

# The Laywoman Project

---

Podcast with **Mary Henold** (20 January 2022).

Interviewed by **Allison Isidore**

Transcribed by **Allison Isidore**

Audio and transcript available at: <https://newbooksnetwork.com/category/religion-faith/catholic-studies>

## KEYWORDS

Catholic Feminism, Laywomen, Vatican II, National Council of Catholic Women, Theresians, Catholic Daughters of America, Daughters of Isabella

### Allison Isidore 00:00

Hello everybody, and welcome to [New Books in Catholic Studies](https://newbooksnetwork.com/category/religion-faith/catholic-studies), a podcast channel on the New Books Network. This channel and episode were created in collaboration with the [American Catholic Historical Association](#), a conference of scholars, archivists, and teachers of Catholic studies. My name is Allison Isidore, and I'm a host of the channel. Today we'll be talking to [Mary Henold](#), who is currently a Professor of History at Roanoke College. Mary Henold is the author of [The Laywoman Project Remaking Catholic Womanhood in the Vatican II Era](#), published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2020. The book won first place, in the [2021 Catholic Press Association Book Award in Gender Issues](#). In this thoroughly researched book, Mary looks at an alternative women's history of the American Catholic church in the Vatican II era. By analyzing laywomen's groups that have been brushed aside as anti-feminists we see a much more complex picture of feminist history where these laywomen found a gray area in which they questioned gender identity and gender roles within the hierarchy of the Catholic church during this era of women's rights. Mary, welcome to the show.

### MH 01:21

Thank you so much. It's my pleasure to be here.

### AI 01:23

I was wondering if you could, you know, start us off with telling us a bit about yourself.

### MH 01:28

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.0, 24 January 2022

---

So, I work in American history, generally, I teach at Roanoke College, as you mentioned, which is in southwest Virginia, and the Appalachian Mountains and the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's a small liberal arts college, so we have about 2000 students or less, but depending on the year. So, although I work in Catholic Studies, I don't actually teach Catholic Studies. I teach American history more broadly. I'm the modern Americanist at Roanoke College so I teach American history survey, but I also teach us women's history here. So, I'm the odd Catholic Studies person who does not teach in Catholic Studies. Which makes me quite unusual. So, my graduate work was much more heavily tilted toward US women's history and US History more generally. So, I did my graduate work at the University of Rochester, under Lynn Gordon and I mostly focused on US women's history there, but I fell in love with doing Catholic history. So much so that I was actually recalling this with a student just this week that it didn't feel like work. Like I had to think about it for a second and think like, Can I do this, it doesn't feel like work. I love it too much. It feels so natural to be pursuing this field. But I had no expectation when I entered graduate school that I would pursue Catholic studies, I might have gone somewhere else, but it was, in the end the right place to go. And I was it made perfect sense. In the end to be pursuing my Catholic studies work from the framework of [Women's Studies](#) and [Feminist studies](#). So, my first large project was my dissertation. And that was a history of the Catholic feminist movement in America. So, from there, I did a two-year stint a postdoc at Valparaiso University. And then I ended up at Roanoke College.

### AI 03:22

Yeah, and that kind of leads us into our next question, diving in to how you found this project. What made looking at these laywomen and really these laywomen organizations and periodicals that you look at what attracted you to them? What sparked your interest?

### MH 03:39

Well, it really is very much related to the [first book](#). So, as I mentioned, my first very long project was on the history of the Catholic feminist movement. And that was my dissertation. And it turned into my first book, and I spent a good eight years working on that project. And what I was focusing on, there was a very specific group of women and a very specific set of sources; and those were self-identified Catholic feminists. But as I was working on them, there was a context that these women were working in, that I was investigating as I was looking at their own writings. So, you could see that the world that they were swimming in, if you looked at the Catholic periodicals, which I spent a lot of time in, you could see this vast amount of writing that was going on about Catholic womanhood at the same time, that was not necessarily feminist. So, I spent a lot of time pulling the feminist work out of that larger body of work in the Catholic periodicals. So that was a lot of where I spent my attention and the first few years that I was working on my dissertation. So that was always in the back of my mind that all of those sources were there. So that's one reason that I returned to it.

**MH 04:56**

But I really was very fascinated and will always been fascinated by laywomen. So, the Catholic feminist project really looked at both laywomen and women religious together, because they — that's what Catholic feminism is. It's both of them together. But I always wanted to return to a project that looks solely at laywomen, in part because there are a lot of historians working on women religious, there aren't enough historians working on laywomen. And by the numbers, there are more laywomen than women religious. And we need more people to be working on them, we don't know enough about lay women and their stories. Partly they didn't keep archives as well as women religious did. And so, we don't have as good of access to their materials, obviously. So, I had this fascination with women in the pew. And I wanted to know what they were doing. So, there's that at the same time.

**MH 05:56**

So, when it came time to work on a new project, I, as historians often are, I was at a loss about what I should do. And, I actually went to Washington, DC to work on a project on [Leonard Bernstein's Mass](#). And so, I was which I've always been fascinated by, that's another story. But I went to the National Archives to get into Leonard Bernstein's papers, which, who, you know, who wouldn't want to do that? But I got there, and I realized that that project wasn't going to work. I think every historian has had this happen, you get into the archives, and you had an idea, and you realize within a day or so like, there's not enough here for what I want to do. I'm sure for someone it's going to work. But for me, it wasn't. And I had a whole week in DC. And so, I said, you know what, I'm, I'll just go to Catholic University to the archives and see what's see what's there. And so, I called her and said, can I come and I sat down, and I said, you know, what, just show me the [NCCW, the National Council of Catholic Women](#) show me something in the NCCW. And I think I'll have to ask somebody, but I think they brought out the publication's their main publication in 1965. And I sat there and within an hour, I knew what the next book was. Because it was astonishing. What I was seeing, I had no idea. They were these women, who I had been led to believe, or extremely conservative, all only followed the rules of Bishops, only interested in doing what they were told. Within an hour, I had seen that they were seriously flirting with feminism. And as I looked more, really in a window from about 1965 to 1971, they were seriously considering feminist ideas and those ideas change them. And that became my research question. Why was this going on? And why did I not know about it? And that's, that's how it started.

**AI 07:55**

Yeah, I mean, it was really interesting. And specifically, you look at, these four organizations, the National Council of Catholic Women, the [Theresians](#), [Catholic Daughters of America](#) and [Daughters of Isabella](#). And they're really interesting in the sense that they all are looking at this very changing

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.0, 24 January 2022

---

time for all of them. You know, it's a drastic change with the [Vatican II Council](#). And I was wondering if it was challenging to narrow down your research groups to these four groups, or what was your process and picking them?

### **MH 08:36**

Some of them were easy to choose. I chose NCCW very quickly, as I just mentioned. Catholic Daughters of America and Daughters of Isabella came as a pair. So, there's a chapter in the book that I look at the two of those together. They are for one of a better word, fraternal organizations. They are like the [Knights of Columbus](#), they're not affiliated with the Knights of Columbus, but they're very like the Knights of Columbus. If you take the NCCW, the CDA, and the D of I together, these are the largest organizations for Catholic women in this time period in the United States. So, they represent together millions of Catholic women, particularly the NCCW. So, they are the most representative and the most powerful organizations in the United States at this time, so those were obvious choices. They also are in a position where they are educating women about the changes of Vatican II. And I think that has been missed in the historiography. So, these organizations took on the responsibility of passing on information to their membership and developing basically pedagogical materials for women to help them understand the transition after the council. And so that became really fascinating to figure out not only how are they teaching about Vatican II, but how are they helping women understand new interpretations of womanhood. So, we have women teaching other women how to think about themselves in this time period. And because these organizations had such a reach, and because they were so powerful, it made sense to start with them.

### **MH 10:11**

The other reason to pick them is because their archives are vast, and, frankly, almost untouched in this time period. So, there are plenty of people who have worked on them in an earlier time period, particularly in the NCCW. In the progressive era, there are a lot of people who have worked on them earlier. Not many people have worked on them in the 60s and 70s. Some people in the 50s, but not later, very few people at all have worked in the CDA, or the D of I, they have some sort of in-house histories. They have a few dissertations have been written. But very few historians have tackled these groups. And if anybody's looking for a dissertation topic, there, there's just enormous amounts of resources available for these groups. The Theresians, this was serendipity, I had never heard of them. This is a tiny group, they never had more than I think 7,000 members, it's very small. I found them because I went to an archive which has been fruitful for me in the past. It's the [Women in Leadership archive at Loyola, Chicago](#), which is a wonderful resource, particularly for historians of Catholic women's history. And I was looking through their source list. And they had an organization called the Theresians, they have all their papers there. And it was an organization founded in 1962. And that caught my attention. So, what kind of

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.0, 24 January 2022

---

women's organization was founded in 1962? At the start of the council, so when I went to the archive, I said, you know, what is this show me that I want to know what this is. And it was so fascinating. So, the Thesians, as I think we'll talk about in a minute, just became emblematic, right? It was almost just a metaphor for everything that was happening in the organization. There were others that I wanted, that I couldn't get, for example, I really wanted [The Ladies Auxiliary of the Knights of Peter Claver](#), which is the largest fraternal order for African American Catholic women. I couldn't get it, their archives were closed to researchers, so I couldn't get those materials. So, there were other groups that I wanted to see, but I couldn't. But I took what I could get. So, I had to be selective, I guess, as well as pragmatic. So, it was not meant to have complete coverage, I guess I would say.

**AI 12:30**

Right, yeah. I can only imagine how difficult you know, you wrote this — it was published in 2020. Right at the start of the, you know, pandemic, I can't even imagine if you were continuing to work on it through the pandemic, how your resources might have shrunk, because all the archives shut down.

**MH 12:47**

Yeah, it would have been nearly impossible. I wouldn't say that my timing was excellent. Having a book released in February of 2020. But at least it was finished before the pandemic started.

**AI 12:59**

Exactly. But you know, like you just mentioned, you know, we're going to jump into the Thesians. Now, you're discussing in chapter one. And in the prologue, this vocational crisis that's affecting the Catholic Church, and how mothers were often framed as being selfish when suggesting their children look outside life of serving God. And like you said, the, you know, Thesians and the formation of the Thesians of America was a response to this crisis in a certain way in 1962, can you tell us about this crisis and the response from the Catholic Church?

**MH 13:45**

The prologue I designed, it just kind of set the scene for how a woman in the pew might think about gender or had been trained to think about gender at the late 1950s or early 1960s. And I did that by looking again at Catholic periodicals, which are just so rich continue to go back to them, in part because the sources that we have about Catholic lay women tend to be thin. And so, I returned to Catholic periodicals because this is where people wrote about Catholic laywomen. This is what Catholic laywomen read and got ideas about themselves. This is often where Catholic would laywomen were published. And so, this is a resource that we can use about Catholic laywomen. So, one of the things I did was I compiled what we can call what I call vocation crisis

literature. So, there was a time period starting in about 1957 when there was a perceived vocation crisis. And I kind of joke in the book, that we would not consider this a vocation crisis today, but the vocations were not keeping up with the demographic shifts of the time. Right. So, vocations were not increasing at the rate that they needed to keep up with the [baby boom](#). And so, there was a great hang right hand wringing over this. So, there was a spike in articles in the Catholic periodicals about the need for vocations. And they would continually blame the parents, about Catholic lay people for not producing enough vocations out of their houses. And this blame tended to fall particularly on the mothers. And so Catholic laywomen would pick up these magazines, and they would hear over and over again, that it was their fault, that their children were not becoming priests and nuns. We also have periodicals in here, like the homiletic reviews and things like this. And the priests were being told that they needed to give homilies telling the lay people that it was their fault. So, what we learned from this is that we have gender constructions being set up, that tell the laywomen, that their sense of themselves, their sense of their spirituality is always going to be inferior, it must be inferior to the women religious and certainly, to the priest. But this is how they were to think of themselves. And they were not to think of themselves as having a vocation. That marriage was not considered to for them a vocation. And if it was, it was to be inferior that only a woman religious had a calling. And not only to not have that vocation was inferior but do deny such a vocation was selfish and it was working against the needs of the church.

**MH 16:31**

So, this shows up in the Catholic periodicals, but it shows up elsewhere as well, because I found a letter in the NCCW archives from Bishop because all of the women's organizations at this time were also asked to promote vocations. So, you see bits of this in the different collections. But I found a letter from bishop to the NCCW, saying that they are targeting laywomen teachers, because they in particular, were blamed for being selfish for not becoming nuns themselves in the first place. And then they were blamed again for wanting to be paid for their work. So, the Bishop claimed that these laywomen teachers were syncing local school districts, the Catholic school districts, it was their fault that the Catholic school districts were going broke, because they had to pay these late teachers instead of them becoming nuns in the first place so they wouldn't have to pay. So, this is how laywomen were treated in the press.

**MH 17:32**

So, this kind of sets up the chapter on the Theresians, which is the first chapter in the book, where we get to see how laywomen's organization thought about vocation. I just I loved, I loved reading about the Theresians so much. This organization was founded by priests Elwood Voss, it was founded out in Colorado, I believe, if I'm remembering correctly, and the organization was designed to be laywomen praying and organizing to promote the vocations of women religious. That was their entire task. So, they were to organize and pray to promote the vocations of young

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.0, 24 January 2022

---

women into religious orders. So, they were not only to organize meetings, and in order to make this happen, they put panels together in high schools, to have speakers come in to promote vocations. There were chapters organized at high schools — Catholic high schools — but every woman who was at region was to do a Holy Hour, once a week where she was to pray for vocations. They set up leisure activities for the sisters, where laywomen and sisters could interact. And that in fact, begins to change culture. So, the interaction of lay women and women religious, which was frowned upon in the past begins to change the culture for these women. So, as we move through the 1960s, toward the end of the 1960s, it's the women religious themselves who begin to be influenced by the theology of Vatican two, and particularly by the writings of the new nuns, toward the back end of the 1960s, who begin to say, you know what, this doesn't sound right to us anymore. We don't actually want you to be doing this. We don't want these laywomen to be spending all this energy and all this prayer, to promoting vocations for other people. And they teach the laywomen to think of their own vocation.

### **MH 19:40**

And so, we get all sorts of writing coming out of the Theresians, starting to say, you know, what laywomen actually have vocations too, and let's begin to think about what that might be. So, and I want to make clear the Theresians are not a feminist organization. At this point, they don't actually become a feminist organization until the mid 1970s. They talk about feminism a little bit, but they're actually kind of anti-feminists at the cusp of the 1970s, which is kind of interesting. But what they are doing is talking about the laywoman project, which is a reevaluation of what Catholic womanhood is. They are very influenced by everything that's in the air with feminism in the country, which is to ask questions about everything they've been taught to believe. And that's the good that came out of it for is to say, you know, what, it doesn't make sense for us to be talking this way anymore. And so, in 1969, they completely changed the entire purpose of their organization, they actually change their bylaws, and they say this is — we are not going to exist for this purpose anymore. And we are now going to promote the vocation of every woman everywhere, no matter who she is, or what she does. So just in a very short span of time, these Catholic women learn to think about themselves in a completely different way.

### **AI 21:04**

And that kind of gets me into our next question, you know, these groups are starting to help women really question, you know, what does it mean to be a Catholic woman? What's their purpose, and what their purpose is within the church at this time? And so, they start to question these contradictions that are seeing from priests, and I was wondering if you can talk about this contradiction between what they're hearing from priests and what they're seeing from the Vatican, II Council papers being released.

**MH 21:42**

So just to back up a little bit, I want to talk a little bit about the title of the book, and what it means. So, the title really kind of has a double meaning in that this was a project I look I've worked on for a really long time, this is probably this book is about 10 years in the making. And that's really what it was, this is my laywoman project, right? This is my laywoman project. But the title really refers to a deluge of writing that took place in a in about a 15-year period from 1960 to 1975. Were Catholic women, were reevaluating what it meant to be a Catholic woman. There was a project that Catholic women undertook in America in this 15-year period. And so, I came to call it the laywoman project. So, the subject of my first book actually is also about the laywoman project, Catholic feminism was part of that project. It's a particular wing of that project. The reason I undertook the second book was because I came to understand that there wasn't a whole another set of women who were also engaged in that project. It was not limited to women who were self-identified as feminists. And that was the big revelation for me, that I didn't quite understand when I was working on the first book. That the conversation was much bigger than the women who identified as feminists, that there were women and men, too, who were preoccupied with the question of gender for about 15 years. And so that is reflected in so many different places, but in particular, in the Catholic periodicals, but also in these organizations, you can see that they just can't get away from the question. All of this becomes problematic around the question of Vatican II. So, one of the central contradictions that the women are trying to puzzle out, and it's a reason that the laywoman project is being undertaken in the first place, is that there's a central contradiction at the heart of Vatican II for women.

**MH 23:54**

And it is not stated outright, and we need to state it outright, and we need to state it outright as historians. And it's, it's kind of obvious, and it was obvious to them. So, the problem is that women were classified as laymen. They consider that to be a gender-neutral term. Women understood that to be a gender-neutral term. So, whenever the council and people interpreted the council, talked about layman, women believed that they were included in that. And so, when they heard that the council transformed the life of laymen, they thought they were included in that. So as laymen, they were being called to a new life in the church and a new life in Christ. They were being called to adulthood in the church, they were being called to new forms of leadership, right? They were being called to a new level of engagement. And they believed that to be true, and they wanted that to be true, but at the same time It was very clear that the people who were the writers of the documents of Vatican II, the people who were disseminating information about Vatican II, did not believe that Vatican II changed gender at all. There is very little indication that Vatican II was intended to shift gender roles. And it was made quite clear quite clearly that people who understood Vatican II be that way were wrong. Because the feminists who wanted Vatican II to be that way, you know, to who wanted to interpret Vatican II, as releasing them from [essentialism](#)



and [complementarity](#), were quickly told that that was not the case. So, you have women now caught in this contradiction, because on one hand, they were being told that they were part of laymen and lay people who were now being called to a new role, but they were also being told that as Catholic women, they needed to stay in a traditional role that was going to anchor the Church, because not everything about the Church could change. Because if everything about the Church change, then everything would spin under out of control. So, something had to stay the same. And Catholic women were expected to hold on the board, to some extent. So how could they do both things? And that's what they were trying to puzzle out. Because nobody wrote, right? Nobody wrote the doctrine on women in the modern world that was not a document. And so how were they — how were they to make sense of it. That's what's going on. That's what they're spending 15 years doing. And because they were getting so many mixed messages, they decided to puzzle it out for themselves. They asked the questions, and they answered them. And that's what I love about it.

**AI 26:58**

Yeah, it's, it's so fascinating seeing this discourse that's happening between these women and these groups, on the personal level, but also on the national level as well. And it's not just laywomen asking these questions. Also, it's also women religious who are asking these questions. And what I think my favorite chapter out of the entire book is, you know, chapter two, which is aptly called Catholic (non)feminism. And, you know, you know, that Catholic feminists like [Sister Margaret Allen Traxler](#), quote, "you're either on the side of the angels, or you're either on the side of [Phyllis Schlafly](#), there was no in between." end quote. But what that chapter does so well is it shows that, no, there's this gray area, there is this middle ground between, you know, angels and Phyllis Schlafly, for these laywomen to find a voice. Can you tell our listeners about this gray area that these women are involved in?

**MH 28:12**

Yeah, I would love to. So, this chapter is there's a lot happening here, where I'm doing a little bit more work in feminist historiography that the Catholic studies folks may not be as interested in. But it was something that I wanted to do. When you work in the history of feminism, what you find is that there's a great deal of policing going on — policing of boundaries. So, you spend historian spend so much time cataloguing, right? Who is a feminist who can be considered a feminist? What is a radical feminist — everyone has to be put into a category. And the boundaries are readily policed. And that has been going on for a very long time. So, feminists themselves have always done it. And particularly the category of who can be considered radical and who cannot be considered a radical. When I first started my work on Catholic feminists, I got a lot of pushbacks, like how could you even consider these women feminists at all? How could there be such a thing as a radical Catholic feminist? Just because I mean, the fact that they're Catholic at all means that can't be radical. I mean, it just, you just go around in circles. So, feminist historiography is really

breaking wide open, like in the past 10 years, so much of that now has broken down and new questions have begun to be asked, where we're moving away from the labels. So, we can start to ask questions now, in a lot of areas. If women did not call themselves feminists, if women did not give themselves the label of feminist, does that mean they had no engagement with feminism? Well, no. Because we're starting to see that women had engagement with feminism, they had engagement with ideas about gender. And if we only studied the women who were self-identified, we miss out on all of not only activity that was happening in the feminist movement, or just outside of the feminist movement, we miss all of this information about gender and the transformation about people's ideas about gender.

**MH 30:26**

So, what's been happening in the last 10 years or so is we're beginning to study particularly organizational women, women and professional organizations, women in religious organizations who did not choose to self-identify as feminists, but who in this time period in particular, were really wrestling with the same kind of questions that they were wrestling with in the NCCW around this time. And they were changing. They were changing, whether they call themselves feminists or not. And I will say, I have no interest in going around sticking labels on people. So, the purpose of this chapter is not to say the women at the NCCW are secret feminists running around, that does not interest me at all. What does interest me is the kind of conversations just as you were saying, it's the discourse. I'm really interested in what they were talking about. And like I said a little earlier when I really got into what was happening in NCCW I was shocked. I was shocked. Because what I knew about the NCCW I knew from the Catholic feminists themselves, they had — they love to talk about the NCCW because they found them annoying. They and they did not mince words about this. They thought they were backward. Traxler actually called them Neanderthal at one point. They really found them annoying because they managed to get on every Commission on Women, right? Because the bishops love to put these women on Commission's and wouldn't put the feminists on there. And so, they had more power. And they were moderates. But it turns out these moderates, as soon as I got into the papers I recognized because this — these are the waters that I swam in. So, I recognized the same authors, the same publications, the same ideas that the Catholic feminists were talking about, the NCCW women were talking about as well. They had openly feminist authors in their publications, they had debates going on about abortion. You wouldn't believe it, about abortion, in their articles, fascinating. They had cover articles on feminist liturgy, in their publications. The NCCW in the early 1970s! I blew me away. So unsuspected there was a window where they really thought about these things. Now, they were conflicted. If you look at the board minutes, they had more conservative folks on there, they have more liberal folks on there. So, it's hard to say for sure, their membership was also conflicted, they would sometimes push them further than they wanted to go. But it was always fascinating. To me, that gray area where they were playing with ideas. And I think they do move; they really do move

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.0, 24 January 2022

---

past the knee jerk essentialism that was so prevalent in their publications up till about 1964. Right, they were they would always go to complementarity, always go to essentialism. And that really starts to fade away.

### AI 33:33

And I just love that chapter so much because it definitely changes the discourse, especially around feminist history, where it is seen as this black and white type of mentality where it's either your Catholic feminist like the sisters or your Phyllis Schlafly, there's no in between. And I've always wondered, I was like, could there have been an in between and your book, I think does that extremely well, demonstrating that, yes, just look at the NCCW. And kind of getting into the periodicals. Now, what I found really interesting was that you discovered that the focus on changing gender roles and gender identity of married Catholics was being discussed more in periodicals like *Marriage* magazine, but these woman organizations such as the NCCW weren't having these conversations. Can you tell us about these articles and how they were challenging these traditional gender roles and gender identity of married Catholics?

### MH 34:42

So, there is one chapter in the book that stands out as different. I chose to study a periodical it's called *Marriage* magazine. I had run across it in my first book, and the articles in it always were interesting to me. And so, I chose to return to it and the reason is, as you say, personal issues, family issues, marital issues around gender do not typically show up in the organizations. So, in the organizations in their what they leave behind, they tend to talk about the church, women's relationship to the church, they talk about leadership, they talk about service, they talk about sort of questions of identity that are related to women in the church. They do not talk about Catholic women's identity and the family. I don't know if that was just taboo, or if it for the most part didn't come up. So, I went to *Marriage* magazine to see if I could puzzle some of that out. And it turns out, this is a magazine if you're unfamiliar with it, that was produced by the Benedictines out of Meinrad Abbey, St. Meinrad Abbey, and it ran from the late 50s through the late 1970s. It was edited by men, but there was a community of people around this magazine that included many women, it had a lot of women authors, and there were a lot of women who would write in, and it certainly had had a heavy female readership. So, there were a lot of laywomen involved in this community.

### MH 36:09

So, *Marriage*, particularly in the early years that I was looking at, it was very, very, very heavily involved in the debate over the rhythm method, and birth control. And so, questions about sexuality make a large appearance there, although I don't tend to talk about that much in this chapter that ends pretty starkly in 1964, they just decided they're not gonna talk about anymore.

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.0, 24 January 2022

---

And so, I decided I'm going to do stuff after that. And I will add here, the reason the book took me so long is this chapter. This chapter took me three years.

### **AI 36:44**

Oh, wow.

### **MH 36:45**

I'm just gonna lay that out here. I think I read almost 600 articles for this chapter. And that's what took so long with processing that many articles, I did a full gender analysis of about 10 years of this periodical. And that's why it took so long, I just got so fascinated by what was happening. And I was trying to figure out how Catholic women and viewed themselves and how that changed over time and how they were seen in the magazine. So, what I came up with was a particularly a few different areas where I saw intensive change. And they were issues that not only that the Catholic women's organizations didn't talk about, but that the Catholic feminists didn't talk about. And that was fascinating to me too. The magazine talks about male headship in the family. This was an issue that did not come up with the Catholic feminists. They also talk about working women and working mothers, that too, is an issue that didn't come up with the Catholic feminist. Both of those — oh, and certainly women's sexuality and women's sexual pleasure that did not come (laughs) with the Catholic feminist. And I think those three issues don't come up in part because the Catholic feminist movement is skewed so heavily toward women religious. And that explains some of it. But also, because the lay women in the Catholic feminist movement just took these as a given. Right? They never questioned it. They assumed marriage equality, they assumed working women, they assumed women's sexual pressure, like these are things they just like da, like they didn't think they had to debate. And so, I never even thought about it. But these questions were being debated, and hotly too. So, for a 10-year period, we see Catholic laymen and laywomen and to some extent, clergy, really having strong debates over these questions. And they're very revealing because we see too, just in the NCCW, you see change over time, as we move away from gender essentialism, we're moving — start to move away from assumed complementarity. And they are really beginning to reveal how they want to change sense of Catholic womanhood.

### **MH 38:59**

And you can see that in the conversation —which I had a lot of fun with— over women's sexuality and sexual pleasure. So, I had no idea I would see so many questions — so many articles about female orgasm and a Catholic magazine. I'm not sure anyone, whatever I've suspected that, and I'll throw it as an aside, I don't know if anyone was there. But a couple years ago, I gave a talk called Sex Catholic Style at the ACHA. And somebody told me afterwards that they think it made history because was the first time that anyone had used the word orgasm in a talk at the ACHA (laughs), which I was extremely excited about, that I had broken that barrier. But what we find in the

periodical is that Catholic women were getting tired of their sexuality being used as evidence for complementarity. So, all of these overflowing articles are being written about male at — men being active and women being passive in the act of sex and that this was evidence for complementarity, right? And how, what a beautiful thing, this was (laughs) all the time in this very flowery language. And the women began to respond and just speak of their sexuality and much more practical language and say, this is ridiculous, right? This is — we are not passive receivers. This is not what our orgasm means (laughs). This is this is ridiculous. Please stop talking about us.

**AI 40:31**

Right.

**MH 40:31**

So that's, that's one of those fun things that came out of that research.

**AI 40:35**

I mean, starting to wrap things up. Now. We're almost out of time. You know, at the end of your book, you're discussing the legacy of the laywoman's project, and how, in some ways history's repeating itself with current church discourse, right? And what do you want our listeners, and you know, readers of this book, you know, be the takeaway from the laywoman's project?

**MH 41:01**

There are a couple of takeaways. The first point that I make in the book is about, really the beauty and the importance of lay women's organizations, they, I'm not sure that we have the context of return to them in the form that they took. But we should not forget that they existed. And we shouldn't stereotype the women who led them and who belonged to them. They were a resource for laywomen, for companionship, for leadership for opportunity for a century, for laywomen. And I think that's really important. And they did good work. And they did good work in sustaining the church, and educating women, and giving them forum. So that's one thing. A second point that I make in the book is that I find it frustrating when the Church, the institutional church, of which I am still an active member. When it occasionally wants to throw a sock at laywomen. And it says something along the lines of, we need to explore what laywoman is, we need to figure out the genius of laywomen, right, we need to study laywomen. And I find this extraordinarily frustrating, because what the book shows is that this work had been done. And it was done by laywomen themselves. And it was laywomen who perpetually asked these questions, and who answered these questions, but it's the church who does not listen, asked and answered. Is what I want to say. That's what I find frustrating. And that would be the takeaway. These questions have already been asked and answered, it is the institutional church that chose not to pay attention. And so, we

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.0, 24 January 2022

---

don't need to reinvent the wheel. We need to go back and pay attention to our history. So yes, that's what I say.

### **AI 43:00**

I think that's a that's such a great takeaway for books like this. And so, my last question is, what projects are you currently working on? Are there any lingering questions that remain from your work on The Laywoman's Project that you're pursuing? Or has your work taken a new direction?

### **MH 43:20**

My work has taken a very new direction, although it's still, I'm still always fascinated by laywomen. When I finished this last book, and it came out, of course, we were in the middle of lockdown. And so, I found myself with no research agenda and no sources. So, I turned to the only thing I had available to me, which were digitized Catholic newspapers, and I began working in a periodical called [The Catholic Transcript](#), which is a newspaper from the Diocese of Hartford, Connecticut, in the 1920s. So, I have moved into a new time period. And what I am looking at is the daily Catholic activities of Catholic lay women as transcribed in the Catholic transcript. So, what we are getting into is minutiae. I am mining minutiae. And it sounds crazy. But what I'm looking at is again, Organization of Women, because mostly these are women and women's organizations, but I'm looking at their meetings and their card parties and their leisure activities and their service activities, and you know, the cakes that they made and the funerals that they sang, and every time they got elected to an office, and all of that is recorded in the paper, and I'm mapping that out and I'm trying to see what that tells me. So, I'm moving into a new area.

### **AI 44:45**

Yeah, and that sounds that just sounds so fascinating. I can't wait to hear more and read more about it.

### **MH 44:52**

Well, I can't wait to see where it takes.

### **AI 44:55**

Well, thank you, Mary for joining us. This has been New Books in Catholic Studies, a New Books Network podcast

### **MH 45:03**

Thank you so much for having me.

---

Citation Info:

Isidore, Allison 2021. "The Laywoman Project", New Books Network: New Books in Catholic Studies. Podcast Transcript. 24 January 2022. Transcribed by Allison Isidore. Version 1.0 24 January 2022. Available at:  
<https://newbooksnetwork.com/category/religion-faith/catholic-studies>