

# **An Apology to Women: More of the Same or the Beginnings of Change?**

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The recent death and funeral of Pope John Paul II in the Vatican displayed the symbolic system of the Catholic Church to the world in a most expressive form. The cast of male players in flowing robes gathered around the casket of the dead Pope in hierarchical precision portraying what Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has called, the kyriarchy (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993: 226). Their relative proximity to the central symbols, the casket and the altar, designated the clerical status of the priests within the hierarchy. The women picked out by the TV cameras, were easily identified as either habited nuns apparently (but not actually) belonging to the hierarchy, or women related to world leaders. The only appearance of a woman within the ritual was that of a young woman allotted a non-clerical part. There was no public appearance of the Pope's close friends although the nuns of his household were singled out for attention by the media. The funeral, and the election of the new pope in the aftermath, had space only for the appearance of clerical men and these generally elderly. Their conclave signified that these leaders had no need to consult church members. They displayed an unwavering belief in their access to the Divine and their ability to choose the next pope for the international church.

Television portrayed the funeral and conclave as firmly situated in the masculine kyriarchal economy with clearly no space or place for “woman” — in an Irigarayan

sense — in the ritual. The televised production negated any influence that the feminist agendas might have had on religion and church, and there was no sign that the dead Pope's 1995 *Letter to Women* or the Millennium apology to women had had any transformative effect of increasing women's appearance in the institution of Church. If access to the Divine is made tangible or enhanced through Church ritual, clearly this ritual leaves women marginalized in abandonment.

Yet, feminists continue to inhabit, clearly uncomfortably, the margins of the Catholic tradition seeking to create symbolic fragments of their presence in the spaces on these margins. This paper asks questions of women's access to the Divine in this tradition. I will address the questions through the meaning and significance of the apology. The discussion is through the lens of an apology by a group of Franciscan men to a group of Josephite women.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Apology: The Contemporary Story**

In October 2004, the Provincial of the Franciscan Friars in Australia invited the leader of the Sisters of St Joseph to meet so that they could apologise for the part the Franciscans had played in the excommunication of Mary MacKillop, the founder of the sisters' order. The excommunication took place in 1871 in South Australia. One Friar explained:

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<sup>1</sup> Josephites refers to the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, an Institute of women religious founded by Mary MacKillop and Julian Tenison Woods in South Australia in 1866. They became the largest women's Religious Order in Australia and have a Province of the Order in New Zealand as well as communities in Peru and Ireland.

I felt that we need to say ‘sorry’ for her excommunication (by a friar) ... I then extended it to apologise publicly for the wrongs we have done as an **Order**, as a **Province** and as **individuals** to women we have served in our ministries and those we have worked with (Friar A 2005).

The apology came as a surprise to the MacKillop women not only because it was so long after the event, but also because it came from the Franciscans. In their minds the Bishop of Adelaide, Bishop Sheil, had done the excommunicating and his relationship to the Franciscans was not immediately apparent. However the link was strong. The records show that Bishop Sheil had joined the Franciscan order in Wexford Ireland and was a Friar during the time of his immigration to Australia in 1853, right up to his appointment as Bishop in 1866. On his Episcopal appointment his line of accountability changed from that of his Franciscan superiors to that of the direct authority of the Pope.

## **Historical Background to the Story**

The contemporary story of the apology addresses in part the earlier story set in colonial South Australia, which at the time was struggling to keep settlers in their territory but without the resources of the gold rush of neighbouring colonies, New South Wales and Victoria.<sup>2</sup> In 1866 Lawrence Bonaventure Sheil came from Melbourne to take up the position as head of the Catholic Diocese of Adelaide. It was at this time as he changed hats, as it were, from the Franciscan cowl to the Bishop’s mitre, that his Franciscan

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<sup>2</sup> Gold was discovered in New South Wales in 1850 and in Victoria in 1851 then in the other States of Australia progressively through the century. The first discoveries in Western Australia were in the early 1850s (the rich Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie fields were not found until the 1890s); Queensland in 1853; the Northern Territory in 1865; and Tasmania, at Beaconsfield, in 1877. The gold brought an influx of people to the colonies, as well as provided finances for infrastructure such as the telegraph and the railway. For a quick overview of the Australian Goldrush see: <http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/goldrush/>

identity was eclipsed. Although he had a reputation as a teacher and pastor in Melbourne, he also had a record of administrative and financial ineptitude and as well suffered chronic ill-health. In hindsight it is clear that Sheil's episcopal elevation promoted him beyond his capabilities, especially as the bishopric had been vacant for over four years prior to Sheil's taking office. Sheil was initially energetic in pastoral visitation but his stamina soon flagged. He took to travelling overseas on Church business for extended periods thus absenting himself from his diocese. Foale notes that he spent less than half of his five and a half year episcopate residing in his diocese. Sheil's prolonged absences served to exacerbate the effects of his administrative incompetence and to open the way for the development of clerical factionalism and disunity among the laity (Foale 1989: 21).

In the same year as Sheil's appointment as Bishop, Mary MacKillop began the Sisters of St Joseph in Penola, South Australia, with the vision of providing catholic education in the Diocese with its vast isolated rural areas. The gifted immigrant English priest, Julian Tenison Woods, collaborated with Mary in the foundation. If success was to be measured by the growth in the number of women who joined as Sisters, the two founders could count their venture successful. During 1870 thirty young women joined the Order bringing the membership to one hundred and eleven (Foale 1989: 234). They were staffing thirty three little schools (Foale 1989: 233).

At first Sheil supported the Sisters as he shared with Woods the hope for a Catholic school system. However his support diminished in late 1870 in the face of related and escalating serious problems compounded by his absences from the diocese. These

included, mounting debt, some of which was connected to the upkeep of the Catholic schools; clerical factions involving Woods and the Franciscan, Charles Horan; Wood's misdirection of two Sisters who claimed mystical experiences and who became disruptive in the community while Mary MacKillop was away in Queensland (Foale 1989: 62-63);<sup>3</sup> a letter of rebuke from Rome for Sheil's dismissal of one of his priests; and Sheil's own inability to evaluate the advice of his advisors.

Horan was a principal antagonist against the Sisters. Sheil had invited Horan and another Irish Franciscan Patrick Keating, to his Diocese, with a view to founding a permanent Franciscan community. He gave them one of the most important Catholic mission areas and appears also to have promised Horan "a higher dignity", even marking him as his successor. During one of the Bishop's absences from the Diocese these two were accused of "neglecting their parochial duties, overstepping the bounds of propriety and engaging in behaviour demeaning to their state" (Foale 1989: 60).<sup>4</sup> The accusations had sufficient grounds for the Vicar General, in the absence of the Bishop, to dismiss Keating from the Diocese. Horan blamed the Sisters for that outcome and from that time led a clergy faction against them charging them with incompetence, ignorance, inexperience and being a drain on Diocesan funds for their upkeep (Foale 1989: 210-15).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "Woods treated the two principal visionaries — Sisters Ignatius O'Brien & Angela Carroll — with the greatest deference, respect, trust and sympathy, and gave them responsible posts with a view to having them lead the rest of the community along the path to high holiness. ... They and their credulous director seem to have been caught in a vicious circle of their own making, and, in order to keep up appearances, they resorted to subterfuge and deceit" — regarding their spiritual lives. (Foale 1989: 62-63).

<sup>4</sup> Foale says that the nature and seriousness of their offences are not clear but that the Jesuit in South Australia, Father Joseph Tappeiner, was sufficiently concerned to write to his General. (Foale 1989: 60). Woods also wrote to MacKillop with the account he had heard from the Sisters. Woods to Mary MacKillop 11 & 19 April 1870.

<sup>5</sup> There are extant four versions of Horan's complaints against the Sisters in the Archives of the Diocese of Adelaide, and also cited in full in the appendix of *The Josephite Story*.

## **Mary MacKillop Excommunicated**

There are several accounts of Mary MacKillop's excommunication by Bishop Sheil on September 1871, including her own (Foale 1989: 210-215; Gardiner 1993: 97-112).

Like the Bishop, she too had just returned to the Diocese after an absence of several months and she walked into a hornet's nest.

Mary understood she was excommunicated because she would not agree to the Rule being changed from that of the Sisters' profession (MacKillop 1916).<sup>6</sup> Sheil gave other reasons, principally his perception of her as disobedient and rebellious in not immediately taking off her habit and leaving the house when he commanded her.

The gravity of Sheil's indictment of Mary should not be underestimated.

Excommunication was the ultimate ecclesiastical sanction effectively cutting the person from communion with the Church and in theological terms this meant that an excommunicated person was also denied the possibility of salvation. In Mary's case the evidence suggests that Sheil was hasty in coming to his decision, was ill advised and without valid grounds for such a move. At the time it had an electrifying effect in the Church and society of Adelaide. The newspaper headlines supported and vilified both Mary and the Bishop in turn for some weeks. Mary was forced to withdraw from the Sisters and public life, effectively going into hiding. Confusion reigned as to the actual status of the Sisters. Some Sisters were dismissed by Sheil, some returned to their

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<sup>6</sup> Horan and Sheil told Mary and some of the other Sisters that they were going to make changes to the Sisters' Rule. They hinted at bringing each school community under the authority of the local parish priest and creating a hierarchy of choir and lay Sisters. However neither man ever showed the Sisters a copy of the new Rule or of the changes they threatened to enforce.

families, a few continued to wear the habit and continue in their ministries, while a majority dressed in street clothes, took whatever work they could find and lived together observing the Rule in the new circumstances. Foale estimates that despite the upheaval, 85% of the Sisters remained in the Institute during the five months of Mary's excommunication. However during this time Mary continued to receive communion indicating her own belief that the excommunication did not in fact cut her off from access to the Divine. She was supported by the Jesuit priests who also regarded the excommunication as invalid. Her letter, written some time later and reflecting on her experience, captures this knowledge:

I really felt like one in a dream. I seemed not to realize the presence of the Bishop and priest; I know I did not see them; but I felt, oh, such a love for their office, a love, a sort of reverence for the very sentence which I then knew was being in full force passed upon me. I do not know how to describe the feeling, but I was intensely happy and felt nearer to God than I had ever felt before. The sensation of the calm beautiful presence of God I shall never forget (MacKillop 1871).

The statement comes from a woman who, sentenced to excommunication, possesses clarity around her own stand in the situation which allows her to understand that she is not the disobedient woman identified by the Bishop and priests. Her "conscience" is in communication with the Divine within and beyond so that she can do that which she is forbidden; that is, practise being in communion, with self knowledge.

## **Mary MacKillop's Excommunication Lifted**

After five months and only days before his death on 1 March 1872, Bishop Sheil sent his senior priest Hughes, to lift the sentence of excommunication from Mary, without conditions. This confirmed that his view about the punishment had changed and possibly also that he realized that the sentence had been unjust and invalid. By mid 1872 Bishop Sheil, the 'ex-Franciscan', was dead, and Horan, the second Franciscan, had had his political ambitions in the Diocese curtailed. Mary MacKillop had been restored to her position as superior of the Sisters (Foale 1989: 108), and Woods, while still working with the Sisters, had lost his influence in the Diocese.

## **The Contemporary Apology**

Mary MacKillop's life, including the excommunication episode, has been scrutinized recently as part of the process for her canonization in the Church. The year of 2005 marked a decade since she was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Sydney. It could have been because of her profile as an Australian woman that the Franciscans chose to apologise now for her treatment back then, identifying themselves to her in a genealogy of power. We could ask, then, are they caught up in what Marina Warner names as the "new political enthusiasm" for apologizing (Warner 2002: 1). Warner noted that among other world leaders the late Pope apologized on nearly a hundred different occasions, including at the Mass for the Millennium where he

... bundled up 2000 years of church injustice into one comprehensive plea for forgiveness and purification. He invoked crimes against Jews, women, minorities in general and some historical episodes in particular, such as Crusades and the Inquisition. After invoking each category what he actually said was, 'we forgive and ask forgiveness' (Warner 2002: 2).

Warner noted that there is a certain double-edged quality about the Pope putting his own forgiving nature first and only then pleading for the forgiveness of the other in return. She thought that it appeared as less than wholehearted.

Warner noted the difference between apologizing for events of the past and for those of the present or near present. An official apology which concerns an event of the past she explains:

... unites two different forms of speech, both of them deeply intertwined with ideas about self examination, and self disclosure — with, in short, ways of remembering oneself. The first is theological and sacramental, the language of repentance and atonement. The second is psychoanalytic: the practice of the “talking cure” and the psychotherapy group meeting to help relieve bereavement, mental distress, and the victims of abuse (Warner 2002: 3).

I will explore the apology of the Franciscans to the Josephites in the light of the first type of speech, that of sacramental language. The question to explore is: Is an apology necessarily in and of itself a plea for forgiveness which reaches completion only if and

when that pardon is granted? Within the sacrament of penance in the Catholic tradition there are three movements towards the completion of forgiveness. The first phase is contrition, when the person who has sinned against another recognises the offence or disruption in relationships and is sincerely sorry, to the extent that the person desires to move towards reconciliation. If the person's contrition is sincere and they confess their sin, then absolution will be given. While confession of sin is directed to the Divine, the priest represents both the community and the Divine in this phase. However the third phase requires the person to engage in reconciliation, for absolution to be efficacious. In sacramental language the person is reconciled by becoming a reconciler of fractured relationships and this requires a response in return from the offended.

Given this understanding and theological tradition, the Franciscan's apology can be read in two ways. The first reading is concerned with the apology as coercion of the symbolic order through using the theology of the natural complementarity of women and men, a theology ascribed to by John Paul II (1988: par 25-26). The second reading of the apology is as a subversion of the symbolic order in the sacrament of penance.

### **Either, Coercion by Complementarity**

The Franciscans explained that their need to apologise arose during their Chapter and that in apologizing for the excommunication of Mary MacKillop, they were indicating their willingness to change their attitudes and behaviour in their ministerial relationships with women. Their apology thus imitated the form of sacramental practice.

The men acknowledged that they felt the need to apologise to women—but only after they realised what women had been telling them for some years regarding the wrongs they were doing towards women, as one Franciscan acknowledged: “I have worked in Parishes for 9 years and realised the pain and anger of women and this has stirred me to reflect” (Friar A 2005). He reflected that in the origins of their Order: “Francis and Clare were friends and recognised the complementarity of each and this has enriched our Order immensely” (Friar A 2005).

However what does not seem to be recognised is that at the heart of the Franciscan movement lies a deep division between the men and women members. Although Francis and Clare of Assisi left their families for a mendicant lifestyle of preaching the gospel in the thirteenth century, the outcome of their desires was radically different and this because of their sexual difference. Whereas Francis found support in the Church for his vision and lifestyle, Clare was forced into monastic enclosure by the Church and presumably the Friars were complicit in the suppression of her preaching lifestyle. So when the founding story of the Franciscans is built on the story of friendship between Francis and Clare without them noticing that Clare is buried alive, might not the present Friars have trouble recognizing and accepting what lies under their noses so to speak—that is, to recognize what the women they work with are offering to give in terms of ministry?

It could well be that in their practice and theology of complementarity the Friars understand women as created by the Divine, and together with men showing full

humanity. However by using men as the standard against which to measure fullness or completeness, their vision of women might well be limited to women making up what they lack. Luce Irigaray warns that to have a sense of the other that is not projective or selfish we have to attain “the intuition of a subject that, at each point in the present, remains unfinished and open to a becoming of the other that is neither simply passive or simply active” (Irigaray 1993: 112). Might it be then that the Franciscan’s apology does nothing actually for women but rather heightens the Friars’ sense of appreciation of themselves in what they **allow** women to do, without them actually divesting or sharing their power so that some women may participate with them in ministry? This would mean that the Friars’ apology has done nothing towards effecting change for women, because their apology represented more their own bid for virtue. It could even imply an excuse not to do anything more about the situation of the real women in their parishes because now, after their apology, they at least feel better. In terms of women’s access to the divine in the Catholic tradition, nothing is gained and it could be that even their place in the margins has become further colonized by avuncular men.

### **Or, Subversion of the Symbolic Order**

There is another reading however. The Friars’ apology was not only for an excommunication in the past but also for the “hurt” that they have continued to give women, as individuals and as a Province, in the present. Therefore their apology could be more genuine and even more effective, provided it is followed by a re-vision, reshaping and transformation of their beliefs and attitudes towards women.

The Friars' apology to the leader of the women's group could restore women's dignity and spread a new climate for relationships, if they truly recognise the dignity and the presence of women as real women. It seems that the dignity restored to them by the apology can enable women to feel recognized to the extent that they are able to respond to the apology. In this way "the fully compacted apology works...as a verbal formula that effects change. The redemption lies not with the one who apologises but in the mercy shown by the woman who accepts." (Warner 2002: 16)

In the case in question, the Friars confessed, as in the sacramental tradition, to the woman, as one who has been both wronged by them and recognised by them as in touch with the Divine. She has become and appears before them as what the late Pope spoke of as "unimaginable" — a woman "ordained" to mediate Divine absolution. In this position she threatens the kyriarchal order by appearing as "a new becoming".

The woman, as the one speaking for herself and the Divine, accepts the Friar's apology making efficacious the third stage of sacramental penance. She invites them into a journey of discovery of contemporary women, and of the women in the Franciscan genealogy. The journey enacts a further phase of the sacrament — working towards a transforming reconciliation and the "new becoming". In gospel terms this phase is a glimpse into the transforming vision of God. The fourth stage is an invitation into the new, reconciled relationships of authentic, collaborative partnerships of women and the Friars. However the journey requires the Friars to engage in voluntary accountability to

and with women, within a Church system which does not excuse its own lack of accountability to women.

In this subversive reading, the Friars are positioned at the brink of the transformative journey but not so much for their apology for the excommunication of Mary MacKillop, for as has been noted already their apologetic words could come from their self-conscious virtue. It is much more that the Friars followed up their MacKillop apology with apologies for their sin — personal, Province wide and Order wide — against the real, everyday women in their own backyards and parishes, that poises them for this journey. Whereas the Vatican apologies appear to have had no effect on women's lives in the Church, the Friars have already shown more commitment. If the Friars now follow up their words with genuine listening and accountable, collaborative action with women, their journey will have an impetus that takes them to the more creative peripheries of the Catholic tradition inhabited by women, where in my view, there is much less obstruction to the Divine. However, these peripheries can be dangerous territory for men of the Church held tautly by the central hierarchy. Will the Franciscans be able to resist that pull to believe and act on the dogma of the complementarity of women favoured by the Vatican?

The Franciscan Friars acknowledged two trophy women in their history — Clare of Assisi and Mary MacKillop, the friend and the sister. The Friars of former times betrayed their relationship with both women by preventing them from participating actively in Church and society, and thus blocking the fulfilment of their desire for the Divine. They allowed Clare to be enclosed and Mary to be excommunicated. The

Friars' apology this time could herald their determined effort to change towards women — individually, as a Province community, and as an Order. Maybe in our time we will see Franciscan men listening to women and taking seriously their desire to participate in the mission of the Divine. Maybe we will have parishes where Friars and women work collaboratively with mutual accountability. Maybe we will see concrete evidence of their commitment to change. Maybe we will see something of the transforming vision and the meaning of reconciliation which will allow a “new becoming” of women and of men in the Church.

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