

ROOT & BRANCH  
COMMUNITY

'PAPABILE' WOMEN

A NEW CONVERSATION ABOUT LEADERSHIP.

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**Root & Branch** invite you to share our vision of creating a new leadership dynamic in our Church, rooted in equality, inclusion and justice, where people's lived experiences are honoured and valued.

As a new leader for the Roman Catholic Church is chosen by 135 men, many of them close to 80 years old, we reflect deeply on what sort of leadership and collaboration a Christian community truly needs. An autocratic monarchy is not the answer.

Can any one person supply the leadership that the 21st century Roman Catholic Church requires? Surely, we need a variety of skills and gifts used collaboratively for the good of all and of the world.

There are multitudes of women in the Catholic Church who are Spirit-led and have the gifts that are needed, yet who are barred from any governance of the institutional Church whatsoever, by its misogynistic laws.

Here Root & Branch offer you a snapshot from amongst our myriad unsung women leaders, with apologies to the hundreds we cannot include, whose pastoral, theological, emotional, therapeutic and management talents make them indeed, *Papabile*.

**'Papabile' women within a transformed leadership offer**

clear and inclusive vision

wisdom and self-belief.

expertise in a variety of academic specialisms.

pastoral, liturgical and ministerial skills.

emotional intelligence and deep listening.

strong responsibility and accountability to those they serve.

action to bring about equality and social justice.

determination to challenge power abuse and transform structure and culture.

## MAKING HER MARK ARE...

### **Kochurani Abraham – India**



#### **Feminist theologian, gender researcher and activist from India**

Kochurani holds her Licentiate in Systematic Theology and PhD in feminist theology. She is a former national convener of the Indian Christian Women's Movement (ICWM).

She is a much-loved founder member of 'Sisters in Solidarity', which supports women survivors of clergy sexual abuse in India. She is a regular contributor to journals and magazines that focus on justice and liberation in the Church and in the wider society.

### **Nathalie Becquart - Vatican City**



#### **Appointed by Pope Francis in 2021 as Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops and as member of the Dicastery for Communication.**

A French Catholic religious sister, Nathalie is a member of the Institut La Xavière Missionnaire de Christ Jésus. She studied at the Jesuit Faculty of Centre Sèvres in Paris and specialised in ecclesiology with research on synodality at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.

In 2021, Pope Francis appointed her Undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops and as member of the Dicastery for Communication.

Nathalie has a long-standing involvement in youth ministry and is a former Director of the National Service for the Evangelization of Youth and Vocations of the French Bishops' Conference from 2012 to 2018. She brings Ignatian spirituality and a keen sense of mission and discernment to all she does. "There is no synodality without spirituality because synodality places at its centre the fact of walking together with Christ and listening to the Holy Spirit." (NB)

### **Simone Brambilla - Vatican City**



**Simone was appointed by Pope Francis as the first female secretary of the Dicastery, October 2023, taking part in the 2023 Synod of Bishops. She received an invitation to participate in the Conclave to replace Pope Francis, 2025, which was hastily rescinded.**

A former nurse, Simone entered the Institute of the Missionary Sisters of Consolata in 1988, making her first religious profession in 1991.

Simone holds a Licentiate in Psychology from the Institute of Psychology of the Pontifical Gregorian University in 1998. A former General Councilor and Superior General of

the women's branch of the Consolata Missionaries (2011 to 2016; 2017 to 2023), in July 2019 she became one of the seven first women members of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

On December 16, 2024, she and María Lía Zervino, former president of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, became the first women appointed to the 16th Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod. In January 2025, she was appointed first female Prefect in the Vatican following Pope Francis' decision to allow women and laity to hold positions within the Roman Curia.

### **Joan Chittister – USA**



**Joan is one of the most influential religious and social leaders of our time. As an executive director of Benetvision, and animator of the online movement, Monasteries of the Heart, she is known and loved by millions and is a highly sought-after international speaker.**

Joan's Doctorate in Communications underlies her passionate advocacy for peace, human rights, women's issues, and monastic and church renewal.

She is a best-selling author of more than 60 books, hundreds of articles, and online column for the National Catholic Reporter.

'The Time is Now' (Penguin Random House), is her most recently published exhortation for a Vatican II spirituality. A former Prioress of her community, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania and a former President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and President of the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses, we can trace her independent thought and powerful analyses back to when she and her community stood up to the Vatican decades ago. That power has turbocharged her life and work.



### **Ilia Delio – USA**

**A Franciscan Sister of Washington, DC, Ilia is seen by many as the natural successor to the great Teilhard de Chardin.**

A theologian specializing in science and religion, with interests in evolution, physics, and neuroscience and the import of these for theology, Ilia holds the Josephine C. Connelly Endowed Chair in Theology at Villanova University.

As Co-author of "Care for Creation", she won two Catholic Press Book Awards in 2009: first place for social concerns and second place in spirituality.

"The Emergent Christ" won third-place Catholic Press Book Award in 2011 for the area of Science and Religion.

"The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love" (Orbis, 2013), received the 2014 Silver Nautilus Book Award and third-place Catholic Press Association Award for Faith and Science.

She has received two honorary doctorates, St Francis University (2015); Sacred Heart University (2020). She is a highly acclaimed and much sought-after speaker.



### **Miriam Duignan - UK**

**Executive Director of the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research from 2024, Miriam is in demand as a visionary speaker and reminds us that 'exposing lies about women's ministry and challenging sexist teaching is not lobbying, it is our duty.'**

She coordinates leading academics worldwide to collaborate on reports tackling the Church's 'officially uncomfortable, difficult, and disputed areas'. With a professional background in communications, she has, for the last 15 years, been an inspiring and creative campaigner for justice in the Catholic Church.

She serves on the leadership team for Women's Ordination Worldwide, communicating fluently internationally. In 2021, she was a contributing author to Crisis and Challenge in the Roman Catholic Church: Perspectives on Decline and Reformation, and recently presented a widely-signed petition to Pope Francis; Ordained Diaconate for Women.



### **Rosemary Ganley CNWE – Canada**

**Recently awarded her country’s highest honour, the Order of Canada, Rosemary also holds the 150th Anniversary Medal from the Government of Canada (1992) and an Honorary Doctorate in Laws, Trent University (2022).**

A Canadian educator, journalist, and activist, Rosemary Co-founded the Jamaican Self-Help organization in Peterborough, Ontario, in the late 1970s, to provide aid in Jamaican communities.

Appointed representative for Canadian women at the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, she also appeared at the Beijing Plus Five Review in 2000 in New York.

She was co-editor of the independent Catholic New Times from 2001 to 2006, and a well-known workshop leader on women’s issues and justice across cultural boundaries. She served on the G7’s council on issues of gender equality worldwide.

Rosemary’s published books include “Jamaica Journal: The Story Of A Grassroots Canadian Aid Organization” (2016); “Positive Community” (2018) in “Gleanings” (2019); “Groundings” (2021).

### **Nontando Hadebe - South Africa**



**Nontando believes that no institution, including the Church, can ignore or violate human rights.**

A lay woman theologian based in Johannesburg, and presently International Coordinator of Side-by-Side Interfaith movement for Gender Justice as well as gender consultant for Bread For the World, Nontando is a research fellow University of Free State and a presenter at Radio Veritas.

She is a member of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and Catholic Women Speak/Preach.

She brings her great warmth, common-sense and academic spirit of enquiry to all that she does and is a much-welcomed speaker in reform circles of the Catholic Church.



**Diana L Hayes - USA**

**As the first African American woman to receive the Pontifical Doctor of Sacred Theology degree (S.T.D.) from the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium), Diana is Professor of Systematic Theology, Department of Theology at Georgetown.**

Her specialist areas are Womanist Theology, Black Theology, US Liberation Theologies, Contextual Theologies, Religion and Public Life, and African American and Womanist Spirituality.

Her taught courses also include Black Liberation Theology, American Liberation Theology, Race, Class, Gender and Religion, Religion and Liberation; The Problem of God (from a comparative world). She has three honorary Doctorates and has authored 6 books and over 50 articles.



**Martha Heizer - Austria**

**As the Co-Founder of the Austrian Kirchenvolks Begehren which led to Wie Sind Kirche / We Are Church International, Martha is known and loved by thousands as a warm, encouraging and merry figurehead of a powerful movement.**

An educationalist scientist and psychologist, a former academic at the Theological Faculty at University of Innsbruck, Martha's specialises in Feminist Theology. She is a redoubtable advocate for the development of small catholic Communities experienced in ministry.

We Are Church was co-founded by Martha exactly 30 years ago in Austria in response to the abuse scandal involving the then Archbishop of Vienna, Hans Hermann Groër. It has since been working on all continents and in an international network for a renewal of the Roman Catholic Church in line with the Second Vatican Council

Martha and her husband Gert were excommunicated in 2014 for celebrating the Eucharist without a priest. They politely returned the decrees to their bishop, saying, "These proceedings illustrate very clearly how urgently the church needs to be renewed."



**Geraldina Céspedes Ulloa – South America**

**Geraldina Céspedes Ulloa is a Dominican Missionary of the Rosary. She has worked in communities in Santo Domingo, Guatemala, Madrid, and Mexico. Geraldina has a PhD in Systematic Theology from the Comillas Pontifical University and teaches at various universities in Central America.**

She co-founded the Women's and Theology Network in Guatemala and is part of several theological networks in Latin America. Geraldina promotes the 'spirituality of inclusion' in relation to synodality, promoting a 'cosmic synodality' that focuses on the marginalised and dispossessed as well as the climate crisis. She focuses her theological approach towards salvation for people and creation in Ecofeminism: Healthy Theology for the Earth and Its Inhabitants.



**Mary Mc Aleese - Ireland.**

**Former twice-President of Ireland, and recent winner of the prestigious Alfons Auer Prize for her work on children's rights and the Catholic Church, Professor Mary McAleese brings her formidable political skills and acuity to challenge the lack of Human Rights in Canon Law.**

She is a broadcaster, academic lawyer and has a licentiate and doctorate in Canon Law from the Pontifical Gregorian University, and is currently Chancellor of Trinity College, Dublin.

As President of Ireland from 1997 until 2011, amongst her many achievements was her work for peace and reconciliation, culminating in the historic state visit to Ireland by H.M. Queen Elizabeth II in May 2011.

As a founder member of the Ireland's Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform, she played a significant role in the successful 2015 same-sex marriage referendum campaign.

Her many articles and books include "Quo Vadis: Collegiality in the Code of Canon Law" (2013) and the groundbreaking work Children's Rights and Obligations in Catholic Church Canon Law (Brill 2019).

She is fearless in challenging the opaque operations of the Vatican, and likens the Church to a stricken bird on the ground with its one (female) wing broken. How the bird could soar if it used both wings!



**Kate McElwee - USA and Rome**

**Based between Rome and Washington, DC, Kate is Executive Director of the Women's Ordination Conference, the oldest and largest organisation working to ordain women into an inclusive and accountable Roman Catholic Church.**

Kate graduated from Mount Holyoke College earning a degree in Religion and an MA in International Human Rights Law from SOAS (London).

A formidable and creative activist, author and seasoned campaigner for women's equality at all levels in the Catholic Church, Kate is Co-leader of Catholic Women Strike 2025. Her warm encouragement and tireless work for change make her one of today's most prominent reformers worldwide.



**Brigid Mary Meehan – USA**

**Rev. Dr. Bridget Mary Meehan was ordained a priest in the first USA ordination of Roman Catholic Women Priests in Pittsburgh on July 31, 2006, and ordained bishop in the first U.S. Ordination of Bishops in Santa Barbara, California on April 19, 2009.**

A former member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters, Bridget Mary was a former pastoral assistant, where her call to priestly ministry was confirmed by her much-loved community.

Bridget Mary has written 20 books, authors a blog on contemporary spirituality and theology, and has produced movies about the historical impact of the Roman Catholic Women Priests Movement on Google and YouTube. Brigid Mary and RCWP challenge the Vatican's automatic excommunication of ordained women as historically and theologically illiterate.

She is a founding member of People's Catholic Seminary, Dean of Global Ministries University's Doctor of Ministry and Master of Divinity Programs, as well as being a much sought-after speaker and liturgical president.



**Paola Lazzarini Orru – Italy**

**Paola is founder of Donne per la Chiesa, Women for the Church, and actively involved in work to challenge gender inequality. She also was a consultant for Voices of Faith and helped establish the Catholic Women's Council.**

Paola is an Italian Catholic feminist and freelance journalist with a PHD in sociology. She is interested in the search for a professional and personal vocation.

Paola is an activist involved in gender inequality and a fighter against women’s unjustifiable discrimination and systemic abuse. She says ‘The social organisation of an entirely hierarchical, entirely male and imperial clerical power is over. Historically it no longer has any justification, and it has no future.’



**Raffaella Petrini - Vatican City**

**Appointed Secretary General of the Governorate of Vatican City State from 2021 to 2022, Raffaella was appointed President of the Pontifical Commission for Vatican City State in January 2025. As the first woman to hold these positions, she is breaking ground for women by being head of the second largest authority in the Vatican State.**

Raffaella is an Italian sister of the Franciscan Sisters. She holds a Master of Science in Organization Behaviour, from Barney School of Business, University of Hartford, USA, a degree in Political Science (specializing in Industrial Relations) from LUISS in Rome and a doctorate from the Angelicum, Rome in 2014. She is also a former professor of Welfare Economics and Sociology of Economic Processes in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Angelicum.

Raffaella advocates for a ‘leadership of care,’ based on ‘theologically inspired and socially realist’ principles.

### **Helen Prejean – USA**



**Helen is renowned for her tireless work against the death penalty and was instrumental in sparking national and international dialogue on capital punishment.**

Originally from Baton Rouge, USA, and a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph since 1957, Helen has worked as a teacher and Religious Education in New Orleans, as well as the Formation Director for her religious community. She has also spent time living with poor people in New Orleans.

Highly valued as a courageous spiritual adviser and witness to the deaths of many men on death row, she described her experiences in *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. This seminal work sparked a national debate on capital punishment, and inspired an Academy Award winning movie, a play and an opera.

A compelling and moving speaker, working with people of all faiths and none, she has exerted moral influence over two Popes and changed formal church teaching. John Paul II revised the catechism to strengthen the church's opposition to executions. Pope Francis reinforced this by announcing the death penalty 'inadmissible', with no exceptions.

### **Christina Reymer – New Zealand**



**A New Zealander of Dutch descent, Christina is a teacher, international development volunteer, community activist, and business owner.**

She has much experience as a grass-roots activist and since 2020, as a member of Be the Change Aotearoa, she was inspired to develop the creative 'Pink Shoes to the Vatican' initiative.

She says, "We need 'to enlarge the space of our tent' so that all may feel welcome, respected and valued as they are! What excites me is that we're doing it, we are taking control, reclaiming our church.."

Christina is focused on building a global church based on love, justice and care of the earth, that welcomes everyone in all humanity's cultural diversity.



**Elissa Roper – Australia**

**Elissa is an Australian theologian and academic, and an expert on synodality in the Catholic Church. She is much sought-after to make the theory and practice of synodality accessible to a wide audience.**

She is a member of the Australian Catholic Theological Association (ACTA) and the Institute of Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG) Theological Association, with whom she works extensively.

Elissa is a former member of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne’s Ecumenical & Interfaith Commission 2017-2021 and in 2022 she assisted the Drafting Committee of the Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia.

Elissa is devoted to ‘building up a mature, responsible and loving Church.’



**Virginia Saldhana – India**

Virginia is a theologian, an activist for justice for women in church and society, and a journalist based in Mumbai, India. She has an illustrious history of working for reform in the Catholic Church. She was founder member and secretary of the Indian Women's Theologians Forum, a former Executive Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India Commission for Women and the Office of Laity, Family & Women of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Executive Secretary of the Women’s Desk, Archdiocese of Bombay.

She has worked extensively on the issue of violence against women in India. She is the co-founder of Rainbow Catholics India working with Catholic members for LGBTQI+ rights in the Church & society. For more than 25 years she has provided formidable support and advocacy for women survivors of clerical sexual abuse.

