

2012

Book Review: Presiding Like A Woman

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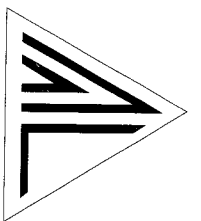


This book review in a scholarly journal was originally published as:

McCarthy, A. (2012). Book Review: Presiding Like A Woman. *Australian Journal of Liturgy*, 13 (2), 91.

This book review in a scholarly journal is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_article/122. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.





AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF LITURGY

Australian Journal
of
Liturgy

VOLUME 13 NUMBER 2 2012

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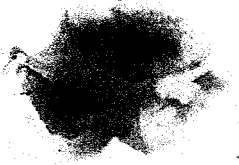
Charles Sherlock

All is the journal of the Australian Academy of Liturgy and exists to further the study of liturgy at a scholarly level, and to comment on and provide information concerning liturgical matters with special reference to Australia. AJL is published twice a year.

ISSN 1030-617X

Cover image: Berlin-based photographer Christian Herrbeck created an arresting series of images on the idea of God-made-man to accompany a recent performance in St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne of Dietrich Buxtehude's series of seven short cantatas on the parts of Christ's body, composed for Holy Week in 1680, *Membra Jesu Nostri*. Used with kind permission.

PRESIDING Like a Woman



Edited by
**Nicola Slee
and Stephen Burns**

Nicola Slee and Stephen Burns, eds, *Presiding Like a Woman*, London: SPCK, 2010

Deep divisions lie within the Christian churches about the role of women within worship, and indeed, other aspects of church life. This book is a rich addition to the literature on such divisions and offers an opportunity for many voices to be heard. The voices range from women who question the very nature of worship forms that are dominated by patriarchal clericalism to those who are consecrated bishops within their tradition. Between the two there are many other points of view and experiences that are joyful, painful, angry, contemplative, affirming, critical and enriching but all of them are worthwhile.

The list of contributors reaches across the globe: from the UK, USA, Australia, Switzerland, and the list of qualifications is impressive. Each contribution is enriched by deep learning and experience and enlivened by a compassionate view of the past and a hopeful imagining of the future. The tone of the book is set in the beginning by contributions from the editors in which Nicola Slee speaks of presiding like a woman through poetry and Stephen Burns uses the opportunity to ask an array of questions that the book endeavours to answer or at least comment upon. He opens with a comment on James Lee Byar's installation artwork 'Four in a Vestment'. When I saw the artwork presented in Melbourne in 1998 it was accompanied by a description about how it was worn by four people in a wedding ceremony. The bride, groom and one other divested themselves of the huge white cloth after symbolically moving within the sanctuary and then it was left to the presider to carry the folded vestment until he too disrobed. The powerful use of the geometry and strength of the fabric was also very limiting so while unity was apparent beneath the white garment, further actions were impossible because of its encumbrance. Stephen suggests that such a situation exists in the discussion around, and the action of, women as presiders.

The question asked many times in many different ways within this book is how should women be as presiders. For some it means pushing aside all clerical gestures and attire and moving toward an utterly feminine expression of the divine in a totally different format. For many of the contributors 'being a presider' seemed to stir deep reflection which then through experience becomes authentic to the person and to their particular spiritual focus so that it can then be valuable to their assembly. For Catholic women in the book it is important to consider the strength of the boundaries that are in place in regard to any kind of leadership of liturgy. The current inability for

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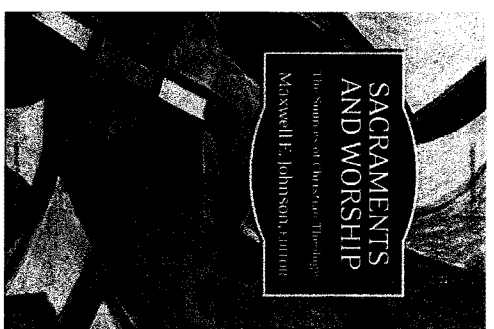
liturgy lead by Barbara Dowling, now a bishop in Melbourne, who said she wanted to be a priest like Vicar Barbara! This is such an encouragement to further generations of women with the hope that their path to ordination will not be as painful as it has been for those who have been pioneers.

A major contribution of this book to studies involving women in liturgy and leadership is the autobiographic offerings from all the contributors. The contribution of feminist thought and experience to the way in which Christianity moves through the twenty-first century cannot be understated.

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issues around the priesthood of women within the Catholic tradition—even for it to be discussed—remains very difficult for many men and women with Catholicism. Lay leadership by women in liturgies that are not eucharistic is necessary in many parishes without a priest and for each of those women their action in leading their assemblies has to be formed from their own experience and the nature of their communities.

Within this book there are many touching stories of how women experience their own leadership, how they experience their lack of possibilities, and how they experience the leadership of others. One of the touching moments was the response of a small girl after sharing a



Maxwell Johnson, ed., *Sacraments and Worship: The Sources of Christian Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012

This book is 'an extensive collection of primary source material on sacraments and worship', the strap-line on the back cover proclaims. It is part of a larger series, 'The Sources of Christian Theology', although this collection is different from others in the series in that whereas others focus on one particular doctrine (e.g. Trinity, christology), this one takes 'the history and theology of the individual sacraments and their liturgical context in the church's worship' (ix). So it intends to be an