

## Speech by Kristina Keneally to the Catholic Secondary School Principals Conference Cairns, July 2018

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In 1975 the American gridiron team the Dallas Cowboys won a semi-finals game against the Minnesota Vikings in the last seconds of play. The Cowboys' quarterback, Roger Staubach, threw a long-shot, desperation pass to his wide receiver, Drew Pearson. Despite being covered by the Vikings defense, Pearson caught the ball on the end zone and scored.

Roger Staubach is Catholic. When he was asked in a post-game media conference as to how he planned and executed the game-winning play, Staubach said "I closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary."

And that is how the "Hail Mary pass" became widely popularised in the English lexicon.

A Hail Mary pass is a desperate act in desperate circumstances. But it is also an act of faith and hope. Staubach's simple statement "I closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary" shows that he didn't give in to his fears and doubts in dire times. He acted, and he trusted that God's grace would do the rest.

I used to share Staubach's straightforward faith. I confess I struggle these days. In the light of the child sexual abuse scandal, the continuing sexism of the institutional church, and the obsession of the Vatican to preference its self-preservation and power over the pastoral needs of the people of God, my faith is challenged.

How can such a flawed institution transmit God's grace, mercy and forgiveness?

Is it just the earthly institution that is flawed, or does the Church's abject failures in these important areas also reveal an emptiness at the heart of the Church's teachings?

In short, where is God in all of this?

I am still a Catholic.

I'm not a devout Catholic – I don't wear my scapular everyday and pray a decade of the Rosary every night.

I'm not a practicing Catholic. That is, I don't attend church every Sunday. But even if I did, I reject this phrase. It says that Catholicism is defined by its practices: Mass attendance, refraining from meat on Friday, regular reception of the sacraments. The practices are important, but only because they are meant to support or encourage faith. They are not ends to themselves. And if the practices become a distraction from faith then they should be discontinued.

Today I say I am "openly Catholic" – not unlike how we used to say someone was "openly gay" back when the distinction between closeted and openly gay people was more pronounced.

I like the idea of being openly Catholic.

It says one is a visible Catholic in the world, a witness to Christian faith.

It says one is open to encounter with people of other faiths, or no faiths at all.

Being openly Catholic means trying to be understanding, not judgemental; forgiving, not revengeful; and most of all, welcoming.

Pope Francis says, "God is not afraid of new things." An openly Catholic person can be open to new things, confident in God's grace.

I should also note that I am not an orthodox Catholic. In good conscience I cannot give my assent to several of the Catholic church's teachings. If the practice of Catholics around the world when it comes to matters like artificial contraception or divorce is anything to go by, I'm hardly alone rejection of certain church teachings.

Some would say this statement places me outside the Church. To make that claim misunderstands what it is to be a Catholic. It also misunderstands the importance of the Catholic Church's teaching on conscience.

In strict technical terms, a Catholic is someone who believes in those things listed in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed: God, the creator of heaven and earth; Jesus Christ, the son of God who was crucified, died and resurrected; the Holy Spirit; the Holy Catholic Church (that is, the entire community of those who believe in Jesus Christ); the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

That's it. No mention in our creeds of artificial contraception, an all-male priesthood, denying communion to divorced people or condemning homosexual behaviour. It's not particularly surprising – not one of the four Gospels records Jesus passing significant comments on such matters.

Everything in the Catholic Church after Jesus' death and resurrection represents human attempts to interpret and apply the teachings of Christ to our human circumstances. That's the definition of theology right there. Because men – usually men privileged by birth or education or property – fairly exclusively ran the world until very recently, it is not surprising that in the Catholic Church it has been men of similar privilege who have been doing the theology. Not overly surprising then that the result is a set of Church teachings that preserve the institutional power for those men.

One of the great misunderstandings of Catholicism is that Catholics are required to give assent to the pope, because he is infallible, and that we must do what the bishops say.

First of all, the infallibility of the pope was only promulgated at the First Vatican Council by Pope Pius IX in 1870. It was not unanimously supported by bishops and cardinals. It is a teaching designed with one precise aim: to concentrate power in the hands of the pope.

Secondly, the pope's infallibility is limited. The pope is not infallible in every utterance he makes. The pope only very occasionally speaks infallibly, and when he does it is specifically noted. For example, the Assumption of Mary into heaven is an infallible teaching. The ban on artificial contraception is not.

A Catholic is also bound to follow her fully-formed conscience, even when it brings her into conflict with church teaching. No Catholic can be forced to act against her conscience, no matter what a bishop says.

Conscience is a crucially important aspect of Church teaching, and given great emphasis in Vatican II, the reforming and modernising council that took place between 1962 – 1965. A fully-formed conscience is not just a feeling. Rather, conscience should be developed by consulting not openly scripture, church teaching, but also the sciences and human experience.

Conservative popes – such as John Paul II – sought to redefine conscience in order to discourage debate and dissent. But the role of a fully-formed conscience in the life of a Catholic is significant and cannot be extinguished.

I began by confessing my faith is sorely tested these days. It is tested by the continuing sexism of the Vatican, and by the institutional church's failure to prevent and respond to the child sexual abuse crisis. Today I will speak to both of these. I will also point to one area of hope, a current development in the church that may just give me enough hope to continue this Hail Mary pass of faith at being a Catholic.

Roger Staubach's Hail Mary pass took place in 1975. Around the same time I was in year 3 at St Joseph's Catholic school in Maumee, Ohio. I recall standing in my grandmother's kitchen one night, with her yellow Bakelite phone to my ear, waiting on hold for a talkback radio program. My family was in the other room, listening to the Catholic Bishop of Toledo take questions from callers.

Finally it was my turn. "Bishop Donovan," I said, "The priest at our school has come to our class to ask for boys to volunteer to be altar servers. Why can't girls volunteer too?"

Poor Bishop Donovan. He mumbled something about church tradition, the importance of serving at mass as the first step to the priesthood – where again, one obviously had to be male – and moved on to the next caller.

Unsatisfactory, I thought. And my career as a Catholic feminist began.

I got a Masters degree in religious studies, in 1995, specialising in feminist theology.

I worked as a Catholic school teacher, a Catholic youth worker, and as a graduate assistant at a Catholic university.

I attended two Catholic World Youth Days (not counting the 2008 event in Sydney). In Poland in 1991, I met my husband, and I snuck in a gender-inclusive interpretation of St Paul when I was asked to read at a Papal liturgy.

Girls can be altar servers today, but that is one of the few signs of progress in 40 years.

I recently visited my all-girls Catholic high school in Ohio. Run by nuns, the school exemplifies female empowerment: women occupy all the leadership positions, women make all the decisions, women teach almost all the classes, and girls are expected to excel academically, exercise leadership, compete fiercely in sport, and demonstrate a mastery of the arts.

All of this was done, at least in my day, with nary a mention of feminism, patriarchy or sexism. I can't recall a religious sister giving even the slightest indication to her young charges that she took umbrage with the exclusively male leadership of our church.

That's why, when chatting with one of my former school teachers at a cocktail party for alumnae and supporters, I nearly dropped by plastic tumbler of wine wine Sister said to me, 'So how about this Pope Francis? He's doing some good things, so I suppose we can cut him a bit of slack. But he needs to get moving on women, don't you think?'

It's one thing to know that nuns, especially the American nuns, as a group, have issues with the Vatican. It is another thing entirely to hear the nun who gave you a detention for chewing gum in her classroom make a casual, unbidden and explicit declaration that her feminist patience with the Pope is running thin.

So is mine.

Maybe it was easier with John Paul II and Benedict. With those two popes, women knew where we stood: metaphorically speaking, it was up the back of church, looking after the kids and helping out in the parish. Our biology determined our destiny, which was to mother the next generation of Catholics in the faith. Or become nuns.

Lest we start to think we could do more, especially as the vocation crisis worsened, John Paul II solemnly declared that women were incapable of serving as priests and told Catholics they were to have no further discussion on the matter.

John Paul II didn't declare this infallibly, but came as close as he could to doing so.

But Francis – this pope gets it, right? He's the populist pope, the selfie pope. He cares about things that progressives care about: inequality and poverty, climate change, and refugees. His purportedly leftist views and symbolic gestures earn him pages of great press, the occasional sideswipe from conservatives, and extraordinary popularity around the world.

He's getting cut a lot of slack.

As a Catholic and a feminist, I find it almost tortuous that the pope is charismatic, modern, friendly media-savvy, reformist, and adopting an inclusive, more democratic approach, and yet he still excludes women.

How deeply must the misogyny run among the Catholic hierarchy when there is a pope who refuses to judge gay people, allows for atheists to get into heaven and yet still maintains that a faithful Catholic woman is incapable of serving her community as a priest, or even serving her church as the head of a Vatican department.

According to Francis, "Jesus wanted it this way."

Give me a break.

Of this I am sure. Jesus never said a word about who could run a Vatican department. Nor did he have much to say about who could be ordained a priest, though it is fair to assume that Jesus' decision to reveal himself after his resurrection to two women indicates he didn't harbour the same fear, resentment or distrust of people with vaginas as the Vatican does.

There are those who argue that feminists should not despair over Francis. They say that the Pope's focus on the poor is a radically pro-woman position. It doesn't really matter, the argument goes, whether he ordains women or promotes them within the Vatican: he's making a world of difference to impoverished women, refugee women, indigenous women and women living with violence.

Yes, he is. But this argument completely misses the point of how important it is for women to be in the room as church leaders are discussing issues like poverty, domestic violence, sexual trafficking, fertility control, divorce and remarriage, and keeping children safe from sexual abuse. If

women are not in those discussions on their own merits as leaders, then all women are dependent on the goodwill of a few men who may or may not consider those issues important, or men who are incapable of grasping how these issues play out in the lives of women.

Put simply, if there are no women present when the pope decides that Catholics needn't "breed like rabbits" without the removing the ban on artificial contraception, then the pope ends up in the farcical position of telling women they can control their fertility while denying them the very medical tools to do so.

There is an important theological point here too: if God is neither male nor female (as the Church teaches) and if we are all created in the image and likeness of God (as the Church teaches) then let's not limit our theology – our understanding of God and how and what God communicates to humanity – by limiting God's voice to speaking only through ordained, celibate men.

Francis said that women theologians are, quote, "The strawberries on the cake." I say they are part of the cake, and a theology that does not include their voices is half-baked.

There is an important theological point about ordination as well. The Catholic Church teaches that ordination is privileged to men because Jesus was male, and the priest has to stand "in persona Christi" – in the person of Christ. It is not possible, the Church argues, for a woman to stand in Christ's place.

This claim simply says that women cannot represent Jesus' humanity. That their female humanity is so fundamentally different to Jesus' male humanity that we would not be able to see the person of Christ in a woman.

If this is the case – how is it then that women participate in Jesus' incarnation, death and resurrection? If humanity is saved because Jesus became human, died and rose from the dead, aren't all humans able to participate in his humanity?

If we follow the Church's logic that only men can represent the human incarnation of Christ – then it inevitably follows that the only people saved by Christ's human incarnation, death and resurrection are men.

Either Jesus' human nature matters, or his maleness matters. Either women participate in the humanity of Christ, or they don't.

Some see hope in Francis' decision in 2016 to set up a "Study Commission on the Women's Diaconate" with a view to determining the role of deaconesses in the early church, and whether women could be ordained as deacons today.

This is despite the fact that, when announcing the Commission, Francis repeated the church's argument that women cannot act 'in the person of Christ' and therefore cannot preside over the Eucharist.

The Commission sits under the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, and is made up of 6 men and 6 women.

Initial media reports were breathless: "Francis' openness to studying the possibility of women deacons could represent an historic shift for the global Catholic Church, which does not ordain women as clergy."

As much as I would like to believe it, I am not confident this Commission, under this Congregation, will come to that conclusion.

Consider that this same Congregation only issued a report in 2002 on the subject of deacons. Its conclusion: "Deaconesses in the early church were not purely and simply the equivalent to the deacons."

Consider that the Cardinal who headed up this congregation until last year, Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, wrote a book called Priesthood and Diaconate in 2002. Mueller also concludes there is no equivalence between deaconesses and male deacons in the early church. "Impossible" he said of women's ordination to the diaconate. "It will not happen."

At best, we may see an explanation that women deacons in the early church were a minor role, they ministered to women at a time when culture did not allow a male deacon to perform certain functions for women, that their 'feminine gifts' and ministry lives on in the lives of faithful women today who are consecrated to religious life or who raise children in the faith.

Or we may see nothing. This Commission, established in 2016, has yet to deliver any findings, according to media reports, has met once, and has no announced timeline for its conclusions.

Francis has resisted calls to promote women in leadership roles: he says he neither wants to functionalise women nor clericalise them. It would seem he just wants to pedestalise them into his particularly narrow view of women's experience.

Consider that just recently Francis released his third apostolic exhortation – Rejoice and Be Glad, a call to holiness in today's world.

There is much to value in this exhortation – especially its call to see God's presence in the migrant, the poor and the homeless, in those who are forgotten, abandoned or enslaved.

It is also notable and welcome that Francis uses inclusive language – he or she, man and woman – even at points when it probably is historically inaccurate to do so (for example, when quoting St John of the Cross).

Female saints are cited just as often as male saints: Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, St Bridget, St Josephine Bakhita, St Faustina Kowalska, St Scholastica, St Monica, and of course, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

But Francis' understanding of the nature of women, and women's experience, remains limited by his narrow view of womanhood.

Francis uses a female character to tell a story of holiness in daily life. But he sets this story in the life of a young mother out shopping, who first resists gossiping with her neighbour, then sits to listen in love to her child's chatter despite her tiredness, then later on when she feels anxious, this young mother 'recalls her love of the Virgin Mary' and picks up her rosary to pray.

As one reviewer in the National Catholic Reporter wrote: "These examples may seem rather innocuous to the occasional reader of Francis, but those who listen to him regularly will recognise that he is reasserting, for the umpteenth time, his belief that women's most essential vocation, and her true path to holiness, comes in motherhood and nurturing her family."

It also evokes another of Francis' constant warnings to women: to avoid gossip. Gossip is, according to Francis "an act of terrorism". He told a group of nuns in Peru that gossip is "like a bomb, one throws it, it causes destruction, and you walk away tranquilly. No terrorist nuns!" He admonishes.

Maybe it was an attempt at a joke, but his ongoing obsession with gossip as one of the greatest spiritual temptation facing women tells us something of his lens on women's lives. So too does his continual references to "the genius of women" is their "feminine style of holiness."

In Rejoice and Be Glad, the pope says that "in times when women tended to be most ignored or overlooked, the Holy Spirit raised up saints whose attractiveness produced new spiritual vigour and important reforms in the Church."

Here he cites doctors of the church Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen and Therese of Lisieux. I'm not sure what their attractiveness had to do with anything, and I can hardly imagine him writing a similar sentence about other doctors of the church, like St Thomas Aquinas, St Jerome or St Bonaventure.

But then, that's it. There's no reflection from the pope as to why women, at points in history (or indeed, most of history) tended to be ignored or overlooked. No consideration for the role the church itself played in that discrimination historically, or continues to exercise today.

Francis' comment that he does not want to clericalise women is understandable when he is, at the same time, calling out the abuses of power within the clerical, or ordained, class in the Church. But he offers no real solution to the problem, and he doesn't really know how to acknowledge the gift women bring to the Church.

There are really only two solutions to this conundrum: abolish the priesthood altogether (not likely to happen, or necessary) or radically change the priesthood by enlarging and democratising it. Telling women you are going to protect them from clericalism by denying them access to the clerical class, and then continuing to subject women to the very same clericalist leadership structure, is demeaning: here little lady, just sit here nicely on this pedestal, pure of heart and mind, while we ordained men deal with this complicated and confusing leadership stuff. We will work it out for you.

And haven't they done a bang up job of that?

Nowhere is this more evident than in the child sexual abuse crisis.

A most damning assessment of the most senior Catholic clerics came from Retired Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson. An advocate of reforming the priesthood, Bishop Robinson told the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Sexual Abuse that Pope John Paul II "handled the abuse poorly," that Cardinal George Pell was "a most ineffectual bishop" and that "the majority of (Australian) priests wished (Pell) would get transferred somewhere else" and that Pope Francis is not providing "real leadership."

Perhaps Robinson's most chilling statement about the Catholic Church was his description of the church hierarchy's response to the revelations about child sexual abuse: "What we got is silence, so the bishops were loyal to the silence."

This simple statement speaks to the extent to which the church hierarchy exercises control – and enforces silence – through a combination of rigid orthodoxy, secretive practices, intimidation and the threat of exclusion and excommunication.

Many Catholics may not be aware the extent to which the church hierarchy uses these tools to manage the institution, as most of us in the pews only interact with our parish priest.

I have known many priests over the years who, in private, express support for women's ordination, for the ordination of married men, and for a greater democratisation of the church. But these priests walk a fine and dangerous line, fearful that one comment in a homily will cause a parishioner or fellow priest to report them to the bishop and invite a world of pain.

Think of the reactions to outspoken Toowoomba bishop Bill Morris, or former priest Paul Collins. Both were forced out after 'sham processes' that were designed to shut them down, and run them out.

Granted, speaking out about lay participation in the church, women's ordination and same sex marriage is one thing, but surely no honest and caring human being could stay silent about child sexual abuse? Surely no priest or bishop could value his job over the need to protect children?

This is where clericalism in the Catholic Church jars so horribly with an open and free society. When the Australian Government becomes aware of the extent of child abuse in the institutions, it holds a royal commission with open hearings.

When the leadership of the Catholic Church becomes aware of child abuse in its ranks, it designs secretive processes to protect the institution and spins to its priests that there are worse sins than sexually abusing children, such as abortion and homicide.

Of the over 4000 cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church reported to the Royal Commission, there is evidence of wilful ignorance by church leaders, systematic shielding of abusers and continual preference for the perpetrator and the institution over the victim.

When Commissioner McClellan asked Cardinal Pell if the church needed to make any changes to its governance or structure, Pell responded that the structure had come from God. Why would they change it?

The royal commission has made recommendations and observations about how Church practices and structures should change. And so it should.

In Australia and elsewhere, such as in Ireland, priests, bishops and nuns have testified to a belief that prayer could cure paedophiles. Some have argued that they were doing God's work by not reporting abuse to the police – if the church had been drawn into such scandal, thousands of souls might have lost their faith and been in jeopardy.

The end result of this flawed theology and ecclesiology is the nauseating, terrifying, grotesque, ritualised and repeated violent assaults on children.

I'm no saint. I make no special claim to sinlessness. I know that the church hierarchy is made up of human beings, and human beings are not perfect. But church leaders do make a particular claim to holiness and grace.

How is it that the very institution that is meant to mediate Christ's saving grace to his followers be so intrinsically flawed?

I know that I am not alone among Australian Catholics in finding it near impossible to reconcile this despicable circumstance with the church's claim to be a special mediator of God's grace, and a place to which I should turn in order to understand more deeply God's love.

I know because fellow Catholics talk to me about these issues. I know because I can look around Catholic parishes and see the declining attendance.

Even enrolments in Catholic schools are falling in Australia. This is in part because fees are increasing, to be sure, but the decline started before the new funding formulas were announced. It would be foolish to dismiss the evidence that has emerged of child sexual abuse for the past decade as having no impact on parents' enrolment decisions.

I recently spoke to a packed audience of mothers at a suburban Catholic primary school in Sydney. I was invited to address faith and family life. All their questions were about how to nurture the gospel message of social justice in their children while raising them in a sexist, undemocratic, and at times abusive institution. There aren't easy answers to those questions.

When the Australian Catholic bishops distributed their booklet on same sex marriage to Catholic families by sending it home in the hands of Catholic primary school children, there were Catholic parents who sent it back. And others who marched straight in to see the priest to give him their thoughts on same sex marriage.

And when the same sex marriage plebiscite happened, polls showed that a majority of Catholics backed changing the law to allow same sex couples to marry.

Some Catholic schools and some Catholic leaders and priests even advocated for the yes vote.

They did this in good conscience.

This is my hope – the good conscience of ordinary Catholics. The consciences of the people of God. That the wisdom of God, and signs of God's love, mercy and forgiveness, will be found not in the Vatican, but in the pews, and in the lives of the lapsed, the disaffected, and the disempowered.

After all, that is where Jesus spent most of his time.

My hope is that Pope Francis is aware of the need to move from a church where rules are handed down on high to one where the consciences and experiences of Catholics enlarges our understanding of God.

There is a basis for this hope.

Francis' last exhortation, *On Love in the Family* released in 2016, up ends the apple cart, so to speak.

It is, possibly, a major transformative moment in the church.

In a document that talks about divorce, marriage equality, parenting, and contraception, Pope Francis deliberately downplayed the role of the hierarchy, the bishops and the Vatican in responding to the reality of family life.

In its place, he asks individual Catholics and local priests to respond to complex circumstances as they best see fit, mindful of Jesus' call to love one another.

"Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium," Francis says. "(The Church) needs a healthy dose of self-criticism." The church, he says, has focused almost exclusively on procreation and proposed an abstract ideal for marriage that is far removed from the concrete situations of real families.

Instead of presenting a pastoral plan for the family, Francis says he is giving guidance on the significant challenges that families face.

Instead of telling Catholics what they can and can't do, Francis reminds them that they have consciences and that they should use them. The faithful, he says, respond as best they can to the gospel and are capable of making decisions in complex situations.

For example, when it comes to birth control, the pope says natural methods should be promoted, but he does not say that artificial methods can't be used. Instead, he says that family planning decisions should be made by parents, in the sight of God, with no one else involved.

Instead of telling priests what rules apply in certain circumstances- can married people divorce? Can divorced people receive communion? Can they remarry? What about same sex couples who want the Eucharist? The pope tells priests, in short, work it out yourselves, without judgement and with love.

There are no "easy recipes" the pope says, no "new rules". Pastors and parishioners must come together to decide how to best apply the gospel message of love, to offer pastoral care, and to ensure people are not excluded.

He reminds the bishops that "we are here to form consciences, not replace them."

The church is a guide, he says, nothing more.

*On Love in the Family* is a remarkable document, and it tells us something remarkable about Francis: he is neither a conservative nor a liberal, but rather, a pragmatist. But his approach is something more than pragmatism: Francis is insisting and trusting lay Catholics and parish priests to interpret the gospel, form their own consciences, and make decisions on how to best live as Christians.

The implications for the church – in every area from pastoral care to liturgy to leadership – are enormous.

As you might imagine, *On Love in the Family* has drawn anger and criticism from conservatives, even prompting 62 scholars and priests to issue a 'correction' of the exhortation, a correction Francis seems to have ignored.

Maybe "*On Love in the Family*" is Pope Francis' Hail Mary pass. Francis is heading up an immobile, outdated, entrenched institution that has lost enormous credibility. I like to think that Francis' turn to the consciences of ordinary Catholics is his attempt to save the institution from itself.

Sometimes people ask why not just leave an anachronistic institution, join a Christian church where women and parents and same sex people can have a say, serve as ministers, or lead and make decisions. Sometimes I ask myself the same question. I love the sacraments and liturgy of the Catholic Church. I love the value it places scripture and tradition. Being Catholic shapes my worldview, my understanding of sin and grace, of oppression and liberation, of mercy and forgiveness. I have, in the words of Andrew Greeley, a Catholic imagination, and draw great inspiration from the Catholic Social justice tradition. And I marvel at the faith, hope and love shown by millions of Catholics who have come before me. Why should I abandon that?

I'm no saint, but when I am most exasperated with the church, when I feel a loss of faith, I recall that among the communion of saints there are hundreds of examples of people who openly disagreed with the institutional church, who refused to act against their conscience. Think of Mary MacKillop – an Australian Catholic educator – excommunicated at one point- now elevated to sainthood by the same institution that threw her out.

We are, I believe, called to follow her example, and act in good conscience. As Catholics, we can do nothing else.

