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—Rev. Michael G. Witzak, SLD  
Associate Professor of Liturgical Studies and  
Sacramental Theology  
The Catholic University of America

# Saints on Sunday

*Voices from our past  
enlivening our worship*

Gail Ramshaw



LITURGICAL PRESS  
Collegeville, Minnesota

[www.litpress.org](http://www.litpress.org)

Cover design by Monica Bokinskie.

Cover art: Wassily Kandinski, *All Saints Day I*, 1911.

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### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ramshaw, Gail, 1947– author.

Title: Saints on Sunday / Gail Ramshaw.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017059285 (print) | LCCN 2018028086 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814645833 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814645581

Subjects: LCSH: Christian saints—Meditations. | Church year meditations. | Devotional calendars—Catholic Church. | Worship—Miscellanea.

Classification: LCC BV65 (ebook) | LCC BV65 .R36 2018 (print) | DDC 270.092/2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017059285>

# Contents

Preface	vii
1 Assembling on Sunday with Justin	1
2 Acclaiming the Trinity with Catherine of Siena	8
3 Speaking of Christ with Ambrose	14
4 Invoking the Spirit with Symeon the New Theologian	20
5 Renouncing the Devil with Perpetua	27
6 Confessing Sin with Martin Luther	34
7 Welcoming All Genders with Margaret Fell	41
8 Assessing Emotion with Julian of Norwich	49
9 Worshiping in Translation with Catherine Winkworth	56
10 Comprehending the Readings with Jerome	63
11 Chanting the Psalms with Benedict	70
12 Preaching the Faith with Mary Magdalene	76
13 Revering the Cross with Radegund	83
14 Singing Hymns with Philipp Nicolai	90
15 Honoring Images with John of Damascus	97
16 Reciting the Creed with Johannes Kepler	105

17	Praying the Intercessions with Dorothy Day	112
18	Presenting the Offerings with Lawrence	120
19	Passing the Peace with Francis of Assisi	123
20	Fostering Ecumenism with Brother Roger	130
21	Praising and Thanking with Thomas Cranmer	137
22	Greening Our Communion with Hildegard	143
23	Recessing for Service with Amy Carmichael	150
24	Treasuring the Triduum with Egeria	157
	Afterword	165
	Acknowledgments	169
	Notes	171

## Preface

**I**n the book of Revelation, twenty-four white-robed elders are seated around the throne of the Lamb, and at Sunday worship, we join with them in singing praises to God. The essays in this book look to another twenty-four of the church's faithful departed, whose ministry was extraordinary while they were alive, in hopes that even now when they are dead, their words might illumine our worship and assist our efforts at liturgical renewal.

Some of these twenty-four elders are universally revered as saints and honored as models of the liturgical life. Others of these twenty-four, although less famous, surprise us with their insight and offer useful suggestions, or at least pose bothersome questions, as we enact worship. I intend by my title, *Saints on Sunday*, to address my essays both to those Christians who formally canonize their dead and to those who name all the baptized, alive and dead, as saints of God. It is about Sunday worship that I am most concerned, for it is primarily on Sunday that Christians, as the communion of saints, gather to hear the Word and share the meal.

Throughout these essays, whether discussing the triune God, the *ordo* of the liturgy, or various attendant issues, I have asked whether the wisdom of these beloved dead might improve and deepen and widen and enrich our communal worship. In some essays, I can identify and applaud specific directions pointed out by these believers. In others, I throw up my hands, both in bewilderment and in invocation, admitting that even though I have heard the voices from the past, acceptable solutions may be quite beyond me. (After one of his

lectures, Marcus Borg was asked, "But how do you know that you're right?" And he responded, "I don't know. I don't know that I'm right.")<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, indeed, my questions are more useful to you than are my answers.

Thank you for joining me in liturgical conversation.

# 5 Chapter

## Renouncing the Devil with Perpetua

Christian tradition remembers that on March 7, 203, the noblewoman and nursing mother Perpetua, a slave Felicity, and several other Christians were martyred by being thrown to the wild beasts in the amphitheater in Carthage, North Africa. One redactor of *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* notes that when entering the arena, Perpetua fixed her hair, not wanting a disheveled appearance to suggest that she was grieving her martyrdom.<sup>1</sup> The designated mad cow was unsuccessful in killing Perpetua, who in the end assisted “the novice gladiator” in cutting her own throat. She has been commemorated since at least 354, and by the late fourth century, Augustine complained that the account of Perpetua’s martyrdom, read aloud in the assembly, was being revered as highly as was Scripture. By the sixth century, Perpetua, called in chapter 18 of the *Passion* “a wife of Christ and darling of God,” was named in the Roman canon.

Most scholars concur that while in prison, the well-educated bilingual Perpetua composed her memoirs, sections of which became chapters 3–10 of the *Passion*, thus making her the only known Christian woman to write in her own name before the fourth century. Given that there is no record of any role she played in the Christian community while alive, her fame relies solely upon the affecting narration in the *Passion*. (Note: luminous prose prevails.) Some current scholars do question the historical reliability of the account. They dismiss any essential gender identification of the prose style of chapters 3–10 and,

noting the parallels between the narrative and the biblical passages Joel 2:28-29 and Acts 2:17-18, propose instead that the *Passion*, including the purported memoir, is a deliberate literary production from somewhat later than 203.<sup>2</sup>

This debate about authorial authenticity is not what interests me on Sunday morning. Rather, I am caught by the references to the devil. In chapter 3, Perpetua's father advances "arguments of the devil"; in chapter 10, Perpetua speaks of her upcoming "fight with the devil"; in chapter 20, it is the devil that prepared for Perpetua a mad cow; and in chapter 21, "the unclean spirit," that is, the devil, is in the gladiator. Most memorably, in the first of Perpetua's four visions, she steps on the head of the serpent<sup>3</sup>—most publications render the Latin *draco* as dragon—as she ascends the ladder to encounter the white-haired shepherd. Whether translated as serpent or dragon, the creature recalls Genesis 3:15 and then Revelation 12:9, "the great dragon, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world."

Historians of Christianity trace this devil back to dualist ancient Near Eastern religion. Religious systems have found a supernatural devil and its subsidiary demons to be feasible ways to explain the endless conflict between good and evil. (You might note that I do not assign the devil a gendered pronoun, neither "he," despite usual practice, nor "she," despite the medieval depictions of the serpent in Eden with a face identical to that of Eve.)<sup>4</sup> The early classical theory of the atonement appropriated this mythology of evil: on the cross, Christ was battling against the devil, and in his resurrection, Christ demonstrated his triumph over Satan.<sup>5</sup> Later in Christian history, despite the psychological usefulness of Satan, fiercely monotheistic theologians demoted the devil, stressing instead the devilish self within each human person with which our baptism contends.

According to Jewish tradition, Uriel, one of the four archangels who held up the throne of God, was in charge of punishing evil, thus providing an indirect way for God to effect

discipline on the people. Christianity did not admit Uriel into its picture of heaven. Instead, the devil took on this role, coming to be in service to God for the purposes of divine chastisement. One recent study cites both Enlightenment philosophy and eighteenth-century Protestantism, by ridiculing medieval Roman Catholic stories of demons and miracles, as bolstering widespread dismissal of the devil.<sup>6</sup> However, we now witness the rise of after-school Satan clubs, and some contemporary Christians maintain that only a literal acceptance of biblical talk of Satan and exorcisms can save the church from trivializing the terrifying power of evil.<sup>7</sup>

Not the devil, nor "Satan," nor the serpent, nor the dragon receives any mention in our creeds. The apocalyptic adventures of the dragon in the book of Revelation have no place in the ecumenical three-year lectionary. I do not think that there exists such a being that embodies sin and evil and that expends its supernatural energy luring humans into its hellish realm. But perhaps the majority of Christians do, and the serpent does slither around on Sunday morning, if not in our sanctuaries, then outside in the churchyard. So let us trace the serpent's movements, in baptismal renunciations, in the lectionary, and in hymnody.

Most baptismal rites include renunciations, a remnant of ancient exorcisms. The baptismal instructions of John Chrysostom tell the catechumens that "even if the demon be fierce and cruel, he must withdraw from your hearts with all speed" upon hearing the exorcism; and "What are the pomps of the devil? Every form of sin, spectacles of indecency, horse racing, gatherings filled with laughter and abusive language . . . tokens, amulets, and incantations."<sup>8</sup> (Laughter is as bad as incantations?) I smiled at another of Chrysostom's comments: "Again there are chariot races and satanic spectacles in the hippodrome, and our congregation is shrinking."<sup>9</sup> Scolding the gathered assembly about lowered church attendance has venerable history.

A recent ecumenical liturgical reform has been to schedule baptisms within the regular Sunday worship. No longer

shunted off to a side chapel, the rite of baptism invites all believers who are present to celebrate the sacrament and strengthen their baptismal identity. In the church I attend, the renunciation includes these three questions: “Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? Do you renounce the powers of the world that rebel against God? Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?”<sup>10</sup> The Anglican tradition also includes both reference to the devil and its demythologizing: “Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”<sup>11</sup> Characteristically, the Orthodox churches amplify the question: “Dost thou renounce Satan, and all his Angels, and all his works, and all his service, and all his pride?”<sup>12</sup> In some denominations, specific reference to the devil is omitted. “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?”<sup>13</sup> Each of the Roman Catholic options includes the specific naming of Satan: “Do you reject Satan and all his works and all his empty promises?” or “Do you reject Satan?” or “Do you reject Satan, father of sin and prince of darkness?”<sup>14</sup> The baptism volume of *Alternative Futures for Worship* included this wording: “Do you renounce Satan and all Satan’s works and all Satan’s empty promises?”<sup>15</sup> By the way, I participated in that collaboration and recall that one of our number urged that Satan’s name be omitted from the renunciations. (Don’t we all wonder about revision committees: who won this debate, who won the next one?) For what it’s worth, the anthropologist and faithful Episcopalian Margaret Mead, in preparatory discussion of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, urged that reference to Satan remain in the rite for baptism.<sup>16</sup>

In the shared Western lectionary, the devil occasionally shows its face. On Maundy Thursday, the devil has put into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. On Easter 7, Year A, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion. On the Sunday of Matthew’s parable of the wheat and the weeds, the allegory blames the devil for having sowed the weeds, and on the Sunday of Luke

10:16, Jesus remarks, "I watched Satan fall from heaven . . . I have given you authority . . . over all the power of the enemy." Our list might include the stories of exorcisms. But the devil comes into its own on Lent 1. Although Mark says only that Jesus was "tempted by Satan," the legend grew, as legends do, and both Matthew and Luke narrate the three-act adventure during which Jesus rejects Satan's temptation to employ messianic power in such a way as to avoid the cross. (I recall in middle school encountering Edward Everett Hale's 1863 short story "A Man Without a Country," a brilliantly crafted piece of fiction that when first published resulted in countless Americans appealing to the president to pardon a man who had never existed outside the story. It seems that both Matthew and Luke, in elaborating Mark's few words, appreciated the power of narrative.) In Year A, in accord with the intertextuality of the Scriptures, the lectionary pairs the temptation of Jesus with that of Eve and Adam in Genesis 3. I fear that the parallel provided by these two biblical passages has strengthened, if not our faith in Christ's victory over evil, then merely the traditional Western blaming of woman for evil.

I listen for the devil also in hymns. Texts with rhythm and rhyme cement themselves into our minds, and we find ourselves repeating these lines while grocery shopping on Tuesday. The vast majority of our hymns do not mention the devil, but many churches sing Martin Luther's late medieval "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," in which believers are situated on a battlefield, with a champion fighting with and for us against the adversary Satan. In a recent translation of this classic, Satan is said to "rant and rage."<sup>17</sup> Also in Luther's Easter hymn *Christ Lag in Todesbanden*, "Satan cannot harm us."<sup>18</sup> In Rhabanus Maurus's eighth-century *Veni Creator Spiritus*, the Latin phrase *hostem repellas longius* is variously translated: in my hymnal, the line is "Keep far from us our cruel foe."<sup>19</sup> According to the well-known Christmas carol "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," Christ is born "to save us all from Satan's power when we were gone astray."<sup>20</sup> In the nineteenth century,

the devout Presbyterian layman Horatio Spafford, having endured repeated tragedies, wrote "When Peace, Like a River," and included the line "Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, . . . it is well with my soul."<sup>21</sup> May I here praise those churches that provide hymnals in the pews, so that sitting there before worship begins, any interested believer can peruse the hymns, without recourse to the liturgy planner's personal computer.

And so, as we baptize our catechumens, proclaim and preach the lectionary's choices, and sing our hymns, we ask: how is the best way to articulate the stranglehold of sin and the immensity of evil? Although I now advocate a weekly printing or projection of images from Christian history or contemporary artists to complement the lectionary, Christian art has been inadequate when depicting the menace and horror of evil. The West has drawn Satan as a humanoid with distorted body parts, pointed ears, bat wings, a long tail, raptor talons, dark red or black skin, and an obscene rear end. Much of this medieval depiction provided the template for the early generation of Hollywood's evil aliens.<sup>22</sup> And what is sillier than monstrous lizards are the film industry's exorcisms, with levitating virgins vomiting green slime. (If you have forgotten *The Exorcist*, view it again.)

The inquiry about whether literalizing biblical texts strengthens or diminishes their power applies of course not only to references to the devil. That the Gospel according to John narrates Jesus' first miracle as his producing over a hundred and fifty gallons of wine strikes me as more christologically kerygmatic if it is proclaimed as metaphor, rather than as Jesus' biography. Here are some questions addressed to us Sunday worshipers who do not accept the existence of a supernatural devil: How do we ensure that we do not overlook the devastating might of evil, substituting instead only social problems and personal growth experiences? Does explicit reference to the devil give baptismal renunciations more potency? Is the name "Satan" the best that we have? Or does such naming of

evil render the text childish, perhaps even ridiculous? Ought our lectionaries edit away some of their references to the devil? Should we keep singing ancient hymn texts? Who is given charge of the translation of historic texts? Does Sunday worship not concern itself with demythologizing, but rather present both a realistic devil and an inspired metaphor? (I have wondered about whether we might identify different denominations, not by their historic quarrels, but by which biblical images they literalize and which they do not.)

That the Bible gives us various ways to word the horror—serpent, dragon, Satan, the devil, the demons—is a gift, since seeing evil from different angles increases our vision and thwarts the temptation to turn story into fact. Yet I have never been as devastated by evil occasioned by baptismal references to the devil as I am nearly nightly while watching a half-hour of BBC World News. Can our liturgy say “evil” with enough malignancy to make necessary Christ’s salvation?<sup>23</sup>

“I am a Christian,” calls out Perpetua. Fixing her hair as she faces the devil, she faces us as well. Standing with her, let us rejoice in the Christian baptismal sign of God’s power over evil and, hopeful in that promise, find ourselves able, as was Perpetua, to treat the serpent’s head as a step stool to God.

# 6 Chapter

## Confessing Sin with Martin Luther

**T**he theologian Martin Luther was an Augustinian friar, professor of Scripture, ecclesiastical critic, excommunicant, imperial outlaw, Bible translator, best-selling author, hymnwriter, polemicist, evangelical preacher, conservative liturgical consultant, husband of an ex-nun, father of six children, and progenitor of Protestantism. He penned both luminous theology for the baptized—the essay *The Freedom of a Christian*—and scathing condemnation of those he opposed, particularly the Jews and the pope—and yet by 1529 was stating that he'd rather drink blood with the pope than wine with the Swiss. Born into a medieval world, dying in the Renaissance on February 18, 1546, Luther stands in everyone's way. We cannot go around him; we must somehow get through him. I am grateful that many of us are undertaking that journey together. It is Luther's call to confess our sins that we still hear half a millennium later and that deserves our consideration on Sunday morning.

The young man Martin Luther was, by our therapeutic standards, overly obsessed with personal guilt, exaggerating his own offenses, terrified of divine judgment, and critical of the church's procedures for offering forgiveness to the faithful. Beginning with his 1517 Latin academic theses proposing a discussion of the church's rituals of penance and popularized with his 1518 German "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace" and his 1519 German essay "The Sacrament of Penance,"<sup>1</sup> Luther directed much of his early career to questions concerning

sin and confession: Were Christians capable of sincere contrition? Could Christians actually know their own sins? In what ways did God punish us for our sins, and what might the church do about it? How ought indulgences to function? What was the relationship between the church's rituals of penance and God's free gift of forgiveness? Were not the church's sacraments to be in the business of proclaiming the Gospel? Who held the keys of the kingdom? Although Luther's ecclesial context and methods of argument were quite different from ours, he was, with us, addressing myriad questions about human sin and divine forgiveness and the ways that the liturgy might best address these issues.

I was raised on a conservative branch of the Lutheran tree. In 1960, as part of eighth-grade confirmation instruction, I was urged to prepare for Holy Communion, which was offered four times a year on Sunday evenings (don't tell me the church never changes), by repeating a set of "Christian Questions with Their Answers," which began with this exchange: "Do you believe that you are a sinner? Yes, I believe it; I am a sinner."<sup>2</sup> Nothing resembling this private preparatory ritual is alive in the Lutheran church of which I am now a member. But sin remains a big deal among Lutherans, a foundational principle. Some years ago, I attended the Sunday liturgy at twenty-five different Lutheran churches to discover which ones used the worship materials advocated by our national church, and thus would regularly include a confession of sin in their service, and which used some other worship form. I discovered that most of the freelancers not only did not include a rite of confession of sin, but did not mention sin during the entire event. Yet despite those renegade congregations, most Lutheran churches for much of the church year participate in a ritual exchange of confession and absolution.

In this Lutherans are joined by Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians, among whom the primary worship resources for Sunday include some adaptation of medieval sacramental penance. Rituals of private confession and

absolution may be in some ways ideal, but we liturgists know that our imaginings about perfect penitential rites crash into the reality of our cultural situation: the vast majority of Christians do not seek private absolution. Sunday worship is what we have. And although what is called the Human Potential Movement suggests that inculcating a regret for personal sinfulness diminishes what people can be, given the great good of high self-esteem, most of the Christian church maintains that liturgy must articulate truth; that such truth about sin is finally, if not welcome, at least wholesome for each person; that feelings of guilt may have nothing to do with accepting personal culpability for sin; and that the human tendency to blame everyone else for everything is not a worthy path forward.

Teaching religion at a Roman Catholic university, I asked the students whether a two-year-old snatching a toy from another toddler was sinning: no, they all called out. Was an eight-year-old hitting a friend sinning? No. Well, how old would you have to be to sin? An eighteen-year-old called out: "Twenty." Such late adolescent attitudes left me wondering whether those Americans who attend worship actually consider themselves sinners. Ordained clergy and pastoral counselors tell me: yes, they do. People regret their actions, are angered at themselves for consistently bad conduct, are guilty over a secret past, try to erase memory of failure. Indeed, it seems to me that people who live aware of world news and alert to their own behavior are called to face the staggering horror of evil, the inescapable force of sin, the bitter facts of their own past, the monsters hiding near the door, the serpent residing within. Since Christians believe that sin is in the first place before the face of God, the baptized ought to have occasion to acknowledge their sin before God, hear the words of divine mercy, and accept the challenge of baptismal grace. And, to repeat, Sunday worship is what we have.

To confess sin is to acknowledge the truth of the human distance from God, to articulate self-awareness concerning the flawed human condition. In the confession of sin, we ritualize

our belief that we are not divine little deities running around. We are not even by nature buddy-buddy with God. As the current Lutheran liturgical resources word it, “We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves” and “We have turned from you and given ourselves into the power of sin.”<sup>3</sup> Sin is the pervasive condition of the human species: it is not mainly the province of men; it is not largely the sphere of women.<sup>4</sup> Some persons try to save themselves by brandishing their own power, while others try to escape responsibility by claiming their own helplessness. Sigmund Freud was Lutheran about this: we are all sick sick sick, and there is no way out; there are only ways to try to deal with it. For Christians, one such way is located in the Sunday assembly. As a contemporary Lutheran pastor wrote about confession and absolution, “When I first experienced it—the part where everyone in church stands up and says what bad people they are, and the pastor, from the distance of the chancel and the purity of her white robe says, ‘God forgives you’—I thought it was hogwash. . . . Eventually the confession and absolution liturgy came to mean everything to me. It gradually began to feel like a moment when truth was spoken, perhaps for the only time all week, and it would crush me and then put me back together.”<sup>5</sup>

“Confession of sin” is not the same thing as “a confession of sins.” A common practice for this ritual is to substitute for the theological category of sin a list of sins, specific infractions, examples of rotten behavior. Often these texts are informed by the week’s lectionary readings, and some are thoughtfully crafted. In their extensive liturgical support for the Revised Common Lectionary, Presbyterians provide for each week a Call to Confession, a Prayer of Confession, and the Declaration of Forgiveness appropriate to the biblical readings.<sup>6</sup> Metaphors—“Our lives bear the scars of sin: bind up our wounds”<sup>7</sup>—are useful. But I hesitate when confessions particularize sin into sins. Sometimes these texts are worded in the plural—“we” have done this and that—although the intention is in fact “I.” How often will a worshiper rightly think, Well, for heaven’s

sake, I'm not guilty of that! At the Lutheran university I attended in the 1960s, when one thousand students attended the impressive Sunday Eucharist, three hundred a daily chapel service, the truly devout also a Wednesday evening Eucharist and evening dormitory devotions, we were given a text in which we confessed "the poverty of our worship." As college students, we were guilty of lots of sins, but the poverty of our worship was not one of them.

Our churches need continual reflection about whether a creedal statement of human sinfulness and the reception of divine forgiveness can be adapted to include a list of individual sins. One manual for improving congregational prayer makes the important point that communally reading aloud an unfamiliar text listing this and that sin could well become no more than a mechanical exercise in literacy, rather than a heartfelt occasion for confession.<sup>8</sup> One technique for individualizing a general confession is to maintain substantial silence after the call to confession: "substantial" does not mean ten seconds, but rather a lengthy heavy space for genuine examination of one's conduct.

A stunning confession of sin profound in its comprehensiveness is the *Ashamnu*, the shorter alphabetical confession in the Jewish Yom Kippur service, first recorded in about 860 by Rabbi Amram. Here is one English translation:

We abuse, we betray, we are cruel. We destroy, we embitter,  
we falsify.  
We gossip, we hate, we insult. We jeer, we kill, we lie.  
We mock, we neglect, we oppress. We pervert, we quarrel,  
we rebel.  
We steal, we transgress, we are unkind. We are violent, we  
are wicked, we are xenophobic.  
We yield to evil, we are zealots for bad causes.<sup>9</sup>

According to this masterful text, we humans are all guilty of everything; we cause sin, we share in one another's sin, we confess each other's sin. Using this prayer, we return like chil-

dren to the basics, to our ABCs.<sup>10</sup> When asked why the Yom Kippur confession was arranged in alphabetical order, one rabbi replied: "If it were otherwise we should not know when to stop beating our breasts. For there is no end to sin, and no end to the awareness of sin, but there is an end of the alphabet."<sup>11</sup> The alphabet serves itself up as metaphor, the rudiments of human language become the method of prayer.

Some Christians question whether clergy can proclaim absolution to a motley crew of worshipers, perhaps many of whom are not genuinely repentant. Thus some people advocate that an absolution be replaced with a benign wish: "May God forgive your sins." Yet the Sunday situation is no different from private confession, when honesty or contrition may be absent. And at least a Lutheran would assert that as each communicant is offered the body and blood of Christ, the meal brings with it forgiveness. Just as the communion ministers must trust to the piety of each communicant or to the boundless mercy of God, so the presider can announce forgiveness to the whole gang—a ritual proclamation that itself may call penitents to faith.

Given the magnitude and pervasiveness of sin, one could argue that a dialogue in which in one minute we say that we have sinned and then in the next minute we receive forgiveness does more pastoral harm than spiritual good. But consciousness of sin actually pervades the Sunday liturgy. Worshipers can be shown that in the texts of the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, and the *Agnus Dei* we each week plead for God's mercy on our sin. One suggestion for occasionally lengthening and intensifying the exchange of confession and absolution would be to replace a spoken text with a hymn pleading for forgiveness. From the fifth century we have Synesius of Cyrene's "Lord Jesus, Think on Me"<sup>12</sup>; from Luther, his hymnic version of Psalm 130, "Out of the Depths"<sup>13</sup>; from the seventeenth-century Slovak Jiří Tranovský, "Your Heart, O God, Is Grieved"<sup>14</sup>; from the ex-slaver John Newton, "Amazing Grace"<sup>15</sup>; from an Anglican become Roman Catholic, "There's

a Wideness in God's Mercy"<sup>16</sup>; from a twentieth-century Roman Catholic man, an adaptation of the parable of the prodigal son, "Our Father, We Have Wandered"<sup>17</sup>; from a twentieth-century Anglican woman, "Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive"<sup>18</sup>; and from the Maori people, "Son of God, Whose Heart Is Peace."<sup>19</sup> I do not confess my sin alone, but with centuries of the penitent around the world: does that help the ritual to find its meaning?

By the way, the Council of Nicaea forbade kneeling on Sunday.

Each year on February 18, I hope that Christians can thank God for at least some of what Luther accomplished. He became disgracefully judgmental as he aged. But Luther's final words, measured and humble, found by his deathbed, were "We are beggars, this is true." Note the "we." May his confession find expression in our Sunday worship.

# 7 *Chapter*

## Welcoming All Genders with Margaret Fell

**M**argaret Fell has now outlasted the period of history during which she was described solely as the help-mate of her second husband, the Quaker George Fox. Born in 1614 into the landed English gentry, she was married for nearly thirty years to Thomas Fell, a prominent justice of the peace and a member of Parliament, during which time she carried out numerous responsibilities at her estate Swarthmoor Hall and throughout the wider British society. She bore eight children. In 1652, as a consequence of her having hosted at her home the itinerant Quaker preacher George Fox, she became convinced—the Quaker term for conversion. Her husband died in 1658, and after eleven years as a wealthy widow, she was married to Fox until his death in 1691, joining with him to further the Quaker movement. For her procreative leadership role during the early years of the Religious Society of Friends, she is honored as the Mother of Quakerism.

Exacerbated by the social instability in England before, during, and after the Civil War, laws forbidding religious associations outside of the established state church meant that many of her fellow Quakers were imprisoned, and she dedicated much energy to their care and toward their release. Fell herself spent over four years imprisoned for hosting Quaker meetings in her home, but granting her high social status, she was able to appeal personally to both King Charles II and James II for

some level of national religious tolerance, especially for such peace-loving citizens as were the Quakers. Both in and out of prison, for fifty years she penned a significant collection of personal letters, public epistles, and religious pamphlets presenting Quaker theology and ideals. She died at her home at Swarthmoor Hall on April 23, 1702.

A recent historical study of all of Fell's corpus argues persuasively that she was an impressive independent Christian theologian who believed that a person's inner light, affirmed by Quakers as the primary spiritual reality, was the manifestation of a Christ-centered realized eschatology.<sup>1</sup> Responding to the social chaos of her time, she adopted the apocalyptic imagery of especially the book of Revelation to announce that the end time, with Christ's triumphant return, was imminent; that the state church, and laws enforcing it, were evidence of the evils that John's visions had foretold; that the light of the Spirit of Christ was found in the self, not in the erroneous religious accretions maintained by the dominant Christian denominations; and that the voice of the Spirit of the risen Christ always spoke the gospel of peace. This second coming of Christ, already experienced in one's self, replaced all old Christian symbols and rituals, which, similar to those in Judaism, were precursors of the end. She was steeped in the Bible—as was the expectation for all Quakers in the Society's early decades—and was herself a trinitarian Christian, writing of the Light as the triune Godhead of Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>2</sup> Presenting herself as a millennialist prophet through whom God spoke, she described Jesus as a man of action and the model for her life of religious and political activism.

Her presentation of and her living out the spiritual equality of women and men were remarkable. Although Fell lived after the impressive career of Queen Elizabeth I, who was a highly educated woman fully functioning as authoritative within a man's world, social strictures supporting the subordination of women remained strong in the seventeenth century. Indeed, the Protestant encouragement for personal Bible study in some

ways intensified male dominance in church and society by urging women's study of especially those biblical passages that served the patriarchal worldview. However, in 1671, anticipating the ideal of "separate but equal," perhaps inspired by centuries of Roman Catholic women's monastic communities that in some ways skirted male authority, Fell was instrumental in establishing separate women's meetings as the ideal venue for developing and encouraging the religious voices of women, who were recognized as having received, no less than men, the divine inner light.

It was Fell's extensive biblical exegesis in her essay of 1666, *Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures*, written while imprisoned, that for about two centuries led the pursuit of women's equality with men in Christ.<sup>3</sup> Fell's faithfulness as a Christian and her absolute reverence for the Bible are evident in her presentation of both classic and creative hermeneutical arguments, as she addressed the positive as well as the negative biblical passages relating to the spiritual role of women. (So it is that her work contrasts starkly with the tone of ridicule and the rejection of biblical authority that characterize the often-anthologized essays in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's 1895 *The Woman's Bible*.) Fell saw her task as probing the original intent of the Scriptures, and I see her leading the Easter procession, holding high the torch of the light, welcoming women and men to walk together toward the exercise of justice.

She began her essay with an exposition of Genesis 1, asserting that the *imago dei* was granted to both men and women. Relying on the King James Bible translation, she interpreted the story of Genesis 3 as promising that the "seed" of the woman, which was to fight against evil, was not solely Christ, but was all those children of Eve—that is, both women and men—in whom the light of Christ dwelt. She delineated numerous biblical passages in which the people of God were described with female imagery. She discussed Jesus' many interactions with women, as well as the role of women after his resurrection and in the church described in Acts. Her

thorough essay concluded with a long apocalyptic exposition of the end time foretold in Revelation as being the current moment, during which both women and men could receive the outpouring of the Spirit and would together bring in the new age. Most noteworthy for a nonacademic theologian was her thoughtful hermeneutical discussion of the contradictory passages in Paul, in which she faced squarely those verses that were used to sideline women in the church, about which she argued that the women whom Paul ordered to keep silent in Corinth were those who had not yet received the Spirit. Thus she claimed that even the epistles affirmed the spiritual—albeit not the social—equality of women with men.

Here's to you, Margaret Fell.

Now to Sunday, and women.

(We might begin with a moment of thanks to God for centuries of Christian sectarians, those religious folk who emphasized one tiny aspect of the faith so obsessively that they skewed everything else. Their single-minded focus—the Quakers refusing participation in war, the Amish resisting consumer values, the Jehovah's Witnesses evangelizing the neighborhood, the snake-handlers relying on divine protection—does hold before our collective face something we too easily can lay aside, and for this we can be grateful.)

The twentieth century witnessed the practice of separate laywomen's worship gatherings among Christians other than Quakers. Certainly for some women, worship apart from oppressive or even abusive male leadership was God's good news, for, as Fell maintained, some women could and would speak more freely—indeed, breathe more easily—when men were out of the room. It's a movement in which I never took part: my feminist contributions to church life, which have been supported and promoted for the most part by egalitarian men holding positions of ecclesial authority, have focused on the texts employed by the full assembly on Sunday morning. Of course, I too have memories of unfortunate episodes with men; but then, given that activists in a movement often criticize

colleagues who seem to be out of step, I also had unpleasant interactions with women. When I have not been welcomed, it was I think not my gender that was the issue, but my passion for specific worship reforms. It is, indeed, by no means accurate to assume that women will support causes promoted by other women.

However, in many Protestant churches now, women exercise significant leadership, serving as bishops, heading the ministry in even large parishes, producing worship materials for churchwide use, composing hymns, teaching theology in universities, staffing seminaries, preparing exegetical resources, publishing model sermons. (I hope that sociologists are not correct when suggesting that women are welcomed into positions only after the culture has devalued those tasks.) One might argue that women have finally arrived, that after four hundred years Margaret Fell is vindicated, that women's voices have indeed been heard, that at least in some places in some countries, a Christian woman can join with a worshiping assembly in which she is fully welcomed. Yet is this claim unrealistically optimistic? (What about in one-church-town, red state?) How can a local assembly welcome women, even if the polity of its church body constricts women's roles? And how can women know themselves to be welcomed by Christ, despite their experience of being silenced or even sexually abused by the body of that Christ? Fell sought to justify and indeed to encourage the voices of women in praise, petition, and moral imperative: alas, we aren't there yet.

The anthropology taught during the Middle Ages proposed that God had allotted to males and females the four human qualities—intellect, will, memory, and imagination—in a hierarchical order. Intellect was the highest characteristic and closest to God, and men had more of it than did women, and imagination was the lowest, because it was uncontrollable, and women had more of this than did men. (I was sorry to discover that most of my university students accepted this medieval understanding of gender distinction as being more

or less accurate.) This worldview led in the nineteenth century to the assumption that religious sensibilities, which utilized more imagination than intellect (!), were best nurtured by women. So, although Martin Luther had written that the man of the house was to lead family prayers, three centuries later during the Cult of True Womanhood, bringing the children to church and saying prayers at bedtime was up to the mother. Continuing into the twentieth century, the essentialist position argues that in some ways females are by essence, by unavoidable nature, different from males and that one result of this gendered difference renders females more qualified than males to deal with matters religious. (I can't keep all this straight: what are women good at?)

But walk with me out of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, when the simplicity of categorizing humans as either male or female is pretty much over in the Western world. Our welcome on Sunday must be extended to more than women. First came the categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Now, here are some of the many more terms that begin to describe human sexuality and societal gendering: affirmed gender, agender, asexual, assigned gender, cisgender, gender binary, gender dysphoria, gender expression, gender fluid, gender identity, gender marker, gender neutral, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, intersex, pansexual, sexual orientation, transsexual, third gender. I note in obituaries in the local newspaper that some conservative Christians are using the verb "transitioned" to mean "died and went to heaven," but given our society's evolving vocabulary, other Christians use the term "transitioning" to mean "the process one goes through to discover and/or affirm their gender identity."<sup>4</sup> (Note the grammatical problems English now has: "one" matched with "their.") That transitioning can have two such vastly different meanings would be comic, if it weren't instead a painful sign of two worldviews contending for Christian dominance.

We hear Fell reminding us that the inner light of the Spirit of Christ is manifest in the self, and we are coming to recognize

the immense complexity in this self. The mystery of the human person is not surprising if we continue to affirm from Genesis 1:27 that we are in some unknown way made in the image of God, and that of a God who is beyond our easy imaginings. However, some Christians are more intent on affirming, also from Genesis 1:27, that God created two sexes, each with its own gendered destiny—see Genesis 3:16-18—and that citing these passages ought to conclude the inquiry. The issues determined by our interpretations of the narratives in Genesis are multiform. Remember that until the mid-nineteenth century, most Christian authorities forbade dispensing painkillers during childbirth, citing the curse of Eve in Genesis 3:16 as indicating God's intention that every woman suffer with pain during labor.

I suggest that the theological affirmation that we Christians connect ourselves in some mysterious way to the God we worship—humans made in the *imago dei*—has more future than has the detailed description of the created earth in Genesis 1, with its reservoir of rain stored above the sky, with plants given to humankind for food, and, yes, with humans in only two genders. An openness to the human mystery allows for more mercy toward one another, more support for those with whom we walk the way of baptism. Wouldn't it be stunning, in itself a powerful proclamation of the gospel, if all those persons struggling with and against their birth sex and their formative gender were to be welcomed with open arms in the Sunday assembly? (Can transgendered persons serve as greeters or lectors in your assembly?) Can we thank God for inspiring not only historical theologians, but also scientists, psychologists, therapists, and political activists, for their deepening knowledge of the human species? We need to run as fast as we can to stay up with them, so that we can hear their proposals and use their new words to welcome all God's children.

In an epistle to Friends in 1654, Margaret Fell wrote, "To all my Dear Brethren and Sisters who are in the Light, which Christ Jesus hath enlightened you withal, I warn you and

Charge you from the Lord God, that you be faithful and obedient unto the measure of Grace which he hath given to every one of you to profit withal, and that the Light of Christ Jesus in every one of you, lead you and guide you."<sup>5</sup> Note: the Light is given to every one of you. Every Sunday Margaret Fell calls to us to welcome men, women, indeed, everyone. We aren't there yet.