

MARY MAGDALENE GOES TO THE SYNOD

Recovering Our Foremothers in Faith in the Lectionary





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During all the phases of the synodal process, faith-filled Catholics across the world agreed that there is a pressing need to re-envision women's roles in the life, ministry, and governance of the Church. In the October 2023 synod synthesis, participants agreed it was "urgent to ensure that women can participate in decision-making processes and assume roles of responsibility in pastoral care and ministry" (Part II, Section 9, m).

Further, synod participants rightly perceived the relationship between women's full participation in the Church and the language, images, and narratives that represent women in our liturgical life. Thus, synod participants also proposed changes so that liturgical texts, including the lectionary, include "a range of words, images, and narratives that draw more widely on women's experience" (Part II, Section 9, q).

There is something of consequence at stake for women and for the Church as a whole in the choice of scripture passages which are heard in the regular Sunday morning assembly. The ways in which we understand and know God are formed within the liturgy of the church. What we pray and sing, as well as the stories we proclaim in public worship shape and form our faith -- what we believe about God, ourselves, our relationship to God, and our relationship to each other.

Thus, we need to ask if the lectionary passages selected over the three-year cycle help or hinder us in dealing with what it means for women to have a full and equal role in both church and society? Do the lections chosen praise women for being subordinate or cast them as people who brought sin into the world, or do they feature their courageous faith, actions, and ministry? Are the stories about women which are in the Bible adequately represented in the lectionary, or does the choice of Sunday readings give the impression that women were not as present, faithful, and active as their male counterparts in our salvation history?



The insights of synod participants regarding the need to be more inclusive of women's narratives in our lectionary have been noted by prominent scholars and officials since the Second Vatican Council. They have raised awareness about the omission of women from the lectionary recognizing that, as Pope Benedict XVI stated, "without the generous contribution of many women, the history of Christianity would have developed very differently," adding that the "female presence in the sphere of the primitive Church" was in no way "secondary."

In 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission asked that lectionary readings be "more abundant, more varied, and more suitable" and in 2008, the participants at the Synod on the Word, in Proposition XVI asked that "an examination be carried out of the Roman Lectionary to see if the current selection and ordering of the readings is truly adequate to the mission of the church in this historical moment."

The late Sr. Ruth Fox, OSB, in her respected analysis, "Women in the Bible and the Lectionary" wrote,

A careful analysis of the lectionary reveals that a disproportionate number of passages about the women of the Bible have been omitted. Women's books, women's experiences and women's accomplishments have been largely overlooked in the assigned scripture readings that are being proclaimed in our churches on Sundays and weekdays.

Other prestigious Catholic scholars affirm Sr. Fox's insights (see scholarly resources at end) and have written extensively about the "woman gaps" in our Catholic lectionary showing how biblical passages that feature women as prophets, leaders, co-workers, apostles, disciples, deacons, patrons, and ministers in the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures are excluded on Sundays and holy days, relegated to weekdays where few will hear the readings, or made optional. Further, as Professor emerita Katherine Tillman of Notre Dame notes, "if women's stories are omitted from the readings, they are not likely to appear in homilies." Thus the richness of women's gifts in the life of the Church are overlooked.

Stories Catholics Miss (and need) on Sundays

The Sunday lectionary is the only canon heard, read, preached, or studied by most church-going Catholics. The



Sunday lectionary is also the cornerstone for many Bible studies, catechetical programs, and spiritual guides.

When selections from the lectionary are proclaimed during the liturgy, they are concluded with the phrase “The Word of the Lord” or “The Gospel of the Lord” to which the assembly verbalizes its assent. The members of a worshipping assembly enter into a liturgical process that evokes remembrance, and by listening to and affirming the lectionary readings the Word becomes “real and present” in their minds and hearts. The liturgical process is designed to lead the assembly to internalize what is heard as a matter of faith.

The goal of the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was to cover as much of the Bible as possible. Thus, many more books and passages of the Bible were made available to Catholics through the scripture readings at Sunday and daily Mass. The widely-held

assumption has been that the lectionary faithfully presents the essence of the Bible, with the omission of only a few troubling or gory passages.

But, a lectionary, by its very nature, excludes some ancient traditions as it includes others, recasts its selections into designated collections, and assigns each collection to a particular context in the church calendar. Thus, devising any lectionary produces a “canon within the canon.” Women’s books, women’s experiences and women’s accomplishments have been largely overlooked in the assigned lectionary readings that are being proclaimed in our churches on Sundays and weekdays.

When women and female images are “erased” or misrepresented, it has real consequences for the entire Body of Christ, but especially for women. The witness of women that is provided in the Bible is incomplete and often presents a negative image, but it is further narrowed and distorted in the lectionary canon. When females and female images are marginalized in the lectionary, women are interpreted as marginal. Furthermore, when androcentric and patriarchal texts are emphasized, Catholics internalize those messages and assume they are part of the divinely designed social order. This has disturbing, even dangerous consequences for women and marginalized groups.

Underlying these texts that explicitly promote the subordination of women or their erasure from the lectionary is patriarchal framework that reflects and reinscribes misogyny. Dr. Regina Boisclair illustrates how lectionary readings chosen from the Hebrew Scriptures miss many lessons that highlight positive, empowering female imagery for God, and focus more heavily on lessons that frame women such as Eve and Sarah as dangerous, weak, submissive, or disposable. When these scriptures are paired with a Gospel reading, another aspect of the unconscious androcentric interpretive framework is introduced into the lectionary by the compilers suggesting that women are “derivative of men, dangerous to men, and except as mothers of sons, they are disposable by men...”

While the Church has honored the contributions of women in important ways, there is a lacuna when it comes to proclaiming their stories of faith, courage, and leadership at Mass thus depriving the faithful of the inspirational narratives of our foremothers in faith whose courage, ministry, sacrifice, and tenacity expanded Christianity throughout the world and shaped our tradition in essential ways. These overlooked stories have the effect of silencing the voices of our foremothers in faith whose faith serves as an indispensable model for us today.

Synod Synthesis as the Foundation for Positive Change

The October 2023 Synod Synthesis laid the foundation for a review of the current lectionary to address the women omitted and to recover those stories of faith for all Catholics today. These supporting citations and proposal are found in Part II, Section 9 of the document.



Many women expressed deep gratitude for the work of priests and bishops. They also spoke of a Church that wounds. Clericalism, a chauvinist mentality and inappropriate expressions of authority continue to scar the face of the Church and damage its communion. A profound spiritual conversion is needed as the foundation for any effective structural change (Part II, Section 9, f).

Women make up most of those in our pews and are often the first missionaries of the faith in the family. Consecrated women, both in contemplative and apostolic life, are a fundamental and distinctive gift, sign and witness in our midst. The long history of women missionaries, saints, theologians and mystics is also a powerful source of nourishment and inspiration for women and men today (Part II, Section 9, d).



SYNOD SYNTHESIS PROPOSAL: *There is a need to ensure that liturgical texts and Church documents are more attentive to the use of language that takes into equal consideration both men and women, and also includes a range of words, images and narratives that draw more widely on women's experience (Part II, Section 9, q).*

Omissions of Our Foremothers in Faith from the Lectionary

There are many examples of biblical passages about women that have been omitted, relegated to weekdays, or made optional in the current Lectionary. While we have included a few samples in this resource, to get a full list, go to futurechurch.org/the-missing-women/.

Mary Magdalene's Witness to the Resurrection is Not Heard on Easter Sunday

When Catholics gather to celebrate Easter Sunday, we do not hear the risen Jesus commissioning to Mary Magdalene, "But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Nor do we hear her proclaim, "I have seen the Lord," to her confused brothers and sisters because the full account, John 20: 1-18, is not proclaimed. Only John 20: 1-9 is proclaimed on Easter Sunday, eclipsing Mary Magdalene's faith-filled actions. The rest of the story, John 20: 11-18, is relegated to Tuesday of the Octave of Easter when few Catholics hear it. Further, John 20:10, the passage about the male disciples going home is omitted altogether. In 2016, Pope Francis officially raised the memorial of St. Mary Magdalene to a feast day naming her the "Apostle of the Apostles." And yet, Catholics do not know this story because they do not hear it proclaimed on Easter. That has the effect of silencing both Christ and Mary Magdalene.



Phoebe the Deacon

The name and story of Phoebe who is *diakonos*, is excluded from our lectionary. Thus Catholics never hear Paul's words, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is, (in the Greek), a deacon of the church of Cenchrae. Please welcome her in the Lord, as saints should. If she needs help in anything, give it to her, for she herself has been of help to many, including myself." As the church grapples with the restoration of women in the diaconate, Phoebe's ministry in the Early Church, which is never heard at mass, should be proclaimed -- a model faith for all Catholics.

Lydia, Priscilla, Tabitha, Junia, Euodia, Syntyche, Lois, Four Prophetic Daughters and more

Catholics do not learn about Lydia, the first European convert and head of her household where Paul stayed in Philippi (Acts: 16 -15, 40). Tabitha, who was devoted to good works from Acts 9:36 - 42) is not proclaimed. Prisca, a coworker of Paul (Romans 16:3-4) is left out. Junia, "prominent among the apostles" (Romans 16:7) continues to be unknown. Euodia and Syntyche, co-workers of Paul (Philippians 4:2-3) are invisible. Eunice and Lois, who passed their faith onto Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5) remain anonymous. And showing what God can do through girls and young women, Phillip's four prophetic daughters are tragically hidden from view (Acts: 21:10).

Shiprah and Puah Who Saved the Life of Moses

In describing the enslavement of Israel, the story of two brave Hebrew midwives, Shiprah and Puah is omitted from the lectionary. The weekday reading of Exodus 1:8-22 skips from verse 14 to verse 22, thus eliminating the story of these valiant women who put their own lives at risk to uphold God's law of life.

Stereotyping of Women

Many lectionary passages present women as weak, submissive, prone to sinfulness, or otherwise secondary in importance. Passages that contain exhortations to be subordinate, submissive, or controlled by husbands, masters, etc. should be eliminated from the lectionary.

Wives Be Subject/Subordinate to Your Husbands

The second reading for the Feast of the Holy Family, presented as the Christian model for family, includes Colossians 3:18: “Wives, be subject to your husbands.” While the Vatican gave U.S. bishops permission to omit from public reading any scriptures admonishing women to be submissive (ex: Ephesians 5:22; Titus 2:1-8, 11-14) in 1992, many clergy still include these passages. These passages should be entirely omitted as they are often used against women by those who exploit the passages to legitimate their need to control, dominate, abuse, and neglect women.

On the twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year B, Catholics hear Ephesians 5:21-32 which exhorts “wives to be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.” There is an optional shorter reading. Ephesians 5: 25-32 excludes the subordinating text, but there should be no option to read a text that exhorts a woman to be subordinate.

Ritual celebrations, such as weddings offer Ephesians 5:21-32, Ephesians 5:21-33, or 1 Peter 3:1-9 as options for readings. All three texts admonish women to be subordinate to their husbands. There are approved shorter readings that excise admonitions to be subordinate — Ephesians 5:2a, 23-33 or 5:2a, 25-32.

Ephesians 3:21-33 which exhorts wives to be subordinate is heard on the Thirtieth Tuesday in Ordinary Time on even years is heard on the Thirtieth Tuesday in Ordinary time in Year II.

Ephesians 6: 1-9 which exhorts slaves to obey their masters is heard on the Thirtieth Wednesday in Ordinary Time on even years.

Titus 2:1-8, 11-14 which exhorts older women to train younger women to be “under the control of their husbands” is heard on the Thirty-Second Tuesday in Ordinary Time on even years.

And while these troubling texts are heard on weekdays, and therefore to a more limited group of the faithful, it is clear that their presence in our lectionary is deeply problematic and even sinful given today’s understanding of the Gospel mandate for gender and racial justice.

Our Request

As all the faithful work together to bring forth a synodal church, we hope renewed dialogue and discernment will lead to an expansion of the lectionary, especially the Sunday lectionary, so that the inspiring stories of our foremothers in faith will be better represented and proclaimed to all Catholics.

As a participant in this vitally important synodal process, we ask you to

- Review the scholarship on our foremothers in faith who omitted from the Sunday Lectionary (contained in this packet).

- Dialogue with other synod participants about the gifts of our foremothers in faith and ways we can improve our Sunday lectionary to include more of their inspiring stories.
- Recommend action be taken to make the lectionary more inclusive so that all Catholics, but especially women and girls will see themselves more clearly in the life, faith, leadership, and ministry of the Church and be inspired to be ministers of the Gospel for our world today.
- Propose that a supplemental lectionary be prepared (or some other interim measure) until an examination of the entire lectionary can be taken up.

Academic Resources

For your convenience, we have included a number of academic articles that are very useful for this dialogue.

- “The Lectionary; A Canon Within the Canon” by Regina Boisclair, Ph.D. from The Anselm Study Bible, edited by Carolyn Osiek, RSCJ
- “Women in the Bible and the Lectionary” by Sr. Ruth Fox, OSB
- “The Easter Gospel Project” by FutureChurch
- The Seven Essential Roles of Mary Magdalene

We have developed a comprehensive list of scholarly articles at <https://bit.ly/MMSynodResources>

To learn more about this initiative go to: <https://bit.ly/MMSynod>

All art included in this resource was created by Laura James.



Thank you for considering our request!

We look forward to discussing this with you as we head to the synod.