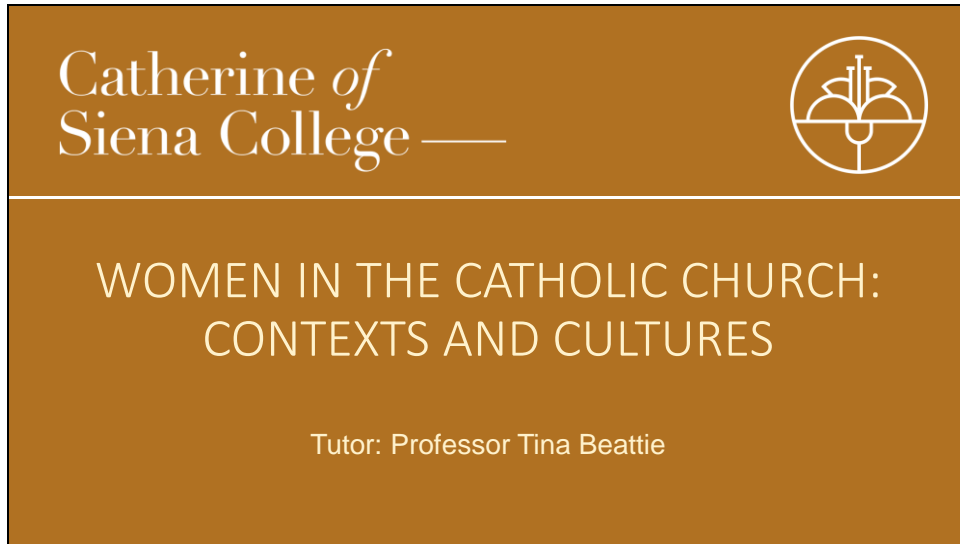



# WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH – TRANSCRIPT OF PRESENTATION

## WEEK TWO

Slide 1



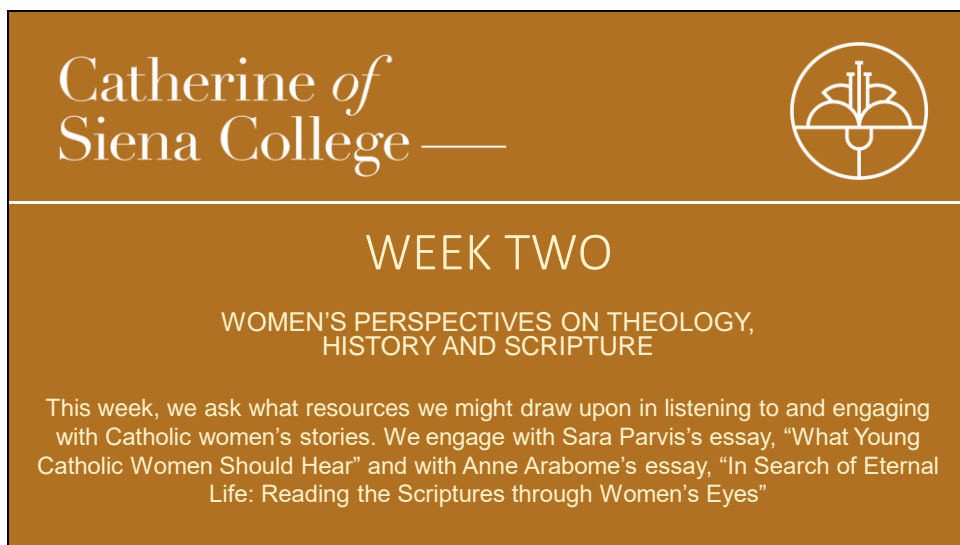
Catherine of  
Siena College — 


WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH:  
CONTEXTS AND CULTURES

Tutor: Professor Tina Beattie

Welcome back to “Women in the Catholic Church: Contexts and Cultures” – a Catherine of Siena College course taught by Tina Beattie.

Slide 2



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WEEK TWO

WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON THEOLOGY,  
HISTORY AND SCRIPTURE

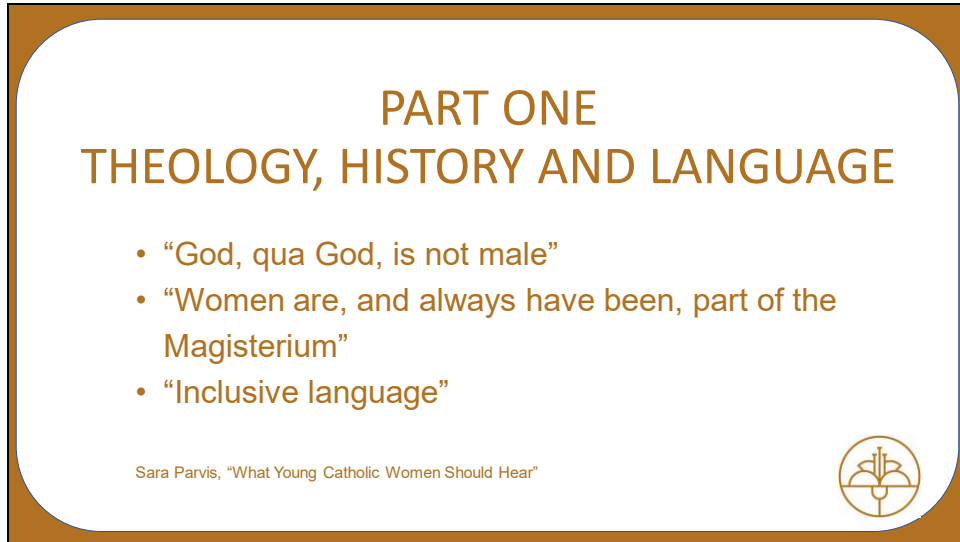
This week, we ask what resources we might draw upon in listening to and engaging with Catholic women's stories. We engage with Sara Parvis's essay, “What Young Catholic Women Should Hear” and with Anne Arabome's essay, “In Search of Eternal Life: Reading the Scriptures through Women's Eyes”

Last week, we looked at the idea of “narrative identity”. We develop a sense of who we are by the struggle with meanings and creative interpretation of our experiences in our linguistic, religious and cultural contexts. This is a dynamic process, unfolding in time, as we challenge

and question our cultural and religious contexts when they contradict or distort our sense of meaning, purpose and identity.

This week, we consider what this means with regard to theological, historical and scriptural sources. We ask what resources we might draw upon in listening to and engaging with Catholic women's stories. We consider two essays in the book *Visions and Vocations* – Sara Parvis's essay, "What Young Catholic Women Should Hear" and Anne Arabome's essay, "In Search of Eternal Life: Reading the Scriptures through Women's Eyes".


Slide 3



**PART ONE**  
**THEOLOGY, HISTORY AND LANGUAGE**

- "God, qua God, is not male"
- "Women are, and always have been, part of the Magisterium"
- "Inclusive language"

Sara Parvis, "What Young Catholic Women Should Hear"





I've divided the lecture into sessions so that you can break up your listening if you need to. In the first part of this lecture, we consider what resources are available to women and girls seeking to construct a more expressive and authentic understanding of female identity, belonging and history in the Catholic tradition. You might like to read Sara Parvis's essay in the book before continuing, and to refer back to it in the course of our discussions. We're particularly looking at three arguments she makes in order to offer a creative resource for women to construct a theology that is fitting of their own understanding and personal development in the Christian context:

- "God, qua God, is not male"
- "Women are, and always have been, part of the Magisterium"
- "Inclusive language"

**“GOD, QUA GOD, IS NOT MALE”**

How does our sense of God influence our sense of self in terms of gender and cultural identity?



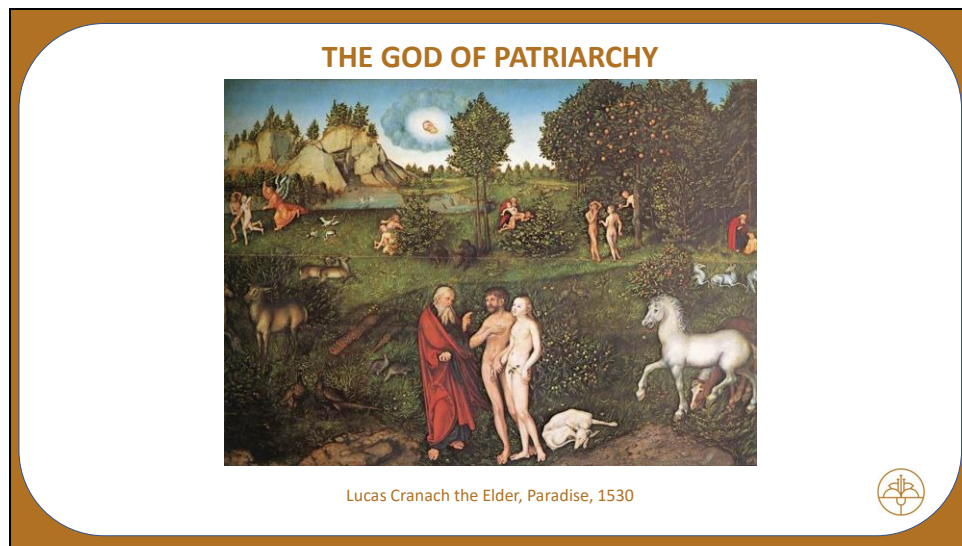
To illustrate this side, I’ve chosen William Blake’s marvellous architectural representation of God creating the universe – and you’ll notice that God is an old man with flowing white hair and a beard!

So the question is how does our sense of God influence our sense of self in terms of gender and cultural identity?

Christianity teaches that the human is made in the image of God, and that our humanity is divinised in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom God became fully human while remaining fully God.

Feminist theologians argue that Christian theology offers a patriarchal model of God the Father, which has had a negative impact on the tradition’s ability to represent the full dignity and equality of woman made in the image of God and redeemed in Christ. In the famous aphorism of radical feminist theologian Mary Daly, “If God is male then the male is God.” (You can find out more about Mary Daly in the links on the Moodle site).

You might like to pause here and to reflect on the relationship between your sense of self and your understanding of who God is. Perhaps you’d like to jot down a few ideas in your journal before moving on to the next slide.



If we accept that our identities and concepts are shaped by the cultures we inhabit, then we begin to understand how our theological language both produces and is produced by culture.

If our culture is patriarchal – as are most if not all cultures in history – that means it is organised in terms of descending hierarchies of paternal authority. In western history, authority has traditionally been passed down from a paternal concept of God, through male kings and leaders, to fathers in the household, so that women, children, servants and animals all fall under the authority of the patriarchal father figure and his laws and institutions.

We are all deeply conditioned to accept that what our cultures and traditions deem to be “normal” is also “natural” and therefore ordained by God. In the development of Christian theology and institutional life, the early Church gradually evolved a patriarchal understanding of God that endorsed the social hierarchies of the ancient Greco-Roman cultures in which Christianity took root. These came to be enshrined in Christian life and thought as God-given, so that the radical potential of the Gospels and the early Church was domesticated and became supportive rather than subversive of the patriarchal status quo.

We see this reflected in much Christian art where God is represented as a bearded old man – the authority figure in a divinely ordained patriarchy that rules the cosmos. We saw that in the last image by William Blake, but consider, for example, this painting from the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

Lucas Cranach the Elder was one of the great painters of the German Reformation. He was particularly favoured by Martin Luther as an artist who could give expression to some of the evolving theological ideas that Luther was generating in the break from the Roman Catholic Church.


In the background we see the Genesis story of the creation of Adam and Eve, the temptation and the expulsion from Eden – the casting out into the wilderness. In the foreground, God holds his finger up to Adam in instruction and warning. Adam points to himself in a gesture of responding to God with one hand, while holding Eve’s wrist in a proprietorial gesture of possession with the other.

This painting from the early years of the Reformation was intended to teach a moral lesson about marriage. God commands the man to take responsibility for and have authority over the woman, who here looks both seductive and dependent. Note the scene of the temptation in the background – the serpent is female too! The message seems to be that women are seductive, dangerous and must be kept under the authority of the man who is delegated to this role of loving but authoritative leadership by God. The dog – symbol of fidelity – sleeps at their feet, while the stallion – symbol of lust – lurks in the background. By setting this moralising scene in the context of Genesis, the patriarchal order is inscribed within the story of creation and human origins and perpetuated in the order of marriage, underwritten by a theology that associates female sexuality with seduction, sin and death.

#### Slide 6

Pause here to reflect on your own cultural and/or religious context:

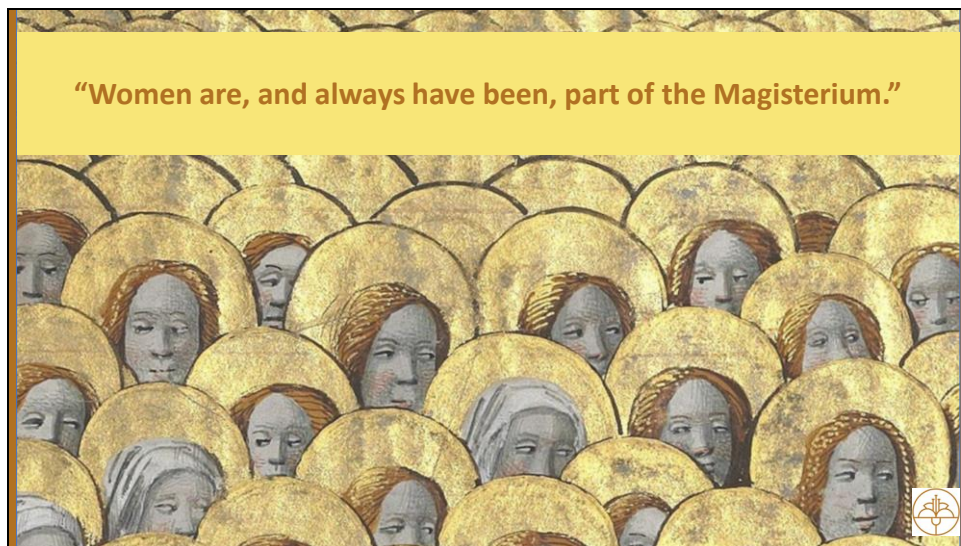
- How do you think your sense of self has been shaped by the theological ideas of your culture or religion?
- Have you challenged those ideas and found different theological resources to draw upon?
- What does this short reflection on God and gender tell you about the significance of language and culture for theology and identity?



Feel free to pause here, engage with some of the materials on Moodle, and come back when you're ready to resume the lecture. You might consider the following questions:

- Bearing in mind those powerful influences that come to us through many channels in culture and institutional life, how do you think your sense of self has been shaped by the theological ideas of your culture or religion?
- Have you challenged those ideas and found different theological resources to draw upon?
- What does this short reflection on God and gender tell you about the significance of language and culture for theology and identity?

Slide 7



[Image: Female Saints from *The Hours of Louis de Laval*, France c. 1480]

Sara Parvis next point is that “Women are, and always have been, part of the Magisterium”. The Magisterium is the body that has responsibility in the Roman Catholic Church for authorising, promoting and defending church teaching. While that term is most often used today to refer to the official Catholic hierarchy, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and papal teachings, strictly speaking it extends to all faithful practising Catholics who, by a process of discernment, prayer and practice, authenticate those teachings which are accepted and embraced by the ordinary faithful. So if an idea finds acceptance and is embraced by prayerful, faithful Catholics living out their daily lives, it is given the mark of authority, but if an idea finds widespread rejection and is not followed by ordinary practising Catholics, then a question might arise as to the authority of that teaching. If you are interested in finding out more about this, you can go to the links in this week’s Moodle site.

We looked last week at the exclusion of women from history and the making of the human story. Paradoxically however, while women have traditionally been subordinated and excluded from the highest levels of leadership and sacramental representation (e.g. priesthood) in the Catholic tradition, that tradition has also preserved the writings and stories of more women than any other historical tradition or culture. Parvis’s essay reflects on how many women, from the time of the Hebrew Scriptures up until the present, have shaped the Christian story.

The task of telling women’s stories is therefore a task of historical retrieval and memory as well as imagination and prophecy. It means reclaiming those neglected and forgotten figures who have been left out of the historical record, or whose stories have been filtered through an androcentric lens in a way that masks some of their more radical, authoritative and theologically significant arguments and insights. If you are interested in exploring these historical stories in more detail, you might like to do our Catherine of Siena ten week course on “Guardians of Faith: Women in the History of the Christian Church” running next year.

Feel free to pause here, engage with some of the materials on Moodle, make some notes in your journal, and come back when you’re ready to resume the lecture.



- You might like to back to Parvis’s essay and read the section titled “Women are, and always have been, part of the Magisterium”.
- Check the meaning of the word “Magisterium” by going to the link in Moodle.
- Engage with some of the other resources in the Moodle site if you have time and want to find out more.

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The third part of Parvis’s essay is about inclusive language. While some languages use separate terms for man, woman and human, English traditionally uses masculine nouns and pronouns in both exclusive and inclusive ways. “Man” can refer to the male or to humankind in general, usually with male pronouns to refer to both sexes. The rise of feminism and the women’s movement in the late 1960s brought about a gradual change in language usage so that inclusive language is more commonly used now – words such as “humankind” instead of “mankind” etc.

However, in liturgy, theology and scriptural interpretation, exclusive language is often still the norm. In a mixed congregation, females are asked to recognise that they are included in terms such as “men”, “man” or “brothers”. Language about God still tends to be exclusively masculine and rarely if ever draws on neglected aspects of the Christian tradition that would refer to the Holy Spirit in the feminine, or to the maternal characteristics and relationships of the persons of the Trinity.

You can find out more about some of these maternal images and metaphors by going to the links in Moodle for this week.

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**END OF PART ONE**


Please pause here to reflect on what you have learned so far in this week's lecture.

If we bring together the three aspects of Parvis's essay, what might we begin to discover about language, belonging and identity in terms of theology, history and culture, and inclusion and representation?

What implications might these gendered perspectives have on the formation of female identities, in terms of "narrative identity" (see last week's lecture)?

Pause here to make a note of some of your ideas. You might like to engage with some of the other resources referred to in Moodle, and to share some of your questions and ideas in the discussion forum.

When you are ready, please move on to Part Two of this week's session.



Please pause here to reflect on what you have learned so far in this week's lecture.

If we bring together the three aspects of Parvis's essay – theological language, the historical representation of women in Christianity, and the question of inclusive language:


- What might we begin to discover about language, belonging and identity in terms of theology, history and culture, and inclusion and representation?
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**PART TWO**  
**WOMEN REFIGURING SCRIPTURE**

Anne Arabome, "In Search of Eternal Life:  
Refiguring Scripture through Women's Eyes"





We're now looking at women refiguring scripture in the context of Anne Arabome's essay.

To think in terms of narrative identity is to recognise the formative role played by scripture with regard to the formation of Christian identity. Today biblical scholars with an interest in the role and representation of women struggle to liberate redemptive and sometimes subversive meanings from settled interpretations of the Bible, which are freighted with androcentric and patriarchal interpretations that are not always supported by the text. Anne Arabome's essay, written from the perspective of African women interpreters, suggests some of the ways in which the biblical text can be broken open anew to reveal fresh possibilities of meaning for women.


This entails "a hermeneutical suspicion", which recognises how the Bible has been used to subordinate and control women's lives and to sustain a patriarchal social order. Hermeneutics refers to the process of interpretation, so a hermeneutics of suspicion means that we don't entirely trust the interpretations that we've been given as authoritative or exclusive. We seek to undermine those by looking for other possibilities in the text.

When women reflect on their experiences and cultures in engagement with the biblical narrative, a process of mutual transformation can result. Women's lives are enriched through a narrative of revelation that becomes liberating rather than enslaving, and the Bible is then read in a new way that deepens and extends its revelatory possibilities.

You might like here to consider two of the other essays in *Visions and Vocations* – those by Sister Madeleine Fredell and Sister Mary Deepika – both of whom say how particular scriptural verses have inspired their religious vocations.

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"[S]cripture is a mine of symbolic creation, production and transmission of meaning shaped by contexts and surrounding cultures. Such contexts and cultures carry entrenched biases that have been the particular focus of gender studies aimed at deconstructing their distorted ideological foundations. Symbols and meanings are born in time and space, not ordained by the gods. Where male symbols have proliferated and dominated theology and Christianity, other symbols can be created, particularly those that honour the diversity and plurality of human experience and are inclusive in promoting human dignity and flourishing. Symbols are meant for human beings, not the other way round." [Arabome]



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entrenched biases that have been the particular focus of gender studies aimed at deconstructing their distorted ideological foundations. Symbols and meanings are born in time and space, not ordained by the gods. Where male symbols have proliferated and dominated theology and Christianity, other symbols can be created, particularly those that honour the diversity and plurality of human experience and are inclusive in promoting human dignity and flourishing. Symbols are meant for human beings, not the other way round.”


Symbolic meanings are often deeply entrenched in cultural and religious narratives, and they can be difficult to challenge and to change. They are read through authoritative interpretations which resist new readings and deconstructive approaches capable of breaking their power to restrain and control. That is why women are engaged in what Paul Ricoeur refers to as “the conflict of interpretations”, as individual narratives collide with wider religious narratives in an age of radical social change which has far-reaching implications for gendered identities and relationships.

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## END OF PART TWO

Please reflect on some of the foregoing, and consider the following questions:

- Can you think of biblical texts that have been used to oppress and silence women?
- Are there biblical texts that you find particularly liberating or inspiring with regard to the identities and roles of women?
- Which women in the Bible might serve as role models for women in modern society?
- You could use the discussion forum to share ideas and suggestions.



That brings us to the end of the topics covered in this week’s lecture.

Please reflect on some of the foregoing, and consider the following questions:

- Can you think of biblical texts that have been used to oppress and silence women?
- Are there biblical texts that you find particularly liberating or inspiring with regard to the identities and roles of women?
- Which women in the Bible might serve as role models or sources of inspiration for women in modern society?

You could use the discussion forum to share ideas and suggestions.

If you want to read more about gendered approaches to biblical interpretation, you will find some additional resources in the Moodle site for this week.


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**CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

Last week we considered the idea of “narrative identity” with reference to the stories that women tell about themselves and the world around them.

This week, we have explored some of the resources available to women in Christian history, theology and scripture as they seek to retrieve new meanings from ancient texts, and to identify unexplored possibilities for the emergence of changing paradigms with regard to female identity, representation and meaning.

You might like to go to the Moodle site and reflect on one of the scripture texts and questions there in the light of this week’s lecture.



To conclude:

Last week we considered the idea of “narrative identity” with reference to the stories that women tell about themselves and the world around them.

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**THANK YOU FOR LISTENING  
TO THIS WEEK’S LECTURE.**

*Mary Magdalene announcing  
the Resurrection to the  
Apostles, St Albans Psalter,  
1123*



Thank you for listening to this week’s lecture. There is in Moodle an essay which tells the story of how Mary Magdalene has been interpreted in Christian history which you might like to read.