

# From Elizabeth to Kate: One Old Girl to Another

Dear Kate

What's a girl to do — especially an old girl like me? Thanks to you we've been voting for 125 years. But change in the Catholic Church is glacial. It's fair to say we've made some progress over the past 25 years — women are involved in all Church bodies except Councils of Priests — but we still can't make decisions because decision-making is tied to Ordination not Baptism. And we can't give a "homily" because only the ordained can.

The American women's rights activist Susan B Anthony wrote to you: "You have the vote, but what have you done with it?" It's a question we Catholic women can ask today. Honestly, Kate, we've tried to effect change and not without cost. But, clearly, we haven't done enough.

The contrast between our experience of Church and our social reality is striking and challenging. Because of you, our history of political and social recognition means that women like me have a voice. We can make a difference and bring about radical change. And with Jacinda on the global stage showing how a working mother can lead a government committed to kindness and compassion — our own gospel values — the Church's sexism seems ridiculous! Jacinda is providing a role model for young women but I can't see the same from the Church.

Sadly, I've met old girls like me recently who've left the Church because they can't be bothered with the struggle any longer. But I'm here for the long haul — staying because I believe I've been called into the Church not out of it.

The problems are the same as those I outlined in 2006 when I addressed the NZ Bishops on the prophetic role of Women Religious in Aotearoa.

The Church continues to address Paul's first two areas of division of equal relationships — "between slave and free and between Jew and Gentile" (Gal: 3:28) — but refuses to address its own institutional sexism.

And our Church preaches a gospel of divinely-willed equality, liberation and justice in society, but maintains teachings and structures which guarantee women's inequality.

Although the Church admits that it finds no mandate in Scripture for women to be denied full access to the sacraments, it claims it has no power to change this man-made teaching.

And it teaches that, because women are human, they have full and equal human rights and responsibilities — politically, economically, socially, culturally and ecclesially — but insists upon women's "proper or special nature" that prevents women from realising these rights.

The Church circumscribes women's rights with male-imagined "special nature" but promotes men's full rights. And calls other institutions to treat women as full human beings but refuses to do this internally.

The Church says God is neither male nor female but prays liturgically to a God imaged overwhelmingly (indeed, almost idolatrously) as male. And teaches that God's merciful forgiveness is freely available sacramentally but mediated only through a male.

It promotes Eucharist as the sacrament of unity and nourishment but ritualises women's subordination so many women experience exclusion and hunger. It chooses to ignore that women's bodies do what Christ did — bleed, feed and give life to others — but dresses up clerics and institutionalise a ritual for men only.

The Church deems half of humanity incapable of imaging Christ in the Eucharist. This, despite women and men equally imaging Christ through martyrdom, re-presenting Christ's own love in Christian marriage, sharing in Christ's presence in the gathered community (women and men) and although we know that Christ baptises when anyone baptises (woman and man).

The Church affirms that a piece of bread represents Christ, actually becoming the Body of Christ, but cannot imagine a woman being a valid re-representation of Christ. And ignores the Gospel where Christ resides most clearly in poor and suffering women and men (eg, Mt 25:31-46, for example). Instead, it fixates on the presider of Eucharist being of the same sex as the human Jesus.

The Jesuit theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator recently said that "treating half the members of the body of Christ as outsiders or assigning them second-class status is a detritus of history and tradition unsuited for the 21st century and unfounded in the Gospel ... The exclusion of the majority in deciding the teachings and affairs of the body of Christ seems like a distortion and mutilation of this body."

I wonder how we can encourage young women to participate in the Church today? Teachers in Catholic schools are experienced in creating community in their schools, but how do young women feel they belong in the Church after they've left school?

I remember as a 10-year-old in Levin tidying the sacristy before school — picking up surplices, soutanes and collars strewn on the floor by altar boys. Even then I wondered why they couldn't do it themselves. Now, 25 years later, I heard 10-year-olds boys asking why girls couldn't serve at Mass. "Keep asking!" I exhorted them.

It seems to me that clericalism is a major cause of the Church's current problems. Embedded in all its structures and theology of priesthood is an entrenched sense of entitlement and privilege held by 1 per cent of the Church who have power and authority over the 99 per cent but have no accountability to us. I can scarcely believe it now, but as a child I sang: "Why do I tip my hat to a priest and why do I call him father? He's like God and how do I know? Holy Orders made him so." What theological nonsense! I feel a reprimand coming my way with a reminder about the "ontological change" that ordination is supposed to give. Considering the nightmare of sexual abuse revelations engulfing us, I prefer to believe that we are all created equally in the image of God.

I'm encouraged by Pope Francis's bold vision: "I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (Evangelii Gaudium par 27).

And in September Francis said to young people: "When we adults refuse to acknowledge some evident reality, you tell us frankly: 'Can't you see this?' Some of you who are a bit more forthright might even say to us: 'Don't you see that nobody is listening to you any more, or believes what you have to say?' ... We ourselves need to be converted, we have to realize that in order to stand by your side we need to change many situations that, in the end, put you off."

Kate, with your supporters you achieved a world first for women in Aotearoa, so perhaps old girls like me just keep on. Keep on urging the Church to realise the best version of itself. It's like Francis said: "It is beautiful to have dreams and to be able to fight for them. You have a right to dream ... Wherever there are dreams, there is joy; Jesus is always present." That's the crux for me, Kate — it is about realising the communion of the trinitarian God at the heart of our faith.

Keep encouraging us, dear Kate!

Elizabeth  
xx

125th Anniversary of  
Women's Suffrage  
19 Sept 2018

Kate Sheppard  
Suffragette



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