pulpit to the masses. We have the information to redirect the conversation and make substantial changes in the clergy and the laity, including women in authority and decision-making positions in every aspect of the Church.

“Only by reclaiming our religious imagination and our sacred powers of naming can woman-church dream new dreams and see new visions”.¹⁷⁹ That is, we can dream new dreams and create real change by reimagining and reconstructing *our* Tradition, sharing the stories of those early Christian women who shaped our Church and *our* Tradition.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 21.

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